

back and forth from new york

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back and forth from new york

by [alphalupi](#)

Summary

After coming out to Rose, Shane decides he doesn't want to lie anymore, even if he isn't sure coming out will mean he gets happily ever after with Ilya. When coming out to the Voyageurs leaves him wondering what his future in Montreal might look like, he lets himself be a little selfish, he lets himself wonder if there might be somewhere else he might be happy. If Montreal wants to get rid of a generational player, he's not about to stop them, especially if it means he can get a little closer to joy.

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Or: Shane Hollander leaves Montreal in search of something better.

Chapter 1: honesty

Chapter Notes

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

January 2017

Shane honestly couldn't tell you the series of events that had led to this moment. Well, he could, but it'd be convoluted and confusing and possibly another adjective starting with 'C' that might just explain how much of a goddamn shit show he'd found himself in.

All this to say, Shane was starting to wonder if there might be some service out there that'd allow him to hire someone to make decisions for him; not quite a cult, but maybe something cult *adjacent*.

"Are you sure about this?" Hayden whispered, looking just as nervous as Shane felt. Shane was well aware that some people (Jackie) might (lovingly) describe his friendship with Hayden as 'clinically co-dependent', but at this very moment he wasn't going to look too far into the psychology of it all. The simple knowledge that his best friend was clearly as nervous as he was acted as some sort of nerve soother, some sort of indication that he wasn't entirely insane for feeling this way.

"No," Shane answered, then stood up anyways. He clapped his hands twice and cleared his throat and delighted just a little bit in the way the locker room fell silent. He was a well-respected Captain, he played a good game and did his best to be there for his teammates, people listened when he spoke, even if he wasn't the sort of effortlessly charming, charismatic captain that some teams (*cough* Boston) might get to enjoy. "I have something I want to tell you all."

"Finally gonna explain how you fumbled Rose Landry?" Mitty asked, elbowing Renaud in the stall next to him and shooting Shane a grin that was probably meant to be friendly teasing but came across as something more akin to a shark scenting blood.

Shane carefully swallowed down the biological instinct to turn tail and run and simply shot a teasing smile back, deciding that if he just acted like this was no big deal it'd simply *be* no big deal. He was well aware that this was wishful thinking, he'd very much like you all to refrain from pointing that out.

"Sort of," he said, forcing out a half laugh that had J.J. visibly cringing to his left. Hayden and J.J. knew what he was about to say and the fact that they'd both immediately hugged him and reminded him they were best friends was the *only* thing pushing him forward. In another life, another time, he might've been able to hold onto the knowledge that sharing this with his team might lead to a day where he could live openly with the man he loved but in this life, this time, all he had was the

knowledge that letting go of this secret, sharing this piece of himself, might just let him feel a little less like the walls were falling down around his ears at every moment of every day.

Telling Rose had loosened something in his chest, telling his parents had reminded him that he was so *stupidly* lucky to have that sort of love in his life, and telling J.J., Hayden, and Jackie had shown him that he'd still have a support system even if this all went pear-shaped, had told him that the relationships he'd spent nearly a decade building wouldn't crumble overnight.

"I've been keeping a piece of myself locked away for a long time," Shane said, forcing himself to keep breathing, he was nearly certain the action was *manual* at this point when it very much should've been automatic, but he refused to allow himself to think too much about that. "Rose and I broke up because we weren't compatible, we're still great friends and she's an incredible person, but I couldn't be what she needed and, more than that, she couldn't be what *I* needed because I'm gay. I know this isn't something you want to hear," he said, pushing through the silence that sounded a little like abject terror (and maybe a little like a brewing hate crime) with the sort of hell bent determination that'd allowed him to become the number two overall draft pick, rookie of the year, an Olympic medalist, the captain of an NHL team, and a two-time Stanley Cup champion. "I know that this is shocking, and I know that this will change your perception of me. I just couldn't keep lying to myself and when I stopped lying to myself I realized that I couldn't lie to my team. It didn't feel right to ask you to trust me to lead you on the ice if I was lying to you off of it. Feel how you need to feel, hate me if you want to, but please keep this amongst the team, I don't feel ready for this to be shared with the world, but I wanted to share it with you. With the people who've been my home and my brothers for so many years."

He felt Hayden's hand wrap around his right forearm as J.J.'s hand landed on his shoulder and forced himself to breathe again. That was, almost certainly, the most words he'd ever said at once in any speech to his team. It was also, almost certainly, the last thing they'd ever expected to hear from him.

He'd prepared for anger, even possibly violence. What he hadn't prepared for was absolute fucking silence.

The spell was broken by Comeau breathing out a snort of laughter.

Shane looked up and realized that several of his teammates were looking at him like they were hoping he was about to say this was all an elaborate prank. A couple of the younger guys, rookies he'd mentored and supported, were simply watching him for a reaction; not tense, not scared, not angry, simply watching. Somehow, Shane could tell that he hadn't lost their respect, and that was enough to make his shoulders drop back down and his spine straighten out. The kids were alright; they simply couldn't speak their support in this weird, vaguely (chronically) homophobic hierarchy. He nodded once to the group of 19 and 20-year-olds that made up their third line and let the soft smiles he got in response calm him just that much more.

“I’m not pulling a prank,” he said, turning back toward the room at large, his coaches were leaned against the door frame, looking like they wanted to tear him limb from limb, and Shane got the sinking feeling that he wouldn’t be spending the rest of his career as a Voyageur and, somehow, that didn’t feel like dying. “I’m not joking, I’m simply choosing to be honest with my team.”

The room fell back into silence, only broken this time by Theriault clearing his throat, looking at Shane like he wanted him to walk into oncoming traffic, and saying, “my office, now.”

Shane nodded, shook off J.J. and Hayden, and walked across the padded floor and chose to stop thinking about how it felt like he was walking to the gallows.

* * *

“How’d it go?” Rose asked the moment Shane opened the door.

Shane couldn’t help it, he laughed.

Somewhere around the 30 second mark, tears sprang up, the laughter turned hysterical, and the next thing he knew he was sliding down the wall near his entry way, his ribs aching and his throat burning with the force of his sobs. Rose dropped down next to him immediately, not a care in the world that they were sitting on a floor that was ever so slightly grimy from snow covered shoes and Shane had the ridiculous thought that everything that’d gone wrong with Ilya was worth it if it ended in him having a friend like this.

Well, maybe not everything seeing as he was still absolutely, desperately in love with Ilya Rozanov, but having Rose as a friend was a rather good consolation prize, even if it didn’t necessarily soothe every aching shard of his fractured heart.

“Awful,” he finally choked out. “My rookies didn’t seem pissed, but everyone else was. Coaching staff and management want to keep me locked away but they can’t bench me without good reason and the only thing keeping me on the team right now is my no trade clause because if they use the morality clause they’re opening themselves up to lawsuits.”

“Can you waive your no trade?” she asked, her voice gentle and her arms wrapped around him like she could hold him together by sheer force of will; she was doing a pretty good job of it, honestly.

Shane paused and thought back to that moment in the locker room where it’d started to feel like retiring as a Voyageur was no longer in the cards, thought about how he’d always assumed that would feel like heartbreak. But now he knew what heartbreak felt like, he knew that there was more to life than hockey even if hockey was so much of what made him *him*. He didn’t want to give it up, that was for damn sure, but he might just be able to stomach giving up Montreal.

“I could,” he admitted quietly, thankful that the look in Rose’s eye communicated that she understood just how insane of an admission that was for him. She smiled, something warm and comforting and knowing and Shane would’ve kissed her if he weren’t incredibly gay. “But if I waive it now and they can create a narrative I honestly might get pushed out before playoffs, we’re still a month away from the trade deadline.”

“Would that be so bad?”

Shane paused once more; paused and tried to imagine a world where he was playing somewhere else in April, where he wasn’t leading the Voyageurs toward the Cup that’d make them a dynasty. It hurt, honestly. It felt a bit like a stab wound to the chest to realize that the versions of his teammates he’d seen today would probably rather get rid of their gay Captain than win that third Cup. It wasn’t about hockey anymore; it was about him.

He *hated* that, he hated when it became a game of politics and optics, when people forgot the love of the game that’d pushed them to this level. But if they were going to make it about him anyways, he might as well be a little selfish, he might as well do what he could to get something like joy out of the hellscape he’d created simply by choosing to be honest.

I mean, really, he hadn’t even told them he was gay for Ilya Rozanov. Well, he’d told J.J. and Hayden but that blow had been lessened by the fact that all three of them had been piss drunk, hiding from Jackie so she wouldn’t tell them it was time to go to bed. It was probably the fact that they were acting like 14-year-old boys who’d gotten their hands on their first sip of stolen beer that had the pair of them simply looking at him like he was insane before Hayden decided that the whole rivals situation made even more sense when framed as years of suffocating sexual tension. J.J. had laughed so hard beer had come out of his nose and all the sudden everything was fine. He knew, though, that it’d take his two best friends time to *actually* process the fact that he’d spent so long pining for Ilya Rozanov, he also knew that he could *never* tell the rest of the team. Their reactions wouldn’t be anywhere *near* as charitable.

All this to say, he'd been kind. He could've gone *far* more nuclear.

"You're already locked in for the All Stars, right?" Rose asked after he didn't respond.

"Yeah," Shane answered, pulling in a deep breath and forcing his nerves to let go of the constant buzz of anxiety that'd been following him since the week prior when he'd sat across from this wonderful woman in a restaurant in Old Montreal and finally admitted that he was gay. "I could have my agent drop the clause right before All Star Weekend and it'd get lost in the hype, it'd give Montreal the break to decide what they want to do and I'd be in a place where I could subtly talk to other Captains, see what's out there, see what teams might need depth at center right now."

"You could always play wing, too," Rose said, settling fully on the floor next to him and wrapping both her arms around one of his now that it was clear she didn't need to quite literally hold him together any longer. "You're fast, a versatile player, you see the rink like no one else. Don't limit yourself."

Shane felt his lips tug into a smile almost against his will as he listed a bit to the side and rested his head atop Rose's, "why do I feel like you're not just talking about hockey."

"Cause I'm not," she teased, poking his side before cuddling closer. "I'm really proud of you," she said, her voice slipping back into something serious, even as her tone remained warm. "You did an incredibly brave thing, Shane."

"All because of you," he said quietly, "you let me be honest and helped me be brave so thank you."

The smile she sent him was blinding.

Chapter End Notes

i've written a couple chapters so far and i'm planning to post one chapter every 2-3 days. this fandom has absolutely taken over my life. i'd forgotten what it was like to be in a fandom *as the thing was happening* and it's like free basing heroin (to loosely quote john mulaney) so i'm really looking forward to writing this, hope you all enjoy!

Chapter 2: waived

February 2017

“Alright, that’s all I need,” Farah said, sending Shane a kind smile that honestly did quite a lot to soothe his frayed nerves. Despite the fact that he’d officially waived his no-trade clause, it wasn’t a sure thing that Montreal *would* trade him in the next month, but he was certain that, one way or another, this’d be his last season as a Voyageur. He was still Captain, still the starting Center, but the only people who talked to him were J.J., Hayden, and the third line kids who still weren’t able to actually speak out in his favor (not that Shane would ever *want* them to put themselves in that position ... he simply hated the environment that hockey seemed to produce where speaking out in support of a teammate became something negative).

Montreal still had a little over a month before the early March trade deadline to come up with some sort of story that would explain trading Shane *motherfucking* Hollander while they were in such an uncertain place regarding playoff standings, but Shane had long since decided that he was going to do fuck all to help them come up with the narrative.

He was simply going to put his head down and play hockey and if all these dumbasses (he really needed someone to come up with a stronger word than dumbass ... something that’d encompass the sheer idiocy, bigotry, and downright stupidity of Montreal’s management) wanted to get rid of a generational player, the sort of player that made dynasties, they could do it on their own.

Shane smiled back at Farah, ever thankful for what an incredible agent she was, and let himself shift his focus to the next thing: All Star Weekend.

* * *

Ilya Rozanov was a lot of things and, apparently, one of those things is a *fucking coward*.

He hadn’t texted Shane since that moment he fled his home in Boston like the hounds of hell were at his heels, no matter how much he’d wanted to say something, anything. Anything from *hello*, *how are you* to *great goal against Vancouver* to *you are the love of my life and I genuinely think I’ve forgotten how to breathe without you by my side*. The spectrum of things he wanted to say to Shane Hollander was genuinely mind boggling so, instead of sorting out his thoughts like an emotionally mature adult, he’d opted for radio silence.

It certainly hadn't helped that Shane had gone and picked a stupidly hot, stupidly famous movie star as his *very* public rebound and now here he was in Florida wearing the world's worst floral shirt because he committed a bit too hard to the bit, waiting for his ex-something and the Captain of his All Star team to show up with an A-List Celebrity hanging off his arm.

There had been rumors that the pair had broken up, but then they'd been photographed together several times, including another appearance of Rose Landry in a Hollander jersey at one of their home games, and Ilya had lost all hope.

He was well aware that he was staring at the entrance to this hotel bar looking like a kicked puppy, but he hadn't yet found it within himself to look away. He was going to, he really was, but then he heard the echo of a familiar laugh from the hall and realized that a bomb could've detonated behind him and he still wouldn't have been able to tear his eyes away from the spot Shane Hollander might just appear.

He had been expecting Shane and Rose to walk in, maybe alongside J.J. Boiziau, the other Montreal player who'd be playing this weekend, and his girlfriend. What he hadn't been expecting was for Shane to step into the room between Boiziau and Hayden Pike, looking unfairly adorable while holding the youngest of the children he could vaguely recognize from Pike's Instagram (he'd been looking for pictures of Shane, sue him) with Boiziau looking more like a bodyguard than a friend. Ilya had no clue why Pike was here when Shane had been Montreal's pick with Boiziau being selected by the fan vote, but, posted up next to Shane, he looked a little like a tiny guard dog and Ilya didn't want to get bit so he decided then and there that he wouldn't ask.

His eyes were only torn from the confusing scene by movement to Pike's left and Ilya watched in likely poorly concealed horror as Rose Landry appeared, holding hands with Pike kids One and Two, a bright smile on her face as she looked over and met Shane's gaze.

There was something there, though, something that he might've been able to fully understand if he'd been paying more attention and hurting less, something that looked a little more like encouragement than love. But, as it was, he was stuck in Florida in a dumb shirt and feeling a little like his heart had been torn out and stomped on and the only thing he wanted was Shane, but Shane was with Rose and Boiziau looked like he'd genuinely kill the first person who so much as looked in Shane's direction so Ilya resigned himself to drinking alone at the bar.

At least he'd get to see Shane tomorrow, at least they'd finally get to play on a line *together*. It was something; something even though what Ilya wanted was everything.

“No one knows, everything’s fine,” J.J. said for about the seventh time, it’d become something like a mantra in their walk from the hallway where each of their rooms were down to this bar. J.J. and Shane were going to be forced to mingle while Hayden and Rose took the Pike kids out to the beach to soak in the last little bit of sun before bedtime. Shane was immeasurably grateful that the two of them were here considering the fact that news was very likely going to break that his no-trade had been waived sometime in the next 72 hours. Jackie had wanted to come, too, but she was nearly seven months pregnant so after getting Shane to promise he’d call her twice a day and reminding him that she’d be watching every minute of coverage on TV, she’d finally agreed to staying back in Montreal with her sister.

They’d brought the kids, though, and Shane was more than happy to have something like a family to be spending the weekend with.

“Everything’s fine,” he repeated back to J.J., tightening his hold on Arthur just a bit and smiling softly when Arthur simply tucked his head under Shane’s chin and wrapped his hand around the unbuttoned collar of Shane’s short-sleeved linen shirt. He’d been about four seconds away from hiring a stylist when Rose had simply shown up to his apartment and dragged him out, telling him it was about time that he used his ‘crazy NHL money’ to buy proper clothing. It felt more like him, the things she’d chosen. More personal than pieces that would’ve been selected by a stylist who didn’t know him.

“Everything’s fine,” Rose repeated, sending him a smile that was all warmth and encouragement.

“I’d agree but for the fact that Ilya Rozanov is staring at us like we killed his dog,” Hayden said, dry as ever.

The laugh J.J. let out at Shane’s affronted expression had the entire room turning to look at them in near comical sync.

“Hollander!” Scott Hunter called, a bright smile on his face as he darted through the room, either entirely ignorant of the odd tension in the room or simply choosing to plow on ahead.

Shane smiled back and adjusted his grip on Arthur so he could shake Scott’s outstretched hand, “Hunter!”

Scott tugged on his hand and pulled him into a quick hug before stepping back to greet J.J. and Hayden in kind and then looking between Shane and Rose with a not even sort of subtle raised brow.

Shane smiled and bit back a laugh as he complied with the silent request, “Hunter, meet my friend Rose who very kindly agreed to spend her free weekend helping us wrangle Hayden’s kids. Rose, meet Scott Hunter, my All Stars teammate for yet another year and the only man I’ve ever fought.”

Scott barked out a bright laugh, clapping Shane on the shoulder before turning and offering Rose his hand. In the moment she dropped Ruby’s hand to shake Scott’s, Ruby fully glued herself to Rose’s leg and Shane couldn’t help but smile at how quickly these pieces of his family had meshed together. There was genuinely only one thing that could make this all better, but he didn’t dare hope.

“Let’s take this party outside,” Hayden said, reaching out for Arthur. With only a little grumbling, Shane unhanded his godson and watched Rose and Hayden maneuver their way through the crowd, greeting a couple people as they went, before making their way toward the beach. Hayden turned over his shoulder just before stepping out the door and met Shane’s eye and nodded once; silent encouragement, a reminder that they were in this together, and a ‘good luck’ all rolled into one.

“Hollander,” Scott said, pulling his attention. Shane and J.J. both went slightly rigid, a miniscule shift but visible to anyone standing close enough, a shift clearly visible to Scott. “Would you be willing to talk sometime this weekend? I feel like we never actually cleared the air and I’ve heard a thing or two that have made me realize that I was deeply in the wrong.”

J.J. looked like he was about 0.2 seconds away from asking Scott *what are your intentions with my best friend?* so Shane decided to step in before this turned into a bad 80s movie, “yeah,” he said, smiling what he hoped was an actual smile rather than a grimace. It’d been a while since that fight, but if Scott had heard any sort of rumor that’d made him think back to what he’d said that’d set Shane off and he was still here, smiling at Shane like an old friend and looking genuinely apologetic, Shane had to assume that Scott was as good a guy as he’d assumed. “Yeah, we’ll find some time to talk, I just need to say hi to a few guys here.”

“Alright,” Scott said, looking genuinely relieved, “I’ll see you later?”

“Later,” J.J. agreed for the pair of them before moving further into the room, nudging Shane’s shoulder so he’d follow along.

Shane shot Scott one last smile and then followed his friend, whispering in French and hoping no one was near enough to properly overhear, “*I need to talk to him, at least tell him Rose and I broke up, can you cover?*”

J.J. looked around the room quickly before nodding and meandering closer to the bar before starting up a loud, entirely distracting conversation with Marlow and some defender from Detroit Shane couldn't be bothered to remember the name of right now.

He slowed his steps, just enough to take in everything he could about Ilya, about the way he was hunched over the bar, his shoulders raised and jaw clenched. He looked almost like he was bracing for a strike, like if he simply made himself small and held it all in he could avoid getting hurt. Shane hated knowing that he'd made this happen, hated that he was among the things that could make Ilya this closed off, this deep into his own head.

He wasn't self-centered enough to believe that this was *all* about him.

There had been a harsh conversation entirely in Russian that Shane had overheard in the moments before disaster, a harsh enough conversation that Shane could guess there was something wrong at home. Ilya always tensed up when someone mentioned his father and he'd mentioned a brother once and never again. Shane knew that he wasn't the only thing that was hurting Ilya in this moment, but he shouldn't be amongst the things that hurt him *at all*, not when all he wanted was to be a safe place for Ilya to land, no matter how that might look.

"Rozanov," he greeted, stepping up to the bar and leaning his side against it, his hands in his pockets as if he needed to physically stop himself from reaching out. He saw Ilya flinch and immediately corrected, dropping his voice lower and putting as much emotion into three simple syllables as he could, "Ilya."

He watched as the fight seeped out of Ilya almost immediately; his shoulders dropping back down, his jaw relaxing, and his eyes fluttering shut as he leaned more of his weight against the bartop and whispered, "Shane."

Shane could tell that Ilya wanted to put on a front, wanted to snap back into that mask of snarky indifference that he so often wore, but something had thrown him off enough that he couldn't, something was keeping him vulnerable, and Shane had a pretty solid guess as to what it was, "Ilya, she's here as my friend. We broke up a month ago. A lot has happened, a lot that I really want to tell you, if you'd be willing to listen."

"Of course I'll listen," Ilya admitted quietly, sounding like the words had been dragged from his core without his permission. Shane watched as he took a deep breath before he looked up, his eyes meeting Shane's for the first time in months. It felt like a gut punch, like he'd been knocked against the boards and had the breath stolen from his lungs. They just stared at each other, eyes flitting everywhere like

they were trying to memorize every line of each other's faces, and the longer they stood, the longer Shane could feel the subtle warmth emanating from Ilya's body, the easier it became to breathe.

"So," Ilya said after a moment, his lips tugging into a smirk that was just this side of fond, "Captain, ready to play for same side?"

Shane couldn't help but smile. The fact that Ilya had dropped the article was evidence enough that he was flustered, even if he was refusing to show it on his face. His English had gotten so much better in the years they'd known each other, and not only in his vocabulary. He was clearly studying grammar, or at the very least reading or listening to books in English. He understood the structure better now and tended to take great care in speaking 'properly' unless he was playing up his accent for the camera or his mind was distracted by other things.

"Yeah," Shane said, just knowing he looked far too fond to be someone looking at his rival, or even someone looking at a friend, "I think we'll make a great team."

The smile Ilya sent him was worth it, though. It was worth people looking back on this moment when the rumor inevitably made its way past Montreal's lockerroom door and wondering just what it was that Shane felt for Ilya. Comeau could've walked in the door right now and shouted that Shane was gay for everyone to hear and it still would've been worth it, simply to see the way Ilya's cheeks dimpled and his eyes lit up when he was truly happy, simply to see that smile, the real one, the one the cameras never saw.

Ilya took a breath and turned around, leaning back against the bar, both of them staring out over the room, a couple feet apart, but if anyone really looked, the space wouldn't matter. The pair of them were like magnets. It was cheesy, honestly, how much Shane bought into every stupid romantic trope now that he knew what it was like to love someone like this; even though it'd taken him this long to admit what he was feeling was love, even though he hadn't yet told Ilya and likely wouldn't until they were in a much more stable place.

"Why is Pike here?" Ilya asked after they'd fallen silent for a moment, after Shane had let himself enjoy simply existing in Ilya's space without cameras shoved in their faces or sexuality crises sufficiently ruining the vibe.

Shane considered telling Ilya he'd explain later, considered just brushing it off, but the entire room was distracted by whatever (likely exaggerated) tale J.J. was telling and no one was close enough to overhear, so Shane chose honesty, "news is probably going to break this weekend that I've waived my no trade clause days before the trade deadline so we're presenting a united front."

Ilya laughed, genuinely laughed, and the sound of it made Shane wish he were joking. It made him wish that he could simply preserve that joy instead of dragging it down with the truth; the truth that Shane had been so fucked up mere months ago that he'd run out on the realest thing he'd ever known, that a few weeks with Rose Landry and her blunt kindness had shown him the truth, that J.J. and Hayden's acceptance had let him believe that the truth might not be life ending. He didn't want to tell him that his coaches had stopped talking to him, he didn't want to admit that he'd been spending extra time on the ice simply so he could avoid getting in the showers with the rest of the team because the one time he'd tried to pretend it was all normal Comeau had been minutes away from burning him at the stake.

When Shane didn't react, Ilya turned toward him, eyes wide as the realization set in, "you are serious?"

"Yeah."

"Shane."

"Yeah?"

"Why?" Ilya asked, his voice dripping with pain, almost like he could feel everything Shane felt, almost like he personally understood just how imperative it was that Hayden, Rose, and J.J. were here, with him, waiting for the fall out.

"It's a long story," Shane said, forcing a wry sort of smile onto his lips and avoiding meeting Ilya's eye. He knew that whatever expression was on Ilya's face right now would be enough to break him and breaking wasn't something he could afford in this moment, but lying wasn't something he was willing to do for another minute, especially when it came to this beautiful whirlwind of a man who'd defined a third of his life, so he forced himself to say, "I broke up with Rose because we weren't compatible, I told my team the reason we broke up, the honest reason, and they didn't appreciate it, but management can't fire me without backlash."

"But you will not play for team that treats you like shit," Ilya said, either accurately summing up Shane's thoughts or giving a direction, Shane wasn't sure which. "You deserve more," he added, sounding more genuine than he ever had, "you are Shane Hollander."

He forgot, sometimes, that he wasn't just Shane; that *Shane Hollander* was already a living legend in the hockey world. He was standing next to the only person who could beat him, the only person he'd ever met who was an even match.

“J.J., Rose, and Hayden know,” Shane said, hoping Ilya followed his train of thought because saying *about us* aloud in this room felt a little like testing fate. “J.J. and Hayden are entirely bewildered but they’re not mad, Rose thinks its hot.”

Ilya blew out a laugh through his nose, a huff that made Shane’s heart feel too big for his chest. It was such a small noise, a minor action on the whole scheme of things, but it was soft and warm and, more than anything, *familiar*. It was Rozanov being *Ilya* in this room full of people who could ruin their lives if they found out, it was *Shane’s* Ilya dropping the pretense of *Big Scary Russian* for just a moment. It was everything.

“We will talk more later, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane agreed easily, forcing his smile into something just friendly as he spotted someone approaching to say hello.

For the first time in all this mess, all this chaos and pain, he felt like he might just get *everything* he wanted, even if they had to walk through hell to get there.

He’d do it, though, he’d do all of this again and he’d continue this trek through hot coals and walls of flame if it meant he still had Ilya.

Because no matter how much the journey hurt, no matter how much all of this hurt, Ilya never did.

Even when they fought, even when they made mistakes and went too far to hide affection, this thing with Ilya was still overwhelmingly *good* and Shane would do anything to keep it.

Chapter 3: scott hunter

Chapter Notes

timeline wise, i'm largely going off the books because i feel like the parallel between the drawn out hollanov situationship versus the five-month speed run of skip is hilarious. for general reference, the shane x scott fight was sometime during the fall of 2016 in this timeline i've created out of thin air.

February 2017

It'd been a while since Scott had heard Ilya Rozanov whisper the words *one two two one* to Shane Hollander as he skated past their bench, it'd been a while since he'd watched raw terror flood Shane Hollander's eyes when Scott had referred to Ilya Rozanov as 'his boy' during the NHL awards his rookie year. It'd been so long, with such little further confirmation, that Scott had started to wonder if he simply had an overactive imagination.

But then he'd responded to a (in hindsight) incredibly tame chirp with the equivalent of a hydrogen bomb and there was simply no other explanation for *Shane goddamn Hollander* getting in a fight. Scott had to conclude that he'd been jumping on the metaphorical grenade by getting Scott to shut the actual fuck up before he said something loud enough for the broadcast to pick up.

But after that fight, it'd all gone silent. He hadn't seen them interact, he'd watched them continue to snark about each other in interviews, he'd seen the rivalry marketing, and he'd assumed that the longing look he'd seen Rozanov send Hollander's retreating back while hidden in the shadows of the stands in Sochi all those years ago had simply been a trick of the light.

Now, though, he's pretty sure he has to stop denying it because Rozanov was looking at Rose Landry like she'd stolen everything important to him before burning down his house and ordering a hit on his family and J.J. Boiziau was scanning the room like he was looking for a threat and Hayden Pike was here, despite the fact that his wife was very pregnant and he hadn't been selected as an All Star, standing a half step too close to his best friend almost like he was staying ready to catch him if he fell.

Scott hadn't wanted to believe the whispers he'd heard from Admirals management that Montreal's star center might be trade eligible in the next couple of weeks, he hadn't wanted to believe the rumors that an unnamed member of one of the Canadian teams had come out to his team and gotten a more than frosty reaction. But looking at the open pain mixed with aching love on Ilya Rozanov's face, looking at the clearly protective stance the Voyageurs' Alternate Captains had taken around their Captain, looking at the friendly smile shared between Rose Landry and Shane Hollander when the

tabloids have been saying it should be a smile full of heat, Scott was pretty sure he couldn't ignore *any* of this anymore.

And if comforting a friend whom he'd wronged in the past brought the possibility that New York picks up depth at center or a player who could shift to wing for a first line or, at the very least, in a pinch on the power play right before playoffs, he was simply being a good captain.

When he'd walked up to greet the Montreal group, he hadn't expected Shane to agree to talk so easily, and he very much hadn't expected to watch Shane and J.J. wander off before splitting up so J.J. could make an incredibly obvious (if you were even sort of paying attention, which none of these other players were) distraction while Shane, in front of God and the NHL's 44 best players, cozied up to his longtime rival at the bar.

Scott watched from a distance as two simple words from Shane's mouth changed Rozanov into an entirely different person. It was almost as if Scott could *physically see* the difference between Rozanov and Ilya. The way he was looking at Shane could only be described as soft and the way his entire body was tilted toward Shane could only be described as loving. He looked far more like an over-sized teddy bear than the wall of muscle he was known to be. It seemed, to Scott, like Ilya wanted nothing more than to tuck Shane into a hug and never let him go.

Scott had honestly expected a relationship born from years of rivalry and vitriol to be full of fire and hate sex (which it honestly, probably, still sort of was) but this was nothing short of soft, all-encompassing love. He could tell, even from across the room, that they had a language all their own, that they'd known each other long enough to speak without speaking. Honestly, if the idea weren't fucking *insane*, Scott might've guessed that they'd been together as long as they'd known each other. The sort of comfort and silent communication Scott was watching right now didn't happen overnight, especially when you were dealing with two people as emotionally repressed as Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.

There was something different about Shane, though, something a little more open, a little less repressed. He was dressed differently, for one. But it was his whole 'vibe' (yes, contrary to popular (Ilya Rozanov's) belief, Scott was *not* too old to know modern slang) that really had Scott believing something had shifted. He didn't look awkward; he wasn't watching the exits like he needed to know the best way to escape. Shane had looked something close to 'at peace' when he'd stepped into the room alongside his three friends and the three children that, according to Hayden Pike's Instagram, called him 'Uncle Shane,' but that was nothing in comparison to the total calm that'd come over his body when he'd stepped into Rozanov's orbit.

Scott, now certain he wasn't reading too far into this, pulled out his phone and quickly plugged in the Apple Maps directions between Montreal and Boston before typing in the directions for New York to Boston, committing the distance to memory just in case he needed an extra selling point. It was only

an hour closer, but the option Scott was planning to pitch didn't involve crossing an international border with a Russian visa in Trump's America, so he was choosing to count that as a win.

He was about to put his phone away when it pinged with a new notification from *Shane 'Rook' Hollander*, a name he had yet to change from the first time they'd played on an All Star team together, despite the fact the man had won two Stanley Cups and was *decidedly* no longer a Rookie. The message simply included a room number and Scott got the weird sensation that he should never, ever tell Ilya Rozanov that he'd received this text, no matter how innocent the circumstances may be.

* * *

"Who are you texting?" Ilya asked, leaning slightly closer to Shane as the room started moving around them again, their colleagues no longer distracted by J.J.'s antics.

Shane noticed the careful structure of his sentence, the type of 'proper' English Ilya really only used when he was calm enough to allow himself the time. It was also, Shane had noticed, the type of English he only used around people he seemed to trust and Shane had to wonder if it had something to do with the fact that he knew those people would correct him with kindness rather than as a tease. Shane had never hesitated to gently correct Ilya's phrasing or structure and, thinking back on it, it felt like a greater show of trust than something so simple should be; it felt like he was telling Ilya he was safe to make mistakes, that Shane would catch him if he fell, and it felt a little like Ilya telling Shane he trusted him enough that simple mistakes didn't feel like failure.

"Scott Hunter," Shane answered, a smile tugging at his lips as he easily anticipated the next words out of Ilya's mouth, and then immediately realized that Scott had been 100% correct when he'd told Shane he was starting to sound like Ilya.

"He is fossil, why are you texting fossil?"

"He asked if we could talk," Shane said with a shrug, "I'm betting he's heard rumors and might have an offer to make."

"New York, it is not so far from Boston," Ilya said, just about out of nowhere. Shane clocked the slightly panicked look in his eye immediately; Ilya hadn't meant to say that out loud. It was simply a case of loose lips in a situation where he felt comfortable enough to drop at least part of his filter and that alone made Shane smile.

“No, it’s not,” Shane said, quickly saving Ilya from embarrassment. “It’s also not a divisional rival, might just be enough to get the League to leave us alone.”

He watched the cogs turn in Ilya’s mind and delighted in the spark of hope that lit up those gorgeous hazel eyes when he realized what Shane was saying, “we could maybe admit we’re friends.”

“Right, friends,” Shane teased, “we’ll talk more later, I’m going to go talk to Scott now, see if I might have some path forward when this all comes crashing down.”

“See you at practice, Captain,” Ilya said, tapping two fingers to his brow before pointing them at Shane in a loose salute, a crooked grin on his lips that made Shane want to throw all caution to the wind and kiss him right here, right now.

“See you at practice, teammate,” Shane shot back, sending him a grin of his own and watching Ilya’s eyes go soft in a way they so rarely did; it was a look that had become more common in the months leading up to Shane fleeing the scene of Ilya’s home in Boston, a look that – if he were about 38% more unhinged – Shane might argue looked a lot like love.

* * *

Despite having literally just decided to stop ignoring the Hollander/Rozanov of it all, Scott was fucking *dumbfounded*.

He looked up from his phone which was still displaying Shane’s text with his room number, to see Shane himself stepping away from the bar while Ilya looked at him like he’d personally hung the stars in the sky. It wasn’t just soft, simple love; it was outright *devotion*. Scott had very little experience with that level of emotion; he knew he was entirely smitten with Kip, but it’d only been a month, and while it’d certainly been an intense month, it really hadn’t been all that long on the whole scheme of things. Shane and Ilya, on the other hand, had been building this love for *years*. Scott couldn’t even imagine what it must be like having to hide this thing that’s so clearly a massive part of their lives. After a mere *month* with Kip he was already considering throwing all caution to the wind simply to be seen with him in public.

“Might as well walk up together,” Shane said, a crooked sort of smile on his face as he walked up to Scott, effectively yanking him out of his introspection. Scott was a little shocked with how calm Shane seemed, but the shock was quickly replaced by concern because it was only this close that Scott could finally see the exhaustion in Shane’s eyes. He’d seemed calmer, less anxious, a little more steady throughout the night, but he clearly wasn’t entirely alright and some odd sort of protective

instinct, something left over from that first All Star Weekend, something linked to the way the Admirals always had the senior members of the team room with the younger guys or new members on roadies, was pushing him to find a way to make it all better.

“Lead the way, Captain.”

Shane huffed out a light laugh, rolling his eyes in a way that somehow still seemed fond despite the odd strain in their friendship over the past few months, in these weeks since Scott had nearly detonated the fragile safety Shane had built for himself.

He trailed behind Shane through the hotel, watching as he effortlessly darted through the small crowd of people in the lobby in a way that made it seem like he'd spent his entire life learning how to avoid contact with strangers, in a way that made it seem a little like he'd long since learned how to make himself smaller so he wouldn't be noticed. It was so different from the Shane Hollander that took the ice each game, a confident set to his shoulders and a steely glint in his eyes, that it threw Scott for a loop.

It honestly reminded him more of one of his friends from boarding school, one of the few friends he'd made who didn't play hockey, he'd darted through crowds with this same skill, he'd avoided eye contact and confrontation, he'd hated the way their school shirts pressed against his neck and had always left his tie just a little too loose to mitigate the sensation. Scott couldn't help but wonder if there was some greater similarity between that friend he hadn't thought of in years and the generational talent stepping into the elevator in front of him; he couldn't help but wonder if there was some extra layer to the anxious fog that seemed to cling to Shane Hollander's every move. Now didn't necessarily feel like the time to ask, but Scott tucked the thought away, deciding it might be good to remember if things went his way, if Shane ended up in New York. It might be something to pay attention to; some lens through which he could view the best ways to help Shane adjust to a major change and a new city.

Shane pulled him out of his thoughts once more as he pushed open the door to the suite he appeared to be sharing with Pike and his kids. It was one of those suites meant for families with a sitting room at the main entrance and actual doors in front of two rooms, one of the doors was open and Scott could spot one of those fold-up cribs he'd seen his teammate's wives cart along for their younger children if they travelled for an away game. Two Voyageurs duffels, one with #35 and the other with #24 embroidered on the face, were placed at the foot of each of the double beds with the crib set up between them. It was such a simple show of friendship, something so sweet and genuine, that Scott was genuinely at risk of tearing up.

He'd heard, somewhere through the grapevine, that Hayden and Shane still roomed together for roadies like they had since their rookie year, despite the fact they wore the C and A and could easily request individual rooms, but seeing it was something else, especially on a weekend like this when

Hayden didn't even have to be here. But he was, he'd shown up for his best friend and brought his kids along for the ride.

"Pike's a good friend," he said out loud and watched as a smile spread across Shane's face.

"The best," Shane agreed as he opened the mini fridge and pulled out two bottles of water, tossing one to Scott and then taking a seat on the couch and nodding his head toward the spot next to him, "what'd you want to talk about?"

"I need to apologize for that fight," Scott said, slumping onto the couch and deciding to just bite the bullet. "It was wrong of me to throw that in your face, to even sort of insinuate that I knew anything. Which I didn't, by the way, not for certain. I honestly wasn't even certain until tonight when I watched you somehow tame the rabid, angry bear that goes by the name of Ilya Rozanov in five seconds flat."

Shane breathed out another laugh through his nose, this one even more fond than the last, "he's not as angry as he lets the world believe," he said before the soft smile was replaced with something more like guilt, "and it was my fault he's been angry recently, it's a long story that hasn't necessarily fully resolved but it's better now."

"I still want to apologize," Scott said, forcing himself to stay on track rather than dig for information on what the fuck Ilya Rozanov could be if it wasn't a pile of anger and cocky bravado. The fact that Scott had seen Ilya go soft with his own two eyes wasn't quite enough to make him believe it had been *real*. "It was wrong of me, especially when I know what it feels like to hide that part of yourself."

Shane didn't look anywhere near as shocked at the admission as Scott might've wished.

He honestly looked a little annoyed.

Scott's face must've shown some sort of discomfort at Shane's reaction as he quickly smiled, shook his head, and said, "I owe Roz money."

"You're kidding."

“I am not,” Shane said, starting to look more amused than annoyed. “I panicked after our fight and called him. The panic wasn’t just about you, it was also things with me and Ilya. We were becoming more serious, something real, and I wasn’t in a good place about any of it. But, yeah, I called, he talked me down, made some joke about how you’d be the least likely to out us because he had his suspicions, we made a bet on it.”

“I don’t know whether or not to be offended.”

Shane let out a real laugh at that, one that made his eyes crinkle and the freckles that dotted his nose scrunch up. It’d always been clear that Shane was attractive – the hottest guy in the NHL according to some magazine that’d led to an absolute treasure trove of chirps directed at the poor guy – but *this* Shane, this person who was relaxed and laughing and free, was something else entirely. If Scott weren’t hopelessly falling for Kip and if he weren’t dead certain that Ilya Rozanov would murder him in cold blood, Scott could’ve easily been convinced to make a move.

“Shane,” Scott said, smiling just a bit even as he tried to get back on track. He didn’t know when the Pikes would be back and he didn’t want to steal Shane’s entire night and they had practice bright and early before the skills competition, so he needed to stop getting distracted, “what’s going on? Management has been talking about a star center becoming trade eligible, Boiziau hardly left enforcer mode all night, and Pike’s travelling with you when he has a pregnant wife at home. I know we’re not, like, super close or whatever, but I hope you can count me amongst your friends even though I fucked up in our last game and I want you to know I’m here for you.”

It maybe wasn’t the most eloquent phrasing, but Scott was tired, he missed Kip, and he just needed Shane to know that someone outside his Alternate Captains and his league-mandated archrival had his back.

“I came out to my team,” Shane admitted, looking a little bit shocked that he’d been so honest. He paused a moment before plowing on ahead, apparently deciding that since he’d said that much he might as well just keep talking, “it didn’t go great. Hayden and J.J. are clearly on my side, most are apathetic, my third line is supportive but they’re too young to really speak up and I wouldn’t want them to risk it. The real problem is the coaching staff and management, though. Like bad enough that I ended up waiving my no trade. They want to get rid of me as soon as possible but they can’t scratch me and strip me of the C without backlash and they can’t admit why they’re scratching without opening themselves up to law suits and they can’t trade me for the same reasons so we’re just stuck at an impasse unless something happens that would give me a media-ready reason to leave.”

“So, like long-term injury reserve or some sort of public fight?” Scott said, thinking faster now that they were talking about hockey rather than the more personal aspect, “or a family thing?”

“My parents live in Ottawa and they’re, thankfully, young and healthy so there’s no reason I’d need to move to take care of them and, also, I don’t really want to go to Ottawa right now. Having the pressure of building Montreal back up to a playoff contender was stressful enough, I don’t think I could handle the pressure of being expected to do the same for Ottawa right now with everything else going on. I don’t have any other close family, or really any family in any major market city, so, yeah, we’re left with injury reserve or a public fight which, honestly, Comeau might take care of soon enough.”

“Are you in danger?”

“Not necessarily,” Shane hedged, clearly not telling the whole truth. When Scott leveled him with a look that was about half Captain, half protective older brother, Shane relented, “the real danger is that they won’t protect me on the ice. They’re keeping their distance, in practice and in games, and it’s going to end with me getting hit because *I* don’t have eyes in the back of my head and *they’ve* decided to stop watching my back.”

“But you’re not in danger in the locker room?”

“I’ve been avoiding the locker room,” Shane said, a sharp sort of sadness flickering across his face, “putting in extra time on the ice so that most everyone has cleared out by the time I go in.”

“Have you talked to your agent about trade options?”

“Yeah, nothing too specific, though. I don’t want to take a massive pay cut, not because I care about the money, but because I want to be paid what I’m worth. Taking a cut feels like admitting that I’m worth less because I’m gay. I don’t know if that’s rational, but I also don’t know if I have to *be* rational.”

“I think you can be as irrational as you want,” Scott said, meaning every word. “You’re Shane *fucking* Hollander, never sell yourself short.”

“Now *you’re* the one who’s starting to sound like Rozanov.”

Scott couldn’t have stopped the laugh that escaped his throat if he tried. When he caught his breath he leaned his head back against the couch and turned just enough so he could meet Shane’s eye, “I hope you’ll consider New York,” he said, packing his tone with as much earnest conviction as he could as

plans and options started to swim through his mind. In a perfect world, they'd get rid of an asshole defender and a weak third line winger and Shane Hollander, the guy with the highest hockey IQ in the league, the guy who could probably play any position on the ice if you gave him decent enough instructions and about five minutes to practice, could slot into their first line along with Scott and Carter and they could carry the Admirals right to the Cup. "Management has been whispering, they're interested. If the space opens up, if the narrative unfolds, I hope you'll consider New York."

Shane nodded once, looking like he was genuinely considering Scott's offer, but before he could respond, the key pad on the door beeped and the room was filled with the overlapping chatter of Pike's daughters and Pike's voice raising over the din to tell his sniffling son, "I checked his location, Uncle Shane is in the room, it'll be okay, promise."

"Aww," Shane cooed, immediately climbing off the couch and heading toward the door, "what's wrong, buddy?"

"Here," Pike said, passing his son over. Shane took him easily, wrapping the toddler into a hug, one strong arm wrapped around his body and one big hand cradling the back of his head. It was an oddly domestic scene, like Shane was simply part of the Pike family, no question about it. It made Scott think of the truly frightening corner of the internet that Kip had introduced him to where teenage girls 'shipped' hockey players. There was an honestly concerning number of so-called 'Shayden' shippers and Scott was about half-motivated to post a video of this little scene just to see what sort of reaction it'd get. He held himself back purely because the absolute *last* thing Shane needed right now was any comment about his sexuality making it into the mainstream media.

"Oh, hey, Hunter," Pike said, finally noticing him on the couch amidst the chaos of young children. He turned to look at Shane and they held the type of silent conversation that Scott had only ever seen happen between married couples and linemates who acted more like a pair of bonded kittens than grown men. Shane nodded once and Hayden visibly deflated, looking just beyond relieved. Scott looked a little closer and realized Arthur had fallen asleep in the mere minute Shane had been holding him and decided it was time to take his leave.

"Hey, Pike," he greeted in return, tossing his empty water bottle into the nearest trashcan as he headed toward the door. "Cute kids."

"Thanks," Pike said, a genuine smile on his face. "You ready for the weekend?"

"Some idiot put Rozanov, Hollander, and I on the same team. What could possibly go wrong?"

Shane shot him a smile as Hayden laughed and as Scott said his goodnights and made his way out the door, he let himself believe that, despite the uncertainty, despite the pain and confusion, everything might just be alright.

Chapter 4: practice

February 2017

Scott hadn't been kidding when he told Hayden it was an idiot who'd put Rozanov, Hollander, and himself on one team. They weren't even five full minutes into practice and Hollander looked to be about three seconds away from murdering Rozanov where he stood and Scott honestly wasn't sure whose side he was going to take (that was a lie, he would absolutely be taking Hollander's).

Scott didn't know why he was here. If they'd just divided the 44 players into 4 teams of 11 based on Division, he'd be happily playing with other players from Metro. Instead, because this League was apparently *still* planning to milk Hollander and Rozanov for all they were worth, they'd divided them between Eastern and Western Conference and drafted from there to make it look like finally putting them on the same team was a choice rather than a matter of conference. This team was *clearly* stacked but the near certain win didn't really make up for the fact that Scott was positive he was about to witness a crime.

He watched as Rozanov came to a sharp stop, the edges of his skates sending a spray of snow directly into Hollander's face where he was stretching on the ice, his mouth opening to either chirp or make some innuendo that'd scar anyone who thought about it for too long and Scott was about ready to step in to prevent the impending homicide when Hollander's voice cut straight through the chatter, "Ilya, stop."

Rozanov shut his mouth so quickly there was an audible snap.

"Sorry," he muttered after a moment, ducking his head slightly and sending Shane what could only be described as puppy dog eyes. The man was actually pouting.

Shane, like some freak of nature, didn't even flinch at the expression as he pointed over Ilya's shoulder, "give me a lap and when you're done we can split into lines and scrimmage. Quit fucking around."

The rest of their team watched in awed silence as Rozanov turned around and started skating with no further complaints or hijinks.

"What?" Shane asked as he caught sight of their shocked expressions.

“Sorry,” Brophy, a giant defenseman from New Jersey, said, somehow finding his voice first, “I simply wasn’t aware you could walk Roz like a dog.”

“He cannot -” Ilya started before Shane cut him off, “skate.”

Ilya went silent and continued to skate.

Scott didn’t know whether he should be repulsed or impressed; then he clocked the heated look Ilya shot Shane and landed on repulsed.

It was honestly a wonder these two hadn’t been found out. They were not subtle.

“Hunter,” Shane called, climbing to his feet and gliding in Scott’s direction, a look in his eyes that Scott usually only saw in the face-off circle. Shane had a plan.

“Hollander,” Scott replied, skating a few paces closer and ducking his head in case Shane didn’t want everyone to overhear. Behind them, the rest of their teammates had started chatting again as they finished warming up and Rozanov was finishing his lap around the rink, clearly taking his sweet time.

“I want you, Ilya, and me to be our first line. He’s probably most comfortable at center or right, but he’d play left if I asked. I mostly just want the two of us to move around until we find the right configuration. It’d be nice if Vaughny were here, but Ilya could probably mimic his play if we want.”

“Did you talk to your agent this morning?”

“I’m supposed to rank trade options by noon. New York is the only team on the list where I’d possibly have to move to wing to play on the first line.”

“I want you on the left first, let’s see if Roz can mimic Vaughan on the right then, in the second scrimmage, you and I swap.”

Shane nodded once and looked over his shoulder, his eyes immediately landing on Ilya like he’d just *known* where he was even with the sounds of a busy rink and a conversation with Scott drawing his

attention, “Rozanov! Can you come here?”

Ilya changed directions immediately, coming to a much more tame stop at Shane’s side and throwing an arm around his shoulders as he asked, “what do you need?”

“Can you mimic Carter Vaughan on the right? Scott’ll play center and I’ll play left.”

Ilya paused a moment, his eyes going distant even as they darted around, like he was seeing something no one else could, “shorter passes and more control in neutral zone, right? A little like Pike but maybe quicker?”

“Exactly,” Shane agreed, leaning into Ilya’s side a bit more like it was entirely natural, like the rest of their team hadn’t stopped talking simply to stare at the historical event that was Hollander and Rozanov *getting along*. God, if only they knew. “Just for practice, for the game we’ll swap around and play as ourselves.”

“You should play center for game,” Ilya said immediately, “I play right, Hunter on left. You are best defender, best two-way forward of us three. You at center for a 3 v. 3 makes most sense.”

“Why am I left?” Scott asked, genuinely wondering what plays Ilya was seeing in his head and happily ignoring the way their teammates were watching this conversation as if it were network television.

“You have a stronger forehand,” Shane answered as Ilya nodded in agreement, “his backhand is the strongest of us three.”

It was stupidly simple in the grand scheme of things, honestly more of a signal that they were great captains rather than a great couple, but Scott couldn’t help but be shocked at how easily they’d read each other’s minds.

“Right,” Scott forced himself to say aloud. They only had so many minutes on the ice and he really couldn’t be spending all of them having an existential crisis over Shane and Ilya. “Let’s practice.”

Shane grinned and turned toward their team, moving carefully so he didn't dislodge Ilya's arm around his shoulders and somehow sounding commanding even as he was essentially being cuddled by his rival as he spoke, "right, let's scrimmage, defenders should probably play center since we're 3 v. 3, if you want to practice face-offs, yell and we'll pause to run drills, sound good?"

He got shouts of general agreement from the rest of the players and the next thing Scott knew they were lined up and ready to play.

The following hour of practice was some of the most fun Scott had ever had on the ice and by the end of it he'd decided he wasn't above begging to get Shane to New York. Any combination of a forward line with the two of them on the ice was incredible. Hell, Scott would play goalie if it got Shane on the Admirals. But that last line up, the one they'd be playing for the game, with Scott at left, Shane at center, and Ilya at right was the stuff of dreams. It made him wish that the salary cap didn't exist solely so there could be some world out there where they could play that line in an actual game.

The first combination they'd played, with Ilya mimicking Carter on the right, was near lethal and just a *glimpse* of how great it could be had Scott nearly salivating. He felt, quite dramatically, like the heavens had opened up and shone a light on the way hockey was meant to be played. For the first time, in a season characterized by slumps and highs and nothing in between, Scott felt steady. He felt like he could *taste* the Cup. He was certain he could do it even without Hollander at his wing, but the path to victory would be so much clearer if he could just make this all shake out in their favor.

He didn't know how to shape a narrative that would allow Montreal to drop their Captain weeks before the playoffs, but Scott was starting to consider the merits of convincing someone to injure Shane just enough that he had to spend a couple weeks on IR but wouldn't miss playoffs.

Maybe he could goad one of the idiots on the Voyageurs into starting a public feud.

Maybe he needed to touch grass.

"Great practice," Shane called, a massive grin on his face as they crowded into the locker room and started stripping out of their practice gear. Scott could almost feel the joy radiating off of Shane and had to wonder how long it'd been since he'd felt safe in a locker room, since he'd felt *good* after getting off the ice. "We're absolutely going to win this thing. Have fun and be back here a little before the skills competition, it'd be nice if we could do media before the competition starts to help the comms team out, give them the option to space the teams out instead of having to deal with all four at once."

“Smart,” the young kid from D.C. said. Scott really needed to learn these kids’ names. It was getting a little embarrassing. “Our media team back home appreciates when we do that.”

Shane shot the kid a smile (that had him blushing at being openly acknowledged by *Shane Hollander*, not that Shane would ever realize that) and yanked his jersey off before sitting down on the bench to unlace his skates. Ilya settled into the stall next to him and started talking under his breath, low enough that Scott couldn’t even hear him from Shane’s other side. Shane was nodding along, a half-smile on his lips, looking a little like he couldn’t believe his luck.

They were interrupted by a shout of, “Uncle Shane!” from the hall that had all eleven of them snapping their heads up as Pike’s daughters opened the locker room door with a bang and ran straight for Shane like they’d been tracking his scent.

Shane tossed his skates aside and leaned down on instinct stretching his arms out just in time for the twins to latch on, wrapping their arms around his neck and talking over each other at a speed Scott couldn’t even *begin* to understand.

“Sorry,” Pike said from the doorway, holding onto his son and sending Shane a sheepish smile. “They got away from me.”

“It’s okay,” Shane responded immediately, resting his head against whichever twin was on his right, his smile turning a little gooey. “I did promise ice cream when I was done with practice, it’s my fault for taking too much time to get out to the lobby.”

“You took *forever*,” the twin on Shane’s left said with a clearly exaggerated pout.

“I know, Ruby,” Shane said, sending her a pout in return that had no business being that cute. Seriously, this was a fully grown man. He should not be able to be *adorable*. Scott was a little incensed, honestly. “I’m sorry. Do you think I could shower quickly before we leave? Ten minutes, promise.”

“Can I start a timer?” the twin Scott could now identify as Ruby asked.

“Sure,” Shane agreed easily before turning back to Pike, “Hayd, can Ruby use your phone to time me?”

“Why can’t she use your phone?” Pike asked.

“I don’t think you want her using my phone.”

Pike’s eyes shot toward Ilya so quickly you would’ve missed it if you weren’t paying attention and a blush spread across his cheeks, just barely visible in the half-lit locker room, “right, yeah. Ruby, come here, you can use my phone to time Uncle Shane.”

Scott didn’t even sort of want to know what might be on Shane’s phone.

“Ten minutes?” Ruby repeated, looking up at Shane.

Shane nodded seriously and untangled his arm from the other twin to offer his pinky, “promise.”

Ruby linked their pinkies together and nodded in return before grabbing her sister’s hand and walking toward the door, she looked over her shoulder as she took the phone from Pike’s outstretched hand, the clock app already open to the timer tab, “ten minutes.”

Shane nodded seriously once more, his voice entirely earnest as he echoed, “ten minutes.”

The door swung shut once more and Scott breathed out a light laugh, nudging his shoulder against Shane’s, “they’ve got you wrapped around their little fingers, don’t they?”

“They sure do,” Shane agreed, standing up and quickly finishing getting undressed before heading toward the showers, grabbing a folded towel off the shelf as he went, “they’re also vicious so I better hurry up.”

The locker room started moving again, all of them smiling just a little at the peak into Shane Hollander off the ice. Well, most of them were smiling, Ilya looked a little like he’d just been checked against the boards as he stared after Shane’s retreating form; breathless and more than a little awed.

“Rozanov!” Shane called, his voice echoing out of the shower stalls and into the room, “get a move on, you’re coming with.”

“Right,” Ilya said, snapping back into action and apparently not even questioning the fact that he’d been invited along for ice cream with Pike’s kids even though everyone else in the room, once more, looked so shocked it looked a little like they’d been electrocuted.

Ilya tossed his gear into his stall, putting it in some vague sort of order that’d eventually be sorted out by the equipment managers and then all but ran into the showers just as Shane was coming back out. Shane walked right to his own stall and started getting dressed, moving methodically, calmly, like he wasn’t fully aware what sort of chaos he was causing simply by being friendly with Ilya in public.

He was sitting on the bench again, tying the laces on his sneakers, when Ilya stepped out of the shower and started getting dressed next to him.

They were both out the door, Ruby’s voice happily announcing, “that was only eight minutes, good job, Uncle Shane!” before anyone else moved.

“Are they ... friends?” the same D.C. kid who’d complimented Shane’s idea to help out the comms team asked.

“Yeah,” Scott said after a moment, wondering what would be too much to reveal but deciding that he might just be able to help with *this* narrative, even if he was struggling to find a way to help with the other. “I mean, I think they always sort of have been. They got shoved to the top of the game so quickly, I think they relied on each other a bit. I think it was nice for them to have someone else who understood the insanity even if they weren’t always super friendly, even if they were mostly just competitive. But they’ve been friendlier recently, maybe they’ve just finally matured.”

“That makes sense,” Brophy mused, looking thoughtful. “Good for them, I can’t imagine how crazy their lives are. It’s good they have each other.”

Scott smiled as the relief flooded his chest; he hadn’t fucked it up, he hadn’t said too much. He’d helped, and he’d helped other people realize that Rozanov and Hollander being friendly wasn’t world ending.

“Who’s that?” the second twin, the one that Ilya was pretty sure was named Jade asked, peeking over Shane’s shoulder and pointing at Ilya after Shane had picked her up when she’d started trying to climb up his arm like a kitten. Ilya had no clue what he was doing here, but Shane had asked (read: told) him to come so here he was.

“This is my friend Ilya,” Shane answered, “he plays for Boston. Ilya, meet Jade, Ruby, and Arthur.”

“Nice to meet you all,” Ilya said, knowing he sounded painfully earnest and feeling a little shy. He smiled and watched Shane’s eyes go soft. They still needed to talk, still needed to sort through the insanity and figure out what this was, but Ilya almost didn’t want to. Sorting all of this out meant admitting to things that scared him senseless, it meant opening up and telling Shane what was happening at home. He wished they could just live in this; in the warmth of the Florida sun in winter and the softness of Shane’s smiles without having to make it real.

“Rose is ditching us to hang out by the pool, but we can meet her there later,” Pike said, seemingly easily adjusting to the fact that Ilya was joining them. Ilya was certain that this calm, easy going demeanor would only last so long but he was going to enjoy it while it was here. He had half a mind to start antagonizing Pike but decided to choose peace ... at least for the time being. “What time do you guys have to be back?”

“Around five,” Shane answered, adjusting his grip on Jade as he shouldered the arena door open, Ilya lengthened his steps to catch the door before it closed, holding it open for Ruby to follow Shane and her sister out and then for Pike and his son to follow after. “Skills competition starts at seven but we’re going to make the comms team’s life easier and space out media. I think the two of us are on a panel with Scott tomorrow.”

“When are you going to call your agent?” Pike asked.

“I already texted.”

Pike looked sad and Ilya *almost* felt bad for him. The pair had played together since their rookie season. They played the same line, had stalls next to each other in the locker room, and all but lived in each other’s pockets off the ice. Ilya was certain that Shane wouldn’t even be thinking about leaving Montreal if it weren’t dire, if he weren’t convinced that there was nothing he could do to make it better.

“Did you rank or just give one choice?” Pike asked.

“I ranked, but I made it clear that there was one choice I’d prefer.”

“New York?”

“New York,” Shane affirmed. “The flight’s only an hour and a half non-stop.”

“You think you’ll play out the season?”

“Probably,” Shane said after a minute. Ilya wasn’t sure what to make of his tone. It was some painful mix of hope and resignation; like he wanted to get out because it hurt but he wanted to stay because it’d been home. Ilya understood that, maybe more than Shane could possibly know. It was how he felt about Russia, on a greater scale than simply the team that’d drafted him. It was his home, even if his family thought him worthless and his government thought him a disgrace. He hated the idea of leaving Russia behind, but he knew that there might come a day where he had to, where the only way to be safe and happy would be to turn his back on the place he’d called home. “It’d take something big happening to get Montreal to let me leave mid-season, even if they want to get rid of me.”

Ilya needed this conversation to end. If they continued, if the tears that were crowding the corners of Shane’s eyes started to fall, he’d follow him right off the cliff into a breakdown and that wasn’t something that could happen in broad daylight.

“So, what has been your favorite part of Florida?” Ilya asked, gently tapping Jade’s arm to get her attention.

Pike and Shane both looked relieved at the re-direction and the broken look on Shane’s face was replaced by an easy smile that made Ilya feel a little like he’d won a prize.

They spent the next couple of hours that way, existing in the fragile peace and living and dying by the Pike kids’ smiles and laughter and when Arthur yawned one time too many and Pike announced naptime, Ilya found himself feeling sad that the time was over. He wanted to follow them and this domestic bliss into the afternoon, he wanted to continue to exist in this simple joy where trade deadlines and sick fathers and the terror of realizing you’ve stumbled into love didn’t exist.

Shane must've read it on his face because he simply squeezed Ilya's forearm, a fleeting touch but a point of contact that felt a little like finally seeing shore after spending months adrift at sea, and said, "I'll help get them tucked in and then why don't we grab lunch out on the pool deck? They can meet us down there when they wake up and we can all have a little more fun before heading back to the arena."

"Lunch?" Ilya asked, attaching to the offer for some reason, holding onto the hope that, despite how insane it might seem, it might be something like a date.

"Lunch," Shane echoed, nodding like he understood what Ilya was really asking. "I'll text when I'm on my way down the lobby."

"Alright," Ilya agreed, doing all he could to stop himself from smiling like an idiot as he turned back toward the Pike kids, "it was nice to meet all of you, I will see you later."

"Bye, Rozanov," Pike said, smiling like he still couldn't quite believe how civil of a morning they'd had. Ilya could relate. This weekend wasn't even *sort of* going how he'd imagined it.

* * *

Once the kids were all tucked in and peacefully asleep, Shane pulled swim trunks and one of the shirts Rose had talked him into buying out of his duffle. He got dressed quickly, leaving at least two more buttons undone than was probably socially acceptable and then tucked his phone and wallet into his pockets before grabbing his sandals and sunglasses.

"I don't think you have to run," Hayden teased, lounging back on his bed with his phone resting on his sternum as he looked at Shane, clearly holding back laughter, "I'm pretty sure he'll wait."

"He's waited long enough," Shane said, knowing that Hayden understood he meant more than just the half hour it'd taken them to get the kids settled after a morning full of excitement and sugar. "I'll see you later?"

"Yeah," Hayden said, kindly not commenting further on Shane's slightly mad dash out of their suite. "We'll come down when they're all awake, text if you need anything before then."

“I will,” Shane promised, thankful once more that life had blessed him with Hayden as his best friend.

He pulled out his phone as he made his way into the hall and shot off a quick text to ‘Lily’ to say he was on his way to the lobby and found he wasn’t exactly surprised when the reply came almost instantly: *I am already downstairs.*

The Ilya of even a week ago never would’ve been that honest, he’d have walked up a flight of stairs and then come back down to perfectly time his entry to Shane’s arrival and then act like it’d just been happenstance. He never would’ve admitted that he was already waiting, that he was *excited* to see Shane. But somewhere between Rose showing up and a morning spent with Hayden’s kids, Ilya had apparently decided to drop the mask.

Shane didn’t know what to do with it. He almost wanted the mask to go back on. He almost wanted them to go back to existing in that weird in between where nothing got too real and they could pretend that they weren’t risking everything; where they could pretend they both weren’t *more than ready* to risk everything.

Shane pushed that thought away and forced himself to remember all the nights he’d spent wishing for *more*, all the times he’d let his fear overwhelm everything good. He stepped out of the elevator and decided he was done letting fear run his life. He’d come out to his team and *nearly* the worst had happened. He hadn’t been injured or kicked out, simply pushed toward the door. But, nonetheless, he’d done the scary thing and something bad had happened and he was still here, still standing. He could keep doing scary things and the laws of the universe said that eventually something good might come out of it. He could only hope that the something good would be life with Ilya at his side.

Ilya was already sitting at one of the tables between the little bar and restaurant and the poolside, clearly trying to appear nonchalant but for someone who knew Ilya as well as Shane did, it was clear that he was nervous. Something about that made Shane calm down. He wasn’t alone in this and if all went well, he wouldn’t *ever* be alone in this.

“Hey,” he greeted, taking the seat next to Ilya at the square table rather than the one across. He wanted to be as close as publicly acceptable, as close as Ilya would let him.

“Hey,” Ilya responded. “How are you?”

Shane blew out a breath and forced himself to actually think before answering. There was only so much he could say in public, but he still wanted to be as honest as possible. He’d decided on honesty

in that restaurant with Rose and even though honesty had made things harder, he still felt more free. He felt more stable, less like he was balancing on an increasingly precarious cliffside.

“I’m alright,” he said after a moment, meeting Ilya’s eye so he could see the truth in the statement. “Things are crazy, I feel a little shaky, but over all I’m alright.”

“Good,” Ilya said after a moment, offering Shane a small but genuine smile as a waiter dropped off a Coke and a ginger ale. The simple fact that Ilya had ordered for them both before Shane had even showed up made Shane’s heart feel about three sizes too big for his chest.

“I’ll give you a couple minutes to look over the menu,” the waiter said, a polite smile on his face before he moved on to the next table.

“How are you?” Shane asked once the waiter was out of earshot. He picked up the menu and averted his eyes, somehow just knowing that Ilya was more likely to speak honestly if he didn’t have the full force of Shane’s attention directed at him.

“I am ...” Ilya started before trailing off with a huff, “I am okay, tired. I missed you.”

Shane hadn’t been expecting that admission.

He looked up and met Ilya’s eye and saw just how much he meant it; just how much complex emotion was living in Ilya’s eyes.

“I missed you too,” Shane said softly.

Ilya smiled again before ducking his head to study the menu. Shane watched him swallow hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing slightly before he took a conscious breath, “things back home are ... not great. I will tell more, if you want to listen. Just not here.”

“Later then,” Shane agreed easily, diverting his attention back to his own menu and scanning for something that at least sort of fit the parameters of his diet. He, oddly enough, didn’t feel the need to be quite as strict as usual. Whether it was the Florida sun, a good morning practice, or the fact that

Ilya was sitting next to him, he wasn't sure, but he decided to take the break his brain gave him and go with it as he mulled over the options. "What are you competing in tonight?"

Ilya breathed out a barely audible sigh of relief at the out from the more serious conversation and after another moment of reading the menu, leaned back in his chair and started chattering about the skills competition.

Shane just let it all wash over him, let the comforting tone of a voice he'd come to love soothe the anxious edges of his mind. The conversation only paused when the waiter came back to take their orders and again when their food was delivered. Ilya kept chatting, chirping about different players and asking Shane's opinion, throughout their meal and by the time they'd finished and charged the bill to their rooms, Shane felt like they were back on somewhat even ground.

Chapter 5: something real

Chapter Notes

i was gonna be responsible and bank chapters and post them on a schedule but that went out the window like immediately so here's another chapter. i'm just gonna post them as i write. made myself cry writing this one. hope you enjoy.

February 2017

By some actual goddamn miracle they got through the skills competition media pool *and* the Saturday morning presser without anyone mentioning the fact that Shane's no-trade had been waived and now, existing somewhere between euphoria and an adrenaline crash, Shane had nothing but time before the games start at 3.

He liked this switch to the 3 v. 3 tournament from the traditional 5 v. 5. It was only the second year they'd be playing this formation, but he was actually looking forward to it, even though there'd been some grumbling over the change the year before. The games are quicker, the play is fun, faster paced and more competitive. And he gets to be on the ice with just Ilya and Scott.

It was almost like if he were allowed to play a regular season game with only Hayden and J.J., with two people he knew he could trust inherently who also happened to be able to keep up with him.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by Ilya knocking their shoulders together as they filed out of Florida's press room and into the hall, "could you talk now?" he asked, keeping his voice pitched low as he started to loosen his tie.

Shane was a little shocked. He hadn't expected Ilya to follow through on his promise to explain what was going on at home until after the game that evening, but he didn't want to leave Ilya hanging now so he quickly agreed, "your room? Mine's full of kids."

"Yeah," Ilya said, smiling a little though the nervous pinch of his brow remained, "1217."

"See you soon," Shane promised and watched as just a little tension evaporated from Ilya's shoulders, just enough to tell Shane that he'd made the right choice.

Ilya made his way down the hall and Shane hung back, simply taking a moment to breathe. He felt a hand land on his shoulder and somehow knew it was Scott without having to look. It might've been odd, how quickly they'd fallen into each other's orbit after reconciling, how quickly they'd become actual friends rather than colleagues or acquaintances who were friendly enough, but Shane didn't really feel like questioning it. Scott felt safe and Shane was in sore need of safety.

"You two alright?" Scott asked, his voice pitched low as well. The hall was empty, but Shane appreciated the gentle way Scott was preserving a secret he still only really half knew anyways.

"We will be," Shane said, and he found himself genuinely believing it. "We've been at it too long to let complications ruin it."

"Good," Scott said, sounding genuinely relieved. "Well, I'm around if you end up needing someone to talk to but if not I'll see you both tonight."

"See you then," Shane responded, thankful for Scott's offer even though he was truly hoping he wouldn't need it. He decided he'd let Ilya have enough of a head start and made his own way down the hall, leaving Scott and safety behind in favor of chasing everything he wanted, no matter how dangerous it might be.

* * *

There were approximately 4,000 things that Ilya needed to tell Shane but they really didn't have that much time so he decided to narrow it down to two: (1) my father is dying and home doesn't feel like home anymore and (2) this thing between us is so far beyond casual and I am scared out of my mind but I'm sick of running away.

He was still trying to decide which one he'd start with when he heard the light knock on his door and realized he was out of time.

He took a breath and stood to open the door. He couldn't help but smile at how impossibly *soft* Shane looked with his dress shirt untucked and unbuttoned to reveal the tank top he wore as an undershirt, his tie folded neatly and tucked into his back pocket.

“Hi,” he said, knowing he sounded at least a little dumb.

“Hi,” Shane responded, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. Ilya was relieved to hear that Shane sounded a little dumb as well.

The pair of them, idiots, really.

Ilya wondered if there was another world out there where he’d be standing here, staring at Shane looking at him like that, and still pretending that this meant nothing. He wondered if there was a world where he hadn’t been so thrown by Rose Landry’s appearance that first night, where he hadn’t watched Shane go all soft with Pike’s kids, where Shane himself was still hiding behind some misguided armor. He wondered how long he would’ve forced himself to keep all of this hidden in a world like that. He wondered how much longer it would’ve taken for him to show Shane just how much he cared.

But he wasn’t in that world, now, he was here, with Shane. He was here, standing inches away from the man he loved, from the man he’s *been loving* for years.

So instead of keeping it all hidden, instead of tucking tail and running scared, he reached out and ran his thumb along Shane’s cheek, along those freckles that caught his eye outside that dingy rink in Regina, and said, once more, “I missed you.”

Shane leaned into his touch like it was the only real thing in this world, his eyes going soft in that way that made Ilya want to hide him away and keep him forever, and responded, “I missed you too, Ilya.”

He pronounced Ilya’s name correctly, the same way Ilya did, with that slightly clipped second syllable before his tongue formed the third. He said it like it *meant* something, like it was precious. Ilya wondered if he could steal Shane’s phone and pull up a webpage on the diminutives of Russian names for him to find the next time he opened his browser just so there might be a chance of someday hearing Shane’s lips form the word *Ilyusha*.

Shane’s brown eyes, always so expressive, were near molten with how soft they’d gone. There were tears forming in the corners that Ilya almost hoped would fall, solely so he could kiss them away.

“I don’t want to miss you anymore,” Ilya said quietly, keeping his hand cupped gently around Shane’s jaw, his thumb still resting on his cheek. “The world is loud, my life feels messy, but you are solid and

I do not want to give you up.”

Shane looked shocked at Ilya’s admission. This moment, somehow, was more intimate than any they’d shared and Ilya could feel the importance of it, could feel the weight of it pressing down on his chest.

“I don’t want to keep pretending that this means nothing,” Shane said, his voice just as quiet, just as soft as Ilya’s. Ilya genuinely wasn’t sure when they’d spontaneously learned how to communicate, but he wasn’t about to do anything that might break the spell, so he simply kept his mouth closed and waited for Shane to continue. “You mean everything to me, Ilya. I’m sorry for running away when things got real, I was scared. I was hiding from myself, I was lying to myself, and I hurt you because of it. I’m really sorry.”

“I forgive you,” Ilya said easily, finding that it was the truth, finding that forgiveness came far easier than he’d ever imagined.

He’d pushed Shane too far too fast, he’d made a massive change in their routine without actually consulting him and, even though he didn’t know what, exactly, made Shane’s brain act the way it did, he knew him well enough to know that big changes like that would send him into overdrive. He should’ve known that his actions would’ve made him panic, he should’ve explained where he was coming from, he should’ve met Shane where he was instead of attempting to yank him forward. There were a lot of should haves, but he couldn’t do anything about it now. All he could do was be here, be stable and solid and understanding.

“Thank you,” Shane whispered, genuine gratitude clear in his tone. “Ilya I want to be with you, properly. I know we can’t be out, I know *you* can’t be out and still be safe in Russia and I’d never ask you to choose between your home and me, but I want to find some way we can be together *and* be safe and the only way we can do that is by actually talking about it and the only way it can happen is if you want it too. If you don’t, I won’t blame you, I just need to know.”

“I want it,” Ilya said quickly, not letting Shane spend even a *second* believing that he was alone in this. “I just don’t know how to have it.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Shane promised and Ilya couldn’t help but believe him. “It’ll be hell, but we’ll figure it out.”

“Okay,” Ilya breathed. He leaned forward and used his grip on Shane’s jaw to tilt his head so he could press a lingering kiss to his forehead. They’d kissed so many times, his lips had mapped nearly every

inch of Shane's skin, but something about this kiss, this chaste press of lips to Shane's forehead, felt monumental. Shane breathed out a sigh that sounded a little like he was coming up for air after a minute too long under water; shaky and nearly heart shattering in its relief.

Ilya reached down and took his hand, pulling him further into the room until they were sitting at the foot of the bed. He didn't let go of Shane's hand as he gathered his thoughts and then started on the second thing he'd decided he needed to tell Shane, "you mentioned Russia, it is not good at home. My father, he is sick."

"I'm sorry," Shane said gently, letting go of Ilya's hand for a moment before taking it with the other so he could use the hand closest to Ilya to softly run his fingers through Ilya's hair, he paused as he reached the back of his head and scratched gentle fingers against the base of his skull.

It was so soothing, so deeply comforting, that Ilya let himself continue speaking, "he is getting old, his mind is not all there. I pay my brother to take care of him, but my brother does not do his job. He disappears and then my father calls me, confused and scared. He asks when I am coming home from school, he forgets who he is married to, and I am here, where I cannot help. It is awful and it makes me feel awful because I do not like my father, even if I love him, even if I miss him and wish he could be better father, I do not like him. He was not kind man, he was not good father, not good husband. But I still love him, I still wish I could help."

"That's a lot," Shane whispered, his fingers still gently running through Ilya's hair. The contact was enough to keep him tethered, to keep him from feeling like he needed to run and hide from the vulnerability. Shane had said he wanted this, that he wanted them to be together even if it felt impossible and this thing with Ilya's father was part of what would make it so hard. This constant push and pull that made Ilya feel like he couldn't ever find his footing was part of what would make it so hard for him to build something real and Shane deserved to know and, honestly, Ilya deserved to share the burden. He never imagined he'd have this, have someone who sat with him in his sadness, who looked at him with love even when he was weak, but he'd somehow, inexplicably, found it in Shane Hollander. "Is there anything I can do to help?" Shane asked, "even just sitting here and listening while you talk?"

"It is hard to find words," Ilya admitted, hating himself just a little bit for how much he still stumbled over English even after so many years living in America. He wanted to be better; he wanted to know every single word so he could perfectly describe how he was feeling. But he didn't even know how to describe these feelings in Russian. It was less the lack of vocabulary and more the lack of any real understanding of his emotions, though the lack of vocabulary certainly didn't help.

"Then tell me in Russian," Shane suggested. "I won't understand you, but I'll be here and I'll listen."

Ilya thought about that for a moment but eventually shook his head, “no, I might do that some other time, but right now I need you to understand.”

“Okay,” Shane agreed easily, his grip on the back of Ilya’s neck tightening for a moment, like he just subconsciously knew that Ilya needed to be grounded. “Then tell me however you can and I’ll listen, we have time.”

What a concept, time.

They never had *time*. It was always stolen moments and quick texts and hidden feelings. They’d never had *time*, but they had some now. They had a few hours before they needed to be at the stadium and they apparently had time even after that if they were both actually serious about letting this become something real, so Ilya let himself believe it, let himself live in a world where he and Shane had time.

He leaned back into Shane’s touch, silently letting him know that he needed it, that he needed the point of contact. Shane’s fingers started moving again, gently twisting through the curls on the back of Ilya’s head as his thumb ran a soft path across the skin behind his ear.

“This is enough,” he said eventually, “this helps, you being here, being honest. I have been afraid to ask too much, but right now it feels like I can ask anything and you will give it.”

“I’d give you the world,” Shane said, his voice hardly above a whisper, and Ilya believed him.

“I know,” he responded. His throat felt tight and his eyes felt warm and every atom in his body was telling him to run and hide, to never let someone see him this vulnerable. But this wasn’t just *someone*, this was Shane. “I am scared,” he admitted, surprising even himself with how honest that had been. “I am scared of what will happen if my brother keeps failing, I am scared of my father dying, I am scared to go back to Russia and realize that it does not feel like home. I am scared of letting us be real and someone finding out before we are ready, I am scared of you getting hurt. I do not like not being able to control these things, but I know I cannot.”

He could feel the tears starting to spill and the next thing he knew Shane was on his lap, arms wrapped around his shoulders, surrounding him with the type of warmth that felt safe, a warmth that Ilya instinctively leaned into. He tucked his head under Shane’s chin and wrapped his arms around his waist, holding on as tightly as he could, attempting to anchor himself in reality. Shane kept one hand on the back of Ilya’s head, his fingers still scratching gently against his scalp.

The sob that wrenched its way out of his throat snuck up on him but once it started he couldn't stop.

Shane just held on tighter and Ilya took that as permission to cling.

He didn't know how long they'd been sitting there, tangled up in each other, before Shane's voice finally filtered through the noise in Ilya's head, soft and soothing and so full of love that Ilya felt his heart shatter and stitch back together, "I've got you," Shane said, his voice achingly gentle, "shh, Ilya, baby, it's alright."

It was the first time he'd ever used any sort of pet name, any term of address other than Rozanov, Roz, or Ilya, and Ilya felt like he was floating.

"Say that again," he whispered, his voice sounding choked with tears which might've been embarrassing if anyone else were in the room but with Shane he simply couldn't care less.

"Baby?" Shane asked, sounding a little nervous.

Ilya nodded, tucking himself impossibly closer to Shane and hoping that was enough to make him understand just how loved that made Ilya feel, just how much he'd loved hearing it, because he couldn't seem to find the words.

"Ah, but there's so many other things I could call you," Shane teased gently, his arms wrapping just a little more securely around Ilya's shoulders. "Baby is a good one but there's always *mon amour* or *mon chéri* or, ah, this would be good, *mon ours*."

"What is that last one?" Ilya asked, feeling steadier now in the comfort of Shane's hold and with the anchor of Shane's voice.

"My bear," Shane said and, this close, Ilya could feel his light laugh in the stuttered rise of his chest more than he could hear it. No matter how impossible it might be, Ilya wanted to spend the rest of his life right here, pressed against Shane with no space for the world to get in the way.

"Accurate," Ilya huffed. "I still like baby best."

“Alright,” Shane agreed easily, “though I do kind of like *mon amour*.”

Ilya knew what it meant, he asked anyways, “what does that one mean.”

Shane pulled back slightly and Ilya couldn't have stopped the pitiful whine he let out if he'd tried. Shane didn't pull all the way away, though, he stayed firmly in Ilya's lap and placed his hands on Ilya's cheeks so he could look him in the eye when he said, soft and sticky sweet, “it means ‘my love,’ Ilya.”

“Моя любовь,” Ilya echoed. He watched the understanding settle in Shane's eyes before a soft smile spread across his face. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Ilya's lips that felt a whole lot like coming home.

It wasn't the three words Ilya wanted to say, but it was enough for now.

* * *

They woke up hours later to an alarm Shane had somehow remembered to set after Ilya had fallen asleep. They were still half dressed from the presser, but Shane had never felt more comfortable. He didn't care that the button on his dress pants was digging into his stomach, he didn't care that he felt a little overheated in the Florida humidity. He was with Ilya, with Ilya who'd agreed to trying for something real no matter how scared he was, with Ilya who'd opened his heart and showed Shane just how much he cared, with Ilya who'd finally admitted just how much stress he was under. Nothing else mattered in the face of all of that.

“Five more minutes,” Ilya grumbled, tightening his grip on Shane's waist. He was wrapped around Shane like an octopus, half sprawled on top of him with their legs tangled together and both arms wrapped around his torso. Shane was certain that one or both of his arms must be asleep by this point, but Ilya didn't seem to mind.

“Alright,” Shane agreed easily, tightening his own grip around Ilya's shoulders and pressing a kiss to the top of his head, “but then we need to head out.”

“Can we go together?” Ilya asked, tilting his head up and resting his chin on Shane's chest. “I don't want to be alone.”

“Of course,” Shane said, reaching one hand up to run through Ilya’s hair. His curls were a total mess that’d need to be sorted out before they were on camera heading into the locker room but that was a problem for later. Right now, Shane was content to just look at him, to memorize every line of his face and soak up every moment of warmth. He felt a little insane, like every ounce of sense and logic had left his body. But he felt giddy with it, almost buoyant with the overwhelming *love* he felt. So, if pushing the schedule and running a little behind made Ilya happy, made him feel more comfortable, Shane would do it, at least just this once.

If he had to choose between running late and Ilya’s happiness, he’d choose Ilya’s happiness every time.

Chapter 6: all stars

Chapter Notes

i have zero self control ... i have written 12.5K words *today*

also shout out to my high school boyfriend (i am 25 now ... we broke up seven years ago) who dragged me to all of his hockey games for two years and apparently taught me something about how hockey works somewhere along the way

February 2017

Brophy hadn't been kidding about Shane being able to walk Ilya like a dog, but this was honestly a new level.

Scott watched as Ilya wandered into the locker room, trailing behind Shane like a lost puppy, and wondered, once more, how no one else had caught on.

They tossed their bags into their stalls and then sat down on their benches, every action almost entirely in sync and Scott couldn't help but marvel at it, couldn't help but wonder if he'd have the chance to reach that point with Kip, that point where they existed nearly in tandem, where they just knew where the other was without having to look, where they spent so much time together that every shared action felt instinctive.

"All good?" Scott asked, leaning over to nudge his shoulder against Shane's. He'd decided this morning that he wasn't going to read into how quickly they'd fallen into this more genuine form of friendship, one that actually *meant* something rather than simply being friendly in passing. His coach had texted an hour before to tell him that management had heard from Shane's agent, that they had confirmation that New York was his top choice whenever a trade became available, and Scott knew that having this friendship, this genuine connection, would make the eventual move so much easier. He couldn't help but hope that the move would come *now* before the season ended, even though he knew a mid-season move would be far more tumultuous. He hated that the thing he wanted might hurt Shane, but he hoped that if it *did* happen, Shane would at least know that he had Scott to lean on.

"Yeah," Shane said, a genuine smile on his face that was almost immediately echoed by Ilya. Scott caught Ilya's eye and hoped that his face said everything he couldn't say out loud; *I'm sorry for throwing this in Shane's face on the ice, and I'm here if you need me, and I'm happy for you but if you hurt him you die.*

Ilya nodded once, the soft look in his eye remaining, and Scott knew he'd been understood.

They eventually made their way out onto the ice for warmups; they were playing the other Eastern Conference team first and Scott drifted toward the center line and just waited for Carter to make his way over.

"How's it going?" Carter asked once he'd finally spotted Scott and abandoned whatever odd game he'd been playing with a young guy Scott was pretty sure played for Tampa. He'd gotten really bad at learning who went where in recent years. Maybe if he figured it out he'd stop calling Shane 'Rook' in his head.

"Good, I think we're getting Hollzy."

"Really?" Carter asked, eyes wide in almost comical shock. "How's that?"

"I'll tell you more later, just wanted to tell you now so you could avoid being an asshole and driving him off before we even get a chance to play with him."

"I'll be nice," Carter promised, rather dramatically placing his hand over his heart. "How's it been playing with him and Roz?"

"It's been incredible," Scott said, knowing he sounded near euphoric. Carter wouldn't make fun of him for it, though, he was well aware of how insane Scott could get about good hockey. "It's like a fantasy team, honestly."

"Good, I'm glad you're having fun," Carter said with a genuine smile before his eye caught on something in the background and his brows pinched in confusion, "what are they doing?"

Scott knew who he was talking about before he even looked.

With a sigh that probably wouldn't have sounded out of place coming from a mother of five or an overworked kindergarten teacher, Scott turned around to find Shane and Ilya, notorious rivals (ha), draft picks one and two, and two of the highest paid players in the NHL playing an honest to god game of keepie uppie with a puck in front of a dozen national media outlets and several hundred fans.

“I think they sometimes forget they’re not twelve,” Scott answered dryly.

“Are they friends?”

“Yes,” Scott answered, huffing out a laugh. He’d leave it up to Shane if he wanted to tell his (potential) new teammate the truth or not. “I think they’re taking the opportunity of being on the same team to finally actually show that they’re friends.”

“Is the league going to like that?”

“They can market a different rivalry,” Scott shrugged, “or they can find a way to market unlikely friends, like those YouTube videos of puppies playing with tigers.”

“Okay but that’s like the cutest kitten you’ve ever seen playing with a goddamn grizzly bear.”

“You’d be shocked,” Scott said, letting his amusement bleed into his tone, “Hollzy’s got claws.”

“Hollzy also walks Roz like a dog,” Brophy said, appearing out of goddamn nowhere at Scott’s left. “Which I’ve said already, but Vaughny wasn’t there so I’m repeating it.”

“There’s no way,” Carter said, an expression on his face that Scott could only really describe as ‘dumbfounded.’

“If I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it either.”

“He’s right,” Scott said, finally overcoming his shock at Brophy fucking teleporting. He really needed to pay better attention to his surroundings. “Hollzy’s got him on a leash.”

“I kind of want to start a fight with him just to see Hollander pull him back,” Carter mused.

“You’re not starting a fight at an All Star game just to observe Hollzy and Roz for science.”

“Why are we observing Shane and Rozanov?” J.J. asked, appearing at Carter’s other side. Scott almost slipped when he jumped in surprise. He was really glad Ilya wasn’t watching. This absolute lack of spatial awareness was simply fuel for the endless ‘Scott Hunter is Old’ fire.

“Their mass marketed dynamic is falling apart before our very eyes,” Carter said, his tone of voice sounding more like he was narrating a nature documentary than observing his colleagues. Scott honestly didn’t think that was too far off base.

Before anyone could respond, the buzzer letting them know their warm-up time was over went off and Scott realized he hadn’t even stretched. It was a good thing these games were only 20 minutes long. God he hoped he didn’t pull a muscle. If Ilya called him old one more time he might just have to hit him.

* * *

They breezed through the first game with Shane, Scott, and Ilya scoring two goals each along with one from Brophy right at the end of the second ten-minute half to bring the score up to 7-3.

Now they had an hour before the final against whichever team won the Western Conference game and Shane was planning to spend it staring into space in an attempt to process everything that had happened that weekend, but his plans were interrupted by a giant Russian sitting directly in his lap the moment he’d sat down on the bench in front of his cubby.

“Ilya, what the hell?” Shane asked, honestly less shocked than he probably should’ve been.

Ilya had been clingy since the second Shane had said he wanted them to be something real and Shane really wasn’t complaining but, at the same time, they were currently in a locker room ... in public ... and Ilya finding a way to sit on his lap while still wearing full gear was harder to explain than a friendly arm around the shoulder or a pat on the back.

Ilya just shrugged, looking over his shoulder to shoot Shane a crooked grin, “you are good seat.”

“You are crushing me,” Shane shot back.

“Ah,” Ilya huffed, waving a hand dismissively and leaning back against Shane’s chest, forcing Shane to lean back against the wall of the locker. “You will be fine.”

“You say that,” Shane grumbled, though he made no move to either dislodge Ilya nor finish his sentence. “Can you at least take your pads off so I can see over your shoulder?”

“Is not my fault you are short,” Ilya said, despite the fact that they were essentially the same height, though he did sit up and pull off his jersey and shoulder pads without any real complaint. He even stayed sitting all the way up long enough for Shane to tug off his own jersey and pads. Ilya was thankfully wearing a compression shirt, something he normally forewent, otherwise Shane would’ve been subjected to having a fully shirtless Ilya on his lap which wasn’t something he thought he’d be able to withstand without facing a criminal charge for public indecency.

“Smile,” Scott said, appearing in front of them with his phone already out and a shit eating grin on his face.

Shane decided arguing would be futile and simply smiled.

Ilya behaved until the shutter clicked once and then, like he simply couldn’t help it, he turned his head and smacked a wet, over-exaggerated kiss to Shane’s cheek just as the shutter clicked a second time.

Shane’s nose wrinkled on instinct. Ilya knew how much Shane hated that sound, especially so close to his ear, and had clearly done it to get a reaction out of him.

“You’re the worst,” Shane grumbled, wiping his cheek on the back of Ilya’s shoulder as Scott started laughing.

“Can I please post this on my Instagram?” Scott asked, sticking out his lower lip in a pout that wasn’t nearly as cute as Ilya’s as he turned his phone around to show a photo of Ilya, somehow exuding unholy glee even in picture form, kissing Shane’s cheek as Shane grimaced. Shane’s knee jerk reaction was to say no, but he also knew that Scott wouldn’t do anything that would harm Shane or Ilya. He forced himself to actually look at the picture and realized that it just looked like Rozanov being Rozanov; antagonizing Hollander and being a general menace to society.

“Fine by me,” Shane agreed, doing his best to sound put out. Scott saw right through it, but he didn’t say anything as he pulled his phone back and waited for Ilya’s permission. Shane’s phone dinged in the second it took Ilya to respond and he didn’t need to look to know it’d been Scott texting him the photos.

“Sure,” Ilya said, after only a second’s hesitation, where he’d likely come to the same conclusion as Shane. “As long as you say something about how handsome I am.”

“Not happening,” Scott huffed as he flopped down on the bench next to Shane and opened the app.

He tilted the screen their direction before pressing post and Shane couldn’t help but smile just a little at the caption: *@ilyarozanov finding new and horrifying ways to antagonize his enemies*
#AllStarWeekend2017

“You need to change your handle,” Scott said as he typed in Shane’s name to tag him in the post once he and Ilya had both nodded their approval. “Did you make this in middle school or something?”

“No, I was fully in the NHL when I made it,” Shane admitted, not commenting on the fact that Instagram hadn’t existed when he was in middle school and knowing full well that the fact he’d been an adult while creating that handle only made it worse.

“Gimme,” Ilya said, holding out his hand.

Shane breathed out a huff but dug his phone out of his locker and handed it over anyways.

Ilya slid off Shane’s lap and, instead, sat pressed fully against his side as he opened Shane’s phone and navigated to the Instagram app.

“How did you know my password?” Shane asked, actually a little confused.

“Guessed,” Ilya shrugged, the tips of his ears turning red which was a sure sign he was seconds away from full on blushing. “Is same as mine.”

“Oh,” Shane breathed, thankful that Scott was pretending to be entirely engrossed in his Instagram feed even though he was clearly eavesdropping. He really didn’t know how to react to the fact that Ilya’s passcode was also *1410* so he simply leaned a little more into his side and let the physical contact speak for him.

Ilya nodded slightly like he’d understood and then passed Shane’s phone back over, “I do not know this password, though.”

Shane was dead certain he was the one blushing now as Ilya watched him type in *Hockey2481!* before handing the phone back over.

That had been his password the *entire* time.

Yet, somehow, he’d only admitted to himself that he loved Ilya, like, a month ago.

He needed psychological help.

Ilya, kindly, didn’t comment on it.

“Good?” he asked after a moment, showing Shane the settings screen with a new handle typed in. “Somehow, just *shanehollander* was not taken. I do not know why you did not just use this from beginning. You are strange, strange man Hollander.”

“Whatever,” Shane said, “thank you.”

Ilya patted him on the cheek in a condescending manner that was also, somehow, fond and Shane just rolled his eyes as he saved the change to his handle and then let his feed refresh.

Scott’s post appeared right at the top and Shane immediately went to share it to his story. The Voyageurs’ comms team had been telling him he should be more active on social media. Voyageurs management probably didn’t picture him being active on social media as him sharing pictures of a man sitting in his lap and kissing his cheek, but Shane would happily light Voyageurs management on

fire rather than comply with their wishes so he simply toggled the screen until Scott's caption was visible, typed "*horrifying is right*" and clicked post before he could think too hard about it.

"The Shayden shippers are going to go into mourning," Scott said, sounding genuinely regretful.

"The *who*?" Shane asked.

Scott's smile wasn't even a little comforting.

* * *

Ilya was convinced he was in the middle of a fever dream, maybe an acid trip. There was simply no *way* this was his life. He very happily tuned out Scott and Shane's conversation about whatever the living fuck a *Shayden shipper* was in favor of staring down at the picture, posted for all the internet to see, of him sitting on Shane's lap and kissing his cheek.

Sure, to anyone outside the three of them, Hayden and Jackie Pike, J.J. Boiziau, Rose Landry, and, probably, Svetlana, it looked like Ilya being a menace with no romantic undertones. But for those very few people in the know, it was an actual, public picture of a couple who'd spent nearly an entire *decade* denying themselves joy while they hid in the shadows.

Ilya knew full well that it'd be quite some time before they were both comfortable letting the world know what they truly were, but things like this, them allowing the world to see them being friendly, friendly enough that they could be silly together, was enough to tide him over. Shane wasn't ready for the world to know the truth and *Ilya* sure as shit wasn't ready for the world to know the truth, but the world knew *something* and that was enough to make it feel real.

He wasn't dreaming, he wasn't tripping; this was his life and the beautiful man sitting next to him discussing the ethics of fanfiction with Scott Hunter was the person he got to spend his life with. Ilya honestly could not believe his luck.

The hour of waiting for their next game went by faster than Ilya had expected, though he should've guessed time would start moving in that odd way it did when he was overwhelmed by emotions.

Shane must've seen something in his face because he rested a hand on the back of Ilya's neck and squeezed once, a grounding touch, just like he'd done earlier when Ilya was telling him about some of the darkest things he'd kept hidden out of some misguided ploy to avoid vulnerability. It worked now, like it had then, and Ilya felt the seconds slow back into their normal pattern. He patted Shane's hip twice in response and pouted a little about the fact that his pads were in the way of him touching actual skin. Shane just smiled and shook his head as he started to pull on his shoulder pads and jersey, nodding at Ilya in a silent direction to do the same.

Ilya stood and collected his pads from where he'd tossed them while sitting in Shane's lap (which he still couldn't quite explain why he'd done he couldn't help but feel giddy over the fact that Shane hadn't pushed him off, he'd simply settled in and let Ilya take whatever comfort he needed) and pulled them on before pulling on his jersey and grabbing his helmet.

"One more game," Shane said, his voice easily cutting through the din of the locker room. He was much more subtle than Ilya, but no less effective. Ilya kind of hated that him moving to New York, to another competitive team where he'd be welcomed and taken care of, would mean that he'd lose the C. Shane was meant to be Captain and as much as Ilya called Scott old, he still had some good hockey left in him. It'd be a while before Shane would be offered that C again and Ilya wondered just how much that stung. "Let's try and run that scoreboard up even higher, give the West no chance of coming back. Focus on control rather than speed. Speed does us no good if we're losing the puck and leaving them with an open goal. Other than that, just have fun. Put on a show."

That last bit was directed at Ilya and seemed like permission to be his most unconstrained self. Shane, of all people, knew what insanity he'd just unleashed but instead of taking it back, he simply smiled wider and Ilya had to actually bite his tongue to stop himself from saying those three little words out loud. Now *really* didn't feel like the time.

* * *

The second game was so much more fun than the first. By the time the first half ended, Shane had a hat trick, Ilya had scored twice, and Scott once. The three of them were like a line coach's wet dream; their passes sharp and plays almost textbook. Shane felt like he was flying as he cut across the ice to line up for the second half. He hadn't had this much fun playing hockey in *years* and this, more than anything else, made him realize just how long he'd been at least half miserable in Montreal.

He'd thought that was just how hockey was, that the teasing and pressure were normal. But this was proof enough that it wasn't. His teammates were other captains, other guys in charge of locker room culture and, sure, there was certainly bigotry, racism, and homophobia everywhere, but there were very few places where it was as pervasive and *allowed* as it was in Montreal's locker room. There was only so much Shane could do as a Captain when the issue was so deeply rooted in the organization.

He'd done what he could with the rookies he'd mentored, as evidenced by their silent support in the wake of Shane's coming out, but he couldn't change the entire beast.

He hated, just a little, how it felt like giving up to cut and run. But, at the same time, he was well aware that he wouldn't survive in that environment for much longer. Hockey had started to feel less like something he loved, like something that defined his life because of the joy and exhilaration it brought, and more like an onerous task. He needed to get away, he needed to find somewhere that made hockey feel like this again.

Thirty seconds into the second half he caught a pass from Ilya and hit a perfect one-timer. He'd started his backswing before he'd even seen where the puck was going to land. It was as if his body just knew where Ilya would aim.

The puck smacked into the back of the net with a satisfying snap and Shane couldn't help but grin as the goal light blazed red.

Ilya skated toward him and before he could think, Shane had thrown his arms around Ilya's shoulders in a tight hug.

Ilya let out a bright laugh and hugged him back.

He pulled away after a second only to smack another exaggerated kiss to Shane's cheek, "nice goal."

"Nice assist," Shane responded, clapping Ilya's shoulder before turning toward the bench for a shift change.

He wanted to linger, he wanted to knock off their helmets and kiss Ilya full on the lips right there on the ice, but he held himself back. Everything that'd just happened existed well within the line of *friendly*. Everything that'd just happened was something Shane had done with Hayden or, really, any other teammate back in Montreal. Everything that'd just happened wasn't something people would read into (well, except for that scary corner of the internet Scott had decided it necessary to tell him about before the game ... Shane needed to ask Jackie if she'd heard of Shayden ... he was certain she'd get a kick out of it). But if Shane let himself drift back into Ilya's orbit, something distinctly *not* platonic was going to happen and that just wasn't something they could afford right now.

They won the game.

Of course they won the game, their team was stacked. But they would've won the game even if only Shane had been on the ice which made Ilya want to march up to Montreal and tell every single member of that organization how fucking *stupid* they were for letting Shane goddamn Hollander go. He also wanted to look into a mirror and tell *himself* how goddamn stupid he'd been for even imagining a world in which he could let Shane goddamn Hollander go but thankfully Shane had been emotionally mature enough for both of them so that was no longer an issue.

The post-game press was full of good-natured teasing and Ilya was more than happy to make several quips about his new ideas for torturing his opponents all while watching Shane's fondly amused smile out of the corner of his eye.

When the press finally let them go, Ilya trailed after Shane and Scott into the locker room, tossing an arm around each of their shoulders and hearing the telltale sign of shutters snapping behind them. That'd be a great picture; Scott Hunter, Ilya Rozanov, and Shane Hollander being *friends*. God, Ilya hated how much the media thought they knew about their lives.

Hockey was such an insular sport, these were just about the only people he saw all year, of *course* they were friendly with one another. It really shouldn't have been so much of a shock that Shane and Ilya were friendly despite the way their 'rivalry' had been marketed. It really wasn't uncommon for people from the same draft class to at least stay in touch, especially when – like Shane and Ilya – they'd known each other since Juniors.

They were changing the narrative, though, step by step. And eventually, when they finally reached that day where Shane and Ilya were both ready for the world to know the truth, maybe it wouldn't be quite so shocking.

* * *

Hayden wasn't even sort of surprised when Shane ducked out of the room after helping put the kids to bed.

He *was* really going down to the bar, but they were both well aware that he wouldn't be staying there for long.

Shane smiled through conversations with guys he only knew from their stats and had no real desire to know in any personal way before he was finally pulled from his misery by the honestly frightening duo that was Carter Vaughan and J.J. Boiziau. Shane wasn't sure when they'd become friends, but he was wondering if it might be worth it to invent time travel in order to go back and stop it.

He let himself relax into the insanity of the clearly embellished story the pair were telling about their team practice that morning until he saw Ilya make his way out of the room. He waited five more minutes before making his excuses and starting the process of leaving the room when all he really wanted was to Irish goodbye. Thankfully, most everyone was drunk enough that very few people stopped him on the way out and, if they did, it was simply to shake his hand or pat him on the back before turning back to whatever conversations they'd been having.

It was only a few minutes later, though it'd felt like hours, that he found himself at Ilya's door for the second time that day.

The door swung open before he'd even been able to knock and Ilya was yanking him inside by the front of his shirt and into an almost desperate kiss before he'd even been able to open his mouth to say hello.

Instead of asking if Ilya had been watching through the peep hole, waiting for him to show up, Shane simply wrapped his arms around Ilya's shoulders and melted into the kiss.

They'd kissed briefly earlier, a few chaste presses of their lips that served more as reassurance than anything else, but it'd been *months* since they'd kissed like this and the overwhelming heat of it felt like a missing piece was slotting back into Shane's core.

Ilya pulled away only far enough to rest his forehead against Shane's. He looked soft in the lamp light, softer than Shane was used to him being. He honestly looked almost nervous.

"What is it?" Shane asked, unwrapping his arms from Ilya's neck in order to cup his face.

"I just," Ilya started before pausing, his nose scrunching slightly before he let out a huff and closed his eyes, "I just want to sleep next to you, just hold you."

“Can we shower first?” Shane asked, feeling the sticky, almost psychosomatic lingering touch of every person who’d clapped him on the back or shook his hand downstairs living on his skin like a layer of grime.

“Of course,” Ilya agreed easily, looking both fond and relieved.

Shane smiled and pressed one last soft kiss to Ilya’s lips before making his way into the bathroom. Ilya kept a hand on him the entire time they showered, not to start anything, not to escalate or arouse, simply to touch, to know that Shane was there.

Shane leaned into it, letting himself enjoy the soft touches he’d been depriving himself of for so long, letting himself drop gentle kisses across Ilya’s chest and shoulders simply because the skin was in reach and Shane wanted to kiss it.

Once they were both dry, Ilya tossed Shane a clean pair of his boxers, already knowing that Shane wouldn’t want to put the ones he’d been wearing back on, even if he’d only been wearing them for a couple of hours.

Shane smiled softly and pulled the boxers on before crawling into bed and opening his arms. Ilya’s smile was bright and warm and soft around the edges as he crawled in after Shane and wasted no time in falling into Shane’s arms, his head pillowed on Shane’s chest, an arm slung around Shane’s waist, and their legs tangled together.

Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya’s shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of his head, “goodnight, Ilya.”

“Goodnight, Shane,” Ilya whispered back, tilting his head up to press a kiss to Shane’s lips before pressing a soft kiss to his chest and settling back down.

Shane waited until his breathing had evened out, until every line of stress had faded from his perfect face, before pressing one last kiss to his forehead and letting his own eyes drift shut.

Chapter 7: down on that icy ground

Chapter Notes

don't mind me, just fucking with the timeline to meet the trade deadline

February 2017

It'd only been a week, and Ilya felt a little like he'd gone insane with the force of missing Shane.

They were on the rink for morning practice and he should've been focusing on his team, on their plays and strategy, or even just on properly aiming the puck at the net, but all he could focus on was the clock currently displayed on the scoreboard, counting the minutes until Montreal's plane landed. It was a short enough flight that they'd practiced at their own rink for morning skate and would be going straight to the hotel from the airport rather than coming to the rink, which meant that Shane would be at Ilya's house by the time he got home after his Captain's meeting.

He'd be there, just waiting for Ilya to get home.

The simple domesticity of it was nearly enough to make Ilya black out.

All he wanted was Shane safe in his arms, all he wanted was to comfort Shane after a week spent surviving his teammate's vitriol and his organization's ire.

They'd called every single day since leaving Florida and it wasn't enough; he wanted Shane directly by his side every minute of every day.

He knew he was being clingy; he wondered when it would become too much, when Shane might push him away, but in spite of Ilya's self-deprecating thoughts, it didn't seem like Shane was planning to. Shane seemed more than happy to keep Ilya close, to the point that he'd let Ilya *sit on his lap* in the middle of a locker room and he'd let Scott Hunter *post a picture of it*.

Ilya had spent far too long staring at those two pictures, zooming in to analyze the way Shane's freckles bunched together when he scrunched his nose, looking at the way Shane's eyes lit up when

he smiled, memorizing the way Shane's fingers curled around Ilya's waist, his grip somehow both friendly and possessive. He'd also spent long enough reading the comments under the post to discover ship wars which, in a fit of insomnia and what might've been a psychotic break, had led him to creating a secret Twitter account tied to a new email and a fake phone number from some slightly sketchy app he'd found in the App Store.

He'd initially been planning to just use the account to scroll through fan posts without the risk of accidentally liking a tweet with his official, verified handle, but then he'd seen someone saying that Shane should so clearly be with Hayden and that anyone who shipped 'Hollanov' was insane and, really, no one could blame him for starting a fight over that immediately.

Ilya needed to make sure Shane never found out about that account because he would never let him live it down.

Apart from the Twitter insanity, Ilya had also nearly made the cheek kiss his lock screen but had eventually talked himself down to one from their final All Stars game that had himself, Shane, *and* Scott hugging in celebration. He'd gotten pretty good at pretending Scott wasn't there every time he looked at it.

Christ, he needed this practice to end.

* * *

Ilya got home an hour later to find Shane asleep on his couch. He was apparently exhausted enough that he didn't even stir until Ilya laid down directly on top of him.

Seemingly on instinct, Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya's shoulders and arched his back enough for Ilya to wrap his own arms around Shane's waist.

"Hello," Ilya said, his voice muffled against Shane's neck.

"Hi, baby," Shane breathed out, turning his head to press a kiss to Ilya's temple, his voice thick with sleep in a way that made Ilya fall in love all over again. He still hadn't said it out loud, but that voice alone made him want to. "I missed you."

“Missed you too,” Ilya responded, pressing his lips to Shane’s pulse point before tilting his head up enough to give him a proper kiss and then settling back down.

He wanted to live here, safe in Shane’s arms with Shane feeling safe under his weight; it was like they could protect each other from the world so long as they stayed like this, pressed together from head to toe, breath mingling in the miniscule space between them, close enough to press soft kisses to whatever skin was in reach.

“It’s going to be weird playing against you now,” Shane said, grumbling slightly as his hold on Ilya tightened. “I liked playing with you better.”

“I like both,” Ilya decided after a moment. He’d loved playing with Shane, sure, he’d loved getting to celebrate goals and assists without having to hide his pride, but he *loved* the competition, he loved playing against someone who could actually keep up, could actually *challenge* him. It was so rare, to find someone who could match him step for step, but he’d found that in Shane.

“Yeah,” Shane said after a moment, his voice breaking slightly on a yawn. He pressed his nose into the hair above Ilya’s ear and looked to be about 30 seconds away from falling back asleep.

“When do you have to go?” Ilya asked softly, not wanting to disturb the peace they’d built.

“Need to be back by three,” Shane answered, “so we have a couple of hours.”

“Sleep, then, *lyubimiy*, I will wake you.”

“You’ll stay here?” Shane asked, his hold on Ilya tightening even further, as if he could even imagine a world in which Ilya would leave.

“Of course,” Ilya soothed, untangling them only enough to grab a blanket before laying back down and tugging Shane closer until his head was tucked below Ilya’s chin and he was ensconced entirely by the soft blanket and Ilya’s arms. He rested one of his hands on the back of Shane’s head, tangling his fingers into soft black hair, and felt Shane go boneless in his hold. Less than a minute later he was asleep again and, somehow, it felt like an incredible show of trust, like Shane felt safe enough in Ilya’s arms to sleep peacefully even as his world continued to crash down around him.

Ilya couldn't help it, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and snapped a quick selfie, angling it so his own face wasn't visible and then adding it to his 'boring' folder and using every ounce of self-restraint he possessed to stop himself from sending it to everyone he knew, posting it on his main Instagram feed, and emailing it to every major news outlet simply to tell the world that Shane Hollander was *his*.

Shane was beautiful like this, soft with sleep and nearly glowing in the afternoon sun. The possessive beast that lived in Ilya's chest wanted to show the world, but an even more overwhelming part of him just wanted to keep this all to himself; wanted to remember that he was the only one who got to see Shane like this.

He pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead, set an alarm to wake them up in an hour, and then let himself follow Shane into peaceful sleep.

* * *

Scott knew he should be paying attention to Kip right now, but something in him, some base instinct, had told him he needed to watch the Boston v. Montreal game.

The Admirals had played at home that night with the 7:00 puck drop but the Boston and Montreal game hadn't started until 7:30, so Scott's game and press had been over with just enough time for him to pull up the live stream of the game in the car on the way back to his apartment. They were a little over halfway through the third period, 7:58 left on the clock, and Kip had taken one look at the concerned pinch to Scott's brow and had simply gone quiet, letting him do what he needed to do. Scott would thank him just as soon as he figured out *why* his instincts were screaming at him to pay attention.

He felt it before it even happened.

Shane and Ilya were against the boards, in a clean battle for the puck, even matched in a way only they could be. Shane pulled away after a few seconds, finally beating Ilya, and took off down the ice with Ilya hot on his heels.

Marlow came out of nowhere, blindsiding Shane entirely.

Scott sucked in a breath in the moment before the hit landed, just knowing what was coming.

His heart was in his throat, he could feel his pulse in his teeth, he felt almost like it was happening to *him* as Shane slammed into the boards, the impact audible even through the tinny quality of Scott's phone speakers.

His shoulder hit first but didn't absorb enough impact and his head followed right behind.

"Fuck," Scott breathed out.

They played in Boston tomorrow, the 8:00 start. If he left now, he could be there in five hours, and he'd have the whole day to sit by Shane's bedside and make sure he was okay. Visiting hours would be over but he could sit in the waiting room until someone let him in to see Shane, he could go to Rozanov's house and stop him from blowing their cover entirely. He could do *something* if he just left New York *now*.

His thoughts were derailed when the broadcast switched to a close up of Ilya's face.

He looked shattered, like the very ground beneath his feet had been torn away.

The talking heads were saying something about how *even Rozanov doesn't want to see an opponent injured* and Scott nearly laughed out loud. If only they knew. If only they knew just how little Rozanov wanted to see this specific opponent hurt, if only they knew the lengths Rozanov would go to in order to keep this specific opponent safe.

Before he could even question it, Scott was calling his coach.

Murdock picked up on the second ring, "did you see that?" he asked before Scott even had a chance to say hello.

"One of us needs to be there," Scott said, answering the question without actually answering it, "I don't trust the Voyageurs to be there for him, and Shane's parents wouldn't have travelled with and there are storms up north, so they probably won't be able to get there as quickly as they'd like."

“I’m sure Pike’ll stay with him until the last possible minute but they’re in Jersey tomorrow and he’s the Alternate so he’ll have to travel with the team.”

“He’s friends with Roz and I’m sure he’ll be there, but I doubt they’ll let him in outside of visiting hours,” Scott said, hating just a little that the public still believed they were the ultimate rivals. It’d only been a week since the All Star game, a week since they’d started acting like friends in public, so it really wasn’t that much of a shock. But the players had adjusted quickly, most everyone Scott had spoken to wasn’t even surprised. It was normal for players from the same draft class to stay in touch and when you’d been rocketed to stardom like those two had, it made sense to befriend the only other person who could understand the insanity. “Boston flies to Nashville Sunday morning to start a roadie so he won’t be able to stay.”

Murdock took an audible breath, clearly sorting through several plans and trying to figure out which would be best while also figuring out which would look the least like trade interference.

Scott hated to think it, but if Shane was injured enough, if he were going to be out for more than a week or two, this would be the perfect opportunity for Montreal to release his contract. Scott knew full well that while Shane sat in a hospital bed, injured and probably scared out of his mind, team management would be using the time to decide his future as if he were a commodity rather than a person.

“Go home and pack your bags,” Murdock said eventually, his words drawn out as if he were picking each one with purpose. “Normal hospital visiting hours start at 9, generally. You and Hollzy are friendly, that’s well known. It wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for you to show up to Boston early to check in on a friend and fellow Captain. I just mapped it, if we leave at 5:30, we’ll get to Mass General by 9:00. Get a couple hours of sleep, I’ll be outside your building at 5:15.”

“You’re serious?” Scott couldn’t help but ask, feeling oddly relieved that he wasn’t being left alone in his panic. He wanted to leave *now*, he wanted to be there to do what he could to hold Ilya together because, despite all odds, he’d become quite fond of the guy, but he understood the merits of waiting, of not driving like a bat out of hell in the middle of the night while in a state of raw panic.

“I’m serious,” Murdock responded. “The rest of the team can travel like normal, we’ll meet them at the rink after you check on Hollander. I can’t go in, it’ll look bad alongside the buzz that he waived his no trade, and it’ll look worse when Montreal inevitably releases his contract in the next couple of days. The kid needs friends, Scotty. I don’t know if he told you why he’s leaving, but management told me and let me just tell you, I hadn’t realized people could be so goddamn stupid. He’s a grown man, he doesn’t need protection, but he does need friends, so I hope I’m right in my assumptions about you, I hope you’ll be his friend even when you know the truth.”

“I can nearly guarantee I know more of the truth than you do,” Scott said, huffing out a laugh even as he felt his chest expand with the knowledge that his coach, a man he hadn’t had the courage to come out to even though he knew he’d need to if he wanted a future with Kip, was still protecting Shane. “I know the truth, all of it, and I’m still his friend.”

Murdock paused for a moment, clearly mulling over Scott’s words, before he said, so quietly it was hardly audible over the crackle of the shoddy cell service they got in MSG where he had to assume Murdock was still hiding out, “you’ll check on Rozanov?”

Scott paused, genuinely shocked that Murdock had clocked what the rest of the truth Scott knew might be, but Murdock didn’t sound shocked, he didn’t sound disgusted. He’d clearly guessed, and he was still talking about taking on Shane’s contract, he was still talking about leaving before the sun rose just to drive up and let Scott check on him in person, so Scott answered, “I’ll check on Rozanov.”

“Good,” Murdock breathed out. He sounded burdened and Scott didn’t envy the choices and meetings he’d be faced with in the coming days. Even if New York was Shane’s top choice, they still had to wait for Montreal to release him, they still had to come up with a media spin, they still had to coordinate with agents and the League and, through all of that, they had to keep Shane’s secret because letting the truth get out while he was stuck in a hospital, likely hopped up on pain killers, would be just about the shittiest thing any of them could do.

“I’ll see you at 5:15,” Scott said after a moment. Kip was looking at him in clear concern, and he could see his building coming into view out the window, he needed to wrap this call up and give himself a moment to actually process. “Thank you, Coach.”

“See you then, Scotty,” Murdock said and Scott listened as the line clicked, signaling the end of the call.

He held his phone up for another moment, just forcing himself to breathe, and then he turned it off and let his head thump back against the seat rest. His throat felt tight and his eyes felt warm and the panic that’d ebbed in the face of Murdock’s steady voice was clawing its way back into his chest.

“What happened?” Kip asked gently, his hand landing on Scott’s knee and squeezing once, his grip warm and grounding and Scott wondered again what he’d done to deserve someone so wonderful.

“Shane got hurt,” Scott said, his voice sounding rough and choked in the way it only did when he was moments away from breaking down. “Bad, he was unconscious on the ice, hit his head against the boards hard enough that his helmet came off.”

“Oh my god,” Kip whispered, his grip on Scott’s knee tightening.

They pulled up in front of Scott’s building before he could respond and he climbed out, grabbing his bag and thanking the driver before making his way inside.

He didn’t speak again until they were behind the closed door of Scott’s apartment.

He dropped his bag and just stared out the window for a moment, trying to collect his thoughts before he turned back toward Kip.

“Harv and I are going to drive up in the morning, check on him. This’ll probably be enough for Montreal to release him, so I hope you’re ready to make a new friend. I haven’t had the chance to tell him about you yet, but he knows about me. He’ll be excited to meet you and I’m excited to introduce you to someone from my world.”

It wasn’t really the most pressing issue at the moment, Shane meeting Kip, but for some reason the thought had burrowed into Scott’s head, and he couldn’t get it to leave. He was one of the few people who knew about Shane and Ilya, and it felt right for Shane to be one of the few people who knew about Scott and Kip. He wanted Shane to see this side of Scott, the domestic side, the soft side. Scott wanted Shane to feel comfortable in his home, he wanted Shane to have a friend in the city who wasn’t contractually obligated to see him every day for practice.

He wanted Kip to know that Scott didn’t *want* to keep him hidden, that he was simply doing it to keep him safe. He wanted Kip to have someone in the hockey world outside of Scott who was safe for him to know, safe for him to talk to.

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Kip said gently, pulling Scott into a hug that he fell into like his strings had been cut. He tucked his head against Kip’s shoulder and wrapped his arms as tight as he could around his waist. “I’m sure he’s great, especially if you like him so much. Let’s pack and then you need to get some sleep. You won’t be any use to anyone if you’re exhausted.”

“Okay,” Scott agreed, his voice muffled against Kip’s neck. He was certain that if the circumstances were any different, if Shane weren’t injured, if he weren’t worried about how Ilya was reacting, he would be panicking about the mere thought of introducing Kip to anyone from the hockey world. But, as it were, he simply felt relief.

Scott waited until he'd showered and packed his bag to pull his phone back out. He paused only a moment when he saw the clock had ticked past midnight but then decided there was no way Ilya was asleep and toggled over to his contacts.

Ilya answered on the second ring, his voice sounding broken and almost childish as he said, "Hunter?"

"Roz, hey," Scott breathed out, overwhelmingly relieved to hear Ilya's voice. At some point, much much later, Scott might grumble about how easily the giant Russian asshole had weaseled his way into his heart. "How are you?"

"I don't -" Ilya started before cutting himself off. He drew in a ragged breath that seemed to echo through the space between their phones and Scott had never had a more visceral urge to give someone a hug. "He was awake, before he left ice," Ilya said, his English getting choppy and his accent thicker as he started to lose whatever tentative hold he might've had on his emotions. "Said my name, but I ... I could not go with. Christ, Hunter," he said, his voice cracking on the second syllable of Scott's name. A mere week ago, Scott never could've imagined a world in which Ilya Rozanov *had* emotions, let alone let anyone see them. But it wasn't a week ago, it was now, and Scott was among a select few who knew how much Ilya cared for Shane and Shane was hurt, badly enough that he hadn't been able to walk off the ice himself. "Pike texted, he is stable, I can visit in morning, but I want to go *now*."

"I know," Scott said, trying his best to be soothing even as he felt his own heart breaking, "I know you do, man, I do too. Coach Murdock and I are driving up in the morning to see him. Do you want us to come get you? Give you a ride?"

Ilya paused to think about that for a moment, seemingly actually considering the offer before he blew out a breath and said, "no, thank you. I will go early, Pike is there. He promised to get me on approved list when he could, I might not have to wait for visiting hours."

"You need to get some sleep, Roz," Scott said gently. "Just a couple of hours."

"My father died," Ilya said, out of nowhere, like he'd just remembered, like the thought had hit him and he couldn't help but spit it out.

Scott didn't know what to say.

Ilya continued talking before Scott could come up with a response, “my brother, left me voicemail, saying father is dead. I found it after game. I have to go back to Russia, I have to plan funeral and pay for everything and be perfect son, but I do not want to, I want to stay *here*, with Shane.”

“Ilya,” Scott said, the name more a breath than a word. “I’m so sorry.”

“He was sick,” Ilya said, clearly trying to brush it off. Scott couldn’t imagine the absolute emotional overload Ilya was suffering through right now.

“So was my mother,” Scott responded, “doesn’t make it easier.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said after a moment. His voice sounded genuine, like a few simple words from Scott had been enough to remind him that he wasn’t alone. Scott wished he could say more, wished he could explain the lifelong process of grief, wished he could put it into words in a way that might make Ilya feel better, but he was too tired, too strung out. “I will sleep,” Ilya promised. “Shane slept on my couch this morning, still smells like him, maybe will help.”

Scott wasn’t so sure it would, but he kept his mouth shut.

* * *

Ilya didn’t sleep.

He’d told Scott he would, but sleep wouldn’t come.

He stayed on the couch, his face pressed into the cushion just for the barest hint of Shane’s smell, the sensory reminder of Shane’s warmth, and stared at the picture he’d taken just that morning.

Shane safely asleep in Ilya’s arms, his freckles standing out against the winter afternoon light, his hair soft and silky and tangled up in Ilya’s fingers, his face peaceful and relaxed and *so damn beautiful*.

He didn't think about his father, didn't think about the fact that he would have to go home, would have to pretend that the place still felt like home when home had long since become Shane Hollander.

He just laid there in silence, staring at Shane's sleeping face, trying not to count the minutes until morning.

Pike had said he could call at any point, but Ilya didn't want to feel like a burden.

He didn't want to feel like he was begging Pike for information, he wanted to be there, by Shane's side, holding his hand.

A concussion and a broken collar bone, out for 4-6 weeks. It would've been longer, but Shane had somehow tucked his shoulder between the hit and the impact, just enough that he'd hit the boards with his shoulder blade rather than his upper arm. He'd moved just enough to allow the force to hit a wider surface area meaning the impact had only *slightly* fractured his collar bone when it easily could've shattered it.

The concussion was bad, but not as bad as it could've been.

Pike had said that one of the nurses mentioned she thought he might've actually passed out from the *pain* rather than because he'd hit his head hard enough to lose consciousness. It wasn't for certain, but just the guess had been enough to calm Pike down which had been enough to calm Ilya down, if only slightly.

But Shane was still out for at least a month, in March.

It was enough that Pike was almost certain Montreal would release his contract and Ilya didn't know whether to be pissed or pleased.

He hated that the team Shane had given some of his best years of hockey to, the team he'd won *two* Cups for, was leaving him in the dust. But, at the same time, he wanted Shane to be somewhere he was appreciated.

Really, all Ilya wanted was Shane.

He should be here right now, tucked safely in Ilya's arms. They should be here together, living in their shared peace and pretending the world outside didn't exist. Instead, Shane was in the hospital and Ilya was on his couch trying not to think about the fact that the man he loves is hurt and that his father is dead.

He also didn't want to think about the fact that the only person who knew his father was dead was Scott goddamn Hunter.

He hadn't even told Svetlana yet, but when Scott had called, when he'd been so gentle and caring and had done what he could to make it seem like everything would be fine without actually saying the words in that placating way that most everyone said them, Ilya's mouth had made the decision for him before his brain could catch up.

Scott had made him feel less alone and Scott had told him to sleep; the least Ilya could do was try.

He turned on his ringer and made sure Pike's number would make it through any automatic Do Not Disturb, then he set an alarm for 6:00 and pulled the blanket he and Shane had been using up until he was cocooned in it and let the warmth and the lingering scent of Shane lull him into a few short hours of restless sleep.

Chapter 8: broken and blue

February 2017

Ilya woke up to his phone vibrating once, the sound followed quickly by his ring tone.

He blinked his eyes open just as the text notification from Scott telling him he and his coach were on their way to Boston disappeared and then he focused on the reason his phone was ringing.

He saw Pike's name and immediately swiped his thumb across the screen to answer, "Pike?"

"Hey, Rozanov," Pike said. He sounded exhausted but steadier than he had the night before which was enough to slow the frantic beating of Ilya's heart. "I made friends with the night shift nurse, she'll help me sneak you in before visiting hours start and then she'll sign you in as a visitor at shift change so come whenever and just text me when you're in the parking lot and I'll come get you, alright?"

"Thank you," Ilya breathed out, not caring how rough his voice sounded, not caring how weak he must sound to Pike. None of that mattered right now. It might've mattered if he lived in a world where Pike didn't know the truth, where Shane hadn't been brave enough for both of them and forced them to admit that this was something real. But it didn't matter now. "Scott Hunter is on his way," Ilya added, having forgotten to text Pike to tell him that the night before. "He will probably wait for visiting hours, though, in case media shows up."

"Security has kept media out of the hospital, but they might be outside," Pike warned him, "just try not to draw attention to yourself. It'd be hard to explain why Shane's pal Ilya Rozanov was invested enough to break hospital rules to show up at 5:30 in the morning."

"Right," Ilya said, nodding to himself. "I will shower and then come. Thank you, Pike."

"You're welcome," Pike said easily. "He's asleep again now but he woke up a half hour ago and asked about you. I waited to tell you until I knew whether or not I'd be able to get you in. He'll be excited to see you."

"I'll be there soon," Ilya promised and hung up the phone before Pike could say anything else that might cause him to have a breakdown.

Christ, he hoped Shane was at least sort of coherent when he woke up. Ilya didn't want to hide it from him that his father had died, and he needed to call his coach to get out of the game against New York that night and get out of the next week of road games. He needed to book a flight back to Russia and figure out his packing list and start researching funeral homes and make sure there was still a plot in the graveyard next to his mother. These were all things that needed to happen today, but he had no plans of leaving Shane's side, so Shane would need to know.

And Shane, his perfect Shane, would want to help, no matter what state he was in, so it'd make Ilya's life a whole lot easier if he was coherent enough to string a sentence together.

Ilya dragged himself off the couch and into the bathroom. He forced himself to properly shower instead of just rinsing off, he used the soap he knew Shane loved the smell of and properly conditioned his hair so he wouldn't look like he'd wandered through a wind tunnel. When he got out he brushed his teeth for the full two minutes with Shane's voice muttering about proper dental hygiene echoing through his head. He pulled on a pair of jeans that were worn in enough to be soft but not ratty and then, after a moment's consideration, selected an old Team Russia t-shirt that'd seen better days and pulled on a plain black Nike crewneck to cover up the worn shirt. He put on socks even though his brain was screaming at him to just shove his bare feet into sneakers and run out the door and then took the time to actually tie his shoes before putting on his winter jacket and grabbing the keys to his least showy car.

Pike had said not to draw attention.

Arriving in a bright orange Porsche and sprinting into the hospital looking frazzled would absolutely draw attention.

Arriving in a black, far more practical car wearing jeans and a sweater and walking like he still had a handle on his emotions was far less conspicuous.

He made the drive to Mass General in silence. He parked his car in the parking garage designated for short-term visitors, made sure his keys and wallet were in his pockets, and then texted Pike that he'd arrived before walking down the street and making his way into the building through the main entrance.

The lobby was oddly quiet, just a janitor and a pair of security guards who simply nodded in Ilya's direction as he walked in.

Pike's head appeared around the corner a moment later and Ilya followed behind him, neither of them speaking as they walked a twisting path through half lit hallways and doors to stairwells that'd been propped open in direct contradiction of the posted signage.

Eventually, they came to a stop outside a private room somewhere near the Emergency Department where a nurse was standing guard. She smiled at Hayden and winked at Ilya before pushing the door open wide enough for them to slip in and then pulling the door shut behind them.

Ilya felt his world tilt on its axis as he laid eyes on Shane.

His face was bruised on the right side from the impact, the bluish tinge spreading beneath his freckles from his temple to the bridge of his nose. His right arm was in a sling, and he looked so small in that hospital bed; not small in the way he looked small in Ilya's arms, but small in the sense that he seemed young, fragile, delicate. Ilya wanted to wrap him up and protect him from the world but, at the same time, he was afraid to touch in case he pressed somewhere it hurt.

He felt frozen in place, almost paralyzed with the lingering fear from the moment he'd watched Shane hit the ice and the complete confusion over how to proceed.

Shane stirred slightly and Ilya's brain was screaming at him to step forward, to stroke his hair and try to soothe him, but his feet felt stuck, like they'd been sunk in concrete and left to fossilize.

And then Shane's eyes blinked open and Ilya stopped breathing.

Shane blinked once, twice, like he was trying to clear his vision, and then eyes landed on Ilya and his whole face lit up. His eyes went soft and his nose scrunched up with the force of his smile and his voice when he said, "*Ilya*," was just about the sweetest thing Ilya had ever heard.

He felt tears well in his eyes and, somehow, still didn't know how to move but then Shane held his left hand out and repeated, "Ilya," and time finally started moving again.

Ilya crossed the room in three quick strides and wrapped Shane's hand in both of his, his eyes darting across Shane's face, searching for any sign of pain or discomfort.

“Ilya, baby, you’ve got to breathe,” Shane said, his voice rough from disuse and honey thick with sleep.

It was only then that Ilya realized; even though time had started moving, his lungs hadn’t started working.

He kept his eyes locked on Shane’s and forced himself to take a deep breath through his nose. On the exhale, he couldn’t hold the tears back anymore. He felt them slipping down his face, carving warm paths in his skin, and hated that there had ever been a time where he’d feared that Shane would shun him for showing emotion.

Shane’s face went even softer and he tugged on Ilya’s hand until he was sitting on the edge of the bed.

Ilya watched Shane’s lips press together lightly in concentration as he moved himself just enough to be pressed against the right railing of the bed. Ilya wanted to stop him, to tell him not to hurt himself, but Shane had done it too quickly for Ilya to react and then Shane was patting the spot on the bed next to him and Ilya found himself tossing his jacket onto a chair, kicking off his shoes because he knew Shane wouldn’t want shoes in his bed even in the hospital, and somehow folding all 6 feet and 200 pounds of himself into the narrow space at Shane’s left.

He laid on his side and pressed his face against Shane’s neck as he tucked his right arm against his own chest and wrapped his left around Shane’s waist and just let the tears fall.

Shane rested his head against Ilya’s and simply let him cry his silent tears as he started speaking softly with Pike, somehow just knowing that all Ilya needed right now was Shane, knowing that asking questions and expecting answers would send Ilya over an edge he wasn’t sure he’d be able to crawl back up.

* * *

“You alright?” Hayden asked, pulling a chair over to the right side of Shane’s bed and pillowing his head on his arms where they were crossed on top of the sheet by Shane’s right hip.

He looked exhausted, the bags under his eyes were darker than Shane had seen them since Arthur stopped teething, but he was still here. They’d sent J.J. back to the hotel because they couldn’t have

the C and both As hiding out at Mass General when the team was getting ready to travel, but he'd only agreed to go back on the condition that Shane let Hayden stay behind.

"Yeah," Shane answered honestly. His head hurt but it was less fuzzy now that the pain meds had started to wear off and it wasn't pounding with the lights dimmed and the shades drawn. He was grateful his collar bone was only fractured. They hadn't had to reset it meaning he wasn't hopped beyond belief on pain meds. He hated the way they made his mind slip, hated the way they made his thoughts refuse to find any real order. "I honestly think the bruise on the back of my shoulder hurts worse than the collar bone."

"You want ice?"

"Not right now, maybe in a bit."

"Alright," Hayden agreed easily, his eyes staying closed for longer every time he blinked.

Shane twisted his torso as much as he could without jostling his shoulder and without dislodging Ilya so he could rest his left hand on top of Hayden's head for at least a second, "sleep, Hayd. I'll be alright. Your new nurse friend is standing guard, and I've got both of you here with me."

Hayden pressed his head up against Shane's palm for a moment, like a cat seeking attention, before he slumped back down and pressed his head gently against Shane's hip, "okay," he agreed, "wake me up if you need me."

"I will," Shane promised as he settled back against the bed. He watched Hayden's eyes slip closed and waited until his breath had evened out before turning his head and pressing a kiss to Ilya's temple, the only place he could reach from this angle, "thank you for coming."

"I wanted to come last night," Ilya said, his voice cracking.

"I know," Shane said softly, leaning his head a little more against Ilya's, hoping that little extra pressure might soothe him.

Ilya tucked himself somehow closer to Shane, his nose pressed against Shane's jaw. His curls were still damp from the shower he must've taken after Hayden called to tell him he could come, he smelled like the soap Shane had told him he liked the smell of; it was subtle, not the strong scent of the sports 3-in-1 they all used in the locker room or the overly perfumed soaps some guys thought were a good choice, it smelled clean, like fresh air and honey and maybe something like pine. It made Shane think of summer nights at the cottage and the sort of warmth only Ilya's presence could bring. He'd taken his shoes off before getting into bed because he knew Shane would complain. He was soft and cozy and warm and so stupidly perfect Shane felt a little like his heart was going to burst.

"My father died," Ilya said so quietly Shane wouldn't have been able to hear him if Ilya hadn't been speaking directly into his skin. "I think during game, Alexei called and left voicemail. I have to go back to Russia for funeral, but I do not want to leave you."

"I'd offer to come with, but I'm not supposed to fly," Shane said, knowing that wasn't the only reason he couldn't go with Ilya but giving them both the chance to pretend that it was; to pretend that post-concussion travel restrictions were the only reason he couldn't be there for Ilya. "I'll be here until my parents get here to sign me out and then we'll drive back to Ottawa. I won't be alone, now we just have to figure out how to make sure you're not alone."

Ilya paused a moment, pressing a kiss to Shane's jaw before snuggling down and resting his forehead against Shane's neck, "Sveta would come with me if I asked."

"Then ask," Shane said gently, moving his left hand until it was resting on the inside of Ilya's thigh and squeezing softly. "You shouldn't be alone, you deserve to have someone who's there just for you."

"When will your parents come?"

"I don't know," Shane answered honestly. He could remember snippets of conversations between Hayden and his parents the night before, but he wasn't sure anyone had ever reached a real answer. Several flights had been grounded throughout the Northeast, and then the doctor had said it wasn't a good plan for him to fly and his parents had switched to planning a drive, but it wasn't just flight paths that'd been disrupted by snow, it was roads as well. "It'll probably be another day."

"Would you come home with me if I signed you out today?" Ilya asked, his voice soft and so full of nerves Shane sort of wanted to cry. "So you do not have to wait here?"

"You'd do that?"

“Of course.”

“Don’t you have a game tonight?”

“I’m not playing,” Ilya said, shaking his head slightly. “Family emergency, two of them.”

Shane really tried not to cry at the simple way Ilya had just called him family, but he was tired and in pain and his nerves felt frayed, so the tears slipped out anyways. He pressed his nose against the top of Ilya’s head and tried to just breathe in the comforting scent of his conditioner and the underlying smell of *Ilya* until he felt like he was standing on even ground again.

“Okay,” he whispered, “sleep now and when Hayden’s nurse friend whose name I absolutely cannot remember comes in during shift change we’ll wake up and start making plans. We’ll call your coach and get your flight booked and start a packing list, alright? But, for now, just sleep.”

Ilya nodded again and pulled away from Shane just enough to kiss his unbruised cheek before pressing a soft kiss to his lips and then settling back down. Shane turned his head to kiss Ilya’s forehead and then rested back against the pillows.

Ilya was tucked against his side and Hayden was pressed against his hip and it was quiet except for the soft sounds of three people breathing and the steady beeping of one of the monitors Shane was attached to and after the fear of waking up disoriented and the emotional turmoil of watching Ilya’s obvious panic and the news of his father without knowing how to fix either, Shane was exhausted. He focused on the steady rise and fall of Ilya’s chest against the outside of his left arm and, within a few short minutes, he was fast asleep.

* * *

Scott left a note on the counter for Kip to tell him he’d left and to thank him for being there for him the night prior as well as a reminder that he was welcome to stay in the apartment while Scott was on the road and, after a moment’s thought, he doodled a little heart and then picked up his bags and headed down to the lobby.

Murdock was already parked outside when Scott made his way downstairs, so Scott tossed his bags into the trunk and then climbed into the passenger seat of the SUV.

“Here,” Murdock said, handing over an Admirals branded travel mug, “the wife made coffee, I couldn’t remember how you took it, but she insisted you liked cream and sugar, so I hope that’s right.”

“Of course she knows that,” Scott said, huffing out a fond laugh. “I’d bet she knows the entire team’s coffee orders.”

“I’m sure she does,” Murdock said, a fond smile on his face as he connected his phone to CarPlay and plugged in the directions for Mass General. It’d take them 3 hours and 20 minutes if they didn’t hit any traffic and Scott sent a brief plea to the universe to keep their route clear.

He fell asleep before they’d even reached Norwalk and only woke up when they stopped for gas shortly after crossing the Massachusetts border.

“Do you want me to drive?” Scott asked, climbing out of the car to stretch his legs while Murdock filled the tank.

“Nah,” Murdock said after a moment, he was staring out at the rising sun like it’d offer answers and Scott decided not to comment on how odd it was to see his usually rather gruff coach looking so introspective. “I like driving, gives me time to think.”

“Okay,” Scott agreed easily, “I’ll at least try to stay awake for the rest.”

Murdock shook his head and shot Scott a distinctly fond smile, “alright, Scotty.”

They didn’t talk during that final stretch. They simply sat in companionable silence and listened to whatever eclectic playlist the car had selected from Murdock’s Spotify.

Scott thought about texting Ilya again, just to make sure he didn’t want a ride, but he decided against it. Scott’s message had been marked as *read* but Ilya hadn’t responded and Scott had to assume that

meant he was already awake and on his way to the hospital where Hayden Pike had more than likely charmed some nurse into letting him sneak Ilya in before visiting hours started.

It was quiet and nice and Scott had started to settle into the brief moment of peace before they reached the hospital and he had to face whatever state Shane might be in and then Murdock opened his mouth and the peace shattered in the way it only could when Ilya Rozanov was involved.

“You know,” Murdock started, his gaze locked on the stretch of road in front of them, his casual tone not even sort of hinting at the insanity he was about to spew, “until I saw the clip of Rozanov reacting to Hollander going down, I’d been betting *you* and Rozanov were together.”

The water Scott had been drinking came up through his nose and he, for the barest moment, genuinely wondered whether or not his coach had been replaced by an alien.

“Explain,” Scott choked out, so beyond bewildered that he felt like he’d accidentally slipped into a parallel universe.

Murdock just shrugged, the corner of his lip tugging into a grin he was clearly trying to suppress, “there’s just no other player that can get under your skin like Roz can.”

“I’ve never even fought Roz,” Scott argued.

“But you’ve fought Hollzy.”

“I’ve been shoved by Hollzy, that wasn’t a real fight. Also, that was entirely my fault. We talked it out. All’s well now.”

“So, you’re not dating, nor have you ever dated, Roz *or* Hollzy?”

“No,” Scott said, putting as much emphasis into the single syllable as he could. And then he caught the expression on his coach’s face. It was almost soft; he was giving Scott an opening. “I do have a boyfriend, though. His name’s Kip.”

“Is he good to you?” Murdock asked.

“The best,” Scott answered easily and immediately.

“Good,” Murdock said, nodding his head once as if that were all he needed to know, “thank Christ it’s not Rozanov, I don’t think I could handle that circus.”

“You do realize you’re about to pick up Hollander’s contract, right?”

“I have a feeling he’s less of a circus where Hollzy’s concerned.”

Scott had to give him that. It wasn’t just the fact that Ilya clearly respected Shane enough to listen when he asked him to stop screwing around, it was that he *trusted* Shane enough to stop putting on a show. He was still a total ass, to be sure, but he was also genuine and earnest and could clearly separate his on-ice personality from the way he interacted with the world in a way he normally didn’t.

“We’ll be there in about 15,” Murdock said after Scott had fallen silent. “We’ll be there before 9, maybe text Pike now if you want to be snuck up before visiting hours start instead of waiting.”

Scott considered waiting, just in case media was there to capture him getting pulled into some dark hallway by Hayden Pike, but then he thought about how desperate he was to see that Shane was okay with his own two eyes and pulled out his phone.

By the time they pulled into the parking garage down the street from the main entrance, Scott had a list of detailed directions from Pike including an instruction to come in quietly because he was going back to sleep and if Scott woke him up, he’d find the nearest scalpel and stab him with it.

Scott had never really viewed Hayden Pike as a threat before, but he wasn’t sure if he wanted to test it out.

Once the car was in park, Scott confirmed with Murdock that he was good to wait here and then pulled on a plain sweatshirt, one that wasn’t covered in Admirals branding, and made his way down the street.

The lobby was still pretty quiet, with a half hour to go until visiting hours started, and Scott easily followed Hayden's instructions until he found the nurse he'd described who quickly confirmed that he was, in fact, Scott Hunter and then quietly let him into a private room.

The lights were dimmed and the curtains were drawn but there was enough light to see a scene that might've just been in the top five cutest things Scott had ever witnessed.

He pulled out his phone and snapped a quick picture of all three of them before taking a step closer and taking one without Hayden in the frame.

Shane and Ilya were both somehow tucked into the bed with Ilya wrapped around Shane like he had no plans of ever letting go and Hayden was passed out with his head pillowed on his arms against Shane's hip, one of his hands wrapped up in the fabric of Shane's hospital gown like he was subconsciously afraid his best friend might disappear while he was asleep.

Scott settled in the chair next to Hayden as quietly as he could, really not wanting to risk being stabbed with a stray scalpel and simply watched Shane sleep.

His face was lax and peaceful, not pinched with pain. There was a pretty intense bruise spreading across his right cheek and his arm was in a sling, but it didn't look like he'd needed any stitches and the only bag hanging from his IV was saline, so he probably wasn't on any intense pain meds and Scott felt himself start to actually calm down for the first time since he'd gotten off the ice the night prior.

Ilya's eyes blinked open first and they landed on Scott almost immediately. He cracked a half smile before tipping his head up to press a kiss to Shane's jaw, the movement was enough to make Shane stir. His nose scrunched up as he yawned and Scott couldn't help but compare him to a kitten.

"G'morning, baby," Shane mumbled, turning just enough to kiss the top of Ilya's head. His eyes were still closed, and he clearly hadn't realized Scott was in the room. If it were any other day, Scott probably would've taken the chance to make fun of the blush spreading across Ilya's cheeks, but the man's boyfriend (?) was in the hospital and his father had just died so Scott decided to give him a break.

"*Dobroye utro, lyubov' moya,*" Ilya responded, pressing another kiss to Shane's jaw and ignoring Scott entirely.

“Duolingo just taught me that one,” Shane said, a smile spreading across his face even as his eyes stayed closed.

“Ah, you are learning Russian now?” Ilya asked and Scott was seriously starting to feel like he was intruding.

“I’m really bad at it,” Shane muttered, apparently disappointed that he hadn’t somehow just mastered the Russian language on his first try.

“You will get better,” Ilya said gently as he disentangled himself from Shane.

Shane let out what could only be described as a whine as he grabbed onto Ilya’s sweatshirt so he couldn’t get away and Scott had to bite down on his lip to stop from laughing.

“Shh,” Ilya soothed, also clearly trying not to laugh. He ran his fingers through Shane’s hair and pressed a kiss to his forehead, “is okay, *moya lyubov*’, I am not leaving, just sitting up. My arm fell asleep.”

“Okay,” Shane sighed, tilting his head up to press closer to Ilya’s hand. “You have to call your coach.”

“Only awake for a minute and already planning,” Ilya said fondly, kissing Shane’s forehead again before moving so he could sit back against the headboard. He reached down and intertwined his fingers with Shane’s, resting their linked hands on his thigh as he leaned his head against the top of Shane’s. “I will call Coach at 9 and then we will make our plan.”

“Call Svetlana now,” Shane directed, “and Scott, someone should tell Scott I’m okay.”

“Aw,” Scott cooed, reaching out and wrapping his hand around Shane’s calf, squeezing once and then just letting his hand rest there, “so nice of you to think of me. It’s nice to know I rank right up there with the Duolingo owl, the Bears’ coach, and whoever the hell Svetlana is.”

“Oh,” Shane said, his eyes finally blinking open, “hi, Scott.”

“Hi, Shane,” Scott echoed, “you alright?”

Shane shrugged his uninjured shoulder, “better than I could’ve been. I somehow reacted fast enough to tuck my shoulder when I hit the boards, so the collar bone is only fractured not broken or shattered.”

“How long are you out?”

“4 to 6 weeks.”

Scott had no clue what his expression did, but Shane laughed and shook his head slightly and before saying, “long enough that Montreal will release my contract to bring up a new center for the end of the regular season.”

Scott’s grip on Shane’s calf was tight enough now that it must have been painful, but Shane wasn’t complaining and Scott was simply doing everything he could to not burst into some sort of celebratory song right here in the middle of the hospital, so he just kept holding on.

“You have to meet my boyfriend,” Scott finally burst out. Of all the things he could’ve said, he had no fucking clue why that was the first thing out of his mouth but there was no going back now. “His name’s Kip, you’ll like him.”

Scott just stared at the nearly identical looks of amusement on Shane and Ilya’s faces and willed himself to not be embarrassed.

“I look forward to it,” Shane said eventually, his eyes almost literally twinkling.

“Good,” Scott nodded, “good, okay. Now, what plan do we need to make and how can I help?”

Fifteen minutes later, when Hayden’s night shift nurse friend came in to sign Ilya and Scott in as visitors and let them know that the shift was about to change over, she walked in to find Hayden still passed the fuck out surrounded by several sheets of paper filled with half-formed plans jotted down in Scott and Ilya’s increasingly messy handwriting.

She just smiled and passed the clipboard to Scott who filled out his information, taking care to actually make the letters legible, and then passed it over to Ilya who then passed it back to the nurse with a kind smile and the sort of earnest tone in his voice that Scott was finally starting to get used to as he said, “thank you for letting us in.”

“Of course,” she said easily, a kind smile on her own face, “happy to help and, I already told Mr. Pike this, but just so you know, I’m bound to keep my patient’s secrets, so I promise to keep my mouth shut. I’m just glad Mr. Hollander is alright and that you two were able to be here for your friend.”

“Thank you,” Shane said, sending her a soft smile and not even sort of dislodging himself from where he was tucked against Ilya’s shoulder. Scott was pretty sure he would once a new nurse, one they weren’t sure they could trust yet, came in, but for now he seemed pretty damn comfortable.

She smiled once more and then made her way out of the room, closing the door behind her.

“Right,” Scott said, picking up the sheet of paper he’d discarded when the door opened, “so Shane’s parents will probably be here tomorrow or, at the very latest, Monday morning so if we book Ilya and Svetlana’s flight for Monday afternoon that gives them enough time to pack and for Ilya to start making whatever arrangements he can from here without having to deal with his family breathing down his neck. Shane can’t look at screens, but he could help make lists and help Ilya pack. Hayden needs to go back to the team hotel before the bus leaves for the airport and then he’ll be on a roadie so all he has to do is keep sleeping and then wake up and order a car. I’m missing morning skate, so I just have to be at the hotel like an hour before the team is getting ready to leave for the rink so I can help get Shane checked out and into Ilya’s car or whatever. This is a total side bar but, Shane, you should post something on Instagram or Twitter to let the world know you’re okay, check with your agent or manager first on what information you should include but I’m going to drag you kicking and screaming into this decade if I have to and that starts with social media.”

“Fine,” Shane grumbled, though he looked more amused than anything, “Ilya can you grab my phone and text my mother.”

“Your mother is your manager?” Ilya asked.

“Yes,” Shane said. He looked a little like he couldn’t decide whether to be embarrassed or proud.

“You are telling me Yuna Hollander is person who has been slutting you out to brands?”

“Who taught you the phrase ‘slutting you out’?”

“I have lived here long time,” Ilya said imperiously as he typed in Shane’s passcode and navigated to his messaging app, “I know things. Now, what am I saying to Yuna?”

“Just press the voice note button,” Shane said, rolling his eyes and then clearly immediately regretting the action as he squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath through his nose.

“You okay?” Ilya asked softly, setting the phone down on his lap and turning to run his fingers through Shane’s hair.

“Fine,” Shane said after a moment, resting his head back against Ilya’s shoulder, “thank you.”

“Okay,” Ilya said, picking the phone back up and pressing the button Shane had indicated before holding the phone slightly closer to Shane’s face, though he was obviously being incredibly careful with keeping the screen angled away from Shane’s eyes.

“Hi, mom,” Shane started, “I’m fine. Hayden’s still here, Scott showed up, and Ilya’s here. We’re making plans. Long story, I’ll tell you more later. Scott has decided I need to be better at social media which means telling the masses that I’m still alive, can you tell me what I should say? And if I should include a picture? Thanks, love you.”

Ilya pressed stop on the recording and sent it off before setting the phone back down and resting back against the pillows again. His left leg was hanging off the bed and he was squished up against the railing because the bed *absolutely* wasn’t made for two full grown men, but he didn’t seem to have any plan to move any time soon, no matter how uncomfortable the position must be.

Shane’s phone buzzed a few seconds later with a voice note from Yuna in response.

“Hi, Shane,” she began, “good to hear your voice, you’ll have to call later and explain whatever master plans you four are coming up with. You’ve got good friends, honey, it’s very sweet,” Scott had to bite back a laugh at the blush spreading across Shane’s cheeks. He looked like a kid at middle school drop off whose mother had just kissed them on the cheek and yelled *I love you* before driving away. “Scott’s right, you should post something. I’ll type something short and you can have one of them copy and paste it for you, maybe include a picture on Instagram? Get one of them to take one of you and Hayden or take one of all four of you, I don’t think you’d want just you and Rozanov or you

and Hunter right now with the trade rumors. Have whoever's operating your phone text Jackie back, she's worried about you and Hayden must be asleep because he's not responding. Love you, honey. See you as soon as the roads are safe."

By the time the message finished playing, the phone had buzzed again with the message Yuna had come up with. Ilya turned the phone toward Scott and he nodded his approval. It was short, to the point, and the exact sort of thing every athlete posted after getting injured because it worked.

Thanks for all the love and support, I'll be out for the next few games, but I'll be doing everything I can to be back before the season ends. Thank you to the trainers and EMTs at @tdgarden and the staff at @massgeneral for everything.

"Hand it here," Scott said, making a rather juvenile grabby hand toward Shane's phone. It got a laugh out of Shane, though, so Scott deemed it worth it. He looked at the bed and flipped over any paper that had anything incriminating on it and shot Ilya a look until he disentangled himself from Shane enough to be platonic and then swiped over to the camera app and snapped a couple of selfies that had Scott grinning in the foreground with Shane and Ilya smiling in the background and Hayden, still entirely dead to the world, just visible over Scott's shoulder.

He then kicked Ilya off the bed entirely, much to the disappointment of both Ilya and Shane, moved all of the papers out of the frame, made Shane pretend to be asleep, and took a picture of just Hayden and Shane before he forced Shane to smile for a picture like it was his first day of school.

The media team back in New York would be so proud of Scott's knowledge of Instagram's new multi-photo feature. They'd also be so proud of the fact that Scott had made Ilya open one of the curtains to let in sun from an angle that wouldn't shine directly into Shane's eyes but would still let in enough light to make Shane look less like a ghost in the dark hospital room. The moment he had a decent enough picture, he let Ilya close the blinds again and very kindly ignored the muttered insults Ilya sent his way as he climbed back into the bed next to Shane.

He opened the Instagram app, put one of the solo shots first, one of the four of them next, and one of Shane and Hayden last before copying over Yuna's caption, tagging himself, Ilya, and Hayden, and then getting Ilya's approval before hitting post.

That taken care of, he pulled out his own phone and shared the photo of the four of them to his story with an added caption wishing Shane well and hit post before picking his discarded paper back up again and opening Google Flights to figure out what options Ilya and Svetlana had for booking international flights so last minute.

“You’d get along with my mother,” Shane said after a moment, looking at Scott like he’d never seen him before.

“I’m honored,” Scott responded, sending Shane his best grin before turning his focus back to flight plans. They had shit to take care of; Shane could tease him another day.

Chapter 9: stay a couple more days

Chapter Notes

don't mind me, just blasting change your ticket by one direction on repeat

February 2017

Shane had dozed off again sometime between Hayden finally waking up from the near coma he'd fallen into in time to head back to the team hotel and Scott finding flights that didn't include 12-hour layovers in Amsterdam or somehow bypassing Russia entirely by putting their connecting flight in Seoul.

Ilya was still crammed into the bed at Shane's side, not at all worried about the fact that he'd long since lost feeling in his left arm or the fact that his hip was absolutely going to be sore by the time he stood up. None of that mattered, he could stretch and take an Advil, he, however, could not find it in himself to move more than an inch away from Shane's side.

He really wasn't sure how he was meant to go to Russia for a week and leave Shane behind. He wasn't sure how he was *ever* meant to leave Shane behind.

Scott had gone out to his coach's car to tell him Shane was fine and to grab his backpack and send Murdock on his way to whatever hotel New York was staying in before coming back up to the room. Now, he had his team iPad propped up on the foot of Shane's bed playing episodes of *The Office* that he'd apparently seen several times over. He'd initially pulled up game tape but after about five minutes he'd decided that was boring and had swapped over to something 'more entertaining.'

Ilya was barely even watching, only really half listening; most of his attention was focused on Shane's sleeping face.

"Did Svetlana reply?" Scott asked into the quiet, his voice barely louder than the low volume he'd set his iPad speakers to.

"Yeah, she went to my house and got my passport information," Ilya answered, tearing his gaze away from Shane to meet Scott's eye, "she booked flights, too. Thank you for finding them."

“Of course,” Scott said easily, shrugging his shoulders like it was entirely commonplace for an opposing team’s captain to wake up before dawn to come check on an injured player, like it was something casual for that same captain to help another sort out details for his father’s funeral and book international flights. Ilya sort of hated it, but with each passing minute he was starting to actually *like* Scott Hunter.

It was just the three of them in the room now. Hayden had made his way back to the team hotel after reminding Shane about six times that he could call whenever he needed and tacking on another three reminders to text Jackie every day because she was worried and she wanted to know Shane was alright. If Ilya didn’t know Shane was into *him*, he honestly might’ve assumed Shane had somehow accidentally tripped his way into joining a throuple with the Pikes.

Scott had gone quiet again and was paying far too much attention to an episode of TV he’d probably seen a dozen times so Ilya pulled out his phone and opened Twitter.

It was still opened to his second account so the first thing that popped up when his feed loaded was a screenshot of the picture of Hayden sleeping with his head on Shane’s hospital bed, posted by an account called *@haydenhollander* with a caption that included about nine too many heart emojis.

“You broke Twitter,” Ilya muttered, turning the phone toward Scott when he looked over.

Scott just grinned, looking like that’d been his plan all along, and then went back to watching *The Office*.

Ilya sort of wanted to tell him he was a menace, but he was pretty sure Scott already knew.

They fell into silence again, the low tones of a well-loved sitcom and the light sound of Shane’s breathing filling the space around them. It was maybe an hour later when the doctor came in with discharge paperwork. It was, quite honestly, *far* too easy for Ilya and Scott to sign Shane out of the hospital. Sure, it made sense for Ilya and Scott, boyfriend (?) and friend of Shane to sign him out. It did not, however, make *any* sense for Ilya Rozanov, Captain of the Boston Bears, and Scott Hunter, Captain of the New York Admirals, to be taking responsibility for Shane Hollander, Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs.

Ilya decided not to question it.

Shane woke up and went through the paces of one last neuro check, listened to the doctor's instructions for icing his shoulder and keeping his arm immobilized, and had Scott type out a message to Yuna including a list of referrals for doctors in Montreal and Ottawa for follow up appointments.

The doctor kindly didn't ask why Shane was wondering about private physicians when he had access to the Voyageurs' team doctor, he simply listed off several physicians he knew that either specialized in or had a good amount of experience with sports injuries and the rehab process.

That taken care of, Scott gathered up the loose sheets of paper and whatever else had been scattered around the room, stuffed it all into his backpack, and went to wait in the hall while Ilya helped Shane change out of his hospital gown into the clothes Hayden had brought with the night prior.

"Ouch," Shane muttered, biting his bottom lip as Ilya helped him thread his arm through the t-shirt's sleeve.

"Do you want to just wear the hoodie?" Ilya asked, pausing his movements and nodding toward the plain gray zip-up hoodie still in the pile of folded clothes.

Shane thought about it for a minute and then nodded.

His cheeks were red and the corners of his lips were turned down, and Ilya just knew he was embarrassed.

"Shane," he said, moving one of his hands to gently grab onto Shane's chin and tilt his head up, "is alright, we can try shirt again later, okay?"

"Okay," Shane said, his voice soft as he studied Ilya's face. Ilya just leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead before moving back to pull the shirt off Shane's arm and toss it back onto the bed. He picked up the hoodie and had much greater success slipping that on without causing Shane anymore harm. He zipped it up and used his grip on the zipper to pull Shane forward just enough to smack a kiss to his lips that had him smiling which Ilya silently counted as a win.

They secured the sling back into place before Ilya moved onto sweatpants, socks, and shoes.

“Thank you,” Shane said softly, his left hand reaching out to run through Ilya’s curls as he knelt down to tie Shane’s sneakers.

Ilya leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Shane’s knee before propping his chin there and gazing up at him. Shane’s hand came down to cup his cheek, his thumb running across the skin below Ilya’s eye.

“Of course,” Ilya replied, staying there a moment longer, simply to look at Shane’s face, at the way his eyes had gone soft and bright. “Come on,” he said after a moment, patting Shane’s calf before standing up and carefully tucking the rest of Shane’s belongings into his team backpack Hayden had brought his clothes in and slinging it over his shoulder before holding out a hand to help Shane stand.

He expected Shane to grumble that he could do it himself but, instead, he took the offered hand and let Ilya help.

Shane dropped his hand as Ilya pulled the door open and Ilya tried not to flinch at the loss of contact, but Shane must’ve seen something because his hand settled on Ilya’s lower back, warm and soft and sure. His thumb ran a gentle path for a moment before he pulled away again. It was enough to tell Ilya that Shane didn’t want to let go either, enough to remind him that he still had to.

Ilya took a breath and stepped fully into the hall, holding the door open behind him for Shane to step through. Scott pushed off the wall he’d been leaning on and they made their way through the halls and out into the February cold.

* * *

Shane fell asleep on the drive between Scott’s hotel (which had thankfully been the same hotel Montreal had stayed at, so they’d been able to pick up his stuff from reception without having to drive somewhere else) and Ilya’s house and only grumbled slightly when Ilya came around to the passenger door to wake him up.

Ilya looked to be about six seconds away from deciding he needed to carry Shane into the house so, before that could happen, Shane climbed out of the car himself. He did, however, let Ilya carry his bag and hold his hand all the way to the door.

“What’s that?” Shane asked, pointing to the plastic bag Ilya was carrying.

“I stopped for food,” Ilya said and Shane was honestly a little impressed that he’d somehow slept through that. “Do not worry, I got you salad. Lots of vegetables. But I did get chicken on it, and you are going to eat it because you need protein, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane agreed easily. He’d honestly eat whatever Ilya fed him at this point, partially because he might as well treat the weeks on IR as an opportunity to pack on weight before playoffs and partially because the little voice in his head that told him he needed to maintain control often went quiet in Ilya’s presence, but he was still stupidly grateful that Ilya had remembered his diet and had done what he could to work within Shane’s parameters. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” Ilya said, tugging Shane through the kitchen and gently shoving him into a seat at the dining table. “Wait here.”

Shane wanted to roll his eyes but knew full well it’d make his skull feel like it was splitting open, so he simply settled back in the chair and waited.

Ilya came back a minute later with the takeout containers, silverware, and drinks for both of them. He dug Shane’s pain meds from the hospital pharmacy out of his backpack and set them on the table before taking his seat.

Shane wanted to talk, wanted to ask Ilya how he was really doing, wanted to ask Ilya what his favorite color was simply to hear him speak, but they were both exhausted and his head was starting to hurt and he knew he was going to get nauseous if there was too much sensory input so he focused on eating and let the silence exist.

Once he’d finished most of his salad, Ilya opened the pill bottle and handed Shane his dose before walking it into the kitchen and tucking it away into a cabinet. The action felt purposeful, like he needed to hide the bottle away from plain sight, but Shane didn’t have it in him to ask why and Ilya honestly didn’t seem to have it in him to offer an answer so he swallowed his pills and bit down the impulse to pretend he could do everything on his own and, instead of asking about pills or emotions, asked, “could you help me shower?”

“Of course,” Ilya agreed easily, smiling at Shane like he was proud of him for asking for help. It made Shane’s chest feel warm.

He did what he could to help clean up the trash left behind by their lunch and then followed Ilya down the hall and up the stairs to his bedroom and let Ilya carefully undress him. Shane's eyes felt heavy, like he might fall asleep standing up, so he leaned on Ilya more than he normally would, but Ilya didn't complain, he simply adjusted and took Shane's weight and maneuvered them into the shower.

Shane let out a sigh of relief that was very nearly a moan when the hot water hit his back. He hadn't been able to properly shower after getting off the ice and, despite the fact that Hayden had tracked down a washcloth and deodorant to at least help him smell less like an old shoe the night prior, he felt disgusting from the sweat and the hospital germs.

Ilya breathed out a laugh that was sickeningly fond and then picked up his body wash and gently scrubbed the previous day off Shane's skin before lathering up his hair with shampoo and washing away the oil and sweat. Ilya's fingers scratching along his scalp was about the closest thing to heaven Shane had ever experienced and he decided he wanted to live in this moment forever. Ilya seemed to read his mind and spent far longer washing Shane's hair than he probably needed to.

Once Shane was clean, he stepped out of the way so Ilya could rinse off too and then he happily let Ilya wrap him up in a fluffy towel. He waited in the bathroom while Ilya went to unearth his shave kit and then he fumbled through brushing his teeth with his left hand.

"Sleepy?" Ilya asked as he combed Shane's hair. The action was so gentle and tender that Shane nearly broke down in tears, but he held it together enough to simply nod. "Alright," Ilya said, ducking his head to kiss the back of Shane's neck. "Clean boxers and then into bed with you."

Shane stepped into the boxers and let Ilya pull them up. He patted Shane's hips and leaned in for a quick kiss before leading the way back into the bedroom.

"One second," Ilya said, darting out of the room. Shane listened to his footsteps pound down the stairs before they receded entirely. Ilya returned a minute later hugging several throw pillows from his living room, "lay down, we will prop up arm so you do not have to wear the sling."

"Thanks," Shane said, his voice breaking on a yawn. He hated how tired he was. He felt like he'd been sleeping for days, and he knew he'd be this tired for the next couple of weeks. Head injuries were tricky like that, and he knew he needed to listen to his body, but it didn't mean that he didn't *hate* how lethargic he felt.

Once he was situated in a veritable mountain of pillows, Ilya pulled the covers up and kissed his cheek and then his lips before resting their foreheads together for a moment, "sleep, I am going to get

my computer and then I will sit with you, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane agreed, tilting his head up to capture Ilya’s lips in another longer, lingering kiss.
“Thank you for this, Ilya.”

“Anything for you, *lyubimiy*.”

Shane was exhausted, his head was pounding, his shoulder was starting to hurt like a bitch even as the pain ebbed just a little as the effects of the medication set in, but he forced his eyes open, forced his gaze to clear as he looked up at Ilya. Ilya seemed to sense the shift. He went quiet, like he was waiting for something, but he wasn’t yet sure what.

Shane didn’t know if Ilya was ready to hear it, but he needed to say it.

He was scared, though.

Scared of driving Ilya away, scared of feeling too much too soon, scared of ruining this incredible thing.

So, he took the coward’s way out, “*je t’aime*, Ilya. *Je t’aime tellement*.”

Ilya went still, tears building in the corners of his eyes as they darted around Shane’s face, searching for something, some sign that Shane hadn’t been completely serious.

“*Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu*,” he breathed out. Duolingo hadn’t taught Shane that one yet, but his heart understood it anyways. “*Ochen’ sil’no*.”

Shane wrapped his uninjured arm around Ilya’s shoulders and pulled him down against his chest. Ilya tucked his head under Shane’s chin and wrapped an arm around his waist and let out a shuddering breath that sounded like it’d held *years* of pent-up emotion.

“So much, Shane,” he whispered, turning his head to press his lips to the hollow of Shane’s throat.

“I know,” Shane whispered back, tangling his fingers almost desperately into Ilya’s hair and pressing his lips to the top of his head as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hold back tears. “Does it feel like agony to you too?”

Ilya started to nod before pausing a moment and then shaking his head, the movement tucking him closer to Shane’s chest and his grip on Shane’s waist tightening as he sniffled slightly and said, “not anymore.”

Shane fell asleep safe in Ilya’s arms and secure in the knowledge that he was loved.

* * *

Ilya watched Shane sleep, memorizing every line of his face as he tried to convince himself that this was *real*.

Shane had just said he loved him.

In French, sure, but he’d said it.

It didn’t matter that neither of them had said it in a language they shared, they’d said it anyways. And, really, spoken language hadn’t ever been something they needed. It was good that they’d been communicating better recently, that they’d been sharing their feelings and actually talking about how to make this whole thing work after nearly a decade of running from anything that might make it too real, but sometimes talking was exhausting, sometimes all Ilya needed was the press of Shane’s lips against his or a reminder of how Shane’s nose crinkled when he was *really* smiling to know that they were okay.

Ilya had known that Shane loved him, long before he’d ever said the words.

He’d known when Shane had kept coming back even when Ilya was an absolute *ass*, he’d known when Shane had agreed to stay when Ilya asked even if he’d ended up running in the end, he’d known when Shane had walked up to him at that bar in Florida and told him, right away, that Rose wasn’t there as his date.

He'd known that morning in the hospital room when Shane had made room for him in the bed, when he'd let them both imagine he would've come to Russia with him if it weren't for the concussion even though they both knew there was so much else holding him back from being at Ilya's side. He'd known when Shane had stayed tangled up with him even when the nurse had stepped into the room. He'd known when Shane had agreed to eat a salad that might not have fit the exact parameters of his diet simply because Ilya was worried about him and Ilya had asked.

He'd known when Shane's gaze had cleared, when he'd seemed more alert than he had in hours as he met Ilya's eye.

He'd known Shane loved him for quite some time, but that didn't make hearing it any less special.

Eventually, he forced himself to get up, leaving the bed only long enough to find his laptop before settling back against the pillows at Shane's side. Shane shifted in his sleep, just enough to rest his head against Ilya's arm and then settled again.

Ilya, again, couldn't help it.

He pulled out his phone and snapped a photo and, after talking himself out of immediately making it his lockscreen, saved it to his 'boring' folder.

He'd seen Shane's phone earlier.

His lockscreen was one of the pool photos of himself, Ilya, and Scott walking away after post-game press, one of the photos that'd been captured just after Ilya had slung his arms around their shoulders. His arm around Scott's shoulders was loose, friendly. His arm around Shane's was visibly possessive and Shane's responding arm around Ilya's waist was very nearly not platonic if you knew what to look for.

They were lucky, honestly, that no one expected two hockey players to be both queer *and* dating each other and, more than that, no one expected *Ilya Rozanov* and *Shane Hollander* to be queer and dating each other.

He knew they'd agreed to delete photos in those early years of their situationship (as the kids on the internet were apparently calling that sort of arrangement), but he also knew that Shane, like him, was no longer deleting them. Honestly, if Ilya had to bet, he'd guess that Shane had an album of his own full of photos of Ilya to look at when he missed him. The thought made Ilya smile. He turned his head to press a kiss into Shane's hair before re-focusing on the task at hand.

He opened the messaging app on his laptop and waited for it to catch up to the messages on his phone before opening his thread with Scott and clicking on each of the links they'd sent back and forth.

By the time Shane had woken up from his nap, Ilya had put a deposit down on a burial plot, had traded emails with the hospital, morgue, and funeral home, and had received an email from the priest at the church he hadn't gone to since his mother died with a checklist of things that needed to be selected for the funeral. It was a helpful list, honestly. Detailed in a way that was necessary when a person's brain was clouded with grief and emotions even more complex. It was kind in a way he honestly hadn't expected; that type of diligence, the care for his parishioners. Ilya knew full well that the priest would hate him if he knew who Ilya loved, he knew full well that he probably preached about things Ilya would never, in his life, agree with, but he did seem to care when it came to this, and that felt like enough for now.

Ilya was clued into the fact that Shane was awake by him pressing a little more firmly into Ilya's side and then muttering, "packing list."

The laugh that escaped Ilya's throat was just this side of hysterical. He felt crazy with how much he loved Shane. That was the second time today he'd woken up and immediately started planning and Ilya could just tell that it wasn't out of the ordinary. This absolute Type A monster with probably undiagnosed OCD was his to love and Ilya had never felt luckier.

"Right," he said once he'd calmed down. He turned his head and grinned at the very angry kitten frown on Shane's face. "I am not laughing at you, *kotenok*, I am just very happy and very, very lucky to love you."

Shane's whole face turned red with the force of his blush. He turned and tried to tuck his face against Ilya's side to hide but he couldn't do anything to cover up the fact that his ears had turned red too. Ilya simply kissed the top of his head and wrapped an arm around him, careful not to jostle his shoulder.

"You are right, I need packing list," Ilya said, keeping his voice soft and very carefully adjusting his tone so Shane wouldn't even think Ilya was trying to tease him. He knew Shane was exhausted and that his brain was all but fried, he didn't want to add to his hurt in any way by making him think Ilya

was making fun. “I’ll be gone for one week and the only things I know I need are my good winter jacket and a suit.”

Shane turned his head, so he was no longer hiding and settled more comfortably against Ilya’s side before reaching out his left hand and navigating to the notes app and then immediately closing his eyes. Ilya had switched the laptop into night mode and turned the brightness as low as possible, but he wasn’t shocked that it was still too much for Shane’s tired eyes.

“You talk, I type,” Ilya said gently.

“Okay,” Shane agreed, taking a steadying breath. Ilya was sure he’d gotten nauseous or at the very least slightly dizzy, so he just waited patiently for Shane to find even ground again before he started talking. “Okay, type down coat and suit so you won’t forget. Then let’s start with your travel documents.”

* * *

Shane was asleep for the night after dutifully eating dinner and taking his meds when his phone rang with his mother’s contact lighting up the screen. Ilya hesitated for a second before answering. Yuna and David knew that Ilya was the one checking Shane out of the hospital, he’d sent them his address that morning, so they knew where to drive to pick Shane up once they made it to Boston, but he still didn’t know if they knew *why* Ilya had been the one to sign Shane out.

Finally, he decided to just bite the bullet and pick up the phone, “hello, Mrs. Hollander,” he greeted, wanting to make sure she knew from the start that she wasn’t talking to Shane in case she’d called about something that she didn’t want other people to hear.

“Rozanov,” she responded, only sounding about half shocked. “How is Shane?”

“He is asleep,” Ilya answered, “ate lunch and dinner, took his meds. He showered after lunch and took a nap and then helped me make the most detailed packing list I have ever seen and then he ate dinner and now he is asleep again.”

Yuna’s voice was nothing but fond as she said, “that sounds like Shane. I was just calling to check in and to tell him that we think the roads will be clear enough for us to drive tomorrow but we’ll get in

late, so we were planning to get a hotel in Boston and then leave early Monday morning, does that work for you?"

Ilya wondered if he should offer one of his guest rooms but eventually decided against it. He didn't know how late they'd get in or how comfortable they'd feel in his space, and he could admit that he was in a bit of a fragile emotional state, so he wasn't sure he'd be a great host to anyone other than Shane; to anyone other than one of two people he felt entirely comfortable showing his true emotions to.

"That works," he said, "I will make sure he is ready to go Monday morning. I will text you my gate code so you can come whenever."

"Thank you," she said, sounding just as genuine as Shane always did. "I will say, I was shocked to learn that you two didn't hate each other, but I'm glad Shane has you. It must be nice to have someone who understands how crazy your lives are."

That really didn't answer the question of whether or not the Hollanders knew who Ilya was to Shane, but it was good enough, "I am lucky to have him," Ilya said honestly. "And I am happy to take care of him."

"That's very kind of you. We'll see you on Monday. Thank you again."

"See you Monday," Ilya responded, smiling a little to himself as the line clicked and the call ended. He crawled into bed next to Shane and pressed a kiss to his temple before snuggling into the sheets, "goodnight, sweetheart," he whispered, "*ya tebya lyublyu*."

* * *

Shane was a little slower through Sunday. His shoulder was sore and his head was pounding more than it had been, but he ate when Ilya told him to, took his meds when Ilya handed them over, and used his one functional arm to help fold the clothes that Ilya had laid out on the bed to pack.

By the time the sun had started to set and they were showered and cuddled up in bed, Shane was beyond exhausted, but he was forcing his eyes to stay open, forcing himself to stay awake and treasure the time he had with Ilya before he was carted off to Ottawa and Ilya had to go to Russia. He

wasn't sure when they'd see each other next and Shane knew his life was about to get crazy even though he was on IR and he just wanted to treasure every spare second he had in Ilya's presence.

"Shane," Ilya said gently, he had a look in his eye that told Shane that Ilya knew exactly what he was doing. "I will call you from Russia, okay? I will send voice notes so you don't have to get headache reading screen or ask your parents to read my texts out loud. And when I get back we will figure out next time to see each other, okay?"

"I'm gonna miss you," Shane mumbled, knowing he sounded young and weak, but he couldn't help it. He finally *had* Ilya and he didn't want to walk away for even a second.

"I will miss you too," Ilya said, running his fingers through Shane's hair and kissing his forehead. He'd been doing that a lot lately, letting himself indulge in soft touches and chaste kisses and Shane absolutely was not complaining but he wanted a real kiss, the type of kiss Ilya had been giving him for years. He was injured and far too exhausted for anything else, but he was well enough for a proper kiss, so he tilted his head up and locked his lips with Ilya's and waited, just a moment, for Ilya to relax into it before pressing forward just a little harder.

Ilya's hand that'd been gently running through Shane's hair paused before his fingers slipped to the back of Shane's head and gripped onto the hair there, pulling just enough to tilt Shane's head back so Ilya could adjust their angle and then he was really kissing him, nipping at his bottom lip and slipping his tongue into Shane's mouth, and holding onto him in that way that always made Shane feel like he was floating.

It was stupid, really, how good of a kisser Ilya was. Shane wished there were something he was bad at, it'd make the world seem a little more fair.

Ilya pulled back after several minutes and Shane just grinned. Ilya chuckled quietly and pressed a soft kiss to Shane's nose and then settled back against the pillows, "sleep, Shane, I will wake you with a kiss in the morning."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Chapter 10: to build a home

February 2017

Shane was groggy when he woke up the next morning to Ilya placing gentle kisses across his nose and cheeks. He tilted his head up just enough to press a soft kiss to Ilya's lips before pulling away. Part of his brain wanted to kiss him harder but he was stopped both by the need to brush his teeth and by the pounding in his temples.

"Your parents will be here in one hour," Ilya said softly. "I packed your bag but left outfit out. Do you want to shower?"

Shane shook his head and then regretted it immediately. He felt dizzy and disoriented and he honestly wasn't sure if he could stand long enough to shower.

"Okay, okay," Ilya whispered, his voice gentle and soothing as he ran his hand along the top of Shane's head and pressed another kiss to his cheek, "bath?"

"I don't think I can stand," Shane said, his voice sounded rough. He felt worse than he had the prior two mornings and he would just like it on record that he fucking *hated* head injuries.

"Is okay, I will carry you."

"Okay," Shane agreed, really not in a place to argue. Ilya crawled out of the bed and Shane could hear him walking toward the bathroom followed by the sound of the tap being turned on.

He came back a couple of minutes later and pulled the covers down and pulled off the boxers Shane had worn to bed while he was still laying down instead of having to do it while Shane was trying to help in the bathroom which was both considerate and vaguely embarrassing. Shane kept his eyes shut as Ilya picked him up and carried him into the bathroom, he didn't think watching the lighting change or his surroundings pass by would help much with the pounding headache.

Once he'd settled Shane down into the tub, which was already half full with perfectly warm water, Ilya stripped off his own boxers and climbed in behind Shane, his legs bracketing Shane's on either side and the comfort of his still sleep warm skin soaking into Shane's back.

Shane let out a slow breath and relaxed back into Ilya's hold, resting his head against Ilya's shoulder and pressing his forehead to the side of his neck.

Ilya let him stay there for a few minutes before directing him to lean forward. He gently soaped up Shane's back with the body wash Shane loved and started rubbing his shoulders and the back of his neck, careful not to press too hard on the mottled bruise on Shane's right shoulder as he gently worked out the knots that'd built up over the past couple of days of attempting to hold himself so he didn't jostle his collar bone.

Minute by minute, the headache that'd been making his vision go foggy started to recede and Shane started to feel far more stable.

"Thank you," he whispered into the quiet as Ilya ran a cloth over his shoulders to wash off the soap.

Ilya simply pressed a soft kiss to his spine in response.

By the time Shane's parents pulled into the driveway, he was dressed in his own sweatpants, a t-shirt that'd only taken them two minutes to get on without fucking up his collar bone, and one of Ilya's hoodies that Ilya had claimed was the better option because it was a size bigger than Shane's, meaning the looser sleeves would be easier for him to put on. Shane thought that was bullshit, but he kept that opinion to himself because he certainly wasn't going to screw up the chance to be surrounded by the soft fabric of one of Ilya's favorite hoodies and the comforting scent of Ilya's detergent and something that was just *Ilya*.

He finished his toast and took his pain meds and kissed Ilya softly, savoring the last couple of moments where it was just them in this bubble before the world came crashing back in.

"Text me when you get to the airport, when you get on the plane, and when you land," Shane reminded him, "for every flight, and call if you need me. You're not alone anymore, even if I'm not physically there."

"I will," Ilya promised, smiling softly and a little indulgently as he kissed Shane's cheek. Shane wasn't sure how he was meant to survive weeks without Ilya's constant presence, without those soft kisses and even softer touches. He wondered, distantly, if he should be confused by this new side to Ilya, but he was simply too in love to question it and, honestly, Ilya had always been at least a little

soft with him, more and more in recent months. This was just him finally being able to be as soft as he wanted without being afraid it'd push Shane away.

"Good," Shane said, nodding once and delighting just a little bit in the fact that the action didn't send his head spinning.

A quiet alert sounded from Ilya's front door and Shane pouted just a little, "that's the gate," Ilya said, confirming Shane's suspicions. "Come on, let's get you home."

Shane really wanted to say that Ottawa wasn't home, that nowhere was home without Ilya there, but he knew Ilya understood that and he knew, without Ilya having to say anything, just how much he was struggling with the concept of home right now and the last thing Shane wanted was to somehow say something that'd make it worse, so he just nodded again and let Ilya mother hen him through the house and toward the door.

They stepped outside just as Shane's mom was climbing out of the passenger seat and she all but ran toward him to wrap him into a hug, only slowing down slightly to be careful of the early morning ice.

Shane easily accepted the hugs and smiled as he repeated that he was fine several times over. His parents had all the medical information, all they wanted now was to physically see and hear that he was alright, so he didn't need to go into specifics, he just had to stand here and hopefully not look like he was at Death's door.

Ilya put his bags into the car when his dad popped the trunk and then dutifully shook his dad's hand and accepted the only slightly awkward hug from his mom and repeated several times that he'd been happy to take care of Shane.

They never asked who Ilya was to Shane, but Shane was certain they knew. He wondered how this meeting might go if it hadn't come on the coattails of Shane getting badly injured and Ilya easily volunteering to take care of him for two days before his parents could get there through the weather, but he didn't spend too long thinking about what-ifs, not when his parents had naturally fallen into fussing over Ilya, not when Ilya's eyes were widened in shock even as he was smiling one of his smiles that Shane knew was real, a smile that said he couldn't quite believe his luck.

"We should head out," David said eventually, clapping Ilya on the shoulder once before taking a step back, "thank you again."

“Of course,” Ilya said for what must’ve been the twelfth time. His eyes caught Shane’s and his smile turned fond and just a little sad, “it was my pleasure.”

Shane stepped forward and wrapped his good arm around Ilya’s waist, tucking his head beneath Ilya’s chin. Ilya’s strong arms wrapped around his shoulders, and he rested his cheek against the back of Shane’s head.

“I’ll see you soon,” Shane said softly.

“Soon,” Ilya agreed, turning his head to press his nose into Shane’s hair for a moment before stepping back, “text when you are home safe, yeah?”

“I will,” Shane promised, “text when you land.”

“I will,” Ilya promised in return.

Shane took a breath and then turned around and climbed into the back seat of his dad’s car and watched as Ilya stood on the doorstep, hands in his pockets, simply watching as the car drove away.

“He’s such a nice boy,” Yuna said once they’d pulled onto the interstate, “I didn’t expect it.”

“He’s still an asshole,” Shane said, knowing he sounded far too fond but deciding he really didn’t care. “But, yeah, he can be nice.”

Yuna looked over her shoulder and smiled knowingly but didn’t say anything else and Shane was grateful for the fact that she was holding her tongue even though he was sure it was torture for her to not ask a million questions. He fell asleep a few minutes later and only woke up at the border before falling asleep again only to wake up when they pulled into the driveway of his childhood home in Ottawa.

“We detoured and stopped by your place in Montreal on the way down,” David explained, walking around the car and grabbing several duffels out of the trunk, looking a little like someone who’d gone overboard at the grocery store but was still convinced they could carry every bag inside in one trip. “Just grabbed enough clothes for the next couple of days.”

Shane nodded his thanks and used his good arm to pick up one of the lighter bags just to feel like he was at least somewhat helpful.

He had no clue what was going to happen after he was given a couple of days to rest and even though that scared him to no end, it also, somehow, excited him. He was ready for a change in a way he couldn't ever remember being.

* * *

Ilya slept nearly the entire flight. He was exhausted in more ways than one, he felt a little like someone had tied a cinder block to his ankle and thrown him into a lukewarm pool, the sort of temperature that lulls you into a false sense of a security before you realize that you can drown even in comfort.

Ilya texted Shane the moment the wheels touched down and received a response half a minute later that said *good, I miss you, be kind to yourself* followed by a second message that was simply a red heart. It was short, simple, and sweet and it made Ilya feel like he might just be able to make it through the week without losing his mind.

They made their way through customs and climbed into the car Ilya had ordered and headed straight for the condo he still kept in Moscow so he wouldn't have to stay at home. He found himself wondering, idly, as the city rushed past the windows, how much longer he'd keep that condo. He wondered, less idly, if this might just be his last time coming home.

He thought it might be and, somehow, that didn't feel catastrophic.

It was Tuesday morning with the time difference, so they grabbed coffee and breakfast from a place down the street and brought it back up to Ilya's condo where they ate and then went through Ilya's notes for what needed to be done that day.

After that, Ilya existed somewhere between present and total dissociation. It wasn't dissociation, not entirely. He knew what that felt like, he could remember the fog settling in the moment he'd seen his mother's limp arm hanging off the sofa, and this wasn't *quite* that, but it was something close.

Arrangements were made, services were paid for, meals were ordered, and conversations were had and Ilya barely registered any of it.

By Thursday, the day of the funeral, he was starting to genuinely consider the merits of finding a therapist when he made it back to the states because he was dead certain that this wasn't a healthy way to process grief, especially grief as complex as this.

The thought had hit him out of nowhere, but it'd settled in, wormed its way into his conscious mind until he was forced to actually reckon with it. He didn't know if he was depressed but he was damn certain he was sad, angry, and maybe a little untethered from reality. He left a note to himself, below his constantly shifting to do list, to search for Russian-speaking therapists in the Boston area.

He wasn't sure, yet, whether or not he'd follow through, but making the note, letting the thought exist somewhere outside of his head, brought something like comfort.

The funeral and following burial happened to someone else.

Ilya knew he was there, knew his feet had walked into the church and then through the cemetery, but he couldn't help but believe that the being living in this body he was operating was someone else entirely.

It wasn't until he was half way through a shouting match with Alexei that his conscious slammed back into him, it wasn't until his brother was right in his face trying to make him believe that he wasn't the one holding this entire shit show of a family together, trying to make him believe that he was worthless, that Ilya started to feel like himself again.

And it wasn't the good version of himself, the version that had tucked Shane into bed and kissed his head and carried him to the bath when he'd felt too dizzy just a few short days ago, the version that visited Boston Children's and spent hours talking to sick kids because he knew it'd make them smile, the version that held his niece's hand every time they walked anywhere just because he could.

It was the version of himself that existed in the moments before his gloves hit the ice and he punched someone hard enough they had to be pulled from the game. It was the version of himself that'd fucked Shane into submission in a Las Vegas penthouse before sending him away without a kiss or an even half-kind word. It was the version of himself that existed in darkness, that lived on those emotions that felt like sludge settling over your heart and like a switch flipping in your brain.

He hated it, the way he let outside influence cloud his judgment and turn him into the worst possible version of himself but he was too far gone, too deep in the well of emotions and too hopped up on his brother's vitriol to pull himself back so he simply shouted louder, got meaner, drove the wedge deeper until it felt like he was standing on an island, lost at sea and his brother was on a different planet all together.

When it was over, when they'd finally shouted themselves out, the only thought left in the frayed remains of Ilya's heart and mind was *Shane*.

He pulled on his coat, shot Svetlana a smile that he hoped was even sort of reassuring, and disappeared into the night.

* * *

March 2017

Shane was sitting on the floor of his bedroom in Montreal late on Thursday morning, staring at a pile of Voyageurs gear and wondering if he should donate it, return it, or use it to host a ceremonial bonfire when his phone rang.

He'd been on and off the phone for two days and he'd just, *finally*, gotten a moment alone after suffering through an exit meeting with Voyageurs management. He hadn't even had time to process yet, hadn't even texted Scott to tell him the news even though he was sure Scott already knew. He hadn't told Ilya yet because today was Ilya's father's funeral and he didn't need to be bugged with Shane's shit. He was planning to text him soon, to tell him that as of 9:00 EST Friday morning he'd officially be a New York Admiral.

He didn't want to pick up the phone, didn't want to hear another word about salary caps and bonuses and fucking work visa paperwork from his agent, didn't want to hear his mom say she was proud in the same breath she'd remind him he needed to contact New York's trainers to talk about rehabbing his shoulder or tell him to look at the real estate listings she'd been genuinely kind enough to print out so he wouldn't have to look at a screen. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to handle Scott's voice right now, no matter how excited he was for the chance to play with him outside of an All-Star game.

He nearly let the phone ring, but then he caught sight of the name and every ounce of left over panic and anger faded.

Ilya.

His contact had been changed only the day prior when Shane had realized that the world knew they were friends, that it wouldn't be so weird for him to have Ilya's actual contact information in his phone. He'd even added a contact photo, the one Scott had taken of them both smiling in the locker room, the one that hadn't been posted on Instagram for all the world to see.

He'd also, in a moment of total genius, gone into his phone's settings and turned off message previews.

The fact that it wouldn't be weird for a notification from Ilya to pop up on his lockscreen absolutely did *not* mean that it wouldn't be weird for someone to see a text from Ilya with a detailed list of filthy things he planned to do to Shane after a game. He was going to have to talk to Ilya about moving his raunchier messages over to the relative safety of Snapchat, but that was probably a conversation for another day.

He picked up the phone immediately and swiped his thumb across the screen to answer, "Ilya, hi."

"Shane," Ilya breathed out and, *God*, he sounded wrecked.

"What's wrong?"

"Everything," Ilya responded almost immediately, it sounded almost like his mouth was outpacing his brain and Shane had no clue how to fix it. "I feel like I am not a person," he said, his words choppy and his accent thick. "I don't know how to describe."

"Like the world is just happening around you but you're not really part of it?" Shane asked. It happened to him sometimes, when the lights were too bright and there were too many different sounds happening, no matter their volume, when he could feel the tags on his clothes rubbing against his skin and every time another person brushed past him he felt like his nerves had been lit on fire in the most unpleasant way. Sometimes, there was just too much, too many inputs, and his brain simply went offline, factory reset.

"Exactly," Ilya breathed out. His voice was a little steadier already even though it was still filled with slightly frantic emotion. "Like someone else is operating my body."

“That happens to me sometimes,” Shane offered. He heard Ilya suck in a deep breath and Shane took that as his cue to keep talking. He wasn’t sure if it was the knowledge that he wasn’t weird or different for feeling that way or simply the sound of Shane’s voice that had his breathing returning to a normal rhythm, but Shane figured that, either way, it’d help if he continued to speak. “It feels almost like my brain shuts off to protect itself, like if I can’t feel the sensations or emotions at all it’ll be better. But that’s not always the case. Sometimes, when my brain shuts off, it’s so much worse when it turns back on. It’s exhausting.”

“I cut my brother off,” Ilya said, a little bit apropos of nothing. “My brain was, like you said, shut off and it came back on while Alexei and I were fighting and he was trying to make it seem like I was bad brother, bad son, like I was worthless and I told him I was done giving him money. I do not think he deserves my kindness and I do not think it was kind to myself to keep listening.”

“I’m proud of you,” Shane said gently. He heard Ilya’s breath hitch and knew he was moments away from breaking down. “Do you want to talk more or do you want a distraction?”

Ilya’s slightly ragged breathing was the only sound for a moment before it steadied just a little and he said, “distraction.”

“I’m no longer a Voyageur,” Shane said.

“That is *quite* the distraction, Hollander.”

“Shut up, Rozanov,” Shane said, huffing out a laugh as he pictured the way Ilya was probably smirking even as his eyes betrayed his real emotions; probably a little bit shocked, but overwhelmingly relieved. “Do you think I should return my team gear, donate it, or burn it?”

“Burn it.”

“That’s where I was leaning,” Shane said, moving back just a little so he could rest against the footboard of his bed, his bed that’d be packed up and moved to New York sometime in the next week. “Do you want to help me pick out a house?”

“You are the real estate expert,” Ilya teased.

Shane let his eyes close as he smiled, “right, I’d forgotten. You know, I finally put those condos on the market, decided I might as well make some actual money off of them if they weren’t going to be of use to me anymore.”

“So, you are finally done lying about the sex condo needing to be renovated?”

Shane couldn’t help but laugh at that. He still couldn’t believe he’d panic bought an *entire* building just for a hook up.

“Yes,” Shane said softly. He couldn’t help but think about how much more it meant than simply leasing out property. He wasn’t hiding Ilya away anymore, even if they still couldn’t be as open as they wanted to be, even though the fact that he was gay was still merely a rumor and a mostly contained secret. “Hey, Ilya?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you, you know?”

The line went silent for a moment before Shane heard Ilya take in a breath that went shaky on the exhale, “I know. I love you too, Shane.”

“Good,” Shane said simply. “Still need a distraction?”

“I just want to hear your voice.”

Shane smiled and happily complied. He kept his voice even and his tone soft, he made sure to keep his pace slow and to enunciate words so Ilya could understand him even over the slightly choppy international connection. He talked about hiring movers and about the fact that he hadn’t been dizzy since Tuesday, he talked about visiting Jackie that morning for breakfast before going to the GM’s office while her sister watched the kids, he talked about how his locker at the practice facility had been cleared out for him but that his game day locker had been left as it was by the equipment managers, about how one of the equipment managers had cornered him before he left the building that morning to tell him he’d be missed and that the staff would let him on the ice one last time when he went to clear out his locker at the arena.

He talked about how he was trying to decide between finding an apartment in the city near MSG or finding a house out in the suburbs closer to Tarrytown so he wouldn't have to drive as far for practice.

Ilya interjected every once in a while; asked if he'd been able to switch to over the counter pain meds from the prescription shit which Shane happily informed him he had, expressed how glad he was that Shane wasn't waking up nauseous anymore, asked after Jackie and grumbled about the fact that they hadn't let Shane clear out his own locker while, at the same time, praising the equipment managers who'd protected his game day locker.

"I think suburbs," Ilya decided eventually.

"Why's that?"

"You like space," Ilya said. "Fresh air, room to move around. I do not think you would like living in the city."

"I think you're probably right," Shane agreed, he'd been thinking the same thing. His mom had found a house that was only a fifteen-minute drive from the Admirals' practice facility and a forty-minute drive to MSG. It was on four acres of land and sat at the top of a driveway that was separated from the main road by a full tree line. There was a gated entrance and a private guest suite and enough room in the house to build a home gym without taking up too much space. There was a massive back yard and enough tree cover that Shane was sure he'd feel more like he was at the cottage than stuck in the hustle of a city in the type of close quarters that always felt a little claustrophobic. It was a bit funny, honestly, that he'd decided to move to New York when he was a much bigger fan of wide-open spaces.

This house felt like a compromise, though.

He was near enough to the city to experience it, but he could go home at the end of the day to a place he'd be able to breathe.

He pulled the phone away from his ear and put it on speaker so he could open the group message with his mom and the real estate agent she'd somehow found with about twelve hours' notice and sent one simple text: *Let's put an offer on the house in Irvington.*

It was that, more than contract discussions and empty lockers, that made him realize he was actually doing this.

“Send pictures,” Ilya said, “I want to see this new house.”

Shane scrolled up and copied the Zillow link and pasted it into his thread with Ilya before setting the phone down and closing his eyes. He could handle screens and light for longer now, but it still wasn't exactly comfortable.

“Sent it.”

Ilya went quiet for a minute and then let out a low whistle, “wow, Hollander, this is very nice house.”

“You think?”

“It has a pond.”

“Does that make a house nice?”

“I sure think so,” Ilya said with a light laugh. “I like the yard, and the stone. It is a very pretty home, Shane.”

“It's almost exactly three hours from yours.”

“You already looked?” Ilya asked and just from the tone of his voice Shane could tell how soft his eyes had just gone, could tell how sweet his smile was.

“Of course I did.”

Ilya took a deep breath, and then another, and then said, “thank you, Shane. I needed this.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“I know, but I am anyways.”

“You’re adorable.”

Ilya blew a raspberry right into the speaker that had Shane laughing almost on instinct, “I am not adorable, I am big and strong and Russian. Russians are not adorable, we do not do this.”

“I think that’s a lie,” Shane laughed, “I think you can be both Russian and adorable.”

“Fine, whatever,” Ilya said, as if he were put out before his voice sobered, “really, Shane, thank you. I am very excited to visit you in the new house, and I am proud of you for leaving Montreal to find something better. You deserve the best.”

“Thank you,” Shane said softly. His parents had told him that, Hayden and Jackie had told him that, he’d told himself that but hearing it from Ilya was something else entirely. “Are you alright?”

“No,” Ilya answered honestly, “but I am better now, *lyubimiy*.”

“Good,” Shane said.

“I should go,” Ilya said after they’d fallen silent for a moment, “I left Sveta alone with the wolves. I will text when I get back to my condo, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane agreed. “I love you, Ilya, keep being kind to yourself.”

“I love you too,” Ilya replied, “I will do my best.”

Shane stayed sitting there long after the line went dead.

* * *

On Friday afternoon, Ilya woke up from his nap and, for some godforsaken reason, opened Twitter for the first time in days.

He was immediately assaulted by the news breaking that Shane Hollander, Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs, Back-to-Back Stanley Cup Champion, was being traded to the New York Admirals a mere 36 hours ahead of the trade deadline.

The theories for why this was happening ranged from the absurd (*he broke up with Hayden Pike and needed to run away to heal his broken heart*, a real fucking thing that someone had actually written, re-read for spelling errors, and then decided to share with the internet) to the almost concerningly accurate (*there's a pervasive issue with inclusivity in the Montreal organization and Hollander must've finally gotten tired of it*).

Thankfully, no one had guessed the whole story.

No one had said they thought Shane had come out to his team, his team he'd spent his entire career with, his team he'd won *two* Stanley Cups for, and they'd responded by icing him out, checking him too hard in practice, and making him feel unsafe in the locker room.

No one had guessed that Shane Hollander had been emotionally compromised from the minor disaster that was his long term situationship with Ilya Rozanov and had decided to do a full 180 and get into a very public, high profile relationship with A-List Movie Star Rose Landry who'd almost immediately clocked him as gay and then had stood by his side while he told his friends and family before spending a rare weekend off in Florida at All Star Weekend just so she could be nearby if he needed her.

No one had guessed that Shane and Ilya had reconciled, that Shane had found a kindred spirit in Scott Hunter and it'd been enough for him to tell his agent where he wanted to go, to make the fact that his no trade had been waived something that mattered.

Montreal fans were in a state of outrage, though Ilya was incredibly pleased to find that about 98% of the vitriol was aimed at the Voyageurs and the 2% who were aiming their anger at Shane were having

the figurative shit kicked out of them by anyone with a brain in the replies.

He also found that the news of Shane's trade had entirely eclipsed any mention of the fact that Ilya wasn't travelling with his team and that he hadn't been so much as spotted in the general vicinity of Boston in a week.

Ilya wasn't sure how to feel about that. He hated that this amount of attention might be hurting Shane in some way, but he also knew that Shane would've expected this attention, that there was no way he could've expected anything else and that he'd honestly probably be happy that the attention was keeping the press away from Ilya's scent, that Shane's life blowing up was protecting Ilya somehow.

He exited out of the app and opened his messages and fired off a text to *Shane*, a contact he'd changed in the short while he'd been awake on the flight over now that people knew they were friends. He'd even added a contact photo, one Scott had taken that hadn't made it onto Instagram where Shane was sitting in his hospital bed, glaring at the camera like an angry kitten while Scott muttered about the exposure and bossed Ilya around like he was the PA on a Rolex campaign.

You're trending, he typed. He almost deleted it to type something kinder, but he knew Shane would understand him, would know he was being a little funny while still actually checking in.

I sure am, Shane replied almost immediately. A second text came a moment later, *my dad is having a great time reading the more unhinged theories about why I'm leaving*.

Has he found the Shayden break up rumors yet?

No, Shane sent back, *and I sure hope he never does. Jackie is bad enough*.

Then a photo came through.

It showed a massive bouquet of roses, like a truly obnoxious number of them, and Shane's hand holding one of those little cards they have at the florist. The message said: *So sorry to hear about your broken heart, sending my love -Hayden's Mistress*.

And then another text came in, and Ilya could almost hear Shane's voice as he read it: *She ordered these online. She typed in this message and submitted the order with her full government name and her credit card information.*

Ilya let out a laugh that echoed through his empty condo as he typed back: *you have weird friends.*

I do, Shane sent. Three little dots appeared at the corner of the screen before disappearing for a moment. Ilya was about to start typing a reply, maybe some actual question about how Shane was doing, and then another text appeared, *thank you for checking in, everything is alright here, I promise.*

Ilya breathed out a sigh of relief.

He knew Shane wouldn't lie, he wasn't really capable of lying, not directly, not to Ilya.

He hid things, sure, but he very rarely *lied*. If he said things were alright, they were alright. Maybe they weren't good, maybe he was still anxious, still scared, but he was alright and that was enough.

Ilya set his phone down and looked around the blank walls of this condo he'd bought right after his rookie season and started to feel like he'd overstayed his welcome.

It was Friday afternoon, their flight back to Boston was Sunday morning.

Ilya took a breath and slung his legs over the side of the bed as he sat up. He rested his elbows on his knees and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and decided that by tomorrow evening, this place would be truly empty.

His father was dead, buried next to what remained of his mother, but he didn't feel tied to that spot like some might, he didn't feel like he was missing anything by not being able to visit her grave. She was with him, always, in the crucifix around his neck and in the instinct to be kind instead of awful. She lived in the songs he hummed under his breath and in the meals he'd learned to make when he needed comfort.

The place she was buried wasn't all that was left and forcing himself to stay here, to continue to call this place home simply to be close to that spot felt almost like a disservice.

She hadn't been able to leave; she'd been young and sad and *stuck*.

Ilya wasn't stuck.

He may be young, he may sometimes be sad, but he didn't need to be stuck. He had the means to find somewhere that made him happy, he had a job that allowed him to leave, he wasn't tied to his father any longer. There was nothing keeping him here, but there was *everything* telling him he was allowed to leave.

Moscow wasn't home anymore, hadn't been for a long time.

Home was Boston and a rowdy locker room and music playing far too loud. Home was yelling at the TV with Svetlana while she threw popcorn at him and told him to calm down before starting to yell at the TV herself. Home was driving an extra 40 minutes to go to the grocery store that had the ingredients he needed for the soup his mother used to make him when he had a cold. Home was the trees in New England changing color in the fall and the decent weather sticking around long enough that you actually got to enjoy them.

Home was brown eyes and freckles and a smile that felt like the sun breaking through winter fog.

Ilya had a home, one that made him feel warm and wanted, a home his mother would want him to run toward instead of push away out of some misguided notion that he *needed* be close to her grave.

He wrapped his hand around her crucifix and felt the peace settle in his bones.

It was time to go home.

Chapter 11: long live

March 2017

This was, without a doubt, one of the best days of Scott's life. He wandered into the locker room that Friday afternoon before their home game against Minnesota, grinning like mad with his phone pressed to his ear, and was met by a wall of raucous sound, "hear that, Hollzy?"

"What the fuck is that noise?" Shane asked, his voice coming through Scott's phone barely even audible over the chaos.

"Your new team," Scott responded, his grin growing even wider. His cheeks were starting to hurt. He felt honestly a little crazy with how happy he was; like the emotion had seeped into every corner of his being instead of simply living in the neurons of his brain.

The team had, apparently, gone entirely insane, cheering and singing and spraying each other with – thankfully - water instead of champagne. Someone walking into this room might genuinely think they were celebrating winning the Cup.

Less than a month ago this locker room had been rife with tension and then Zullo had gotten arrested and they'd released him and traded for Matti Jalo who was both a better player and a better person and now news had just hit that they'd gotten Shane *fucking* Hollander whose injury report said he'd be back on the ice for practice by the end of the month and back into games in early April while they were smack dab in the middle of a generational run that would only get better with, again, Shane *fucking* Hollander on their team.

"What?" Shane asked, clearly confused. Scott could somehow picture the face he was making, the way he'd cock his head just slightly to one side and, for once, look more like a puppy than a kitten. Scott probably needed to find some way to describe Shane's expressions that wasn't comparing him to tiny, baby animals but that was a task that could wait for another day.

"Listen," Scott said, stepping fully into the room and turning his phone on speaker.

* * *

Shane had to pull his phone away from his ear as the sound crashed through the speakers.

It took a second for his brain to organize the words and when their shouting became clear, he nearly started crying.

Most everyone was chanting *WE GOT HOLLZY!* at the top of their lungs with the sort of fervor you normally ever heard after a massive win and a voice he somehow recognized as Carter Vaughan was simply screaming along to the song blasting through the locker room speakers which even Shane wasn't offline enough to not recognize as Taylor Swift's *Welcome to New York*.

Hearing his new team cheer for him like his trade was the equivalent of a Cup win was such a stark departure from the exit he'd made from Montreal that morning that it felt like his head was spinning and for the first time in a week it wasn't in a bad way.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

He didn't know how to react, how to properly emote in the face of that level of excitement, of support.

"Boys!" Scott shouted, his voice somehow cutting through the noise and Shane felt a strange sense of pride as the volume decreased immediately; that was his new Captain, the person Shane was more than happy to follow toward victory, the person who could cut through the insanity of a locker room in the midst of chaos with a single shout because his team respected him enough to listen.

"Scotty!" Carter shouted. If Shane didn't know they had a game in an hour, he honestly might've assumed Carter was drunk.

"Can I switch to FaceTime?" Scott asked, his voice closer to the speaker now.

Shane paused for only a moment, taking stock of his head, of the pounding that sometimes existed behind his eyes, and decided that seeing his new team would be worth having to sleep off a headache, "yeah."

Scott let out a whoop that seemed almost involuntary and then the call cut out. It was silent for only a second before Shane's phone started ringing again. He picked it up and was met with the faces of

about a dozen of the Admirals, half dressed for warmups and quite literally climbing over each other to make it into the frame as they crowded around Scott.

“Hollzy!” one of them, Shane was pretty sure it was Brisebois, shouted.

“Breezy!” he shouted back, ignoring the way the volume made his eye twitch and deciding to take the risk that his assumption was right.

He was met with a cheer that told him he had, in fact, guessed correctly.

“Can I just say,” Carter called, his voice cutting through the chaos almost as effectively as Scott’s, “Montreal is fucking stupid for letting you go.”

Shane didn’t necessarily want to start off his time with his new team by complaining about his old one so, instead of saying anything directly incriminating, he just grinned a little and said, “Roz thinks I should light a ceremonial fire with all my old gear.”

“Someone write down the date!” Carter crowed, the smile on his face turning almost manic with excitement, “I actually agree with Ilya Rozanov! This is a historical event!”

Shane couldn’t help but laugh at that. A real laugh, one that came from his chest and made him feel genuine joy, one that made his stomach shake with the force of it, “what a feeling, right?”

“Yes, yes,” Scott said, laughing too. Not as loudly or as freely as Shane and Carter, he seemed, to Shane’s eye, to be more focused on *Shane’s* reactions than his own. “We all remember the first time we agree with Roz, it’s a distressing experience.”

Shane smiled and decided he needed to change the subject before his expression slipped into something unmistakably fond, “Minnesota tonight, you guys ready?”

“Absolutely,” Wagner yelled, popping up at the bottom of the frame and forcing Scott to adjust his hold on the phone so he wouldn’t drop it, Shane quickly adjusted his grip on his own phone so he could take a screenshot, just needing to have something to remember this moment by. “We’re winning this one for you, Hollzy!”

The Shane of about three weeks ago might've protested, might've said something about how they should win the game for themselves, might've made some comment brushing it off and downplaying just how appreciated that made him feel but the Shane of now had blown up his life and it'd all shaken out in his favor anyways, so, instead of playing it down, instead of blushing and ducking his head and trying to make himself *small*, he tipped his head back like he was swooning and said, "oh, my heart, I'm honored. I expect whoever scores the winning goal to blow a kiss at the camera, really seal the deal."

"You got it," Carter called, laughing in an open sort of way that made it easy for Shane to understand that he was laughing *with* Shane instead of at him.

"I'll watch the third period then," Shane promised.

"Oh, shit," Scott said, his voice nearly a yelp as he flinched, his arm holding the phone shaking slightly as he nearly dropped it and then pulled it closer to his face. "You're not supposed to be on screens, young man."

"Sorry, dad."

"Enough of that," Scott said, pointing his finger at the camera like he was attempting to scold Shane, "put your phone down, take whatever meds you're supposed to take, and if you don't have a headache you can watch the third period."

Shane just smiled, "alright, Scotty. I'll see you all soon, kick the shit out of Minnesota."

He was met with a resounding cheer that cut off as Scott shook his head and ended the call. Shane just sat there, staring at the now blank screen, and let the feeling sink in.

* * *

Ilya woke up Saturday morning and, once again, opened Twitter.

His feed was full of hockey which wasn't much of a shock.

What *was* a shock was the fact that New York had beat Minnesota in a 5-0 shut out.

Ilya navigated over to New York's page to check for game highlights because any game with that sort of score would've certainly been entertaining to watch and, instead, found a compilation of all five goals where each play ended in the shot cutting to a close up of whoever had scored the goal who then, each of them, for all five goals, blew a kiss straight into the camera.

Ilya didn't understand what was happening until the last goal, a beautiful shot straight into the top shelf rounding out Scott's hat trick.

He turned toward the camera, winked, and then blew a kiss right as Carter Vaughan slammed into his back, threw an arm around his shoulders, pointed at the camera, and yelled *HOLLZY* loud enough for the broadcast to pick it up.

Shane hadn't even put on the jersey yet and they were already treating him like he was an integral part of the team.

Ilya knew he was grinning like an idiot as he exited out of the app and opened Instagram. When the page loaded, the first circle in the line of stories was Scott's. Ilya clicked on it and found the team's highlight of Scott's hatty, followed by the compilation of all five team goals, and then a FaceTime screenshot that Shane must've taken where Shane was grinning in the top right corner of the screen, the bruise across his face clearly visible but looking far better than it had a week ago, and most of the Admirals crowded around Scott who was holding the phone, all of them either grinning or in the middle of cheering.

It looked like screenshots Ilya had seen of players calling their families after they'd won a playoff series on the road.

Scott had simply written: *welcome to New York*.

It was simple and stupid and Ilya was half certain Shane wouldn't understand the reference, but it was perfect, nonetheless.

And, honestly, if a 5-0 game against a solid playoff contender was how New York was playing after simply *hearing the news* that Shane had been traded to their team, Ilya wasn't sure he wanted to experience how they'd play once Shane was actually on the ice.

Ilya exited out of Instagram and shot a text off to Shane to tell him good morning (even though it was the middle of the night in Montreal) and then moved over to his notes app, to the to do list he'd made himself the day before in an attempt to channel Shane.

He had some clothes that'd been left here over the years that could be donated and a few belongings he wanted to bring back home meaning he needed to go out and buy a second suitcase.

The list helped, the knowledge that all he had to do was follow the next step stopped him from slipping into that foggy state where time simply passed around him without his knowledge.

Just 24 more hours, just a short list of tasks and he'd be on a plane flying home.

* * *

It was Monday morning, Montreal had the day off practice, and Shane, Hayden, and J.J. were standing on the ice staring up at the two banners they'd put up in the rafters together.

It'd been just over a week since Shane had been injured in Boston and he probably shouldn't be in skates just yet, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't step onto the ice in the Bell Center for the last time as a Voyageur in sneakers. He'd let Hayden lace his skates for him and they'd only skated out to center ice before stopping, but that was as much of a concession as he'd been willing to make.

They were in home game jerseys that'd been cleaned and left hanging in their stalls by the equipment managers, a note folded next to Shane's telling him the jersey was his to keep along with a card full of messages from dozens of people who worked in the building or out at the practice facility wishing him well and thanking him for always being so kind.

This was the last time he'd ever wear this jersey.

After he got off the ice, he'd hand it to his mom and it'd end up being sent somewhere to be framed and, probably, once this departure stopped feeling like an open wound, it'd be hung in his trophy room next to the one he'd received on draft day.

Hayden's hand landed on his lower back and J.J.'s rested on his shoulder and Shane heard the shutter of a camera and found himself torn between wishing the team's media staff weren't here and grateful that someone was documenting this moment.

"You ready?" Hayden asked, his voice soft even as it echoed slightly through the empty rink.

"No," Shane answered honestly.

He'd felt good this past week, excited for change, excited to see what happened next. He'd already been added to group chats and invited to someone's birthday party the next week and he'd been talking to the Admirals training staff about rehab and they'd made a timeline that'd have him back on the ice before the end of the regular season if all went well and everything was working out in ways he'd thought he could only *dream* of but now, standing on this ice, on the ice he'd called his home rink for *seven years*, he stopped feeling so ready for change.

He felt his eyes well up against his will and before the tears could even fall, he found himself sandwiched in a hug between his two best friends.

"I'm gonna miss you guys," he said, knowing his voice sounded wrecked.

J.J. sniffled behind him and buried his face in Shane's hair as Hayden tucked his head against Shane's uninjured shoulder, "we're gonna miss you too, Capitaine."

"You'll visit," Hayden said, like it was simply a fact of life, which it absolutely was. "There's always a room in my house for you, you know that."

"I know," Shane whispered, the emotions clogging his throat making it hard to speak any louder. "It won't be the same."

"It won't," J.J. agreed, "but maybe it'll be better."

Shane just nodded. He knew it'd be better, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt to leave.

Eventually, once each of them had steadied, they untangled themselves and, by some sort of unspoken agreement, started to skate back toward the boards. Shane looked up at that banner once more, the memories of hoisting the Cup into the air flooding his senses, and then turned around and followed Hayden and J.J. off the ice.

They waited for him at the gate and Shane knew why without needing to be told.

He slid to a stop and then held out his fist. It'd normally be the right, but the left would have to do seeing as his right arm was very much still in a sling.

As always, J.J. was third to last off the ice.

He tapped his fist to Shane's and then knocked their foreheads together lightly, being careful both because of Shane's concussion and because they'd normally be wearing helmets. Instead of good game, Shane whispered, "thank you."

J.J. nodded once and replied, "thank *you*," before stepping off the ice and through the gate.

Hayden, as always, was the second to last off.

He skated that last stride forward, tapped his fist to Shane's, and kissed the side of his head where he'd normally give an exaggerated smooch to Shane's helmet after a win. Shane breathed out a laugh and returned the gesture, "love you, man."

"Love you too," Hayden replied, his nose twitching slightly as he tried to hold back tears.

Shane watched as Hayden stepped off the ice and then took a breath and followed.

On Monday afternoon, Scott's phone lit up with two notifications, almost in sync; a text from Ilya that said Boston was all but forcing him to take an extra week of bereavement leave that was in response to Scott asking if he'd be playing that night and a push notification letting him know that @shanehollander had posed on Instagram.

He ignored Ilya's message for the time being, knowing that if anyone was going to be able to convince him that caring for his mental well-being wasn't a form of torture it'd be Shane, not Scott, and opened Instagram.

It was ten pictures, a full carousel.

The first was a shot of Shane, Hayden, and J.J. in jeans and their game jerseys standing at center ice, Hayden and J.J.'s arms wrapped around Shane with back-to-back Stanley Cup banners hanging above their heads.

The second was a video of Shane standing at the boards, his arm still in its sling as he held out his left fist.

J.J. stepped off the ice first after thanking Shane, the same ritual they'd do after every game. Hayden stepped off second. There was no sound, but Scott could see Shane's lips form the words *love you, man* after they'd exchanged helmet-less helmet smooches. It was adorable and bittersweet in a way that made Scott feel immeasurably guilty about how happy he'd been about Shane's upcoming move.

The third slide was Shane with the first cup Montreal had won while the fourth slide showed all the Voyageurs with the Cup on the ice after their second win.

The fifth slide showed Shane and Hayden in what must've been either their first or second year, considering the fact that neither of them had an A stitched into their sweater. They had their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders and were grinning at the camera like mad, their hair sweaty in that post-game way that made them look boyish and full of life.

The sixth slide was Shane standing between his parents. He was in an away jersey and Scott could just make out the corner of the Centaur's logo on the wall in the background meaning it'd been a game in his hometown. David and Yuna were in matching Hollander jerseys, and they looked so damn proud it made Scott's heart hurt, just a little.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth slides were action shots; one of Shane in the faceoff circle against Ilya, one of Shane in the midst of knocking a pass over to Hayden, and the last of him on a breakaway with Vancouver's goalie barely visible on the edge of the screen. Scott had a feeling it was a shot of Shane's first career goal.

The final slide was what made the tears fall.

It was from Shane's draft day.

Ilya was holding his Boston jersey, holding up his finger to show he'd gone first and he was grinning over at Shane in a way that was clearly meant to be teasing but had failed spectacularly. Neither of them had ever told Scott the timeline, but looking at this picture, Scott somehow just knew this was the beginning.

Shane was holding his Montreal jersey, two fingers held up, and his media smile plastered across his face.

He looked so young, younger than Scott could ever actually remember him being. He'd just been drafted second overall to a team only two hours away from his hometown, a team that needed to go through some rebuilding, but a team that had *wanted* him, had started to build a legacy around him even before he'd stepped on the ice. He had probably assumed, when he'd been handed that jersey on that stage in Ottawa, that it'd be the jersey he'd retire in, the jersey that, maybe, someday, after a career well played, would hang up in the rafters of the Bell Center.

That Shane probably couldn't have even imagined a world where his team would turn their backs on him so thoroughly, a world where he didn't retire as a Voyageur.

The comments were filled with well wishes, with Montreal fans talking about the games they'd had the chance to see Shane play, with old teammates from Juniors saying how proud they were of how far he'd come, with New York fans saying how excited they were for his next chapter.

It was only after Scott had spent far too long scrolling through other people's words that he went back and read Shane's:

Montreal has been my home for seven years and I never thought I'd be leaving it behind. I have had the time of my life playing on this ice, for this team. I always imagined spending my entire career as a Voyageur, but sometimes plans change. I am incredibly grateful for the years I spent with this organization, with these fans and this incredible community.

Thank you, Montreal.

Love always, #24.

Chapter 12: your eyes look like coming home

March 2017

Shane startled awake as his phone rang.

It was pitch black outside, even the streetlights were turned off outside his parents' house in Ottawa meaning it was almost certainly the middle of the night. They'd driven back to Ottawa after dinner with Hayden and J.J., leaving Shane's Montreal apartment empty for the movers that'd be coming Thursday morning.

Shane's dad had driven his car back, filled with his personal gear and a couple of suitcases full of clothing and belongs he didn't want to leave at the movers' mercy and now Shane was in his childhood bedroom, yet again, just waiting for the news that he could move into his new house in New York. It was empty, had just been sitting on the market after the previous owners had decided to move into their vacation home somewhere down South full time, so Shane would be able to move in as soon as the deed was properly filed.

It was all moving way too quickly, faster than Shane could even process, but he found himself not actually wanting it to slow down.

He ran his hand across his bed before rolling over, reaching for his nightstand where his fingers finally wrapped around his phone. He cracked an eye open just enough to press answer seeing as anyone who could get through his Do Not Disturb wouldn't be calling him in the middle of the goddamn night if it weren't important.

"Hello?" he said, trying not to yawn which only made him yawn harder.

"Shane?" Ilya's voice responded.

Shane sat bolt upright, ignoring the way it made his head spin and his shoulder twinge. It had only been one syllable, one measly syllable carried across phone lines and international borders, but it was enough to make alarm bells go off in Shane's head.

Ilya sounded off, nervous almost, and the slight crack in his voice clued Shane into the fact that he'd either been crying or was trying not to cry now.

“Ilya, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya whispered and now Shane was dead certain he’d been crying. His voice was rough around the edges and sounded like it’d been stretched thin.

“What can I do? What do you need?”

“You.”

“I’m here,” Shane responded immediately, trying to keep his voice soft even as his mind started to spiral, running over every possible reason why Ilya could be this sad. It wasn’t at all comforting to realize that was a pretty lengthy list.

“No,” Ilya said before cutting himself off with an almost annoyed huff. Shane got the feeling it hadn’t been directed at him. “I need *you*, Shane.”

Shane took a slow breath and let it out, hoping that Ilya might at least follow his breathing subconsciously if he made it obvious, that he might use it as a way to ground himself while Shane tried to get his injured brain to formulate an actual thought.

It took a minute, a minute of silence and shared breaths crackling through the phone, but Shane finally clawed his way toward an idea, a thought that’d form and stick around instead of disappearing with a throbbing pain in his temple, “Boston gave you this week off?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I do not have to be back until practice Monday morning. Well, I was told to not be back until practice Monday morning.”

“Okay, come to Ottawa.”

“What?”

“Come to Ottawa, you can drive my car to New York with me when I move. That way my parents can fly instead of having to make the drive round trip or booking a one-way flight. I’m still not cleared to drive, so you’d be helping me out. It’d give you something to do and you could be here, with me.”

Shane had sort of taken a stab in the dark with the whole *you’d be helping* angle, but he was pretty sure that it’d work.

“It would help?” Ilya asked and even though Shane had assumed that he’d be more comfortable taking what he needed when it also helped Shane, it still sort of broke his heart to actually hear.

“Yes,” Shane said. “It would be a huge help. I’m staying at my parents in Ottawa right now but you’re welcome here, Ilya. It’s Tuesday right now, right?”

“Yeah,” Ilya answered, huffing out a little self-deprecating laugh that made Shane’s chest ache. “Early Tuesday, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Shane said, “please don’t apologize, you can call me anytime, I promise. I was just asking so I could give you a timeline. I think the deed on my house will be filed this morning, the movers are packing up my apartment in Montreal on Wednesday, and I was planning to drive to New York on Thursday. You can come whenever and I’ll either have a car ready for you at the airport or one of my parents and I will come get you, okay?”

Shane heard a slight rustle, like Ilya had sat up in his own bed.

“Okay,” he whispered after a moment, his voice slightly distant like he’d switched to speakerphone. “There is a flight at eight,” Ilya said, sniffing slightly and Shane had honestly never wanted to hug a person more. “One and one half hours non-stop, so I would be there at 9:30. Is that okay?”

“That’s perfect,” Shane said. “My mom works from home and I don’t think she has any meetings scheduled in the morning so she’ll be free to drive. Send me your flight info and we’ll be there.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m entirely sure, Ilya.”

“Okay,” Ilya whispered again. He sounded steadier now but no less choked up. “I love you, Shane.”

“I love you too, pack a bag and get a couple hours of sleep, alright? I’ll see you soon.”

* * *

Ilya hung up, booked his flight, sent Shane a screenshot of the confirmation, making sure to copy and paste the flight information into their texts as well, and then turned off his phone and stared into the darkness of his bedroom.

He didn’t know what he’d been expecting when he called, but it certainly hadn’t been for Shane to immediately tell him to fly to Ottawa and then offer a plan that was clear enough for Ilya to latch onto. He knew Shane knew that telling Ilya he’d be helping was the right way to get him to agree but instead of feeling annoyed, Ilya simply felt *seen*.

Shane had this way of seeing the world that constantly amazed Ilya.

He could read the ice and every player’s every move like a book, and he was the same in conversation. He often struggled to come up with responses or proper emotions when the conversation was personal, but in a professional or smaller social setting he was a master. He could read the barest change in a person’s expression, and he could see through even the hardest of masks, he listened to changes in tone like he was listening to plays being called. It was impressive, honestly, and Ilya hated that he had a sinking suspicion that it was a learned behavior; that Shane had figured out how to read people, how to react properly, because he hadn’t just naturally known how.

But with Ilya, it was different.

Shane didn’t study him the same way he studied other people, he simply watched and listened.

And he had known, the moment Ilya had said his name, that something was wrong.

Ilya barely even knew what was wrong, only that he’d needed to hear Shane’s voice. But Shane had known, and he’d found a solution.

Ilya rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyes and then dragged himself out of bed, flicking on the closet light as he made his way across the room.

He pulled out a duffle bag and then carefully packed enough clothes for a week, a combination of jeans and sweatpants, hoodies and nice sweaters. He counted out socks and underwear and found himself thinking in Shane's voice, found himself counting and sorting in that methodical way Shane had when he'd helped Ilya pack for Russia.

Once the duffle was packed, he moved into his bathroom and put together a shave kit with only travel sized things. He didn't want to waste time checking a bag, didn't want to stand around at baggage claim in the Ottawa airport when it was a precious few minutes he could be spending with Shane.

He double checked the airline policy, making sure he could bring both a carry on and a personal item, and then packed his backpack with an extra hoodie, his laptop, his team iPad, and the little bag Shane had organized with his headphones and chargers. He made sure his passport was still in the front pocket and then put both bags by his counter and opened his car service app to schedule a ride in a few short hours.

All he needed to do now was sleep until his alarms went off and then he'd be on his way toward Shane.

* * *

Shane felt distinctly like he'd been chosen as the representative of the cousins to ask the adults if they could have a sleep over after a family gathering.

It was an experience he'd assumed he'd grown out of somewhere around his 12th birthday but here he was, two and a half months away from 26, having war flashbacks to every time his cousins had decided that his 'puppy dog eyes made him the best option' (and yes, that is a direct quote) while he tried to figure out how to tell his parents that his boyfriend (maybe, they still hadn't used a word which maybe felt like something they should've done by now but, really, a lot had been happening so you're gonna have to give them a break) was currently en route to Ottawa.

He decided to just bite the bullet.

“Good morning, I’m dating Ilya Rozanov.”

His dad spit out his coffee.

Maybe Shane could’ve eased into that a little better.

But Shane wasn’t anything if not determined, so he simply kept talking, “Boston gave him the week off for bereavement leave, he called me last night and something was wrong and I didn’t want him to be alone, so I invited him to Ottawa. His flight leaves in,” Shane paused, glancing down at his watch, “30 minutes and lands at 9:30. He’ll drive my car to New York with me so you two can fly and -”

“Shane,” his mom said, cutting him off. She looked amused which Shane was deciding to count as a win. “Thank you for telling us. Do you need me to drive you to the airport to get him?”

Shane blew out a deep breath and slumped down into his seat at the kitchen table with a slightly sheepish smile, “could you?”

Yuna simply nodded and turned back to her breakfast.

Shane was starting to wonder how long she’d let the fact that he was injured stop her from conducting the impending interrogation.

He decided that could be a problem for *later Shane* and stole a slice of toast off his dad’s plate, “sorry about your coffee.”

“It’s alright, bud,” David said, patting him on the shoulder. “I look forward to meeting Ilya properly.”

And what a concept that was.

They’d met him in passing at NHL events and had spoken to him briefly in his driveway a week prior, but they hadn’t really met *Ilya*. But they would, and Shane was certain they’d love him.

* * *

The moment the seatbelt sign was turned off, Ilya was out of his seat.

He slung his backpack over his shoulder, pulled his duffle down from the overhead storage, and became one of those annoying people who waits in the aisle of an airplane as if standing there will make the deboarding process go any faster.

He didn't care how irrational it was, how annoying the behavior was, Shane was outside and that was the *only* thing that made sense, the only thought flitting through his mind that he had any desire to hold onto.

When he finally made it off the plane and then through customs, it took every ounce of self-control in his body to not run through the airport at a dead sprint.

He pulled his hat down slightly and threw on a pair of sunglasses and pretended that'd be enough to keep the Captain of the Boston Bears from being recognized in the Ottawa airport as he checked his phone for the 6th time since they'd landed to read Shane's text telling him to come to the second level of the parking garage, all the way at the end of the row.

Ilya followed the directions dutifully and very nearly cried in relief when he spotted Shane - bundled up in a jacket with only one sleeve properly on because his arm was still in that stupid sling, a Team Canada hat on his head, and a massive goddamn smile on his face – leaning against the outside of a black mid-sized SUV.

“Hi,” he said, and Ilya fell in love all over.

“Hi,” Ilya breathed out, lengthening his strides and dropping his duffle next to the car before pulling Shane into a hug, not sparing a single thought for the fact that they were still very much in public in *Canada* and were two of the most well-known hockey players in the league. He didn't care, he needed Shane in his arms.

Shane's left arm wrapped around Ilya's waist, underneath his coat, and he burrowed himself into Ilya's chest, tucking his face against Ilya's shoulder, his cold nose pressing to Ilya's neck.

“You’re here,” he said softly, sounding awed.

“I’m here,” Ilya whispered back, “thank you.”

Shane didn’t ask why Ilya was thanking him, he didn’t need to, he just tilted his head and pressed his lips to Ilya’s neck and then stepped back to open the car door.

Ilya, against his will, detangled himself from Shane and tossed his duffle and backpack into the back seat before crawling in himself, “good morning, Mrs. Hollander.”

“Yuna, please,” she responded, turning around and giving him a warm smile as Shane climbed into the passenger seat. “Did you eat breakfast before you left or do you want to stop somewhere?”

“I ate at the airport,” Ilya answered which was about half true. He’d had a coffee from Dunkin that had enough sugar and caffeine to make him feel like that little rabbit that advertised batteries and half a Cliff bar he’d found in his jacket pocket, but he was too nauseous to eat properly, so he stuck with his half-truth.

Shane looked over his shoulder and shot Ilya a look that said he didn’t believe him for a second and Ilya just grinned. Shane grinned back, like it was automatic, like Ilya smiling instinctively made him smile too.

“Thank you for coming to get me,” Ilya said after a moment, after he realized he’d been staring at Shane’s smiling face for at least three seconds too long while in the presence of the man’s mother.

“You’re my son’s boyfriend,” she said, shrugging like that was the only reason she needed.

Ilya’s eyes snapped back to Shane at the word boyfriend. Shane’s cheeks were bright pink, Ilya’s favorite shade and Ilya could’ve teased him, could’ve said *oh, so I’m your boyfriend now?* but he didn’t, instead he said, “yeah, I am.”

Shane’s grin went so soft Ilya was at genuine risk of cardiac arrest.

“Let’s get home,” Shane said, finally tearing his eyes away from Ilya and turning forward in his seat, “my head hurts and I want to take a nap.”

* * *

Shane’s head didn’t really hurt. Well, not any more than usual. He just wanted an excuse to force Ilya to lay down with him and sleep.

The bags under Ilya’s eyes were nearly as concerning as the shaky edge to his voice on the phone the night before and Shane was certain it’d been a number of days since Ilya had an uninterrupted night of sleep. Ilya was here now, though, he was with Shane, in a place Shane could actually *do something* about it, and he was going to get some restful sleep if it was the last thing Shane did.

Yuna pointed out several ‘landmarks’ as they drove North toward the city proper and Ilya seemed to be hanging on to her every word.

He asked questions about what ages Shane had been when he played at different rinks, about where David had lived as a child after Yuna had mentioned it was David’s hometown, about what school he’d gone to and whether or not people swam in the river.

He seemed more like himself than Shane had been expecting, more settled.

He still looked exhausted and his shoulders were a bit too rigid to be entirely casual, but his voice was steady and his smile was real.

But as the drive dragged on, as they got caught in a brief spot of traffic caused by a blockage on the road, Ilya’s energy started to ebb. Shane noticed it immediately and started to pick up the conversation where Ilya was trailing off, pointing out things that Ilya would find even remotely interesting that didn’t require him to ask follow-up questions. He told stories about his cousins climbing too high into a tree near a playground they passed and having to be coaxed back down like scared cats, about the first pond he’d skated on during winter break, about the trails he ran on in high school.

By the time they made it home, Ilya had gone almost entirely silent and Shane realized that it was something like an adrenaline crash.

The chaos of booking an international flight six hours before getting on it and seeing Shane again after a week apart that felt far longer than a week and meeting Shane's mom properly were fading, leaving behind exhaustion and grief and whatever else it was that had him calling Shane well past midnight.

"Come on," Shane said gently, holding out his hand as Ilya climbed out of the car. Ilya slipped his backpack over his shoulder and then grabbed onto the handles of his duffle, shutting the door behind him before taking Shane's outstretched hand. "I need a nap," he said, looking toward his mom, "can you wake me up for lunch? The alarm sound makes my brain short circuit."

"Of course," Yuna agreed, her voice raising slightly over the sound of the garage door rumbling across its tracks as it shut behind them. "Are you sure you don't need anything to eat now, Ilya?"

"I'm sure," Ilya said, his smile was real if only a little small, a little pained. "Thank you."

Yuna just nodded and patted Shane's cheek before wandering off toward her office. She'd been doing far more work than normal in the past couple of weeks, managing Shane's life in a way she normally didn't have to when he was able to actually look at a screen for long enough to send an e-mail and, also, when he wasn't moving countries in the middle of the season.

Shane kept ahold of Ilya's hand as they made their way upstairs and down the hall, "this is it," Shane said, pushing the door open.

His room was a bit messier than he'd normally keep it with bags from his apartment in Montreal stacked in front of the closet, but it was decorated exactly as he'd left it when he moved to Montreal seven years prior.

The shelves were full of trophies and medals, and the walls were covered in evenly spaced, properly hung posters and framed photos. The closet that was thankfully being blocked by a decent portion of his belongings was still full of whatever clothes high school Shane Hollander had thought were fashionable and his bed was made with the Pottery Barn Kids sports-themed sheets and throw pillows that he'd used in elementary school that his mom had decided were sentimental and simply could not be replaced by either the plain navy sheets he'd used in high school or anything else made for an adult.

Ilya wandered over to the bookcase, a smile on his face that Shane was genuinely shocked to realize was fond rather than teasing as he picked up a framed photo of Shane from his Timbits team. He was tiny, grinning at the camera and absolutely swimming in his pads and jersey.

“Baby Shane,” Ilya cooed, pulling out his phone and snapping a picture before Shane could even attempt to protest. “This is my new favorite photo, I will cherish forever.”

“You’re not allowed to show that to anyone,” Shane said, trying his best to sound anywhere close to strict even as he felt a little like he was turning into a puddle at the mere mention of Ilya *cherishing* a picture of him.

“No,” Ilya promised, clutching his phone and the frame to his heart as he turned to look at Shane with what could only be described as puppy eyes, “all mine.”

Shane just shook his head and turned around in an attempt to hide his smile. He draped his coat over the back of his desk chair and pulled off the jeans he’d worn to the airport, leaving him in just his boxers and a t-shirt as he climbed into his bed, unmaking it even though he’d only just made it an hour prior.

“I should shower before getting in bed, yes?” Ilya asked, placing his coat over Shane’s and putting his duffle bag and backpack perfectly in line with Shane’s own against the wall between the desk and the opened bathroom door. It was a Jack and Jill bathroom, shared with the guest room, but they rarely had guests, so it was pretty much just Shane’s.

“You don’t have to,” Shane said, “just don’t get in my bed with your airplane clothes.”

“I will shower,” Ilya responded, pulling off his hoodie and stepping over to the bed to drop a kiss into Shane’s hair, “and then we will nap.”

* * *

Just like Ilya had been well aware that Shane knew telling Ilya he’d be helping if he came to Ottawa would get Ilya to agree to coming to Ottawa, he was well aware that Shane wasn’t really in need of a nap but had simply noticed how exhausted Ilya was and knew this was the best way to get him to actually sleep.

Again, instead of being annoyed or feeling like he was being manipulated, he simply felt seen.

There were a towel and a washcloth already folded on the counter and Ilya set his shave kit next to Shane's, doing his best to follow the order that Shane had made for himself. It was almost unconscious by this point, adhering to the way Shane moved through the world. Shane knew what he needed to say to get Ilya to take care of himself and Ilya knew what he needed to do to keep Shane from stressing over a change in pattern.

He showered quickly, just wanting to get the feeling of airport air off of his skin and out of his hair and then dried off before brushing his teeth and stepping back into Shane's room. Shane was half asleep, a throw pillow tucked between his ribs and arm as he laid on his back. Ilya knew his head was doing better, that his shoulder had been hurting less, but it was pretty clear he was still lethargic, and as much as Ilya wanted him to get better immediately, he was quite alright with sleepy Shane. He was soft around the edges, with big brown eyes blinking slowly and a sweet smile on his lips. His voice got rougher, the syllables stretching out and his tongue heavy around the vowels.

Ilya pulled on a pair of clean boxers and wasted no further time before crawling into bed next to Shane.

"Hi," Shane whispered, his left hand immediately coming up to run through Ilya's hair, "I missed you."

"I missed you too," Ilya whispered back, leaning down and pressing his lips to Shane's.

Shane sighed into the kiss and Ilya could feel the tension bleeding out of his own muscles more and more as each second passed. Part of him wanted to take it further, wanted to deepen the kiss with intent, but Shane was still injured no matter how much he'd been pushing the boundaries of what he was meant to be doing, and Ilya was exhausted and Yuna was right downstairs so he kept the kiss sweet, let it stay gentle and full of love rather than lust. He let the feeling wash over him, the feeling of safety and belonging, the feeling of coming home.

"Sleep, mon amour," Shane said, pulling back and pressing a kiss to Ilya's cheek before using the hand in Ilya's hair to guide him to lay against Shane's chest. Ilya went willingly, wrapping his arms around Shane's waist and pressing as close as humanly possible. They were pressed together head to toe and it still wasn't enough. He slipped his hand under the hem of Shane's t-shirt and grumbled, hoping Shane would get the idea.

Shane just huffed out a laugh and sat up, dislodging Ilya and settling back against the pillows.

Ilya took that as his cue to carefully pull off Shane's shirt, untangling it from the sling and moving slowly so he wouldn't tweak Shane's shoulder. It took a minute, but it was worth it to feel Shane's skin against his; it felt like his warmth was seeping directly into Ilya's bones, thawing him from the inside out.

Shane snuggled back down into the bed, tucking the pillow back beneath his arm and arching his back enough for Ilya to wrap his arms fully around his waist, "can you sleep now?"

Ilya just nodded, tucking his face against Shane's neck, pressing a kiss to the soft skin at the base of his throat as he let his eyes slip closed.

Shane used his free hand to pull the covers up until they covered Ilya's shoulders. The sheets were soft in that way sheets could only be when they'd been well loved, when they were old and had been washed time and time again. The duvet was heavy and Shane was warm and they were deep enough in the suburbs that the sounds of cities Ilya had always lived amongst were absent, leaving only the low hum of heated air pouring out of the vents and the steady rhythm of Shane's breathing.

It was the closest thing to peace that Ilya had ever felt, and within that simple peace, sleep came easily.

Chapter 13: i'll make this feel like home

Chapter Notes

title from home by one direction which is a seriously underrated bop

March 2017

Shane dozed, never actually falling asleep as Ilya slept holding onto Shane like he was afraid he'd wake up to find Shane had disappeared. His sleep was mostly peaceful, interrupted only briefly by a twitch followed by a soft whine that was immediately soothed by Shane pressing a kiss to his head and murmuring soft words.

He was awake when his mom pushed the door open around noon, her eyes caught on Ilya's sleeping form and softened immediately, "is he alright?"

"Yeah," Shane whispered back, running his hand up Ilya's back to tangle gently in his hair. His curls were wild; he'd climbed back into bed before his hair was dry and Shane just knew they'd look even more disheveled when he actually sat up. It was stupidly endearing and Shane had never been more in love. "Just needed some sleep."

"I think he mostly needed you," Yuna said softly, studying Ilya a moment longer before turning her attention back to Shane. "What are you thinking for lunch?"

Shane had suffered without proper comfort food for too many years under the guise of a performance diet and Ilya deserved comfort food, so Shane asked, "do we have tonkotsu broth?"

Yuna's eyes lit up as a clearly delighted smile spread across her face.

Shane's performance diet had been partially her idea, a way for him to plan out his days and follow a pattern, but Shane knew she thought he'd been taking it too far, he knew that she'd been trying to get him to eat more, both in volume and variety, but hadn't known how far to push.

For him to be asking for something as rich and full of flavor as tonkotsu broth, for him to be asking, without having actually asked yet, for a proper bowl of ramen full of pork and eggs and real noodles, was big, and she knew just how big.

“We do,” she answered, clearly trying to stifle her excitement, at least a little. “I have some in the freezer and I just bought the good ramen, too.”

“Can we make that?” Shane asked, already knowing the answer, “I’ll help.”

“Of course,” Yuna said, her grip on her excitement wearing thin as the seconds passed. She was almost bouncing on her toes. “I’ll go get all the ingredients out and start thawing the broth.”

“Thanks, mom,” Shane responded, talking to nothing seeing as Yuna had already took off back down the hall. He huffed out a laugh to himself and then turned his attention to Ilya.

He ran his hand through Ilya’s hair again, putting a little more pressure against his scalp, and pressed soft kisses into his hair and across his temple and cheek, “Ilya, baby, time for lunch.”

Ilya let out an incoherent grumble and tightened his grip around Shane’s waist, ducking his head and tucking his face against Shane’s neck.

“C’mon, love,” Shane said softly, “we’re gonna make ramen, you’ll love it.”

Shane wasn’t entirely sure that was true but from what he’d seen, Ilya ate anything that was put in front of him so he really wasn’t all that worried.

“Don’t wanna move,” Ilya grumbled, “just got you back.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be by you the whole time, promise.”

Ilya let out a sigh and then nodded softly, “okay.”

“Okay,” Shane echoed. He waited patiently while Ilya disentangled himself and sat up on the side of the bed.

“You get dressed first and then sling, yes?”

“Yeah,” Shane responded, yawning slightly. The sleepy look on Ilya’s face was making him want to forget the whole concept of lunch and simply stay in this bed forever, but he was hungry and he was excited to spend time with his mom *and* Ilya and he was excited to introduce Ilya to a dish he’d loved as a child that he hadn’t had in years, so he sat up and moved to the edge of his bed himself.

Ilya leaned over and pressed a kiss to Shane’s cheek and then stood up and made his way over to Shane’s duffle, “t-shirt or sweatshirt?”

“Hoodie,” Shane answered, pointing to the one that was folded on top of his desk. It was Ilya’s that he’d worn to drive from Boston to Ottawa, it was plain black as a lot of his clothes tended to be, but Ilya’s number was embroidered into the shoulder. It was, Shane would guess, locker room merch from a few years prior. The fabric was thick but worn in, soft with use and time.

Ilya’s whole face softened as he realized what Shane was pointing at but, because he was Ilya and had apparently met his softness quota, he said, “wearing your boyfriend’s hoodie, Hollander? Very high school girl of you.”

“Shut up,” Shane shot back, laughing despite himself. It was weak in the grand scheme of Ilya’s chirping, but Ilya was smiling like he was proud of himself and his eyes were still so soft as he picked up the hoodie and walked toward Shane and Shane was so stupidly in love with this man that he’d laugh simply if Ilya asked him to.

“I don’t think I will,” Ilya responded. He was so careful as he helped Shane into the hoodie that Shane didn’t have it in him to tell Ilya that the swelling in his shoulder had gone down enough that he could do it himself. He even let Ilya secure his sling even though he could absolutely do that alone too. Ilya dropped a kiss on top of his head and Shane let himself tip forward just enough to rest his head against Ilya’s stomach.

“Thank you,” Shane said, lips pressed against Ilya’s skin.

His lips were about three inches above the waistband of Ilya's boxers and, oddly enough, Shane didn't really feel the need to go lower.

That's not to say that he didn't want to, he was pretty sure he'd be 95, dementia ridden, and terrorizing the nursing home staff if they dared to change the channel while he was watching hockey, still wanting Ilya's dick in his mouth. But Ilya was his *boyfriend* now. He wasn't some hook up where Shane walked away each time wondering if that might've been the last time. He didn't need to rush; he didn't need to take everything he could get in a few short hours. He could simply stay here, resting gently against the soft skin of Ilya's stomach, and let it simply be that.

He stayed there a minute, just enjoying the feeling of Ilya's skin pressed against his and Ilya's fingers running gently through his hair before he stood up. He dug a pair of soccer shorts out of his duffle and slipped them on, his balance much better now after a week of getting dressed one handed than it had been that first morning he'd woken up in Ottawa without Ilya there to help him get dressed. His parents would've done it if he'd asked, but he hadn't wanted to. There was something different about asking Ilya for help, something easier.

"Look at you," Ilya teased lightly, standing there with his hands on his hips as he watched Shane pull his shorts on himself, a proud sort of smile on his face. Shane smiled back and held out his uninjured arm as if to say *ta da* which just made Ilya huff out a fond laugh as Shane sat back on the bed to pull his socks on.

"C'mon, get dressed and we'll go make lunch."

* * *

Ilya complied easily, pulling on a hoodie and pair of shorts of his own. He felt far better now after a few hours of actually restful sleep, and he already felt oddly comfortable in Shane's childhood home. He followed Shane down the hall and back down the stairs, his hair was a little longer than he normally kept it, probably a couple weeks past the point he'd usually go get it cut and it was perfectly messy, both from sleep and Ilya running his fingers through it. Ilya sort of wanted to beg him to keep it longer, to let it grow even more just to see how it might look.

They headed toward the kitchen where Ilya could already hear someone moving around.

Yuna turned around as they stepped in, a bright smile already on her face as she pointed toward the side of the little island opposite the oven and stovetop where there was already a small pile of ingredients along with a large cutting board and two knives.

Shane settled onto one of the barstools and nodded toward Ilya to do the same.

“Shane, honey,” Yuna started, turning back toward the stovetop, she seemed to be almost vibrating with energy and Ilya had no clue what had made her so excited, but the joy was infectious so he was grateful for whatever had, “can you show Ilya how to cut everything up? I’ve got the broth thawing and the eggs boiling and once the broth heats up I’ll do the noodles and then -”

“I know, I know,” Shane cut her off, laughing slightly. The corners of his eyes were crinkled up, and he was so goddamn cute Ilya kind of wanted to bite him. He had no clue where that instinct had come from, but it was taking a whole lot of willpower to hold himself back. “You need the bok choy first, right?”

“Right,” Yuna responded, “thank you. The pork is cooking, I cut it into smaller pieces so it’d cook faster. It won’t be the same as when we have all day to make it but it’ll be close enough.”

“That’s fine, mom, thank you,” Shane said, picking up a green vegetable Ilya had never seen before, but he deduced must’ve been bok choy and setting it on the cutting board before picking up one of the knives, “these just get cut in half,” he directed.

Ilya was honestly impressed by how smoothly Shane cut the plant in half while only having use of his non-dominant arm. He picked up a plant of his own and followed Shane’s instructions. They did the same for the scallions and mushrooms, though Shane left the ginger to Ilya after carefully explaining how to use a microplane and reminding him about six times to stop before he accidentally shredded his fingers.

They stuck to mostly talking about food and the weather and whatever game had been on the night prior as they worked and Ilya felt himself settling into the simple peace of it all. The kitchen smelled incredible and Shane and Yuna both easily adjusted to Ilya being part of the conversation, part of their lives.

As she put the noodles into the boiling broth, Yuna turned around and leaned back against the counter with a soft smile on her face, “I used to make this for Shane whenever he was sick when he was little, he hasn’t had it for a long time.”

“I’m sick of limiting myself,” Shane said simply and Ilya knew he wasn’t just talking about his diet.

Ilya leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, not needing to actually say anything to tell Shane that he was proud of him.

Shane turned toward him with Ilya's favorite smile, the one that he now knew meant *I love you*, no words necessary.

"So," Yuna said.

"Oh no," Shane muttered.

Yuna just grinned, "when did this start?"

"I knew it was too good to be true," Shane sighed, resting his chin on his hand as he propped his elbow on the counter and looked over at Ilya, talking to him as if Yuna weren't even there, "she's been so nice, holding off on her questions while I was injured. I thought maybe she'd just let it go entirely, alas, no such luck."

"If you thought I was going to let *this* go entirely, you were sorely mistaken."

Shane huffed out a laugh that was enough to let Ilya know that they weren't in any sort of danger, that he was more amused than concerned.

"We've only been properly together since All Star Weekend," Shane answered, "that's when we talked and decided to stop acting like we weren't anything real, when we decided that we wanted to find a way to make this work properly. But we've been *something* for a lot longer. Since our rookie season, really."

"No," Ilya said, his eyes locked on Shane's, "summer before."

"Right," Shane responded, nodding slightly, his smile turning so incredibly fond Ilya felt it in his chest. "Summer before."

“The *entire* time?” Yuna asked, sounding genuinely shocked.

Shane and Ilya both snapped back toward her, having nearly forgotten she was there all together.

“Yeah,” Shane said, clearing his throat, “the entire time, but we only met up sporadically those first few years, we were barely even talking to each other between games, but for the past couple of years, since, like, 2015?” he said, turning toward Ilya for confirmation. Ilya nodded in agreement. “Yeah, around 2015, we started texting more, actually talking, and it started to become more serious, less of something that we could brush off and pretend wasn’t happening.”

“What about Rose?”

“That was me panicking,” Shane answered, darting an apologetic glance toward Ilya who easily waved him off. He was over it now, he understood and he had Shane back, properly this time. “I was afraid of admitting how much I cared for Ilya, afraid of admitting that I was gay, afraid of admitting that both of those things would stop me from living the life people expected with a wife and kids and a golden retriever. But Rose helped me realize that lying to myself wasn’t good for anyone involved and Ilya was kind enough to hear my apology and, even though it’s terrifying, it’s been good, incredible, really. I’d do it all again if it meant having Ilya at the end.”

“Me too,” Ilya said softly, resting his hand on Shane’s knee and squeezing gently, “all of it. All the pain and jealousy and confusion and fear. Anything is worth it to have Shane.”

“Well,” Yuna said, clearing her throat. Ilya looked toward her and was surprised to realize she was tearing up. “I’m glad it’s not painful anymore, even if it’s still scary, and I’m glad you have each other.”

Ilya felt like they’d pretty much bypassed the whole awkward *meet the parents* stage when he’d checked Shane out of the hospital in Boston, but he still felt the need to say, “I love your son, Mrs. Hollander, more than anything. I know I have reputation, not a good one, but Shane is the only person I have ever loved, the only person for me and I promise to take care of him.”

“Ilya,” Shane whispered.

Ilya didn’t need to look at him to know he was tearing up, to know his beautiful brown eyes had gone soft and awed. He kept his own eyes on Yuna, needing her to understand how serious he was. He’d

marry Shane tomorrow if Shane would let him. Shane was it for him, always had been now that he let himself actually think about it.

“That’s all I could ever dream of for my son,” Yuna said after a moment, smiling softly at Ilya in a way that made his heart warm in a way far different than Shane’s smile did. It was a warmth he hadn’t felt in years; familiar and beautiful as much as it was painful. “Welcome to the family, Ilya. We’re happy to have you.”

* * *

Shane knew he’d gone totally ‘doe-eyed’ as Jackie liked to call it, but he couldn’t help it.

Ilya finally turned away from Yuna and met Shane’s eye. He was smiling already, big and real and so, so beautiful. He leaned forward and kissed Shane’s forehead and then his nose before pressing a quick kiss to his lips, chaste and sweet and absolutely perfect.

“I love you,” Shane whispered when Ilya pulled back.

“I love you too,” Ilya responded, easy as breathing.

They fell back into easy conversation after that, chatting about hockey like they hadn’t just changed the very foundation of their family in a single afternoon.

And when his mom passed him his bowl of ramen, Shane realized he’d never been happier. Ilya was here, in his home, with his family, eating Shane’s favorite childhood meal and chatting animatedly with his mother and nothing outside of this mattered. His father would be home from work that evening and his mother would tell him what Ilya and Shane had explained and he’d accept it like he accepted every other bit of chaos Shane threw his way and then they’d all sit in the living room and watch a movie and trades and homophobic teammates and impending moves wouldn’t matter.

He was home, the world couldn’t reach him here.

Chapter 14: maybe it's all part of a plan

Chapter Notes

title from thinking out loud by ed sheeran :)

the titles of these chapters serve as subtle reminders to harris drover that there are better options out there than diamonds by rhianna

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

March 2017

Late Wednesday afternoon, after an evening spent on the couch watching movies with Shane's parents and a full night of sleep that had Ilya feeling far more like himself than he had in days, Ilya was sitting on the couch with his iPad out watching game tape while Shane laid spread out across the cushions with his head in Ilya's lap when Shane's phone started ringing.

He let out a grumble before digging it out of his pocket to answer.

Ilya sort of wanted to laugh but he knew how much time Shane had been spending on the phone over the past couple of days and he knew how tired he was of it, so he simply continued running his fingers through Shane's hair, hoping to provide some modicum of comfort.

"Hello," Shane greeted, his voice surprisingly pleasant for how annoyed he'd just been. Ilya was impressed by how quickly he'd been able to switch it up, it was probably why Shane was so much better at media pools than Ilya was. Ilya normally just went for the humor and the chirps while Shane actually answered questions.

Shane went quiet for a moment while he listened to whoever was on the other side and then a small smile spread across his face, not big enough for the other person to be a friend but big enough to tell Ilya that he was happy about whatever they were saying.

"Thank you," Shane said, "I really appreciate it, have a good day." He hung up and let out a light sigh before looking up at Ilya, "that was the moving company, all my furniture from Montreal is now in the house in New York, the real estate agent was able to let them in just like we planned. Now I just have to fill the other four rooms and a living room, but that can happen later. At least I have a bed now."

“So, we are good to drive tomorrow?”

“Yep,” Shane said, his smile turning more real, “we can leave in the morning, get settled in. My parents will fly Friday evening when my dad’s done with work and we’ll do shopping and whatever Saturday and Sunday morning, so tomorrow and Friday it’s just us.”

Ilya had loved being with David and Yuna, had loved spending time in Shane’s childhood home, but he was beyond excited to spend time with just Shane.

He smiled and leaned down to press a kiss to Shane’s lips, not needing to say anything else.

When David got home from work an hour later, Ilya helped him carry everything from Shane’s room back down to his car. Shane trailed behind them, carrying some of the lighter bags and ignoring them every time they told him he didn’t need to help.

“I know Montreal sucks, but they did pay you, yes?” Ilya asked as he shoved Shane’s gear bag into the back seat.

“Yes?” Shane answered, sounding earnest, which was a real shame.

“Then why are you driving shitty car?”

Shane pouted, genuinely pouted. Bottom lip sticking out, puppy eyes out in full force and Ilya just stared back, pretending that expression didn’t turn his heart into a puddle. David was standing just behind Shane, his shoulders shaking as he tried not to laugh.

“It’s not a shitty car,” Shane argued, “it’s a Jeep! It’s a nice car, it’s good in the snow.”

“Good in the snow,” Ilya echoed, doing his best to sound unimpressed. It was incredibly difficult when Shane looked that adorable.

“Yeah!”

“There are many cars that are good in snow,” Ilya argued. “I live in Boston, there is snow in Boston, and I do not drive shitty car.”

“You drive obnoxious cars,” Shane shot back, “this is a practical car.”

“Practical,” Ilya tsked, “exactly what all the ladies want to hear from pretty millionaire hockey stars.”

“Lucky for me I don’t give a shit what the ladies think,” Shane grumbled.

“Lucky for *me*,” Ilya corrected, patting Shane’s cheek gently. He wanted to kiss him, but it was still light outside - even though the winter sun was well on its way toward setting - and they were in the Hollander’s driveway in plain view of their neighbors.

Shane’s pout finally disappeared in favor of a smile.

“Come on, boys,” David said, walking back toward the open garage door, “dinner time.”

* * *

They woke up early the next morning and Ilya dutifully got out of bed and got dressed for the day. He wanted five more minutes cuddled up with Shane, warm under the duvet and snuggled up in the little kid sports-themed sheets that Ilya was absolutely going to make fun of him for forever. But he knew Shane was getting antsy, that he needed to keep moving or he’d have too much time to think about everything that’d happened, so he got out of bed and went into the bathroom to get ready for the day while Shane did an overly thorough scan of the room to make sure they hadn’t forgotten anything.

Soon enough, they were dressed for the day, and Ilya had convinced Shane to let him carry their backpacks down to the car which he’d only agreed to because Ilya had agreed to drink one of Shane’s stupid protein smoothies which Ilya had only agreed to because Shane had agreed that they could stop at Tim Horton’s on the way out of town.

There was a whole lot of compromising going on for 5:45 in the morning which was sort of making Ilya’s head spin but all he *really* cared about was the fact that he got to carry Shane’s backpack *and* he

was going to get a chocolate dip donut.

Ilya checked the road conditions while Shane made their smoothies. Ilya wasn't even sort of surprised to learn that there were several containers in the freezer with the ingredients pre-portioned. Even if Shane was starting to expand his diet, there were clearly certain habits that were going to die hard.

Ilya was planning to talk him into eating a donut, anyways.

It involved a multi-step plan, part one of which he'd already achieved by simply getting Shane to agree to *going* to Tim Horton's (even though Ilya was the one driving the car and could just go wherever he wanted), and part two of which mostly just included Ilya pouting and asking Shane nicely.

Yuna and David wandered downstairs in time to hug them goodbye and tell them to travel safely and then they were in the car, just them, with a seven-hour drive ahead of them.

"You are eating a donut today," Ilya declared as they turned right out of Shane's neighborhood.

"I can't remember the last time I ate a donut."

"You deserve donut," Ilya said, nodding his head seriously. He could almost feel Shane's eyeroll.

"You are professional athlete, Shane. You spend many hours every week working out, you can eat one donut, I promise. I eat many donuts and am still faster than you."

"I literally *just* beat you in the speed skating competition."

"Ah," Ilya waved him off, pulling up to a stoplight and flicking on the blinker, "barely."

"Still beat you."

"And to make me feel better about such devastating loss, you will eat donut."

“Fine,” Shane sighed, sounding genuinely put out about the prospect of eating a donut. Ilya did not understand this man. He loved him anyways.

They pulled into the parking lot of the nearest Tim Horton’s and Shane stayed in the car while Ilya ran inside, far more excited about the prospect of stupid Canadian donuts than he probably should be and also *far* too recognizable as Ilya Rozanov to be openly inside a stupid Canadian coffee shop, even at 6 in the morning. He simply got his coffee and donuts and hurried back out to the car, hoping that, at the very least, none of the *several* patrons had taken a picture.

He’d almost gotten Shane a hot chocolate but had decided that would be pushing it a step too far. He had his smoothie and a water bottle, and he couldn’t drink coffee quite yet without it making his head pound, so Ilya simply got himself a coffee and got at least three too many donuts for two people and headed back into the freezing morning.

“Donut time,” Ilya cheered as soon as he opened the car door, grinning like mad and delighting in the way Shane’s eye roll was distinctly fond.

“Fine, fine, what kinds did you get?”

“All of them,” Ilya answered happily, opening the box to show a variety of literally every kind of donut they had. What was NHL money for if not buying a dumb number of donuts? Honestly.

“You’re insane,” Shane laughed, though he didn’t actually complain as he picked up the honey cruller and tore it in half. Ilya started to complain before Shane cut him off, “I’ll eat half now and maybe the rest later, it’s been a long time since I had sugar, and I don’t want to get a headache.”

Ilya had to concede to that argument as he selected the chocolate dip for himself and then set the box carefully on the floor behind Shane’s seat.

“You took medicine this morning, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane responded, leaning across the center console to press a quick kiss to Ilya’s cheek. They were parked on the far side of the lot, not even under cover of the streetlights, but it was public enough to make Ilya’s heart race. He was shocked to realize it was in the good way. There was so much to lose if they were found out, so many reasons to keep this private, but he still delighted by the little ways Shane pushed the boundaries, by the little ways they found to show the truth to the world

without risking everything. “Thank you for the donut, and for driving seven hours through Canadian and upstate New York winter with me.”

“Of course,” Ilya responded, turning his head and pressing a quick kiss to Shane’s lips before he could settle back into his own seat.

Shane pulled away smiling, his blush just barely visible in the early morning light.

“Now, driver gets to pick music, correct?” Ilya said, plugging his phone into the cord in Shane’s car and going through the steps to connect it to CarPlay. Why it was so difficult to connect a new phone to CarPlay, Ilya would never know. After a full minute, the screen finally loaded and Ilya let out a slightly obnoxious whoop in victory, but it made Shane laugh so Ilya decided not to feel embarrassed.

Ilya scrolled through his playlists until he found one Shane wouldn’t immediately object to, one that didn’t have much, if any, rap ... or really any songs that would essentially possess Ilya and force him to turn the volume far higher than advisable. He really didn’t want to blow out the speakers in this boring Jeep and, more than that, he really wanted to avoid giving Shane a headache.

“There’s no way this is the music you actually listen to,” Shane said as the first song, *Thinking Out Loud* by Ed Sheeran, started playing.

“It’s what I listen to on long flights,” Ilya explained, “calmer music, not so loud.”

Shane looked at him like he knew exactly why Ilya had chosen this playlist, but he was smiling so Ilya simply put the car in reverse and made his way out of the parking lot, following the directions back toward the highway.

Once they were on open road, Ilya reached across and took Shane’s hand, running his thumb gently along the outside of Shane’s and smiling just a little too hard at the fact that this was something he could do now. He could hold Shane’s hand and know that Shane wouldn’t question it, wouldn’t wonder why Ilya was being so soft.

Shane lifted their hands and pressed a kiss to Ilya’s knuckles before resting them back against his thigh, and Ilya wondered whether he was thinking the same thing.

They drove in silence until the sun properly rose, both of them keeping their eyes peeled for black ice or stupid drivers but when the sun started to warm the air around them and the slight rush of early morning traffic cleared, Shane broke the quiet, “how do you say car in Russian?”

“Ah, *mashina*,” Ilya answered, a little bewildered but deciding to just go with it.

“*Mashina*,” Shane repeated, perfectly, barely an accent. “How about road?”

“*Doroga*,” Ilya translated.

Again, Shane repeated the word, his tongue curving almost naturally around the syllables.

“Alright,” Ilya said before Shane could ask another word, “what are you doing?”

“Learning Russian,” Shane said shrugging like Ilya was the one who was crazy.

“Word by word?”

“Why not?”

“Because that is insane.”

“It’s easier to remember words in context,” Shane explained, looking a little sheepish and now Ilya felt bad for calling him insane. “I’m good with patterns, especially auditory ones. Like when I hear songs I can remember them almost perfectly after one listen and I can memorize speech patterns so I usually know what people are going to say before they say it and with languages, like when I learned French, I started by memorizing words and then by recognizing the pattern of grammar and all the sudden it just made sense.”

“It just made sense?”

“I know it’s weird,” Shane murmured, looking almost scared that Ilya would make fun of him which simply wouldn’t do.

“Is not weird, *moya lyubov*,” Ilya said, squeezing Shane’s hand gently before running his thumb over Shane’s again, “is interesting, you are very smart.”

“I just have a good memory.”

“No, smart. Highest hockey IQ in the league, I have heard that many times and they are right. You are very smart, Shane.”

“Alright,” Shane agreed, his cheeks that perfect shade of pink in the early morning light.

“When did you learn French?”

“In school,” Shane answered, “Ottawa is a bilingual city. It’s the only language other than English I can actually write in. I’m a heritage speaker of Japanese but I don’t speak it as often anymore now that my grandparents have passed away. I really only use it when I’m with my cousins in public and we’re talking shit about someone and don’t want them to overhear.”

“You know three languages?”

“Kind of.”

“And now you are learning Russian?”

“It’s your language,” Shane said simply, like that wasn’t completely absurd. Like Shane Hollander using his minimal free time to learn a *fourth* language simply because it was Ilya’s native language wasn’t the most romantic thing Ilya had ever heard of, let alone experienced.

“You are incredible,” Ilya whispered, feeling something a lot like awe as he darted his eyes over toward Shane before focusing back on the road.

“I want to learn,” Shane said earnestly, “now tell me the word for snow.”

They went back and forth like that until they reached the border an hour later, Shane saying a word in English and Ilya repeating it in Russian.

They crossed the border at Johnstown and thankfully had very little issue with their car full of bags and Ilya’s Russian passport. Apparently, they’d found one of the only chill border agents employed by the U.S. government. Ilya sent a brief word of thanks to the universe and then continued on across the bridge into upstate New York.

Shane dozed off once they’d passed the border which really didn’t shock Ilya. He’d seemed a little sleepy since shortly after they’d left Ottawa, but he was clearly nervous about Ilya crossing the border safely, even if he hadn’t admitted that out loud.

Ilya simply kept ahold of his hand and continued driving.

They stopped in some town Ilya had never heard of called Utica to top off the tank and stretch their legs and Ilya took the opportunity to house two more donuts while Shane ate the other half of his, clearly delighted by the taste of sugar and by the fact that the first half hadn’t given him a migraine.

As they pulled back onto the highway, headed South toward New York, Ilya felt the shift in Shane’s energy.

He’d been steady the past two days, simply being there as a shoulder for Ilya to lean on. The only time he’d gotten serious was when Yuna had asked about them and Ilya could tell he was getting serious again. Ilya truly appreciated the fact that Shane had held off on having any real conversation until Ilya was no longer clearly distraught and beyond sleep deprived, so he let Shane make the shift instead of attempting to deflect before Shane could even say what he was clearly working up the nerve to say.

“Can we talk about how we’re going to move forward from here?” Shane asked, clearly nervous. Ilya reached out and took his hand, both for the point of contact and to stop Shane from chewing at the skin around his thumb which he tended to do when he got antsy. “Like, obviously we want to be together, but we need to figure out how to do it safely, we can’t just keep going with the flow and hoping for the best while you still have a Russian passport.”

Ilya took a deep breath at that.

That was exactly what he'd been avoiding thinking about.

He was still a Russian citizen and if he were seen promoting this 'lifestyle', it wouldn't be that he couldn't go back; it'd be the opposite. The government would do what they could to force Ilya to return to Russia so they could properly punish him. He would never be able to come back to the United States, he would never see Shane again.

One solution would be marrying Svetlana for a green card but one look at Shane's face told him that suggestion would *not* be taken well.

Shane wanted them to do this together, not together with Ilya's fake wife.

And U.S. citizenship wasn't the solution he wanted it to be.

The political climate was divisive at best and there was no guarantee that Ilya would be protected even if he was on the pathway toward legal citizenship. He needed to find some way to protect himself while still working on building a real relationship with Shane and keeping his job with the NHL, so he had a reason to stay in the U.S.

One solution would be asking for a trade to a Canadian team and going through the citizenship process from there, but Shane had just been traded to New York, they would be living three hours apart and playing in the same conference without the added pressure of being divisional rivals. It was the perfect team placement for them at the moment and Ilya moving would mess it all up.

"Can I suggest something fucking insane?" Shane asked after Ilya had been quiet for a minute too long.

Ilya just nodded, genuinely intrigued to hear whatever Shane was about to say.

"We could get married," Shane said and Ilya almost crashed the goddamn car. "On paper," Shane continued, his words coming out rushed as he tried to explain himself. There was a low buzzing in

Ilya's ears that hadn't been there thirty seconds prior and Ilya found himself wondering if he'd finally lost his mind. "For now, at least. We've only properly been together for like a month so getting married now would be crazy but if we were married in Canada, we could list your permanent address as my cottage or our condo in Montreal," and Ilya almost crashed the car a second time.

"Our condo?" he choked out, interrupting Shane's spiral.

"Yeah," Shane said, looking genuinely confused about what Ilya could possibly be confused about. Ilya, once again, did not understand this man. Ilya, once again, loved him anyway. "The place you so lovingly call the sex condo. I kept the fourth-floor unit open, both so I'd have a place to stay when I visited Montreal and because I kinda started to see it as ours, you know?"

Ilya's vision went blurry and he decided it was probably about time he pull over lest he kill them both before they could follow through on Shane's insane plan.

He pulled off at the next exit and parked in the first open lot he found.

"Okay," he breathed out once the car was safely parked and no longer hurtling down the interstate while Ilya was in the midst of an existential crisis. He turned fully toward Shane and kept ahold of his hand, both because he needed the point of contact to convince himself this wasn't a fever dream and to stop Shane from thinking Ilya was mad. "I started to think of it as ours, too. Now, can you tell me your plan?"

Shane smiled, a little sheepish, a lot in love and lifted their hands to kiss Ilya's knuckles lightly before he started speaking again, "we could list one of those as your permanent address and, if we were married, I'd be able to sponsor your permanent residency in Canada which leads to full citizenship after five years.

"If you're a permanent resident, the government will protect you if anything goes wrong, if we're outed or even if just you were outed somehow. In that awful scenario, you'd even be able to claim political asylum which would give you even greater protections.

"Canada is a better option than the U.S., even if it might seem like it takes longer. The system is standardized; it's always going to take the same amount of time whereas U.S. citizenship is varied.

"There are requirements for how many days you have to spend in Canada over that five-year period but there are waivers for work or travel, you just have to communicate openly with the officer assigned to your case. We could spend summer and breaks at my cottage or in Montreal or at my parents' house and you play enough games in Canada that you'd end up being there for a good part of the year and we could figure out waivers for the days you're not. A lot of players have permanent addresses outside of the city they play for, so it wouldn't be that out of the ordinary.

“We also don’t have to do it now, we could wait a year, wait until we’re on more even footing in our relationship. It’s just an option. I’ll also wait to come out to the public until we know that you’re safe, just on the off chance that you associating with me, even as a friend, could be framed as you promoting homosexuality. I want to come out to my team. The GMs and coaching staff in New York already know and they’ve been supportive so it’s clearly a safer environment, but I’m not ready to tell the world and even if I were, I’d happily wait until you were safe.”

“You want to get married?” Ilya asked.

There were so many other things he could say, other questions he could ask, but that was what his mind was stuck on; not just that Shane would do that for him, but that it almost seemed like it was a solution Shane would be *happy* with, almost like it could be something Shane could *want*.

“I love you, Ilya,” Shane responded, like that alone answered every question.

And maybe it did.

Maybe loving someone meant that solutions that should be completely insane felt rational; maybe loving someone meant you’d do anything so long as it kept them safe.

“I love you too,” Ilya said, reaching out and cupping Shane’s cheek. Shane leaned into the touch like he couldn’t even imagine another option, like leaning into Ilya was entirely natural even when they’d spent so many years pulling away.

“We don’t need to do this now,” Shane said, his voice softer now, less strained now that the nerves had bled away. “The earliest we’d both be back in Canada is this summer, anyways. It’s just an option.”

“You already did all the research, though, didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” Shane murmured.

“Of course you did,” Ilya said, breathing out a light laugh as he leaned across the car and pressed a soft kiss to Shane’s lips.

He meant to keep it soft, chaste, but Shane had other plans.

He surged forward and dropped Ilya's hand in favor of clutching onto the front of his hoodie and tugging Ilya closer. Ilya went willingly, ignoring the odd way he had to twist his spine in order to crowd into Shane's space. He brought up his now free hand so he could cradle Shane's face properly as Shane bit down softly on Ilya's lower lip.

It was a good kiss, one of the better ones they'd ever shared despite the center console digging into Ilya's hip and the fact that Shane only had use of one of his arms. Ilya poured every ounce of love into the kiss, needing Shane to understand just how much it meant that he'd been worried enough for Ilya's safety that he'd spent time researching the citizenship process when he wasn't supposed to be spending time looking at screens, that he loved Ilya enough to suggest marriage and actually *mean it*; even if what he was saying out loud was that it'd only be on paper, Ilya could see the truth of it in his eyes.

Shane pulled away slightly, their foreheads still pressed together and the air between them filled with shared breaths, "we can also file a petition to keep the records private," he said, sounding breathless and Ilya loved him so much in that moment. This was so perfectly Shane. Kiss drunk and panting and still talking about logistics. "Marriage certificates are normally public record but if there's a reason it would be unsafe, we can apply for a confidential marriage license."

"Okay," Ilya whispered, pressing another soft kiss to Shane's lips, and then a second simply because he couldn't help it. "Shane I want forever with you, I don't care how we get there."

"Okay," Shane whispered back. His eyes were closed but Ilya could see the tears that'd gathered in the corners, a clear sign that Shane was as overwhelmed by this as Ilya was. But they were in it together, no matter how insane the circumstances may be.

"I will do some research too," Ilya said because he felt like if he were going to be properly, thoroughly responsible about anything in his life it should probably be this, "we will talk more, figure out together how to keep me safe and keep us together, yes?"

"Together," Shane echoed. He settled back in his seat and finally let his eyes flutter open and Ilya would've given him anything he asked for in that moment.

His brown eyes looked almost amber in the bright winter sun. They were shining with unshed tears and so full of love that Ilya felt himself start to tear up on instinct alone.

Ilya reached across and reverently ran his thumb across the skin below Shane's eye and simply looked at him.

They sat there for a minute, just looking at each other in a way Ilya would've called disgustingly cheesy a few short weeks ago but now he understood; when you loved someone this much, when you had someone in your life who made you feel like this, you simply couldn't help but stare.

Ilya took a deep breath and pulled his hand away as he put the car in drive once more and navigated back toward the interstate, "so this is your plan to keep me safe, what else is going on in that head?"

Shane laughed, soft and beautiful as he reached over and ran his fingers through Ilya's hair, his hand settling at the nape of Ilya's neck, "we've gotta come up with more ways to make it seem like we're friends in public that don't rely on Scott Hunter."

Ilya laughed at that, a real laugh that punched out of his lungs in a way that shocked him just a little, "do you have ideas?"

"Well, there's the little stuff," Shane started, "agreeing to more joint interviews, going to the same events and actually speaking to each other instead of just trading room numbers, properly saying hello on the ice before games and getting our teams to go out to the same place after. But there's bigger stuff too. We could start a charity, maybe. I've been thinking about doing that and it'd be cool to do it together. We could start summer hockey schools, maybe get some other players involved so we can hold them in more cities. We could ask our agents and managers to book more joint campaigns, let the league actually market us as friends like they've been marketing us as rivals."

Ilya wanted all of those things, every last one, simply because each of them meant he'd get to spend time with Shane.

But something about the idea of starting a charity, of giving back to their communities alongside Shane, felt right.

"We should start charity," Ilya said, "build up to it some, like be friends in public so is less weird that we are suddenly starting foundation."

“We could have the camps be a fundraiser,” Shane suggested, “and it wouldn’t be weird for us to hold them in Ottawa because it’s my hometown and that way you’re in Canada for the summer, working and filing taxes and everything *in* Canada.”

“I like that idea,” Ilya said, taking his eyes off the road for a moment so he could smile over at Shane.

“I like you,” Shane responded and Ilya couldn’t even attempt to deny the way that made him blush.

The last three hours of the drive were spent discussing who they’d want to ask to coach at their theoretical camps, talking about Shane’s rehab schedule, and making a comprehensive list of everything Shane needed to buy for the house and in that little bubble, in Shane’s boring Jeep with just the two of them, nothing felt too scary, nothing felt impossible.

Ilya could see it all stretching out in front of him; a life with Shane where he wasn’t subjected to the whims of the Russian government, where they could be *actual* friends in public, where they could start a foundation they cared about and spend parts of their summers playing hockey for fun instead of as a job.

A life full of road trips and hard conversations that they worked through together, mornings full of the perfect balance of Shane’s smoothies and Ilya’s donuts.

Ilya wanted it.

Every little piece.

Good, bad, scary, or wonderful, it didn’t matter so long as it happened with Shane.

Chapter End Notes

i am absolutely stretching the definitions of permanent residency per canadian law but i’m a lawyer in america, not canada so i don’t actually care. in other news, check out the second work in this series. it’s the media reaction to each chapter & i may eventually add in some texts/group chats. thanks for all the love on this work!!

Chapter 15: it's brighter now

March 2017

When they got to Irvington around mid-afternoon, they stopped at the real estate office first where Shane was able to pick up his keys, the garage button, the remote for the main gate between the road and the driveway, and the instructions for setting the code on the second gate at the top of the driveway along with the instructions for arming the house's security system.

Ilya stayed in the car and just waited, letting himself process the past couple of days.

Shane was holding it together *remarkably* well.

For anyone, really. But Shane was someone who was *not* good with change. He loved patterns and thrived on routine and absolutely nothing in his life right now was following any semblance of a pattern. It was like someone had planted a pipe bomb in his routine and in the middle of it detonating, had dropped a hydrogen bomb right on top for good measure.

But here Shane was, smiling, eating donuts, and proposing marriage.

Ilya didn't buy it for a second.

That didn't mean that he didn't think Shane's expanded diet and his offered solution to Ilya's immigration issue weren't genuine, it simply meant that Ilya was concerned about how well Shane was *actually* handling this.

He was interrupted from his thoughts by his phone ringing, the noise far too loud over the car speakers. He scrambled forward to answer it simply to make the noise stop, barely even pausing to check who was calling.

"Roz," Scott greeted, trying to sound casual and failing by a mile.

"Hunter," Ilya responded, "what's up?"

“Just calling to check in,” Scott said, “hadn’t heard from you in a couple of days and I was starting to get worried.”

“I’m good, Hunter, promise.”

“Really?” Scott asked, sounding like he believed Ilya even less than Ilya believed that Shane was fine with all this insanity.

“Really,” Ilya said, a smile breaking out across his face as Shane stepped through the door of the office and started heading toward the car, “I’m fine.”

“I don’t mean to pry, Roz, but I’m not sure if I -”

He was cut off by the passenger door opening and Shane greeting Ilya with a, “hey, baby,” as he leaned across the center console to give him a quick kiss.

“Ah,” Scott hummed, starting to sound more amused than concerned.

“Oh,” Shane said, his shoulders going rigid before he saw Scott’s name on the screen and relaxed, “hey, Scott.”

“Hey, Rook,” Scott replied, “taking care of our boy?”

“My boy,” Shane corrected with a laugh. It was so casual it made Ilya’s cheeks go warm. “And, yeah, I think so. Trying to, anyways. We just got to New York, by the way. Just picked up my keys.”

“You already got a house?”

“Yeah, the real estate gods were on my side, apparently.”

“I was planning to text you tonight to ask if you wanted to stay at my place while you found one of your own, but I guess I’m not needed.”

“I might still take you up on that if I end up having to be in the city late for any meetings,” Shane said, picking up on the way Scott sounded genuinely put out that Shane wasn’t going to need to stay with him, “I ended up getting a house out by Tarrytown.”

“That makes sense,” Scott replied, his tone turning excited again at the prospect of Shane still needing his help. “Get away from the noise of the city a bit. But, wait, Roz is with you?”

“Yeah,” Ilya answered, swiping across the screen so he could see the map again as he pulled out of the parking lot. “Flew up to Ottawa on Tuesday morning, met the parents. I was very well behaved, the perfect boyfriend, you would be proud.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

“He really was,” Shane said, looking over at Ilya with that lovesick smile that made any bit of insanity and struggle worth it. Ilya was once more overwhelmed with the urge to bite him. Apparently it was called cuteness aggression. He’d googled it. It was a genuine biological phenomenon which was nice because that meant Ilya wasn’t actually insane. He still held himself back from giving into the urge. At least while he was driving. “Helped my mom cook, answered all her questions, gave the whole ‘I love your son’ speech, even did a puzzle with my dad.”

“Oh my god you’re in love,” Scott said, as if it were some great revelation.

“Uh, yes?” Shane answered.

“No, like, actually in love.”

“Yes,” Ilya answered that time.

“Like real love. Like forever, marriage love.”

Shane genuinely snorted at that before he broke into laughter that Ilya couldn't help but echo.

It was absurd.

After everything, after knowing, to at least an extent, that they'd been together (in some fashion) for the better part of a *decade*, after watching Ilya react to Shane getting injured and then watching how they interacted while Shane was in the hospital, after listening to the way they talked about each other, it was the fact that Ilya had met Shane's parents and not been a total dick that had Scott realizing they were genuinely in love.

"I knew you were old," Shane said once he'd caught his breath, "but I didn't realize you were senile."

And that simply made Ilya laugh harder.

"Cheap," Scott said, huffing out a laugh, "it makes sense, I guess I just hadn't really processed how big this was, how much it meant."

"It's big, Scott," Shane said, his voice sobering up, "Ilya's it for me, always has been."

"Yeah," Ilya said, reaching over to take Shane's hand, "Shane's it for me, too."

"Well," Scott said after a moment, clearing his throat, "good, I'm happy for you."

Shane checked his phone and then looked over toward Ilya and Ilya knew what he was asking without him needing to speak. Ilya nodded once and Shane smiled softly as he said, "you're free tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, why?" Scott responded. Ilya had thought Shane was going to ask about that night but was rather glad he'd asked about the next. He wanted Shane alone, when they weren't in a car, when they could just be together and talk or not talk as much as they needed. He had a feeling that it was all going to hit Shane once he stepped into his new house and he didn't think that Scott Hunter necessarily needed to witness that, he didn't want Shane tempering his emotions because someone else was there to see.

“Why don’t you come over? I’ll send you the address, we can do lunch or dinner or just hang out, doesn’t matter. You could even bring Kip if he’s free.”

“Yeah, alright,” Scott said, his excitement bleeding through his tone, “sounds good, send the address and I’ll check with Kip and see what his schedule looks like.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Ilya said, “thank you for checking in, Hunter. I appreciate it.”

“No problem, Roz. I’ll see you boys tomorrow.”

“Bye,” Shane said as Ilya ended the call. He was smiling, eyes lit up, he was clearly excited to have someone over, to make this real in a way it wouldn’t be if only he and Ilya and his parents were in the house. Ilya wanted that for him; wanted him to know what it felt like to be a part of a team that’d support you no matter what, wanted him to be able to feel like this home could be permanent even though the last one hadn’t been.

* * *

Shane felt a little like he’d been possessed by someone with about 85% less general anxiety and possibly an entirely different personality.

He’d been far too chill about all of this, and he knew, distantly, that pretty soon the calm would disappear and he’d turn into a monster, possibly a small natural disaster, but for now he was simply going to roll with it.

They pulled up to Shane’s driveway and he used the remote he’d been given to open the external gate. There was some snow sticking to the ground as they made their way up the slightly twisting drive, but it’d mostly melted, leaving behind trees that were just starting to grow new leaves, and Shane just knew it’d be beautiful come fall.

If he hadn’t looked at a map, he never would’ve guessed how close they were to the insanity of New York City or even to the mere existence of other humans. The property seemed almost closed off from the world around it, private and protected and Shane knew he’d made a good choice. The gate at the top of the hill was open because Shane hadn’t yet set a code, so he simply used the other remote he’d been given and opened the garage.

It felt so simple, like he and Ilya were just coming home from a visit to his parents instead of arriving at this house for the first time, instead of recognizing the fact that moving into this house meant he was truly leaving Montreal.

“Is beautiful home, *moya lyubov*,” Ilya said, reaching over and squeezing Shane’s hand softly before climbing out of the car. “Should we go look around?”

“Yeah,” Shane responded, taking a deep breath before getting out of the car himself.

Inside, the house was beautiful even though it was almost entirely empty. The furniture from Shane’s guest bedroom, that had pretty much only ever been used by his parents, had been put into the private guest suite since that was where his parents would sleep and the furniture from his own bedroom had been put in the master while the furniture from his living room had been put the den next to the office on the third floor. The small amount of exercise equipment he’d kept in his apartment had been put into what’d become the gym down in the basement, but every other room in the house was essentially empty.

Including the kitchen.

Which was a problem because they’d never actually stopped for lunch so all they’d consumed that day were donuts and smoothies.

“Let’s order dinner,” Shane said as they stood in the middle of the mostly empty foyer.

“Right,” Ilya agreed, pulling out his phone and opening a food delivery app, “what do you want?”

“I have not one single clue.”

“I pick restaurant and then you pick your food?”

“Sure,” Shane agreed, thankful to have Ilya at least make half the decision for him. He wandered back down the hall toward the garage and started pulling bags out of the Jeep. He left most of it piled next to the door between the garage and the house, knowing that Ilya would gripe about him carrying it

even though he felt *fine*. Everything that'd been in the Jeep was in bags which were much easier to carry one handed than boxes so Shane was managing just fine, thank you very much.

He brought their backpacks and duffle bags all the way into the house before carrying the half empty donut box into the kitchen and putting their empty smoothie cups into the sink.

He needed dish soap.

And a sponge.

But he really did not want to leave this house until he was physically forced to do so, so he wandered into the dining room where the little four-seater table from his Montreal apartment looked far too small and more than a little dumb and sunk down into one of the chairs as he took out his phone and opened his grocery delivery app.

He was switching between the list he and Ilya had made earlier and the app (where after a decent amount of deliberation he'd selected Target) filling up his cart when Ilya wandered into the room and passed over his phone.

Shane had no clue what restaurant Ilya had picked but it had a decent number of options and Shane quickly picked out a salad and a sandwich, adding chicken to the salad when Ilya glared at him, and then passed the phone back over.

"Good," Ilya declared, planting a kiss to the top of Shane's head, "where are you ordering groceries from?"

"I'd forgotten you could do groceries," Shane murmured, realizing that meant he needed a whole new list which was enough to make him start to spiral, just a little. He knew you could do groceries, obviously. This was how he made sure he had food in his apartment after a roadie. He didn't know why he'd forgotten about groceries.

Ilya's hand landed on his shoulder, big and strong and warm, and Shane felt the spiral slow down before it came to a full stop, "I was just going to ask you to get Coke, this place only has Pepsi, which is crime if you ask me."

“Yeah, sure,” Shane responded, navigating over to the grocery tab and adding 12-packs of Coke and ginger ale. He thought about adding groceries for breakfast but decided they could just order food again in the morning instead of having to attempt to unpack the kitchen boxes now after they’d spent seven hours in the car or in the morning while they were sleepy and hungry and far more likely to get annoyed.

“Get snacks, too,” Ilya requested, dropping another kiss on top of Shane’s head and setting his phone on the table. It was on the last screen of the delivery app, with the ETA and the little tracker to show you where your driver was. Shane spared a brief thought for the question of whether or not that was invasive and then focused back on the task at hand.

“Snacks?”

“Yes, we can have movie night, eat snacks, not think about crazy outside world. Will be fun.”

“Alright,” Shane agreed, leaning back against Ilya’s chest. He added microwave popcorn and a few different candies he knew Ilya liked to his cart and, after a moment’s hesitation, tacked on a bag of mini snickers. He felt Ilya’s grip on his shoulder tighten, just slightly, just enough to tell Shane that he’d noticed, that he was proud.

Shane scrolled through the cart once more and decided it was good enough for now before pressing order and setting his phone down next to Ilya’s.

“Let’s go see how they set up everything else,” Shane said, standing up from the chair with more effort than he would’ve liked. He was half exhausted and his joints were sore from sitting all day after spending two weeks just laying around.

Ilya took hold of his hand as they started wandering through the house.

It was giant, bigger than necessary for one person, but Shane liked the space and, if pressed, he had a half-formed dream of sharing this house with Ilya, properly. Maybe after they were both retired, maybe after Ilya’s contract with Boston ended and he moved to one of the three teams in the area ... maybe the dream was more than half-formed.

The yard was massive, big enough for the dog he knew Ilya wanted and for the kids they could maybe talk about a few years down the line. The space was big enough to host team gatherings or to host

friends who'd come into town to visit. Shane could almost hear the Pike kids laughing and running around. The thought made something sharp and painful dig in between his ribs, cutting deep and aiming for his heart.

He missed them already, missed nights at the Pike's after practice, standing in the kitchen and helping Jackie cook which mostly meant intercepting her children before they could interrupt her, laughing over dinner and then helping put the kids to bed before spending an hour on the couch just talking with Hayden.

It didn't help that they'd just stopped in front of one of the guest rooms, the one that'd had three twin beds in the listing photos Shane had seen, the room he'd seen and immediately thought would be perfect for Ruby, Jade, and Arthur, when he was a little bit older.

It was that, more than anything, that made him hate Montreal.

It wasn't just that the organization had written Shane off because of who he loved, it was that they'd torn him away from his family.

He'd been with the Pikes the entire time, he'd been there the night Hayden met Jackie, and he'd listened to weeks of Hayden pining and then months of Hayden expounding on the many incredible things that made Jackie *Jackie*. He'd been the best man in their wedding, and he'd been at the hospital hours after the births of the twins and Arthur and now Jackie was pregnant again and Shane was in New York.

Shane wanted nothing more in that moment than to be in their house, surrounded by the sounds of happy children and the warmth of a family home full of love. He wanted to call Hayden and tell him he missed him and ask to talk to the kids, but he knew that if he did he'd start crying and he honestly wasn't sure he'd ever stop.

It hadn't hit him in the moment, standing on the ice and watching Hayden and J.J. walk into the tunnel, but it was hitting him full force now.

Not being a Voyageur anymore was one thing, never playing with his brothers again was another.

"Hey," Ilya said, noticing that Shane had stopped moving. Shane was sure that he was staring unseeing, unblinking into the empty room, he was sure he was probably scaring Ilya with how still

he'd gone, but it was like his brain had gone into overdrive, like he'd told Ilya about over the phone that day after his father's funeral. "Hey," Ilya repeated, "*moya lyubov'*, Shane, what is it?"

"Hayden," Shane whispered, his voice sounding distant to his own ears, "I'm never gonna play with him again, I'm gonna miss his next kid being born."

He felt Ilya's arms wrap around him and he instinctively tucked his head against Ilya's shoulder, pressing his face to Ilya's neck, but it felt like his whole body had gone numb.

"I know, sweetheart," Ilya whispered, his lips pressed against Shane's temple, "I'm sorry."

Shane felt his breathing hitch at the softness in Ilya's voice, at the gentleness of the pet name and the way Ilya simply held him and said he understood instead of trying to rationalize it.

"I needed to leave," Shane said, not entirely sure if he was talking to Ilya or himself, "that doesn't mean I wanted to."

Ilya's fingers tangled into the hair at the back of Shane's head; it was longer than he'd let it grow in years and he didn't know how he felt about it. He didn't know how he felt about any of this. Well, any of it but Ilya.

He knew how he felt about Ilya, he'd known for a while.

It was a feeling strong enough to bring sensation back to his limbs, strong enough to drive away the icy depths his mind had slipped toward.

"I know I said on paper earlier," Shane said, pulling back just enough to meet Ilya's eye, "I didn't mean it."

"Shane, what?" Ilya asked, looking the perfect mix of bewildered and hopeful.

"I didn't mean it," Shane repeated, "marrying you could never just be something I did for paperwork. The fact that it'd keep you safe is simply an incredible bonus. I want a life with you, Ilya, however we

can have it. Even if we can't live in the same city ten months out of the year, even if we have to keep it a secret and deal with immigration paperwork and muddle through the fear of being found out before it's safe, before we're ready, I don't care. I'd go through all of that for you, happily."

"What are you saying?"

"Even if we come up with some other way to keep you safe, I still want to marry you, Ilya. I want us to take every step from here until the end together."

"Really?" Ilya asked, his voice breaking as his hands moved to cup Shane's cheeks. His eyes were so soft, glistening with unshed tears and so incredibly blue. His lips were curved into an awed sort of smile and his grip on Shane's face was perfectly toeing the line between reverent and possessive.

"Really," Shane confirmed, "I'd marry you tomorrow, Ilya. Now that I have you I'm never letting go."

"Maybe not tomorrow," Ilya hedged, huffing out a slightly disbelieving laugh, "even though I'd want to, we should do it in Canada, easier for paperwork."

"You're saying yes?"

"Of course I am," Ilya said, like he couldn't even imagine another answer, "Shane I will never let go either, never. Not now that you are mine."

"Yours," Shane whispered softly, leaning forward and pressing his lips to Ilya's.

Every single kiss, every single time, felt like coming home.

It didn't matter if it was a soft press of lips like this, chaste and sweet, or a heated kiss as Ilya backed Shane up against a hotel door. Ilya was his home.

Ilya pulled back and rested their foreheads together, his hands still cradling Shane's face with so much love it threatened to shatter Shane's heart and stitch it back together, "I love you, Shane."

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*, Ilya,” Shane replied. He watched Ilya’s expression melt, a single tear finally slipping free from his right eye that Shane gently kissed away.

Ilya pulled him back into his arms, into a hug strong enough to hold Shane together even when the world was falling apart and in the halls of an empty house that Shane had suddenly started to think of as *theirs*, Shane caught his first glimpse of forever.

Chapter 16: i only see daylight

March 2017

Ilya had no clue how to properly express everything he was feeling so he simply stood in the hallway of Shane's empty house and hugged him until his phone buzzed to tell him their delivery driver was almost there.

He pulled away slowly, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's forehead as he went and reaching down to tangle their fingers together so they wouldn't have to actually separate entirely, "food is almost here," he said, his voice softer than it'd normally be, *far* softer than anyone other than Shane could probably even imagine it being, "how about we eat and then we put away the things you ordered and then we get your TV set up and watch movies?"

"Alright," Shane agreed, squeezing Ilya's hand as they headed toward the stairs, "all my bedding and blankets are in one of the bags we brought in the Jeep, so we won't even have to dig through boxes."

"You didn't let the movers move your blankets?"

"I did laundry before packing and didn't want everything to get all gross," Shane explained with a shrug and, really, Ilya should've guessed that'd be his answer. Jesus Christ, he wanted to leave right now and find the closest place to buy rings. He wanted to get in the car and drive them back across the border they'd only crossed that morning so they could get married *now* without having to go through the process of getting their marriage license verified by the U.S. Secretary of State (who, as far as Ilya knew, was possibly Satan) in order to get it properly filed in Canada. He wanted Shane to be permanently, legally *his* with such incredible fervor that he felt drunk on it.

Instead of saying any of that, Ilya simply leaned over and kissed Shane's cheek, deciding it'd been far too long (read: 30 whole seconds) since his lips had touched Shane's skin and said, "smart."

Shane used the control near the front door to let the delivery person through the gate and then they both made themselves scarce as the driver left their order on the front porch.

Ilya had already been recognized in the Tim Horton's in Ottawa and they'd both talked to a border patrol agent who had no legal imperative to keep the fact that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov had been crossing the border together a secret and they'd absolutely been spotted at the gas station they'd

stopped at in Utica but they'd also apparently come to the silent joint decision that a delivery driver seeing the two of them standing in a clearly newly purchased house together was a step too far.

Ilya's account used a fake name so the driver couldn't even say they'd delivered food to Ilya Rozanov at a house suspiciously close to the Admirals' practice facility which was an added bonus.

Shane's grocery delivery showed up only five minutes later, just as they were laying their food out on the dining room table and Shane made quick work of unearthing glasses from the meticulously labeled boxes, washing them with his newly acquired dish soap, and filling them with ice so they wouldn't have to drink lukewarm soda with their dinner.

Shane was mostly silent as they ate, simply focused on his food as his legs stayed tangled with Ilya's beneath the table and Ilya let him sit in his silence. He needed time to think, to process. Ilya had no doubt that every declaration Shane had made about their relationship had come from a place of total honesty, but he sincerely doubted that Shane was thinking clearly about anything else. He needed to decompress; he needed to just exist for a minute without anyone talking about contracts or rehab or optics.

Ilya watched as he finished up his sandwich - some monstrosity of whole wheat bread with about six too many vegetables for Ilya's taste - before pausing for a moment and reaching into his pocket. He pulled out his new house keys and carefully slipped the second set off the ring, fumbling slightly with his right arm still secured in a sling, and passed it over to Ilya, "this is your house too," he said, simple as anything, like that declaration didn't make Ilya's heart stop with even greater power than Shane saying that he wanted them to get married for *real*, not just for Ilya's passport.

Marriage was something they'd do together, and it was something that'd help keep Ilya safe which was a benefit to them both; Shane welcoming Ilya into his space with such gentle ease felt different, somehow.

And then Shane stood up from the table and walked over to his backpack in the corner of the room. He dug through the front pocket for a moment before returning with another set of two keys that he set on the table next to the first, "and those are for our condo in Montreal. It's yours as much as it's mine, Ilya. I don't have a copy of the cottage keys right now, but I'll get a set made before the next time we see each other."

Ilya sniffled slightly and carefully picked up the keys, looking down at the simple metal instead of at Shane when he said, "the spare keys for the house in Boston are in Boston but they are yours. My home is yours, too."

“I don’t have a ring for you yet, so I guess the keys will have to do.”

Ilya looked up at Shane then and found him already smiling. He looked steady again, like thinking about Ilya made everything else fall away.

“The keys are perfect, *lyubimiy*,” Ilya promised, reaching across the table to squeeze Shane’s hand, “we can pick rings together, this summer maybe?”

“Summer works,” Shane agreed and Ilya could see his mind nearly split in two; part of him still caught up in the simple joy of starting a life together and the other half already focused on paperwork and planning and if Ilya had ever thought he couldn’t possibly love Shane any more, he’d been dead wrong.

After dinner they cleaned up the few dishes they’d used and finished putting away Shane’s grocery order before deciding to finish exploring the house. Ilya could already see how incredible it’d look once it was fully decorated and even after a few short hours and a few shorter minutes of Shane saying this house was also, somehow, *his*, Ilya felt at home.

He could picture them here, years in the future, with a dog running around and kids playing in the yard. It was the sort of life he’d never let himself imagine; a life he couldn’t help but imagine now.

After they finished their little tour, Shane identified the two bags that had his freshly washed blankets, sheets, and towels and let Ilya carry them up the stairs to his bedroom where they made the bed and hung two of the towels in the bathroom and put the extras in the cabinet next to the sinks.

“Shower and then movie?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded, yawning slightly. Ilya was pretty sure Shane was going to fall asleep before whatever movie they picked hit the halfway point, but Ilya was quite alright with that. He’d simply keep Shane cuddled against his side and then carry him to bed.

Ilya might’ve suggested watching a movie in *their* room, but he wanted snacks and he was well aware that Shane would never let him eat in a freshly made bed.

They unearthed soap and shampoo from the box labeled ‘bathroom’ and then Shane spent a minute figuring out the shower controls before letting Ilya help him take off his sling and shirt even though Ilya was pretty certain he could do it himself at this point.

Shane’s lips were on him the moment they stepped under the stream and Ilya was surprised for only the barest of seconds before he reciprocated, letting his hands settle on Shane’s hips and pressing closer.

After days of kissing just to kiss, Ilya could tell the difference immediately.

Shane seemed almost desperate as he buried his fingers in Ilya’s hair to tug him even closer and Ilya had half a mind to slow down, to remind Shane that he had an injured shoulder and lingering concussion symptoms but then Shane’s lips were on his neck, then his chest, and then Shane was on his knees, water dripping from his silky hair, running rivulets down his perfectly muscled torso, looking up at Ilya like he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to worship him or eat him alive and every protest Ilya might’ve raised died on his tongue.

* * *

Shane felt properly blissed out as Ilya turned off the shower and grabbed their towels off their hooks.

He’d been expecting Ilya to stop him, to remind him that he was injured and tell him that they didn’t have to do anything, but Ilya hadn’t, he’d happily let Shane suck him off before *enthusiastically* reciprocating and Shane was more than happy about it. He was pretty sure that letting the day they decided to get married and started moving into this new house that was *theirs* (no matter how much Ilya tried to skirt around calling it that) go by without a proper celebration would’ve been a minor tragedy.

Shane pulled on boxers and then had Ilya help him into the compression brace the Admiral’s trainer had recommended he start using while he slept starting this weekend (while also moving into using it for part of the day instead of the sling to slowly increase his range of motion and then continuing to use it for practices and games for the rest of the season) before slipping into one of Ilya’s hoodies. Ilya just put on a pair of boxers and called it a day. Shane decided to not question it and simply enjoy the view.

Shane headed upstairs to attempt to connect the TV to the wifi that’d supposedly been set up while Ilya went down to the kitchen to pop popcorn and gather their snacks.

Ilya walked into the room just as Shane had successfully gotten the TV working and they cuddled up in the corner of the plush sectional Shane had spent far too long choosing back when he'd picked it out in Montreal. He let Ilya pick the movie because he knew he wasn't going to stay awake through the whole thing and pulled the soft blanket Ilya had found up over their laps.

"I love you," he whispered, stretching his neck to press a kiss to Ilya's cheek before snuggling back down against his chest.

Ilya's arm around his shoulders tightened just a bit, tugging Shane even closer as he kissed the top of Shane's head, "I love you too."

* * *

Shane woke up the next morning, safely tucked into bed with Ilya wrapped around him like a koala, not quite sure how he'd gotten here but willing to bet that Ilya had carried him.

The pink light of sunrise was streaming through the windows, making everything look vaguely gilded, and Shane thought, not for the first time, that this was how he wanted to wake up every day for the rest of his life.

He felt more like himself than he had in weeks.

It wasn't just the couple of weeks he'd spent injured; it was the weeks he'd spent at the edges of the Voyageur's locker room, weeks spent making himself smaller when all he wanted was to be the truest version of himself. But he was on the other side of all of it now. His shoulder was healing, his head had stopped hurting, he had a new team with management who knew exactly why he'd left Montreal and supported him anyways, and he was here with the love of his life.

Doing the scary thing had paid off.

* * *

“Explain this to me one more time,” Kip said as they drove North, the city fading into the horizon behind them.

Scott had explained twice.

But he loved Kip and he'd probably (definitely) kill someone for him if he asked nicely enough so explaining the Hollander-Rozanov saga a third time was pretty low on the list of things he'd do for the man. As such, he explained again, “they're the same age, same draft class. Played against each other twice in the Prospect Cup which set up the rivals narrative that the League has been milking for a decade. I don't know the exact timeline, but they've been into each other, at least in some sense, since their rookie year. Rozanov is an asshole and he's marketed as an asshole. Shane is marketed like I am, as a golden boy of hockey who doesn't drink or swear and never starts fights. Anyone who doesn't know them would assume they were polar opposites but they're really not. They complement each other well, they balance each other out, and they're far more alike than I would've guessed. You'll like Shane and you'll probably think Ilya is funny and I can almost guarantee you'll end up seeing a side of them that the public never has and probably never will. It's also absurd to be around them because, other than you, they might just be the prettiest people I've ever seen. It's, like, unfair.”

“And Shane is really going to be on your team?”

“Yes.”

“How's that going to work out? Don't you play the same position?”

“He'll probably end up taking Wagner's spot as the left wing on the first line and I doubt he makes it through a week of practice without being given the A,” Scott said as he turned onto the highway that'd take them to Shane's place. The route was familiar, just a turn short of how he'd get to Tarrytown. “The team's rallied around him already and he hasn't even gotten on the ice with us.”

“Do they know why he left Montreal?”

“Management does,” Scott hedged, he could see Kip's concerned frown out of the corner of his eye. Scott could guess he was thinking along the same lines Scott had; *what happens if Shane comes out and the same thing happens again?* “But some of the guys have guessed it was a culture problem, and they're mad at Montreal, not Shane and if Shane decides to come out to the team or even just a few players, I'm doing it with him. I'm not letting him fall on that sword alone this time around.”

Scott didn't know how to even begin to describe the expression on Kip's face.

It was some mix of love and pride and maybe a little fear for how this could go wrong.

Scott was afraid, too. But he was less afraid now than he had been before Shane had come out, before he'd had someone to confide in, before he knew he'd have at least one friend if this all went wrong. He knew Shane wasn't ready to come out publicly, especially if it'd create any danger for Ilya, but Scott was starting to think he might be. Shane had gone first in the locker room in Montreal, and he'd probably go first in the locker room in New York, so Scott could return the favor by going first in public.

He hated thinking about it from an optics standpoint but if Scott came out, he'd be doing it with Kip, with a nice college-educated guy from Brooklyn who had nothing to do with hockey, who was sweet enough to make friends with all the WAGs and charm the media but strong enough that he'd be able to stand up for himself.

They were palatable in a way Shane and Ilya simply couldn't be.

Scott and his relationship could be pointed at as a symbol of tolerance that'd do well in Middle America. Shane, already a symbol of tolerance from a race standpoint (no matter how much he seemed to despise it), coming out as gay and then admitting to a decade-long secret affair with his arch-rival who also happened to be a womanizing, Russian, *asshole* probably wouldn't be appreciated in the Bible Belt or by the League in general.

Kip reached across the car and rested his hand on Scott's thigh, squeezing gently as he said, "I'm proud of you."

"I haven't done anything yet."

"Doesn't matter," Kip said, shaking his head lightly, "you're thinking about it, you're planning for it, and I'm proud of you."

Scott took a breath and let the feeling of having someone in his corner, someone who sometimes seemed to be proud of him simply for *existing*, wash over him and then said, "thank you."

They thankfully pulled up to Shane's gate before they could have any more emotional conversations which was good because Scott didn't think he'd be able to hold it together much longer.

As they drove up to the house, Kip seemed to be slightly mesmerized by the truly ridiculous home Shane seemed to have purchased on a whim while concussed but Scott was more focused on the scene happening outside the front door.

He'd spotted them as soon as he turned the corner toward the space in front of the house that seemed to be designed for visitors to park in, but he hadn't been able to sort out what was happening until he opened the car door and could hear their voices.

Shane and Ilya were standing in the little grass circle at the top of the driveway, looking up at the front of the house. Ilya was gesturing wildly while Shane stood there with his hands on his hips.

The first thing Scott noticed was that Shane was no longer wearing a sling.

The second thing Scott noticed was that Ilya seemed to be mid rant about landscaping.

"No, no, Hollander," Ilya said, sounding genuinely distressed, "you cannot just have hedges and one stupid tree, you need *color*, you need whimsy!"

"Who taught you the word whimsy?" Shane asked. Somehow, neither of them had noticed that Scott and Kip were out of the car and standing behind them.

"The internet," Ilya said, waving him off, "you need whimsy, Hollander and, right now, you have no whimsy."

"Okay, okay," Shane conceded, holding his hands up in a placating gesture, "you're right. I'll make sure to request whimsy when I talk to a landscaper."

"And you will let me approve of plans," Ilya said. Shane shot him a look and Ilya immediately amended, "can I please approve plans?"

“Of course you can,” Shane said, rolling his eyes slightly even though his whole face was lit up with a fond smile that seemed to be reserved entirely for Ilya. He was in jeans that were just a little too loose on his frame meaning they sat low on his hips and an old Team Canada t-shirt that had the bottom hem cut off; not quite enough to make it a crop top but enough that when he raised his left arm to ruffle Ilya’s hair Scott could see the dimples at the base of his spine. From the way Kip shifted next to him, he’d noticed too. Scott might’ve undersold how pretty Shane Hollander was. But, in his defense, it was difficult to describe and saying that he’d been named the Hottest Man in the NHL several times over only went so far.

“Hey guys,” Scott called before they could start an argument about shutter colors or brickwork, also before he ended up getting decked by Ilya because he’d been caught staring at Shane.

They both whipped around, clearly surprised by Scott and Kip’s presence which was a little concerning because it’s not like Scott’s car was silent, nor had the car doors closing been silent. It really shouldn’t have been that easy to sneak up on them, but it did make Scott feel better about the way he kept getting surprised during warmups on the ice at the All Star games.

“Hey,” Shane said, a bright smile spreading across his face as the shock disappeared, “sorry about that.”

“You’re fine,” Scott said, waving him off as he stepped forward. He ended up meeting Shane halfway and pulled him into a hug, trying his best not to squeeze too hard and hurt his still healing shoulder but he couldn’t help but squeeze just a little. He hadn’t seen Shane in person since he was still deeply bruised and mostly groggy leaving the hospital and, though it’d only been two weeks, it seemed like a lifetime had passed.

Ilya clapped him on the upper arm in greeting as Scott stepped away from Shane and back to Kip’s side, “guys, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Kip Grady. Kip, this is Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.”

“Nice to meet you,” Shane said, holding out his hand with a kind smile on his face and that specific softness in his eye that Scott recognized as the look Shane likely gave rookies and new acquisitions to make them feel welcomed. Scott found himself eyeing the way Shane moved his right arm probably a bit too closely, but he decided he could waive it off as a combination of both personal concern and professional interest as his new Captain instead of what it probably actually was; a rather severe case of being overprotective.

Shane was moving slowly, a little stiff, but he didn’t seem to be in pain which was a great sign. The bruising on his face had almost entirely faded, leaving behind just a slightly yellow patch on his

otherwise flawless skin.

Scott maybe needed to stop waxing poetic about Shane Hollander in his head.

“Nice to meet you,” Kip echoed, shaking Shane’s hand and smiling right back. He looked relaxed and maybe a little awestruck which Scott decided not to take personally considering the aforementioned waxing poetic.

“Is good to meet you,” Ilya said, slinging his left arm around Shane’s waist as he held his hand out toward Kip and, alright, maybe Ilya had noticed Scott and Kip’s staring.

Scott was going to have to watch his back the next time they played Boston.

“Good to meet you,” Kip said, shaking Ilya’s hand, looking slightly wary but not wary enough in Scott’s humble opinion. He turned back to Shane as he said, “thanks for inviting us.”

“Of course,” Shane replied easily, leaning a bit into Ilya’s side, “it’s still a bit of a disaster inside, we only got here yesterday but there’s at least a dining room table and couch, so it’ll do.”

“We can order food,” Ilya said as he turned Shane around and started walking toward the front door, Scott and Kip falling into step behind them, “we have not gotten groceries yet so only food in the house is donuts and candy.”

“Shane bought donuts and candy?” Scott asked, genuinely shocked.

“I bought donuts,” Ilya corrected, “and Shane bought me candy. Shane also, apparently, bought me a house even though he already bought me whole building, right, Shane?”

“Quit,” Shane shot back, pinching Ilya’s hip with one hand as he pushed the door open with the other, “I bought myself a house, you just happen to have a key.”

“No, no, this is not what I remember,” Ilya teased, “you said, very specifically, that this is *our* house, Hollander, you cannot take it back now.”

“I heard no denial over the purchase of a building,” Scott found himself saying, really not sure why he was saying it or if he even *wanted* to know why Shane had bought Ilya a building. He *was* starting to wonder just how much Rolex was paying the kid, though.

“I might’ve purchased a building in Montreal a couple years back,” Shane said, looking a little embarrassed even as he tried to keep his face impassive, “I rented out the ground floor to a baking supply store but kept the condos empty. They’re on the market now, but we did keep the top floor for ourselves.”

Scott couldn’t help but notice the way they were both using *we* and *our* like they were making real estate decisions together.

“Mr. Real Estate,” Ilya said, his tone of voice suggesting it was a pet name which was just odd, but Scott didn’t really have it in him to question anything Ilya Rozanov did, so he let it slide.

“Are you going to be living here too, then?” Kip asked, looking more than a little confused which Scott happened to understand on a soul deep level.

“Sometimes,” Ilya shrugged, “I still play in Boston, but I will be here some and in Canada some.”

Shane smiled up at Ilya at the mention of Canada and Scott narrowed his eyes. He was missing something, he could feel it, he just didn’t know *what*.

He watched them interact, probably a bit too closely, as they showed Scott and Kip around the house and by the time they all settled onto the couch upstairs, Scott was no closer to making a guess as to what, exactly, he was seeing.

He knew they were in love.

The type of love where you flew to a different country and met the parents and drove seven hours just to spend time together under the guise of helping out, the type of love where you casually talked about cohabitation and purchased entire *buildings* for each other. But there was something else, something bigger, and Scott was driving himself just a little crazy trying to figure it out.

He wanted to pry, wanted to figure out what was going on, but he had the odd feeling that he wouldn't get an answer, so he decided to let it go, at least for now.

Scott zoned back into the conversation while Kip was in the middle of telling Shane about what he'd studied in college and he realized that Ilya was looking at him with that stupid little grin that made people want to punch him on the ice and Scott realized that Ilya knew Scott knew he was missing something and Scott realized that Ilya absolutely wasn't going to tell him what it was that he was missing.

He was starting to feel like a conspiracy theorist with a cork board and a ball of red string.

Every one of the nice thoughts he'd had about Ilya Rozanov in the past month were starting to crumble, just a little, in the face of that grin.

"So, wait, when do you start practice again?" Kip asked and Scott forced himself to look away from Ilya so he could pay attention to Shane's answer. He hadn't heard anything specific from the trainers, and he hadn't wanted to bug Shane about it, but he'd been wondering (more like obsessing over it) himself.

"I'll be at practice on Monday but not back on the ice yet," Shane answered and Scott felt himself grin. Having Shane in the facility, even if he wasn't going to be on the ice, would be big for their team. They'd been on a winning streak, sure, but there were still some players who seemed to be worried it wouldn't stick, worried that it was all too good to be true, but Shane was steady in a way very few players were. He took losses in stride and was mild as he celebrated wins, he rarely overreacted to anything when it came to hockey, and his presence would almost certainly go a long way in making the rest of the team feel steady as well.

"You will be back on ice very soon," Ilya said, turning and pressing a kiss to the top of Shane's head and, just like that, Scott forgot why he'd been annoyed with him. Watching him like this, soft and comfortable in his own home with Shane, made him so much more likable that it was actually fucking *mind boggling*.

"I know," Shane said, squeezing Ilya's knee in a silent *thank you*. "Hopefully in time for New York's next game against Boston."

“Ah, but you will not be center, I will win every face off because I am so much faster than that old man and it will be very sad night for you.”

Shane started laughing as Scott sputtered out an incoherent protest, feeling a little like he was suffering from whiplash, before finally landing on, “I’m only seven years older than you!”

Ilya tsked, his tongue clicking against the back of his teeth as he shook his head in a mockery of concern, “I do not think so, I think you are forgetting things in your old age, Hunter. I am very concerned.”

Kip, the absolute traitor, was laughing.

Hard.

Scott could feel him shaking with the force of it and he wanted to be mad but Kip looked so delighted to be a part of Scott’s life - even if, for now, that only meant watching him get made fun of by Ilya Rozanov in person after only getting to hear Scott gripe about it second hand - and Scott realized that he simply couldn’t find it in himself to be offended that his boyfriend hadn’t taken his side.

“Be nice to Scott,” Shane said and Scott felt the barest moment of hope before he saw the glint in Shane’s eye and preemptively sighed, “you could get charged with elder abuse if you’re not careful.”

Kip’s laughter hit a new pitch, Shane looked so damn smug, Ilya was eying Shane like he wanted to pin him down, and Scott found himself, inexplicably, wondering how he’d gotten this lucky.

Chapter 17: one last kiss, then catch your flight

March 2017

They spent the few spare hours between Scott and Kip leaving and the time they needed to leave to pick Yuna and David up from the airport unpacking the kitchen. Ilya had simply declared it to be the most important room after the bedroom when Shane had been stuck in a moment of decision paralysis after Ilya had asked what they should unpack first.

He let Ilya play his music while they worked and only complained twice about how he didn't understand why people liked that sort of music (and, honestly, the complaints were mostly just to make Ilya laugh, Shane didn't really have a problem with the music) and they talked aimlessly about landscaping and paint colors and whether or not Shane would actually stop Ilya from getting a dog (answer: he wouldn't) and then it'd shifted into a debate over the perfect dog breed.

The discussion over the hypothetical dog continued as they got in the Jeep and drove the 45 minutes to Laguardia and by the time they made it to the arrivals door they'd ruled out German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers, and Border Collies because the internet told Shane they were likely to develop separation anxiety which made Ilya frown because he was adorable and considerate and cared deeply about things like dogs' mental health. They'd also ruled out several breeds that shed like crazy (except for Golden Retrievers, which *absolutely* shed like crazy, but Ilya had looked so sad when Shane tried to put the breed on the 'no' list that Shane had folded immediately).

They only had to wait a couple of minutes before Shane's parents were walking out of the airport and toward the car and the moment they were both settled in the back seat Ilya asked, "what kind of dog should I get? Shane said he will not stop me."

And David, because he'd spent 25 years getting used to Shane asking random questions at all hours of the day and because he was a wonderful father, simply frowned a little in consideration and said, "well, do you want a dog that could run with you?"

And then they were off, rambling back and forth as they drove back through the city and out into the suburbs like Yuna and Shane weren't even there.

Shane looked over his shoulder and caught his mom's eye and found her wearing the same look of fond exasperation that Shane knew was on his own face. They shared a private, commiserating sort of smile that made Shane's chest feel warm. This was his family now. The family he'd known and loved his entire life had expanded by one and it simply *worked*.

It was like Ilya had been the missing piece; the person who'd been in the wings just waiting to fill the empty seat at every four-top table in every restaurant they'd ever eaten at.

About fifteen minutes from the house, Yuna finally interrupted Ilya and David's conversation that had somehow devolved into a genuine debate over whether a puppy's paw size actually correlated to how big they'd be when they were a full-grown dog.

"David and I had an idea."

Ilya and David both went quiet and Shane looked over his shoulder again to see his mom looking determined and his dad looking almost nervous.

"What is it?" Shane asked.

"I went down a rabbit hole reading about Russian politics and immigration issues, and it made me worry about Ilya, so I started looking into ways to get him a different passport."

"What is rabbit hole?" Ilya asked, glancing over at Shane.

"It means like a spiral, like you read one thing and then kept reading more and more because you couldn't stop."

"Ah," Ilya hummed, "I do that on Wikipedia, you learn very strange things."

Shane couldn't help but smile, letting himself feel the full force of his affection for just a moment before turning his attention back to his mom, "and what did you decide on?"

"If you two got married you could sponsor his Permanent Residency," Yuna said. She then entirely misinterpreted the look on Shane's face and started scrambling in a rather uncharacteristic manner, "it could just be on paper, at least for now if you're not ready to actually be married or if you don't want to be married, but you clearly care about him, Shane, and this could keep him safe and -"

“Whoa,” Shane said, cutting her off. Ilya’s shoulders were shaking lightly as he clearly tried to hold himself back from laughing. He was doing a pretty poor job of it. “We already talked about it.”

“What do you mean.” Yuna said, more a demand than a question.

“I suggested we get married on paper and Ilya agreed and then we talked again a couple of hours later and I admitted that I didn’t want it to just be on paper, which Ilya also agreed with.”

“What are you saying?” David asked, far more gently than Yuna probably would’ve.

“I asked Ilya to marry me, properly, he said yes.”

“I did not get ring though,” Ilya said, sending a rather exaggerated pout in Shane’s direction, “just a house key.”

“And a condo key, come on, Ilya, don’t sell me short.”

“Right, and condo key,” Ilya said, nodding seriously before holding up his finger like a detective realizing something in a bad procedural, “and the promise of a cottage key. Many keys, no rings.”

Shane counted down from three in his head and was quite proud of himself when the moment after he got to one his mom nearly screeched, “YOU’RE ENGAGED?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, feigning nonchalance in a way that had his dad cracking up immediately. His mom did not look impressed.

“Congratulations, wonderful, very happy for you. I did all this research though, so I am going to help with the paperwork.”

“Wow,” Ilya whispered, looking amused in a way that had Shane’s eyes narrowing on instinct, “you are very like your mother, Hollander.”

That was far more tame than Shane would've guessed but he imagined that Ilya would've been more of a dick if Shane's parents weren't in the car.

"Thank you," Shane and Yuna said almost in sync.

Shane let himself live in the moment for a minute, let himself catalogue the way Ilya was grinning, the way his dad looked so proud while his mom was split between excitement and planning mode, and then he took a breath and focused on the more serious aspects, "we have to keep it a secret to keep Ilya safe until he has full citizenship. We'll talk to each other and decide who we want to tell but we can't advertise it or promote it in any way. We need to find people we trust, everyone from the clerk we pick up the marriage certificate from to the immigration agent assigned to our case needs to be someone who won't sell the story to the press for a payout."

Shane honestly wasn't all that worried about the world at large. He knew he and Ilya were incredibly famous in the hockey community but being famous for a hockey player didn't necessarily translate to being *famous*. He was a little worried about how the League would react, a little more worried about how their locker rooms would react. But he was mostly worried about the story getting out and becoming a massive deal about a queer hockey player trying to defect from Russia in the middle of what could only be described as a political shit show.

The sociopolitical implications really made Shane wish he'd paid closer attention in his high school government class. The fact that he'd gotten an A really didn't matter anymore because doing well on tests didn't mean he actually understood the reality.

All he knew was that it would be really fucking bad if word got out and the real damage wouldn't be to something as simple as their careers.

"I can handle that," David said, his eyes going distant like he was already running through lists of everyone he knew, handpicking people who could be trusted to either help them themselves or identify others who could.

The car went quiet after that, and Shane could see the turn for his road coming up in the distance, so he just let the silence settle.

Just as they pulled up to the gate, Yuna said, "I think you two should hide in plain sight."

Shane was already nodding before she finished explaining. He'd been thinking the same thing.

Ilya looked at him in question, either too overwhelmed or too tired to parse through the idiom and the underlying meaning.

"Keep being friends in public, make it seem totally normal that we're together all the time," Shane explained in broad strokes. He was glad to have his parents on their side, but he also didn't want to keep this conversation going at this very moment. He wanted to enjoy a night in his new house with his family and leave all the serious stuff at the door. "Make it so no one wonders why we spend time together. Like they'd see us and just think, oh yeah, Hollander and Rozanov are friends, why wouldn't they be running a summer camp together and why wouldn't they go get drinks after a game."

"I like that idea," Ilya said, reaching over to squeeze Shane's hand before putting both hands back on the wheel to maneuver into the garage.

Just like Shane had hoped, they left the conversation at the door and instead spent the evening making lists of things to shop for, researching interior designers, and, yes, discussing dog breeds and Shane went to sleep that night feeling just that much more settled.

Saturday was spent with Shane and Yuna running between stores at the whims of their various lists while Ilya and David finished unpacking the rest of the boxes the movers had left behind. Between the pair of them, they'd been able to guess where Shane would want certain things which, when he got home that afternoon and noticed, had made Shane smile like an idiot. They spent the afternoon and evening putting away everything Shane and Yuna had purchased and adding the delivery dates for the few pieces of furniture they'd picked out into Shane's calendar.

They talked a little more then, about Shane and Ilya, about how they were doing with all this change, about how Ilya was handling his father's death (a conversation that hadn't wrapped up without Yuna and David both reminding Ilya no less than twelve times that they would always pick up the phone when he called) (it had taken Shane explaining later, after his parents had gone to bed, that they were showing their love for Ilya for him to finally believe they meant it).

And on Sunday afternoon, Shane ordered a car to take his parents to the airport because he wasn't yet cleared to drive and none of them wanted to ask Ilya to drive another hour and a half round trip, even though he would've done it happily.

Boston had Monday off of practice after a three-day run of away games, so Ilya wasn't flying back until the next day and, even though this was, by far, the longest amount of time they'd gotten to spend

in each other's presence, Shane was thankful for that last extra night with Ilya by his side.

He was thankful that when he woke up Monday morning, his first official day as an Admiral, it was in Ilya's arms.

"Good morning," Ilya whispered, his lips pressed into Shane's hair.

"Good morning," Shane echoed, wrapping his arm tighter around Ilya's waist and not at all ready to let go. He tilted his head up, silently asking for a proper kiss and Ilya easily complied. Shane never wanted to leave this moment. Ilya's skin was warm from sleep, and he was relaxed in a way he so rarely was, holding onto Shane with something like devotion as he kissed him, sweet and slow. Shane rolled slightly, pushing himself up before settling back down, draped entirely over Ilya so they were pressed together from head to toe, barely even breaking the kiss as he moved. Ilya's arms wrapped around him, one around his waist with his hand splayed over Shane's hip and the other around his ribs, holding him close with his fingers tangled in Shane's hair.

Shane pulled away from the kiss after a minute and tucked his face against Ilya's neck, delighting in simply being *held*.

"You are ready for today?" Ilya asked gently, his fingers scratching softly against Shane's scalp in the way that always made him go boneless.

"I think so," Shane answered, his voice muffled against Ilya's skin. "I'm going early to work with the trainer and then I'll watch practice, I think. I might have to do some media. I'm nervous, to be totally honest. But I think I'm ready."

"Is okay to be nervous, you will be wonderful anyways and they will love you because you are Shane Hollander."

Shane stopped himself from saying his first thought: *Montreal didn't love me*.

Because that wasn't true.

The city loved him *desperately*. The fans were up in arms about his trade and Shane had a feeling that even if the reason he was traded got out, most of them would still be on his side. The city didn't care about optics like the GMs did, they cared about *hockey* and Shane was objectively good at hockey. Shane was objectively fucking *great* at hockey.

It was the Voyageurs who hadn't loved him.

Or maybe they'd stopped loving him, which was somehow worse.

If they ever even had, they hadn't loved him enough to stay by his side.

New York would be different though, it already was.

Shane wasn't in charge of the locker room here. He would, at best, be an Alternate Captain. Scott was the one in charge and he'd made it quite clear that he was protective of Shane in a way that bordered on *over* protection, but Shane wasn't going to complain. Coach Murdock was protective too, in his own way. He'd given Scott the opening to come out to him and Scott had only been met with genuine care. He knew the reason Shane was being traded and, if Scott was to be believed, even knew about *Ilya* and he'd still fought for Shane's contract.

So, it was going to be different, it was going to be better, and Shane was done making himself smaller to be more likeable. He was going to let everyone see the side of himself that rarely showed its face; the side that could joke and tease, the side that *openly* fought tooth and nail for what he wanted instead of acting like it all came naturally. He was going to show this team just how much work he put into being the best, he was going to make damn sure they appreciated just how much he gave to build a legacy, and he refused to shove himself back into the closet in the process.

They were going to get Shane *fucking* Hollander, whether they wanted him or not.

Ilya must've seen something in his eye because his soft smile, the one meant just for Shane, transformed into that grin that usually meant he was about to get punched. His fingers dug into Shane's hip and his grip on Shane's hair went from soft to suggestive in the space of a second, "you will show them who you are," he said, his voice low in the way it only ever got when he was saying things like *on your knees, Hollander*.

Shane met him with a grin of his own before he leaned forward and nudged their noses together, his lips brushing against Ilya's as he spoke, "Shane *fucking* Hollander."

* * *

The car the Admirals had sent to bring Shane to the practice facility because he still wasn't cleared to drive reached the gate shortly before nine and Shane felt torn. He was ready now, after a morning of being fucked into the mattress while Ilya reminded him exactly who he was. He was ready to show his new team that he was even more than anyone thought. But, at the same time, he didn't want to leave Ilya's side.

It felt so much worse now, the knowledge that he'd come home to an empty house.

"I know," Ilya said softly, pulling Shane into a hug when he hesitated near the door. "I will miss you, sweetheart."

"I miss you already," Shane responded, tucking himself against Ilya's chest and wrapping both arms around his waist, his grip with his right noticeably weaker than with his left but it was progress all the same. He felt Ilya's lips against his temple and then his cheek and he tilted his head up to catch them in a proper kiss. Ilya's lips lingered against his for a moment, almost searching, like he was waiting to see what sort of goodbye kiss Shane would want. It was stupid and sweet and Shane loved this man with every fiber of his being. So much it was actually ridiculous.

Shane pressed forward and let his lips part on a sigh and Ilya groaned in relief, his arms wrapping tighter around Shane as he kissed deeper, harder, pouring every emotion he couldn't quite articulate into the press of his lips and the warmth of his tongue against Shane's.

Shane felt breathless as he stepped away. He could hear tires crunching across the gravel of his driveway which made him wonder how the hell they hadn't noticed Scott and Kip's arrival on Friday morning, and he knew he needed to leave but he let himself stand in this little bubble with Ilya for a moment longer. He let the peace they'd built here, in this house, settle into his bones so he could carry it with him when he walked through the door.

"I love you," Ilya said, every syllable filled with meaning, "so much, Shane. And I feel very proud of you. You deserve good things because you are good."

“I love you too,” Shane responded, tilting forward to kiss Ilya once more, soft and sure. “Thank you for being here with me, thank you for helping me move, for all of this, Ilya. You made it all so much easier.”

“Thank you for letting me.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Shane said, his voice almost a whisper, like if he kept quiet the goodbye somehow wouldn’t become real, “text me when you get leave and when you get home, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya agreed. He kissed the bridge of Shane’s nose, his lips featherlight against Shane’s skin. “Call me tonight, I want to hear all about your first day.”

“I will,” Shane promised, finally taking a full step back. He reached out and squeezed Ilya’s hand gently and then picked up his bag before opening the door, “I love you,” he said, again, just because he could, because he wanted Ilya to hear it and he wanted to say it.

“I love you too,” Ilya responded, smiling like he knew exactly why Shane was saying it, like he understood and felt the same.

Shane took a deep breath and stepped through the door, his gear bag, the smaller one that only really fit his skates and a few other random things, slung over his shoulder as he walked toward the car. He could feel Ilya’s eyes on him through the tinted glass of the windows set into the front door, but he didn’t look back. He didn’t think he could look back now and keep walking forward.

He felt dramatic and a little dumb, but he was also dead certain that if he looked back now, if he saw even the outline of Ilya’s shadow still waiting just inside, he’d turn back and ignore the world entirely.

So, instead, he stepped forward and opened the back door of the town car, putting on his best media smile as he climbed in and greeted the driver and, as they headed back down the driveway, Shane remembered that even though he’d be coming home to an empty house, it’d still be a house that knew Ilya, a home that was already becoming *theirs*.

Chapter 18: new york state of mind

March 2017

Shane stepped out of the training room to find Carter Vaughan grinning like a mad man standing next to a woman who, by the jersey draped over her shoulder and the slightly frantic energy, Shane pretty quickly placed as either a comms director or a social media manager.

“Hollzy!” Carter greeted, clapping Shane on his uninjured shoulder in greeting, “good to see you, man!”

“Yeah, good to see you too, Vaughny,” Shane replied. He couldn’t help but smile in the face of Carter’s joy. He was a little sore from physical therapy, but it hadn’t tempered how excited he was to be here. He wasn’t necessarily looking forward to doing media but based on the fact that Carter was dressed in jeans and his home jersey, Shane was guessing he at least wouldn’t be doing media alone.

“This is Christina,” Carter said, gesturing broadly, “she’s our social media manager and she’s in charge of us this morning, we’re just waiting on Scotty.”

“This is your home jersey,” Christina said, passing Shane the bright red sweater with a smile, “the equipment team got it finished early so you could wear it for media today, the rest of your uniform should be ready by the end of the week. Oh, also, it’s great to meet you. We’re really excited to have you here.”

“I’m excited to be here,” Shane said earnestly.

She grinned a little brighter and then headed down the hall, calling over her shoulder to tell Shane to put the jersey on and keep the sling off if it was alright by the training staff before disappearing around the corner.

“She’s got a lot of energy,” Shane observed, honestly pretty impressed. It wasn’t like it was super early in the morning, but it was still a Monday.

“She does,” Carter agreed. He then scanned the hall quickly before turning back to Shane and Shane felt something like dread settle in his stomach as Carter opened his mouth and closed it before

pausing for a moment, taking a breath and then saying, “I heard a rumor about a player in Canada telling his team something personal and it not going well.”

Shane studied his face, trying to figure out how Carter felt about it, trying to figure out if he knew what the ‘unnamed player’ had told his team. He didn’t know how to feel, but he knew Scott trusted Carter as much as Shane trusted Hayden and Shane trusted Scott’s judgment so he just nodded.

“The rumor’s true?” Carter asked, his voice dropping into almost a whisper and Shane couldn’t tell if it was because he was shocked or because he was trying to protect Shane.

“Yeah,” Shane said, clearing his throat and trying to pretend like he wasn’t in the middle of a cardiac event, “I, uh, came out to my team. It didn’t go well in the locker room, it went even less well with management.”

“Jesus Christ,” Carter spit out, his eyes lit up in fury and Shane took an unconscious step back, “no, no, no,” he said immediately, waving his hands like he was waving a white flag, “not mad at you, mad at your team. You don’t treat a teammate that way. Even if you don’t agree with them, you don’t treat them badly. Also, is Montreal actually fucking *stupid*? Who the hell gets rid of Shane Hollander just because he likes to suck dick?”

Shane couldn’t have stopped the laugh that burst out of him if he tried. Carter grinned, clearly glad that he’d made Shane laugh before he sobered just a little, just enough that Shane could tell he was serious when he said, “I’m glad you’re here, man, and I don’t care who you love. Well, I care if they’re good to you, but I don’t care if they’re a guy. Doesn’t matter to me.”

“Thanks, Carter,” Shane said, feeling the need to use his actual name rather than a locker room nickname. “That means a lot.”

Carter nodded once and then his face split into a grin again as he pulled out his phone, “put on that jersey and then let me show you what I found on Twitter.”

Shane unfolded the jersey to comply and felt his breath catch in his chest when he laid eyes on the A already stitched into the fabric. It’d been a few years since he’d had an A on his chest, and this one somehow felt more significant; it was a sign that the Admirals trusted him, before he’d even stepped onto the ice. They trusted him to be a leader, to show up and play hard and lead this team both on and off the ice.

Carter's smile softened just a bit as he watched Shane run a finger over the white letter, like he knew what Shane was thinking. But he didn't point it out, didn't say anything else, he simply let Shane have his moment.

It felt odd putting this jersey on for the first time in an empty hallway with only Carter Vaughan as a witness instead of on stage in L.A. in front of a ballroom full of people and several major media outlets, but it felt right, somehow. He was coming into this team as a player instead of as a young kid who was already being talked about like a legend. He didn't need the pomp and circumstance, he just needed a team that welcomed him, and that was exactly what Carter was doing.

They wandered down the hall toward the locker room so Shane could change into the jeans he'd arrived in before he'd changed into shorts and a t-shirt for PT and Shane realized the facility was already starting to feel like home.

* * *

Scott could feel the energy shift when he walked into the practice facility Monday morning.

It felt like the walls were buzzing, like every atom in the brick had been electrified.

He heard him before he saw him, that laugh Scott had only ever heard in the privacy of Shane's home was ringing through the air, loud and real and contagious.

Scott rounded the corner, putting far too much effort into continuing to walk rather than dropping his bag and taking off at a sprint just to see Shane in the building with his own eyes sooner, and found Shane leaning against the wall outside the locker room with Carter, both of them slumped over with the force of their laughter. Shane looked like he belonged there, like he'd always just *been* there and Scott felt fucking *giddy*.

Shane was in jeans and the bright red Admirals home jersey, Hollander across his shoulders, the number 24 stitched into the back and arms, and the A already stitched over his chest.

Carter was dressed the same and Scott was starting to wonder if he'd missed some sort of memo.

“Get dressed, Cap,” Shane called, still grinning, his shoulders shaking just a bit with lingering mirth.

“Scotty!” Carter greeted, smiling wider than Scott could genuinely *ever* remember seeing. “Jeans and your away jersey, we’re doing media.”

“Why am I wearing away if you two are wearing home?” Scott asked, finding it somehow easier to just slip into this conversation like it was a normal day instead of wondering how these two had become such fast friends or asking what spirit had possessed Shane Hollander to turn him from the ever-serious hockey robot into this guy who was slouched against the wall, grinning like a mad man.

Actually, Scott didn’t need anyone to answer that second question. Scott had met the spirit, and it was simply Shane Hollander under the influence of Ilya Rozanov. Or really, as Scott was starting to realize, the Shane Hollander no one except Ilya Rozanov (and probably Hayden and Jackie Pike) had ever had the pleasure of seeing until now.

“So there’s some variety,” Shane answered, drawling just a bit, and Scott got the feeling that he’d asked the comms team the same question Scott just had. “Also, it might’ve been nice of you to mention that this was gonna be here when I saw you Friday,” he said, pointing to the rather prominent letter on his chest.

“I didn’t know,” Scott shrugged, “but I’m not surprised, Hollzy. You deserve it.”

“I haven’t even played a game with you guys yet.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Scott said, “you’re you. You’re a leader on and off the ice and you were a great captain in Montreal, you deserve the A.”

Shane’s expression went soft for a second, like he was actually listening to Scott’s words, actually believing the truth of them, and then he was grinning again, turning back to Carter, “you’ve gotta show him what you found.”

“Oh no,” Scott said, a little bit worried about what the hell Carter could’ve found that had made them both laugh like that.

“What do you know about fanfiction, Scotty Boy?” Carter asked with the air of someone giving a goddamn TED Talk.

“I know there are a lot of teenage girls who think Shane is getting up to some crazy shit with Hayden Pike in hotels across America.”

“And Canada,” Shane amended, conversationally.

“And Canada,” Scott agreed, matching Shane’s tone even as he felt his lips twitching with the force of keeping back his grin.

“Well, the teenage girls have switched gears,” Carter said, and the light in his eyes was genuinely concerning. “They can’t agree on a ship name, though.”

“Yet they’ve already written such interesting things,” Shane said, and now they were doing a joint presentation and Scott started to wonder if bringing Shane to New York had actually been a smart decision. He was starting to realize that he would never know another day of peace.

“I know,” Carter said, nodding seriously, “*such* interesting things, but still no ship name!”

“My personal favorite is Shott,” Shane said, his nose twitching as he tried to keep his composure. Carter’s face was starting to turn red, like he was literally holding his breath to stop himself from laughing.

“Shott,” Scott echoed, already seeing where this was going and just *knowing* that Shane had already sent whatever Carter had found to Kip. Scott would really never again know peace.

“Shott,” Carter repeated, like it simply needed to be said by all three of them to be real. “I’m feeling a little left out, honestly.”

“Oh, I’d bet there are some where you get to join,” Shane said, leaning over Carter’s shoulder to look at his phone, “you’ve just got to filter the tags.”

Carter tsked, as if he were disappointed in himself for not realizing that, and held his phone a little closer to Shane while Shane tapped the screen a couple of times and then they both let out a whoop, “victory!” Carter yelled, pumping his fist while Shane started laughing again, hard enough that he was slumped entirely against Carter’s side. Carter started laughing too, tilting forward and nearly sending them both tumbling to the ground which only made them laugh harder.

Scott just watched for a second before taking out his phone, opening the camera, sliding over to video, and pressing record.

The two of them were far too busy trying to find their footing to notice Scott recording. Eventually, they gave up entirely and just sat on the ground which was about the point Scott realized they were the only three players here. They must’ve scheduled time for media which probably had a buffer for Captain bonding which Scott didn’t imagine the coaching staff had pictured as Scott recording Shane and Carter giggling on the floor like children, but what the coaching staff didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them.

Shane was cross legged on the floor leaning back against his good arm with his right arm resting on his leg. He must’ve been wearing the compression brace he’d shown Scott on Friday which was good to see. Scott wondered, briefly, if they’d put him back in the sling for media or if they’d leave him without it as a subtle clue that he wasn’t anywhere near as injured as Montreal was pretending.

Carter was pressed entirely against Shane’s left side, his legs splayed out in front of them as he held his phone so they could both see it. Carter was a tactile guy and Scott honestly would’ve assumed that Shane would be uncomfortable with it, that he wouldn’t want strangers touching him, but he seemed entirely at ease and Scott wondered how much of that was Shane letting the team see the *real* him and how much of it was Shane simply being far more comfortable in small groups than in crowded rooms.

“Oh my God, Hollzy, read this,” Carter said through his laughter, pulling Scott’s mind away from the odd sort of psychoanalysis he’d slipped into.

Shane squinted a little until he found what Carter was pointing to and he let out an honest to God *cackle*, his head thrown back with the force of his laughter for a moment before he looked back down at the phone, his eyes bright with unshed tears and a massive smile on his face, “I’m sorry, does that say you, oh my God I can’t say that out loud. Christ these people are creative.”

“How’s Pike gonna feel about you moving on?” Carter asked, tilting his head back to look at Shane and holding up his phone toward Shane’s face as if it were a microphone.

“I think he’s gonna be really broken up about it,” Shane said, putting on his best big brown puppy eyes as he frowned just a bit and if Scott weren’t the one holding the camera, he might’ve thought they knew they were being recorded. But, as it were, Scott knew full well that this was just *them*. Somehow already acting like best friends when Shane probably hadn’t even been in the building for a full hour. They weren’t even putting on a show for Scott, let alone for some audience. “I’m just thankful Jackie’s there to comfort him.”

“But what about J.J.,” Carter asked, somehow sounding entirely earnest, “he has no Jackie to go home to and now you’ve left him for Scott Hunter.”

Shane let out a wistful sigh, fluttering his eyelashes, “J.J. will always hold a piece of my heart but I simply couldn’t help it. I have a thing for *much* older men.”

“Hey!” Scott cried as Carter fell over sideways, laughing so hard sound stopped coming out as he curled almost into the fetal position. Shane just looked up to meet Scott’s eye and instead found a camera pointed in his face. Scott expected him to glare, maybe to tell Scott to stop recording Shane saying anything that even hinted at him liking men. But, instead, Shane stared right down the barrel and fucking *winked*.

Scott wanted to ask *who the fuck are you and what have you done with Shane Hollander?* But instead, he just ended the recording, stuffed his phone in his pocket, tossed his bag on the ground and then dropped down onto the floor and wrapped one arm around Shane’s waist, careful not to actually tackle him so he wouldn’t accidentally slam his shoulder into the ground, and pinning Carter entirely with his other arm and half his body weight.

“Gerroff!” Carter yelled, thrashing slightly in a way that told Scott he didn’t actually care and was simply being a menace which Scott took as his clue to put more of his weight on top of Carter while Shane just laughed, the sound free and bright as it echoed through the hall.

That was how the media team found them, in a dog pile on the floor laughing their asses off like they’d stayed up way too far past midnight at a sleep over.

Scott was pretty sure a video of it was going to end up on the team’s socials and he hoped it made people realize how different Shane could be in an environment that actually supported him.

He had no clue what they had planned for media that day, but if they were just going to sit at the table and answer questions he was certain Shane would slip back into his perfectly media trained smile, but

that moment, with Scott and Carter on the hallway floor, was a glimpse of *Shane* when the world only ever got to see Hollander.

“Finish getting dressed and then come to the media room, boys,” Christina ordered, “we’ve got two hours scheduled before the rest of the team gets here and we’ve got a surprise.”

“What the hell would we need two hours for?” Carter asked as Scott climbed up off the floor and offered Shane a hand to pull him up as well. Shane took it, only stumbling slightly when Scott yanked him back to his feet a touch too quickly, having somehow forgotten the man had recently suffered a head injury. Shane shook his head in a silent indication that he was fine, Scott squeezed his shoulder slightly in apology anyway and then grinned like a lunatic when he realized that he and Shane had just had an entire conversation silently.

He needed to get it together. He was starting to feel crazy.

“It’s a surprise,” Christina said, a little singsongy as she led the comms team back down the hall.

* * *

Ilya was half asleep on the couch upstairs, pretending that if he ignored the clock it wouldn’t move and he could simply stay in this house forever, when his phone started ringing. He looked down and saw it was Shane FaceTiming him.

He answered quickly, more than a little nervous that something had gone wrong, but instead of coming face to face with a somehow injured Shane, the call connected to show Shane grinning in an Admirals jersey, the A already affixed to the chest. Ilya was so proud of him he thought his heart might escape his ribs.

Carter Vaughan was right behind Shane, his chin propped on Shane’s shoulder like they were already the best of friends.

“Roz!” Vaughan greeted.

“Vaughny!” Ilya greeted back, “Shane, why are you calling?”

“Gotta show you something,” Shane answered.

“Is it your new jersey?”

“No, better,” Shane said, and then the camera flipped around to show Scott Hunter in the middle of a literal dog pile.

He was laying on the floor of what looked like a media room in his away jersey with five dogs attempting to climb on top of him.

“Oh my God, no fair,” Ilya said, shooting upright on the couch and putting his face way too close to the phone screen, “now I want to come visit!”

“Tell your media team to copy us!” he heard a female voice call from the background. Ilya guessed it was probably New York’s social media manager or comms director.

“I will,” Ilya responded, already thinking of all the ways he could beg the media team to copy ... whatever the hell it was the three Admirals captains were doing. “Hollander, go closer to Hunter, I want to see dogs better.”

“You do realize that’ll mean you can see Scott better, too, right?” Shane asked.

“Is necessary sacrifice.”

“Hey,” Scott protested, rather weakly right as a massive lab licked his face.

The camera flipped again and Ilya almost protested the fact that Shane had taken the dogs away but then the shot steadied and his phone screen was filled with Shane’s perfect smiling face right next to a little golden retriever. Not quite a puppy, but not full grown either.

“You have to steal that dog, Shane,” Ilya said, 100% serious.

“I can’t steal a dog, Ilya.”

“Then give it a treat so it will follow you home and you can say you didn’t steal it, it just followed you, not your fault.”

“Or he could properly adopt the dog,” Scott suggested.

Ilya huffed in annoyance, waving him off even though Scott couldn’t see him, “boring solution from boring old man, Hollander, find way to bring that dog home.”

Shane’s grin turned soft in a way that couldn’t be interpreted as anything other than completely and utterly *besotted*. Ilya took a screenshot and briefly contemplated having the photo enlarged and printed out so he could hang it up in his living room in place of the giant modern painting he had above his couch.

Ilya knew that Shane was smiling like that because Ilya had said *home*. To anyone else, they would think Ilya was telling Shane to get a dog and bring it to his own home, but Shane knew that Ilya meant bring the dog home to me, to *our* house.

“I’ll think about it,” Shane said and Ilya could tell he meant it which made his heart do something funny. Three days ago, Shane hadn’t wanted a dog at all but then he’d seen how much Ilya *did* and now he was actually considering it. “We’re ripping off the BuzzFeed puppy interview with dogs from the Westchester SPCA, by the way.”

“That is how you are being introduced to New York fans?” Ilya asked. “By playing with cute dogs?”

“Yup.”

“Hollander, the whole world is going to fall in love with you, this is unfair.”

Shane laughed and Ilya realized right away that it was his real laugh, the one that Ilya had never actually heard in public before this very second. Shane was happy, genuinely happy.

Shane shot him a smile, then, a smile that Ilya easily interpreted as *I don't need the whole world, I have you.*

“I’ll see you later, Rozanov, we’ve gotta go actually shoot this video, I just wanted to show you the dogs.”

“Bye, Hollander,” Ilya said, having to actually bite his tongue to stop himself from saying *I love you.*

Shane smiled once more and then the call cut out.

Ilya let his phone fall against his chest as he leaned back into the cushions, a smile on his face that was big enough to make his cheeks hurt.

He didn’t understand how only a week ago he’d been in his house in Boston, trying to argue against his coach telling him he needed to take an extra week before coming back and trying to tell himself that he didn’t need Shane’s help to feel better and now he was sitting in New York, engaged and talking about getting a dog.

His life was insane. He loved every second of it.

* * *

Shane shut his phone off and slipped it into his back pocket, turning all his attention toward the little golden retriever that’d climbed into his lap and didn’t appear to be planning to leave. She was an adorable little thing named Sunday and Shane was actually in love.

When they’d talked about getting a dog, Shane had sort of assumed the hypothetical dog would live with Ilya, now he wasn’t so sure.

Shane really didn’t see himself making it to Friday without driving out to the shelter and adopting this dog. He wasn’t sure if that was a responsible decision to make but he’d already bought a house, moved countries, and gotten engaged this week, he might as well adopt a dog too.

They'd already filmed their introduction and then released the dogs on them and now they were just sitting on the ground, playing with the dogs while the comms team got B-Roll footage before they started asking them questions.

"You should FaceTime Jackie," Scott suggested, his head popping up from the pile of dogs still surrounding him like a meerkat, "show the kids the puppies."

"She'll kill me," Shane said, already pulling out his phone and opening his contacts.

Scott just laughed as he laid back down and Carter picked up one of the other dogs and came to sit by Shane, apparently excited at the prospect of showing puppies off to children he didn't even know.

Jackie answered on the second ring.

Well, Ruby answered on the second ring.

"Uncle Shane!" she yelled and Shane could see one of Christina's co-workers who'd introduced herself as Amanada moving closer with her camera. Shane was pretty sure this shot, two objectively attractive hockey captains holding puppies and FaceTiming an adorable little kid, was going to go triple platinum.

"Ruby Bear!" Shane responded, "did you steal your mom's phone?"

"Noooo," she said, jumping up and down in the frame, "I'm on the iPad!"

"Ah," Shane said, nodding seriously. That actually made sense, Shane was on the list of about six people the girls could contact using their iPad that was attached to Jackie's iCloud account. "I want to show you something, is Jade there?"

"One second," Ruby said, picking up the iPad and running down the hall. Shane was starting to feel a little motion sick by the time she stopped moving. She set the iPad down on the kitchen table and clamored up into a chair and Shane smiled when Jade and Jackie appeared on his screen.

“Hi there, Jade. Hello, Jackie,” Shane greeted. She narrowed her eyes at him like she could smell hijinks from five and a half hours away.

“Shane, I don’t trust that grin.”

“Look,” Shane said, tilting the camera down so Carter and both puppies were in view.

Jackie’s glare intensified even as she was clearly trying not to smile as both girls shouted *PUPPIES* at the top of their lungs.

Shane laughed and Carter held his puppy, a little pitbull mix named Lucy, up to the camera.

“Are you getting a puppy, Uncle Shane?” Jade asked, only her eyes and forehead visible as she pressed in close to the screen to see better. It was exactly what Ilya had done a few minutes earlier which was both hilarious and ridiculously adorable.

“I might be.”

“Wait, really?” Jackie asked, popping into frame over Jade’s head. “I didn’t think you liked dogs.”

“It’s not that I didn’t like dogs, I just wasn’t sure I could handle the disruption to my routine but I’d say my routine has been pretty well disrupted and I’m still standing,” Shane said, hoping the comms team would cut that admission out of the final video, “also, look,” he said, pulling his phone closer so Sunday’s face filled the screen.

“Oh my God you have to get that dog,” Jackie decided, “babe, that is the cutest dog I’ve ever seen. Also, wait, is that your new jersey, let me see!”

Shane let out a huff as Carter stole his phone and gestured for Shane to stand, “give us a spin, Hollzy.”

Shane scooped up Sunday, who he was already affectionately calling Sunny in his head, with his left arm and then dutifully stood, giving Carter and Jackie a spin. Jackie let out a wolf whistle that was loud enough the sound crackled slightly as it echoed through Shane's phone speakers, "are those the jeans I made you buy, babe? They look good!"

"I think so," Shane said, lifting up the hem of his sweater to check the label, "yes, they are indeed the jeans you said I should purchase because they 'make my ass look edible.'"

"I stand by that declaration," Jackie said decisively, "I also hope my children don't repeat that tomorrow at kindergarten."

"They've watched hockey with Hayd and me, they've heard worse."

"Fair," Jackie admitted. "Call me when you get home, Hollander, I want to hear about your first day."

"I will," Shane promised, "I'll call before bedtime so I can say goodnight."

"Good," Jackie said as Shane took his phone back from Carter. She was smiling happily, just a tinge of nostalgia around the edges and Shane returned the expression, his eyes feeling just a little warm at the reminder that he had to call to say goodnight instead of just *being* there. "Arthur was asking for you to read him a story last night, so he'll be really happy if you call."

"I'll call," Shane said, scrunching his nose slightly to try to stop himself from tearing up. "Bye girls, I'll talk to you later."

He hung up the phone after a chorus of *bye, Uncle Shane* and tucked it back into his pocket once again before sitting back down next to Carter.

"I'm sorry," Scott said, sitting up properly for the first time in a while and turning toward Shane, "did Hayden's wife just call you 'babe.'"

"I believe she also said his ass looked edible," Carter said.

“Yes, she did,” Shane agreed, offering no further explanation. There really wasn’t one. Jackie didn’t really come with an explanation which was part of why she was one of Shane’s favorite people. She was just Jackie.

* * *

Scott looked at the nostalgic, edging on sad, expression on Shane’s face and wanted nothing more than to make it better so he turned toward Christina and nodded, hoping she’d take that as a cue to start asking them questions.

She stepped in immediately, directing them to sit closer together with Scott in the middle, Shane on his left, and Carter on his right.

Shane tried to set Sunday down, but she immediately turned around and climbed back into his lap. Scott was about 95% certain that Shane was going to be a dog owner by Wednesday.

They started with easy questions: where’d you play Juniors? What was your favorite All Stars location? What’s your favorite arena to play in as a visitor? What’s your pregame ritual? Does it matter which skate you put on first?

Then they started asking slightly harder ones: what was your most meaningful fan interaction? What would you be doing if you weren’t in the NHL?

Scott expected the questions to veer into even more difficult territory, he expected them to ask Shane how he was feeling about having to play his old team or how New York was different from Montreal, but they kept just asking all three of them the same question, they kept just acting like it wasn’t odd that Shane was here.

It was after they asked what their favorite part about New York was and Shane answered, “how welcoming everyone’s been,” that Scott finally figured out their strategy.

It was the perfect combination of Canadian politeness, and a massive NYC *fuck you*.

They were just going to act like Shane had always been here.

They weren't going to openly shit on Montreal and the closest they were going to get to saying Shane was a new acquisition was him saying people had been welcoming. They were just going to subtly show the world that Shane was perfectly fine; that he was comfortably playing with dogs with almost no visible bruising left on his face and no sling in sight as he talked about himself with an ease he'd never once shown in Montreal with the A already stitched into his New York jersey.

They were going to include a clip of him showing the dogs to Rozanov as a reminder that this was Shane Hollander, second overall draft pick and absolute terror on the ice, they were dealing with and a clip of him talking to Pike's kids as a reminder that Shane was also the sort of person you'd bring home to meet your parents.

It was fucking genius.

No one would be able to say they'd taken the low road, and no one would be able to claim that Montreal had been justified in letting Shane Hollander go when he was clearly already fine only two weeks after his injury.

The messaging was clear without being explicit: Montreal's fuck up is New York's gain.

Chapter 19: sunday

March 2017

Shane's phone started ringing as he trailed Carter and Scott back toward the locker room so they could get changed for practice.

"Hey, mom," he greeted after sliding his thumb across the screen to answer the call.

"Shane, please tell me you're adopting that dog."

"How do you even know about the dog already?"

"Jackie and Ilya both sent screenshots. Now, please tell me you're adopting that dog."

Shane wasn't all that surprised that Ilya had taken and sent a screenshot, but he was a little surprised Jackie had, mostly because he wasn't sure how she'd taken one while Ruby had been holding the iPad with an iron grip the entire time. He was a little concerned it'd been while he was 'giving her a spin' and that he was going to open Instagram to find a picture of him holding a puppy showing off the back of his new jersey that Jackie would somehow find a way to not-so-subtly make about his ass because she was a threat to Shane's peace.

"I'm considering adopting the dog," Shane said.

"Oh good," his mom sighed, clearly relieved, though Shane wasn't quite sure why. It sounded like it was about more than just having access to an objectively cute dog. "I just worry about you alone in your house. Not that I don't think you can handle living alone, obviously, I just think you'll be happier coming home to a dog instead of empty rooms."

Shane couldn't argue with her there, but he didn't really want to get into how much he'd been dreading walking back into an empty, Ilya-less house while standing right outside his new locker room so, instead, he said, "I'll do some research tonight but I'm leaning toward yes. I'll send you the pictures I took, they're probably better quality than FaceTime screenshots."

“Please do,” Yuna said, her smile almost audible, “have a good day, honey, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Love you.”

“I love you too.”

Shane smiled a little to himself as he hung up and tucked his phone back into his pocket. Scott and Carter had stepped into the locker room already and Shane could hear people milling around. He took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

The room went silent for exactly three seconds - Shane counted - and then hit a decibel henceforth unknown to the human ear.

Shane was pretty sure his bones were rattling with the sheer volume of their shouting. He smiled, even though it felt a little like his brain was starting to melt.

Carter wrapped an arm around his shoulders in what was clearly meant to look like a brotherly embrace, but Shane could tell that he’d noticed Shane flinch at the noise; that he’d decided to take it upon himself to ground Shane, to shield him – at least a little – from the team’s excitement. Carter’s arm remained a grounding weight as the team crowded around to introduce themselves and welcome Shane to New York.

After a couple of minutes, Scott’s voice finally cut through the noise, “alright, alright, leave the man alone and get dressed for practice!”

His direction was met with a chorus of groans, but everyone moved to comply and Carter led Shane back toward their stalls. They were placed on either side of Scott, exactly how Hayden and J.J. had bracketed Shane back in Montreal. Cale Wagner, the current first line leftie, was on Shane’s other side. Shane was pretty sure he’d been moved over to accommodate for Shane’s acquisition; both in his locker placement and, eventually, in his line placement. But he didn’t seem to hold any ill will, he was grinning as Shane settled down onto the bench next to him.

Cale reached out and clapped Shane’s shoulder, much more carefully than anyone else had, “we’re excited you’re here, Hollander.”

Shane smiled back and felt the gentle, earnest welcome settle in his chest, different than the raucous yelling or Scott and Carter's easy camaraderie, "I'm excited to be here."

"Good," Cale said with a decisive nod, "also, tell me if I'm overstepping, but I've heard you follow a pretty strict performance diet. I know it's not the exact same, but my daughter has a lot of different allergies, makes shopping and eating out pretty tough. My wife has a whole list of grocery stores and restaurants around here that we've found that always have things she can eat if you'd like me to send it over."

"That'd be great," Shane responded. He wasn't sure if he was going to follow the same exact diet, he needed to talk to the team doctors and training staff and probably a nutritionist, but he did like the way whole foods made him feel so it'd be good to have recommendations either way. The offer also felt a little like the first time Jackie had invited him over, teasing lightly about his 'bird food' but never once complaining about Shane's restrictions. "Thanks, Wagner."

Cale smiled and went back to putting on his gear for practice. Shane looked around the locker room and realized it'd already fallen back into a rhythm. They'd made a big deal about Shane showing up, they'd made it clear how excited they were he was here, and now they were simply existing with Shane already woven into the fabric.

He took off his jersey and folded it carefully, setting it on one of the shelves for the equipment team to collect and then pulled on his sweatshirt - a plain, navy CCM branded hoodie - and carefully secured his arm back into the sling. The compression brace was great for PT, for sleeping, and felt fine for a couple of hours, but Shane had been getting jostled around and he was starting to feel a little careless. He didn't want to ruin any of the progress he'd made in healing, so he went with the safe route.

"You okay?" Scott asked, immediately clocking the sling and turning toward Shane with concern shining in his eyes.

"I'm fine," Shane assured him, "just not supposed to be out of the sling for more than a few hours a day yet."

Scott studied him for a moment, "the shoulder is bugging you, not your collar bone, isn't it?"

"How the fuck did you know?"

“I was in the hospital with you, Shane,” Scott said, rolling his eyes. “I saw the bruise. Sure, your collar bone was fractured, but your shoulder got it the worst. I’m honestly shocked you didn’t crack your shoulder blade or even your upper arm.”

“The swelling’s gone down, it’s just sore.”

“You’ll ice it when you get home?”

“Yes, dad.”

“I’m only seven years older than you.”

“Mmm,” Shane hummed, wondering just a little how many more times he could call Scott old before the man snapped.

“Stop,” Scott said before Shane could even get a word out. “I know what you’re thinking, stop.”

Shane just grinned, unrepentant.

Whatever complaint Scott was going to make was cut off by Coach Murdock stepping into the room and letting out a sharp whistle that had everyone turning toward him immediately, “I hope you’ve all introduced yourselves to Hollander. The coaching staff decided to make him our second Alternate Captain based on his incredible record with Montreal, so I expect each of you to listen when he talks and respect his opinions. Hollander, you’re with me for practices and games until we can safely get you back on the ice, let’s go.”

Shane, smartly, took that as his clue to get up and follow Murdock out of the room.

“How was your morning?” Murdock asked as they made their way down the hall, toward the door that led to the practice rink’s bench.

“Great,” Shane answered honestly, “the plan I made with the trainers over the phone is looking like it’s going to work out so I should be back on the ice for practice in about a week and for games by the

beginning of April.”

“Good to hear,” Murdock said with a genuine smile as he shouldered the door open. Shane followed him through and then jumped up to sit on the low wall behind the bench as Murdock set his team iPad next to Shane, leaning back against the wall to Shane’s right. “And how was media? Not too crazy I hope.”

“Crazy in a good way,” Shane laughed, “the puppy interview was genius, far more fun than just sitting at a press table.”

“Do you have any pets?”

“Not yet, but I was recently convinced to consider getting a dog someday and then the media team goes and drops the cutest dog I’ve ever seen in my lap this morning, so it feels a little like fate.”

“Which one?”

“The little retriever,” Shane answered, “Sunday, she kept following me around, wouldn’t leave me alone.”

“I think you’ve been chosen, Hollander. That’s your dog now.”

“I think you might be right.”

Murdock smiled and then reached out to turn on his iPad, navigating over to the app Shane knew coaches used to plan out shifts and plays, “we’re gonna scrimmage today and I want you to watch closely and give me your thoughts. We’ve been playing great offensively and better defensively now with Jalo, but I want better consistency which is what you’re known for so don’t hold back, alright?”

“I can do that,” Shane agreed.

“Good man,” Murdock said, patting Shane’s knee as the team spilled out onto the ice.

* * *

Scott found Shane in Murdock's office after practice. He was a little worried Shane had already left seeing as he hadn't needed to go through the whole process of getting out of gear and showering before leaving the building but, apparently, it was Scott's lucky day.

"Need a ride home?" Scott asked, leaning against the door frame. Shane's house was placed pretty perfectly between Tarrytown and Scott's apartment and, selfishly, Kip was at work and Scott didn't really want to go home to an empty apartment quite yet. He also sort of wanted to see if he could goad Shane into going to the SPCA with him and adopting that dog, like, immediately.

Maybe Scott could adopt a cat and give it to Kip as a late birthday present.

Maybe Kip would like that better than a check for 50 grand.

Maybe Scott should ask Shane for advice before he did something objectively insane ... again.

"Yeah, sure," Shane agreed, "I hadn't called a car yet so that works."

"Well, I'm done with you," Murdock declared, "see you both tomorrow for morning skate and, Shane, you're in the press box for the game tomorrow night. I don't want you on the bench until you've cleared post-concussion protocol, alright? I don't want to risk it."

"Works for me," Shane agreed easily, slinging his bag over his good shoulder as he stood, "see you tomorrow."

Scott waved and led the way out of the building toward the parking lot.

"Hey, should I get Kip a cat?"

Shane paused, looking at Scott like he was trying to figure out whether or not he was being serious, and then asked, “does Kip like cats?”

“I think so.”

“I think you should probably make sure.”

Scott was glad he’d asked.

“I think we should go to the SPCA right now and you should adopt Sunday before someone else gets there first.”

“That’s insane, Scott, I can’t just adopt a dog on a whim. I need to do at least a little research first.”

“Research in the car,” Scott argued, “it’s probably like a 30-minute drive, that’s more than enough time.”

Shane walked in silence for a minute and then let out a sigh that immediately told Scott he’d won, “we’d have to go to a pet store, too, and you are going to help me carry whatever random shit we buy into my house.”

“Deal,” Scot agreed quickly.

* * *

An hour and a half later, Shane found himself standing in a PetSmart in Yonkers with Scott Hunter and the whole ass dog the Westchester SPCA had pretty much just handed them, no questions asked.

Well, they’d asked a couple of questions like ‘are you over 21’ and ‘can we make a copy of your ID’ and ‘the NHL pays you enough to properly care for a dog, right?’

They hadn't actually asked that last one with that exact wording but that was the general idea.

"We need a leash," Scott said, reading from the list he'd found on some sort of Mommy Blog while Shane was filling out paperwork. Shane really hoped no hockey fans were around that'd recognize them and take pictures and/or videos. They really were not giving the vibe of two people who had a handle on their lives.

"Makes sense," Shane agreed. Sunday was thankfully still light enough that he could carry her with one arm seeing as Scott had put himself in charge of pushing the cart and, as previously mentioned, they didn't yet have a leash. "Probably a collar too."

Scott snapped and pointed at Shane, nodding as if acknowledging the fact that Shane had just made a groundbreaking observation, "and a bed, are you going to kennel train her?"

"I think I'll probably have to," Shane decided, that was at least one thing he'd thought about over the weekend while his dad and Ilya had been talking about dogs. He needed to research more and read some reviews to pick out the right kennel, so he said, "that's a problem for a different day, though. We just need the basics right now."

The 'basics' ended up being a bed, a leash and collar, dog shampoo, a brush, treats, food, bowls, and about \$200 worth of toys that they, for some reason, had decided were absolutely imperative.

Shane was pretty sure they looked insane.

Scratch that, Shane was dead certain they looked insane.

"I can't believe you agreed to this," Scott said as they (Scott, Shane was mostly just supervising) loaded everything into his car.

"Me neither."

"I like this version of you," Scott decided, "you seem far more sure of yourself, it's nice to see."

“I like this version of me, too.”

* * *

Ilya was sitting on his couch in Boston wishing he could go back to New York. His house was too big and far too quiet and walking into it after a week of being in Ottawa with the Hollanders and then in New York with Shane was more than a little disorienting. He'd been coming home to an empty house for seven years and after one week of knowing something different it, all of the sudden, felt *wrong*.

He was pretty sure Shane would be in the same boat which made him feel a little better. But based on the last text he'd gotten, a vaguely worded message about old men having insane ideas, Shane at least had Scott.

Ilya didn't really know how to ask for what he needed, but he knew he needed to learn so he unlocked his phone and called Cliff.

They hadn't actually spoken since Shane went down on the ice a little over two weeks prior and Ilya only felt a little bad about that. Cliff was his best friend on the team, but Shane was his everything and even though it'd been a clean hit, it'd been hard for Ilya to compartmentalize, especially considering the added emotional whiplash of his father's death.

Cliff answered on the second ring, “Roz, hey buddy, good to hear from you.”

He sounded about half nervous, half relieved, and Ilya felt good about his decision to call. It seemed like they both needed it.

“Want to come over and watch whatever game is on tonight?”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Cliff agreed without any hesitation, “should I bring anything?”

“Maybe grab food, I have been out of town for two weeks, there is nothing here.”

Cliff laughed through his agreement, and they said quick goodbyes before ending the call. Ilya felt better having a plan, knowing that he wouldn't be entirely alone in this giant empty house while he attempted to adjust back to this new normal where he was actually letting himself admit that he missed Shane like a limb. He'd thought it'd be easier at first, like how loving Shane had stopped hurting so much after admitting it aloud, but this felt different. He used to be able to shove the thoughts down, to pretend like the ache he was feeling was simply exhaustion or simple sadness.

Now, though, now he knew what it felt like to fall asleep and wake up next to Shane, he knew what it felt like to cook with him and spend evenings watching movies cuddled up on the couch. He knew what it felt like to be a part of Shane's orbit, how it felt to let themselves be domestic.

But Cliff was coming and even though he wouldn't fill the hole in Ilya's heart, his presence would make the quiet less suffocating.

Ilya turned his phone back on and opened Instacart. Boston had a string of home games this week, so he needed actual groceries instead of just relying on team meals on the road and he really didn't feel like getting in his car and actually going somewhere.

He dozed a little after that, only waking up when he heard a knock at his front door.

He opened it to find Cliff, holding a takeout bag from a sandwich shop Ilya recognized as the one Cliff frequented near his house, standing beside several grocery bags that must've been left by the Instacart shopper without Ilya noticing.

Cliff helped him put the groceries away and waited until they were on the couch, ESPN on, and their first beers opened, to say anything real, "have you heard from Hollander?"

Ilya almost choked on his sandwich.

"Yes," he landed on.

It felt like the safe answer. Much safer than, *yes I heard quite a lot from him while he was writhing under me this morning* or, *yes he texted me an hour ago and I think he's hanging out with Scott Hunter which I am trying very hard not to be jealous about.*

“How’s he doing?”

Wonderful, Ilya thought, very happy, newly engaged.

“Good,” Ilya said, “he is healing faster than I think many people thought he would. He likes New York. Called me this morning because they did Captain’s interview with a bunch of dogs from the shelter near their practice facility, I think I am going to annoy our media team until they let us copy them.”

“They did a puppy interview?” Cliff asked, looking nearly as excited as Ilya had been. “Lucky bastards.”

“There will probably be pictures up soon,” Ilya guessed, “I think they probably want to introduce Shane as a Captain before their game tomorrow, even though he isn’t playing.”

Cliff pulled out his phone and immediately opened Instagram, navigating to the Admirals page with honestly impressive speed. Ilya leaned over a little bit so he could see the screen and there, at the top of their feed, was a brand-new photo of Shane, Scott, and Carter.

Ilya took out his own phone so he could look at it himself and genuinely almost started crying as he was overwhelmed with affection.

The picture was taken from behind Carter who, based on the fact the FaceTime screen was showing a slightly blurry Jackie Pike, was holding Shane’s phone while Shane stood holding Sunday against his chest with one arm. He was turned about halfway away from the camera and Ilya would bet good money that Shane had called to show the girls the puppies, and it’d ended with Jackie forcing him to show off his new jersey.

The A was right above Sunday’s head, and you could read most of the *HOLLANDER* where it stretched between his shoulders with his number clearly visible on his arms and back. He was smiling and his hair was just a little messy, just enough to give him that stupidly endearing boyish charm.

Scott was in the background, still on the floor in a pile of dogs just like he’d been when Shane had called Ilya.

There was no ‘welcome’ in the caption, no indication that it was odd for them to be posting New York Admirals’ Alternate Captain Shane Hollander; just a note about the captain’s puppy interview premiering on their YouTube an hour before Tuesday’s game against Calgary.

“Oh my god,” Cliff whispered. He sounded genuinely stunned and Ilya’s thoughts immediately started spiraling, imagining the absolute worst. Then Cliff tipped his phone toward Ilya, showing him a picture of Shane and Scott sitting on a linoleum floor with Sunday licking Shane’s face. Shane was in a hoodie and jeans, his arm back in the sling, his eyes scrunched shut as he laughed. Scott was next to him in jeans and an Admirals crewneck, smiling over at Shane with rather obvious affection and if Ilya hadn’t seen the precise difference in the way Scott smiled at Shane and the way he smiled at Kip, he would probably be texting Scott a very detailed threat right about now. The photo had been posted by the Westchester SPCA and shared to the Admirals’ story along with a second slide featuring information on how to support the shelter. “Is this why Hollander chose New York?”

It took Ilya a full ten seconds to process what Cliff was asking and, when it clicked, he burst out laughing.

“What!” Cliff said, sounding genuinely offended, “it’s not a wild jump. I’ve heard some rumors about how shitty Montreal’s locker room was treating Hollander and how backwards their management is, it’s really not that crazy to think he left because the culture was bad and he’s *clearly* clicked with New York pretty quickly. It’s not insane to assume it’s because he was already *close* with Hunter,” the way he emphasized ‘close’ made it clear what he was actually saying. “Twitter agrees with me, by the way.”

“Twitter also thinks Hollander is fucking Hayden Pike.”

“Is Hollander not fucking Hayden Pike?”

“No, and I can assure you that he’s not fucking Scott Hunter, either.”

“Hunter looks pretty smitten,” Cliff argued, clicking on the story again and all but shoving his phone in Ilya’s face.

As if on cue, Ilya’s phone started ringing with a FaceTime request from Scott himself.

Cliff's eyes widened with panic and he started shaking his head as Ilya just grinned and answered the phone, "Hunter!" he greeted, "tell Marlow you're not fucking Hollander."

"What the actual fuck?" Shane's voice asked from somewhere off camera.

"Yeah, that's a good question," Scott said, looking at Ilya like he'd lost his mind, "what the actual fuck?"

"Marlow here thinks that Hollander moved to New York for you, he claims Twitter agrees," Ilya informed them, genuinely delighted.

"They're calling us Shott," Shane added, still off camera which simply wouldn't do.

"Hunter why am I still looking at you when I could be looking at Hollander?"

"I called to show you Shane but then you answered like a crazy person so now I'm not so sure I want to," Scott said, frowning slightly.

"Shane, make him be nice to me."

"Scott, be nice to Ilya," Shane sighed. "Also, why are *you* calling Ilya? I was going to do that."

"You're a little occupied," Scott said which, to Cliff's credit, did sound a bit suggestive.

Cliff looked at Ilya as if to say *see!* and, again, Ilya just grinned.

Finally, the camera flipped around to show Shane laying on the floor of his living room surrounded by dog toys with Sunday fully asleep on his chest. He looked tired, worn down enough that Ilya could spot the beginnings of dark smudges under his eyes, but he was smiling softly and he didn't seem visibly anxious, so Ilya forced himself to calm down and remember that it'd been a long day and that Shane was still healing.

“You got the dog!” Ilya said which he probably should’ve realized when he’d seen Shane and Scott in street clothes with Sunday in a photo posted by the shelter rather than the team but he’d been pretty damn distracted by how cute Shane looked when his whole face scrunched up with laughter.

“Yeah,” Shane responded, smiling down at Sunday, “Scott’s idea, we went on very fun adventure to Briar Cliff and then to the Yonkers PetSmart and now he refuses to leave my house.”

“I’m not refusing to leave, I just don’t want to,” Scott argued. The video went blurry for a second before the camera flipped to show him now laying on the floor next to Shane, the phone held up above them.

They really were not doing anything to disprove Cliff’s theory and Ilya was finding far too much humor in the way Cliff’s eyes kept getting wider and wider.

Shane just shook his head, looking far more fond than annoyed, and then looked back up at the camera, “Ilya, you can tell Marlow why I moved.”

“Can I also tell him why I know you are not fucking Scott Hunter?”

“Why do you keep saying my full name?” Scott asked.

“It’s a good full name,” Shane rationalized, “flows well. Also, yes, you can tell Marlow why you know I’m not fucking Scott Hunter.”

“Oh, good,” Ilya said, grinning in a way that made even Shane look nervous, “I know he is not fucking Scott Hunter because Hollander is a good person, he would not cheat on his boyfriend with an old man, he would at least pick someone young and attractive.”

Shane and Scott were locked in some sort of staring contest that, to the untrained eye, *really* did look like they were gazing lovingly at each other. Ilya had no clue what that was about, well he could maybe guess that Shane was trying to silently communicate that Cliff was safe and that this was extremely unlikely to go sideways, so he turned his focus back to Cliff.

“Hollander has a boyfriend?” Cliff asked, clearly having no goddamn clue what was going on, “does he live in New York or something?”

“Boston,” Shane answered, finally looking away from Scott, “total asshole.”

“Asshole, maybe,” Ilya agreed, “but very good at hockey.”

Ilya watched the realization hit Cliff, he watched as his eyes went wide and could almost *hear* the gears working in his head, “Hollander’s boyfriend plays for Boston?”

“Yes.”

“You stopped talking to me after I injured him.”

“I did.”

“I forgive you for that, by the way,” Shane cut in.

Cliff ignored him, still staring at Ilya, “your Montreal girl.”

“He lives in New York now, keep up Marly.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“I’ve seen it with my own eyes, Marlow,” Scott said, “he’s not joking.”

“Well fuck,” Cliff muttered, flopping back against Ilya’s couch cushions, “now I feel even shittier about that hit. Also, Hunter, you’ve gotta stop looking at Hollander like you want to bend him over, people are gonna get the wrong idea.”

“I do *not* look at Shane like I want to bend him over!” Scott argued.

“You kind of do,” Ilya mused.

They very quickly devolved into one of the more insane arguments Ilya had ever been a part of and all of the sudden his house didn’t feel quite so lonely. He had someone in his corner now, someone in Boston who knew the truth.

* * *

Scott left later than he probably meant to, but Shane was more than alright with it. They’d talked to Cliff and Ilya for nearly an hour before hanging up and deciding to order dinner and then they’d spent another hour just sitting outside in the early spring evening watching Sunday run around the yard until the sun set while Shane iced his shoulder under Scott’s watchful eye.

It was comfortable and it made the house feel warmer, less quiet and empty.

After Scott left, Shane decided to try his hand at giving Sunday a bath which was far easier than he’d expected. He’d read that golden retrievers liked water, but he hadn’t been certain that would apply to baths. Shane dried her off and left her to explore while he showered himself, then he took her out once more before climbing into bed to call the Pikes.

Sunday spent about 45 seconds in her bed on the floor before taking a running leap onto Shane’s bed. She snuggled right up next to him, her head pillowed on his stomach, and almost immediately fell asleep and he really couldn’t find it in himself to complain.

Shane paused a minute, just running his hand over her head and realized that the anxious thoughts that usually ran through his mind when he got into bed for the night were quiet in the way they’d really only ever been when he’d shared a bed with Ilya.

That was enough for Shane to justify the impulse dog adoption.

He picked his phone up off his nightstand and called Hayden and every remaining bit of anxiety and first day jitters bled out of him as he read Arthur a story. Hayden was holding the pages near the

camera, but Shane didn't actually need to see them to know what they said given the sheer number of times he'd read *Goodnight, Moon* between all three kids.

After that he said goodnight to the girls and then Hayden wandered downstairs and propped his iPad up on the coffee table and Shane told him and Jackie everything about his day. It wasn't quite the same as being there in person, but the familiar pattern of it all was like a balm on his still frayed heart.

He hung up and checked his messages, finding a text from Kip telling him to please never stop sending the insane shit he and Carter found on the internet, a text from Scott reminding Shane that he'd pick him up for morning skate so he wouldn't have to call a car, and a text from Ilya thanking him for saying he could tell Cliff.

He liked Kip and Scott's messages and then sent Ilya a text saying, *I'm glad Cliff knows. You should tell Svetlana too, I want you to have people in your corner. Goodnight, I love you so much and I miss you already.*

Ilya texted back not even a minute later, *I love you too. I will tell Sveta when I see her next.*

Shane smiled to himself, made sure his alarm was set, and then let himself fall into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 20: can't wait to go home

Chapter Notes

title from castle on the hill by ed sheeran :)

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

March 2017

Shane woke up on a Friday, three days short of two weeks after his first day as an Admiral, with a smile already on his face.

He'd cleared post-concussion protocol the day prior meaning he actually got to get on the ice today. The team was leaving for a five-day roadie, but Shane would be staying behind so he could work with the trainers on the ice alone before getting thrown back into everything with the team on Wednesday morning.

Sunday, who everyone had started calling 'Sunny', had been coming to the rink with him every day because Murdock had happily declared her the Admiral's new mascot for the remainder of Shane's time on IR (and, honestly, probably long past that seeing as Sunny had effectively converted the media team into a cult in her name and they would be more than happy to take over 'mascot duties' once Shane was back on the ice).

She was suspiciously well-behaved for a three-month old puppy, but Shane wasn't about to complain about that. So long as she got a long walk or a decent run in the morning and a sufficient amount of love throughout the day she was perfect. She rarely barked, she was house trained, and she barely even chewed on Shane's furniture.

The team would be on the road for five days and by the time they got back, Shane would be cleared to practice. And two days after that he'd be back on the ice properly.

According to the schedule the trainers had set, his first game back on the ice would be at home against Pittsburgh the final day of March meaning he'd get to play the final five regular season games before launching into playoffs.

New York's spot was already secured; it just came down to seeding now.

Shane climbed out of bed and smiled as Sunday immediately followed, “c’mon, Sunny,” he said, “run, breakfast, rink.”

Shane’s driveway was a half mile long and Sunny’s legs were still tiny, so they only went down and back. After their quick mile, Shane set her up with breakfast before heading down to his slowly expanding home gym to go through the exercises he’d been assigned for PT. His range of motion was almost entirely normal and so long as he stretched properly and didn’t fuck around, his shoulder was only sore instead of painful.

As he moved through the now-familiar motions, he thought through the next few days.

New York played L.A. on Saturday, Anaheim on Sunday, and San Jose on Tuesday before coming back to New York.

He’d be back on the ice by the time they played Pittsburgh at home on Friday.

Shane was ready, and he would make damn sure that when he stepped onto the ice in Madison Square Garden for the first time as an Admiral he would show everyone just how much being homophobic assholes had cost Montreal.

He already knew it was going to be an incredible feeling. The reaction to him simply being in the press box for the past couple home games had been absurd and the number of Hollander jerseys just kept multiplying.

Shane was also giddy because Boston played in Brooklyn Saturday night. The team was flying down the morning of the game, but they had Sunday and Monday off practice, and Ilya had already somehow gotten his coach to agree to him flying back separately from the team, so Shane was looking forward to two nights with Ilya back home.

His phone buzzed as he finished up his workout and he checked it as he made his way up to the kitchen to make his smoothie.

Ilya: dobroye utro, lyubov' moya, i will see you soon. be safe on ice today, please. take care of yourself. ya tebya lyublyu.

Shane smiled to himself as he texted back: *Good morning, I can't wait to see you. Promise to be careful, I love you too.*

He then took a picture of Sunny who was asleep, sprawled out on the ground, halfway between her food bowl and her bed in the living room and sent it to Ilya along with a second message that said: *Your daughter is excited to meet you.*

His phone started ringing a half second later with a FaceTime request.

Shane smiled harder as he answered, "hello."

"My daughter?" Ilya said, grinning wide with his hand very dramatically over his chest. "You did not tell me she was mine!"

"I assumed it was implied," Shane laughed.

"Was not," Ilya argued, "she is your dog, Shane."

"She's *our* dog," Shane said, "she just lives with me in one of our several houses. We can get a dog that lives in your house, too."

"I want to. I am trying to convince media team to copy your interview. They are trying to find shelter to work with, but I don't know if it will happen before playoffs. Everyone is getting very focused, too intense for cute puppies."

"We can go to a shelter this summer, maybe. Or maybe there's somewhere in Ottawa we can look when we're up at the cottage, it'd give us the summer to train them before life gets busy again. I think I lucked out with how well-behaved Sunny is, I doubt that's the norm."

"Oh, I have question about summer."

“What is it?”

“I normally train in Russia, but I am not going back to Russia, so I need to find trainer. Sveta’s father could connect me with someone, but his contacts would be in Boston and in Moscow.”

“I have a plastic rink at the cottage and normally just got training schedules from the Voyageurs’ staff and I’m planning to do the same here. But I’ve also gone down to the Centaurs’ practice rink a few times to train with whoever stuck around for the summer. They’re nice guys, you’d like them and it wouldn’t be weird if we were seen training together a few times over the break.”

“You train with the Centaurs?”

“Sometimes,” Shane shrugged before he set his phone down, propping it up against the lip of the kitchen island as he pulled his pre-portioned smoothie ingredients out of the freezer. He understood Ilya’s shock. Ottawa’s team was pretty shit, but it was really an issue with the coaching staff, not the players. The guys trained hard, they just didn’t have leadership who knew how to put together a cohesive unit.

“I liked Boodram when I met him in Florida,” Ilya said before pausing for a moment to think, “alright, I like your training plan. I will ask Boston staff for schedule before we leave. We will drive up together, yes? Or do we need two cars?”

“We can go together,” Shane agreed easily, knowing from Ilya’s tone that going together was what he preferred and he was simply offering Shane an out by suggesting two cars, “hey, can I call you back later? I need to eat and get ready to go to the rink.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Sorry, just wanted to yell at you for not telling me I had child face-to-face instead of over text.”

“You are insane,” Shane said, his smile unmistakably fond.

“You love me anyway.”

“I do.”

“I love you too,” Ilya said softly, “I will talk to you later, *lyubimyy*.”

“Talk to you later,” Shane promised, “love you.”

* * *

Ilya hung up and opened his texts, his thumb hovering over his messages with Svetlana.

He’d been dodging her since Shane had said Ilya should tell her about them. It wasn’t that he didn’t think she’d approve. In fact, he was pretty sure she already knew. It was that he was worried how she’d react to the *extent* of it. He had no clue how she’d react to finding out that Ilya had been in love with Shane Hollander since the moment his eyes had landed on freckle dusted cheeks and big brown eyes behind a rink in Saskatchewan. He had no clue how she’d react to finding out that Ilya was *engaged*, that he was going to get married that summer and start the process of becoming a Canadian citizen with a long-term goal of publicly coming out meaning he’d be leaving Russia behind forever.

But she was his best friend, his closest thing to *real* family, and she deserved the truth.

But, at the same time, Ilya didn’t feel like he could have a sit down, coming out conversation. With Cliff, it’d just happened to work out that Scott called to show him Shane and Sunday and Ilya had been able to joke about how he knew that Shane couldn’t possibly be with Scott. The slight humor in it, the ability to deflect before it got too earnest, had made it easier.

He couldn’t orchestrate the same situation with Svetlana, but he could make it so he at least had something else to occupy his mind as he told her and as he answered her questions.

He opened the text thread and hesitated only a moment before typing: *come hang out while i pack for new york?*

She replied only a minute later, liking his message and telling him she’d be there in 20.

Ilya forced himself to breathe and, instead of panicking, went into his mud room where a small (read: excessive) collection of toys and other dog-related items had been growing over the past couple of

weeks and started working on deciding what he was bringing to New York to give Sunday *now* and what was going to stay in Boston for when she visited with Shane.

Scott had posted a picture the day before of himself and Shane on the floor of the team's weight room, both of them grinning and sweaty enough that it was clearly post-workout, with Sunday sitting on the floor between them wearing a backwards Admirals baseball cap that was far too big for her tiny head, looking up at the camera with her tongue lolling out. Ilya had seen it because Hammersmith had audibly cooed at his phone while they were all changing after practice.

Shane's dog (*their* dog, Ilya's mind corrected itself in a voice that sounded suspiciously like Shane's) was cute enough that she had 20 full grown professional hockey players fussing over her *picture*, not even her actual presence. And then Carmichael had remembered that Ilya had been in a clip of the New York puppy interview on FaceTime with Shane and he'd gotten to show off screenshots he'd taken on the day, along with several pictures Shane had sent him since.

Nobody questioned why he had an entire album of photos of Shane Hollander's dog, they'd been far too busy fighting each other to get closer so they could see her adorable little face better.

Ilya smiled as he remembered that moment, feeling oddly proud of how cute their puppy was, and decided she deserved a whole backpack full of dog toys instead of just limiting it to two.

He wasn't really letting himself think about getting a dog of his own (or, as Shane had said, a second dog for *them* that just happened to live with Ilya) quite yet, he didn't want to get his hopes up. Sunday had sort of just appeared in Shane's life at the perfect time with the perfect temperament. Ilya didn't think that happened all that often and, call him pessimistic, he really didn't think it would happen to him.

Ilya pushed that thought away as he dropped his armful of dog toys onto his bed. He heard his front door unlock as he was pulling his duffle off its shelf in his closet and steeled himself for the conversation to come.

At least, he thought to himself, I get to explain in Russian. No floundering for English vocabulary.

"What is going on with you?" Svetlana asked, walking into his bedroom and climbing up onto his bed without so much as a by your leave.

“Hello to you, too,” Ilya huffed, dropping the empty duffle on the foot of his bed. He opened his phone to the packing list he’d made three years ago after spending an entire year making fun of Shane for having one and then finding himself on a weeklong road trip with fourteen pairs of socks and exactly zero pairs of underwear and deciding that Shane might’ve had a point.

“You disappeared, Ilyusha. What is going on?”

“I was in Canada. After we got back from Russia I went to Canada and then I was in New York and then I came back here.”

Svetlana just stared at him for a second before taking a deep breath, her lips pursed as the air rushed out of her nose, “you were with Jane?”

“Shane,” Ilya corrected, his eyes locked on the t-shirt he was folding so he wouldn’t have to look up, wouldn’t have to see whatever reaction she might have. “I was with the Hollanders in Canada and then at Shane’s new house in New York. Well, our house. He said it was our house.”

“So, you met his family and now you are buying too many toys for his dog?”

“I love him,” Ilya whispered, setting the stack of folded t-shirts carefully into his duffle before picking up a pair of jeans to fold as well. It felt like his arms were moving on instinct, like he just needed to keep moving so he wouldn’t shut down. “I have loved him for a very long time, Sveta. Longer than I even realized. He asked me to marry him, I said yes.”

“You’re getting married?”

“No one knows. Well, a couple of people know we’re together but only his parents know about us getting married but you’re my family, you should know.”

“And you’re just going to keep it a secret? What, for forever? Until you retire?”

“At least until I’m safe,” Ilya said. It felt like his emotions were filling his lungs with tar, making it difficult to breathe. He had no clue how to even *begin* parsing out what he was feeling, but he knew he needed to keep talking. He knew that this was the root of why he’d been so nervous to tell

Svetlana. "Until I am a Canadian citizen and will not be in danger of being extradited by the Russian government and imprisoned."

Ilya heard the sharp intake of breath; felt the moment she understood.

"You aren't going back to Russia."

"No," Ilya answered, finally daring to look up. There were tears in Svetlana's eyes, clinging to her lower lashes but they hadn't yet fallen. She looked almost stricken, like she couldn't quite believe what she was hearing, but she didn't look angry and she didn't exactly seem surprised. "My home is here now, with Shane."

Svetlana wasn't a public figure.

She wasn't at risk of punishment for supporting Ilya after this all came out, but she may be at risk with her family back home. Her father might not be openly supportive, but Ilya had never gotten the indication that he shared the same views as Ilya's father had. But Ilya wasn't sure about the rest of Svetlana's family, he didn't know if her supporting him would make it difficult for her to return home.

He hated how much of a risk this was, he hated how every step he took to be closer to the future he wanted felt more and more like having a gun trained at his unprotected chest.

"Okay," Svetlana said after a full minute of silence. She nodded slightly, her face set like she'd come to a decision. "Okay, what can I do to help?"

Ilya was stunned.

He'd expected her to be quietly supportive, maybe to tease him and say she'd already figured him out, but this was different.

It wasn't just support; it was an offer of active involvement.

Ilya knew there must be ways she could help, things he could ask for that she would be happy to do just like she'd immediately agreed to fly home with him for his father's funeral, just like she'd helped him box up his Moscow condo without asking a single question as to *why*. But he didn't know what he needed yet, he didn't know what step came next, so instead of asking for anything real, he said, "help me get all those toys into this bag."

She smiled at him like she knew exactly what he was really saying and hopped off the bed, pulling him into a tight hug and pressing a soft kiss to his cheek before dutifully helping him shove the pile of presents for Sunday into his duffle.

* * *

Shane was more than a little nervous about getting back on the ice. He was excited, certainly, but he almost felt like he was pushing his luck.

His anxiety was starting to eat away at him, living as a little voice in the back of his mind telling him that things had been going *too* well recently. The voice kept reminding him of all the incredible things that'd happened to him over the past month and a half and then twisting it all until Shane started to believe that he didn't deserve good things, that he'd tricked the universe somehow and it was only a matter of time before the other shoe dropped.

He kept trying to remind himself that it hadn't all been good; that he'd been unceremoniously shoved out of Montreal and that he'd been badly injured and Ilya's father had died and Ilya was clearly struggling despite the fact that he seemed happy. It hadn't all been good, even though things had been working out.

Usually, that type of rationalization worked. That reminder that life was rarely ever all good or all bad made him remember that consistency was key, that taking it day by day and reacting to things *as they happened* instead of spending hours spiraling over what ifs was the far healthier way to go, usually kept him steady.

But, sometimes, when there were external factors making him anxious, rational thought stopped working.

And right now, he was getting on the ice in full gear for the first time since he went down in Boston and it was becoming increasingly difficult to quiet the voice that felt like a parasite, eating away at everything good.

“Just drills,” he reminded himself. There would literally be no one else on the ice. No one was going to blind side him; no one was going to check him too hard and rebreak his clavicle. He was fine.

He kept muttering to himself as he made his way down the hall, extra thankful he was alone because he knew he sounded like a crazy person, and then he shouldered open the door, took the last three steps across the padded floor, and stepped onto the rink.

The moment his skates touched ice, everything fell away.

He ran through every drill the trainers shouted, answered their questions about if turning too fast was making his head spin (it wasn't, thank god), talked about range of motion and took their tips for compensating for any remaining stiffness in his right shoulder and the next thing he knew, two hours had passed and Sunny was barking while Amanda and one of the other social media people who hadn't traveled with the team named Riley - both of whom had wandered down from their office with Sunny to watch Shane practice - were cheering. The trainers were smiling and Shane knew he was ready to be back.

* * *

Boston's plane landed at Laguardia on Saturday morning and Ilya felt like he was about to vibrate out of his own skin.

He needed to get it together. They'd done morning skate back in Boston before boarding the plane in Bedford and now they had several free hours before they had to meet for team dinner before leaving for warmups. Ilya wanted to go to Shane's house, but Shane had made the very intelligent and well-thought-out argument that the hockey world knew he wasn't traveling with the Admirals and, if they wanted people to stop thinking it was so weird that they were friends, they needed to be seen in public together.

Ilya hated it. He wanted Shane alone.

But he was also well aware that Shane was right so, instead of going out to Irvington, Ilya, Cliff, and Victor St-Simon (who'd decided he liked Hollander because he spoke French unlike the 'heathens' in Boston) would be meeting Shane for lunch near their hotel. It was warm out with spring finally sticking around in the final days before April and Shane had suggested grabbing take out and going to

eat at the park between the hotel the Bears were staying at and the Aviator Sports Center where the Brooklyn Scouts played.

Ilya knew he'd be with Shane after the game and for the next two days, but he wasn't exactly feeling rational at the moment. He just wanted to go home.

By the time they made it to the hotel, Ilya felt a little like a feral racoon that'd been captured by animal control and from the concerned looks Cliff kept sending him, he was pretty sure he *looked* at least a little feral, too.

Ilya had his own room which was good because it gave him a second to calm the fuck down without anyone watching.

He set his bags down but left them packed knowing he was just going to be sneaking out that night and telling his coach he'd called a car in the morning to go to the 'hotel he'd booked' so he could 'take meetings with his agent' so he 'wouldn't be distracted during playoffs'. It was a bad lie, and he was nearly certain LeClaire had seen right through him, but he hadn't actually questioned it, so Ilya was just going to take the win.

He checked to make sure he had his phone, wallet, and hotel key and then pulled on a hoodie because it'd seemed a little windy when they were driving over and he could be responsible sometimes and then made his way down to the lobby, feeling at least 60% less insane than he'd been when they'd arrived.

Cliff and Victor were already waiting, standing just through the front door but still visible from the lobby. Their backs were turned and Ilya wasn't sure why until he saw a flash of golden fur by Cliff's calf. Ilya jogged across the lobby, ignoring the several people who shot him glares, and then burst through the front doors just knowing he was smiling like an idiot.

"Shane!"

"Hey, Roz," Shane greeted, leaning to the side so he was visible over Victor's shoulder. He was smiling wide even as he was clearly trying to temper it and Ilya decided he didn't give a fuck. He wasn't going to kiss Shane on the street in broad daylight or anything, he wasn't suicidal, but he was *absolutely* going to give him a hug without caring about how odd it might look.

Ilya darted around his teammates and wrapped his arms around Shane's waist, tucking his face against Shane's neck and felt himself settle. One of Shane's arms wrapped around Ilya's shoulders as he breathed out a fond little laugh that made Ilya's heart race.

Ilya held on for a few more seconds than he probably should've and then stepped back and crouched down.

Sunday was quietly sitting by Shane's side, looking up at Ilya with her head cocked in interest, just studying him. It was a very *Shane* look which made Ilya smile even brighter.

"Hello, there, pretty girl," he greeted, holding out his hand - palm up - and waiting for her to approach. She studied him for a second longer and then stood up and rested her whole head in his hand. Ilya let out a slightly disbelieving laugh and then scratched under her chin as his other hand came up to scratch behind her ears. She clearly loved it; her whole body was wriggling with the force of her tail wagging.

"You can pick her up if you want," Shane said, crouching down and unclipping her leash. He folded it up and tucked it in his back pocket as Ilya wrapped his hands around Sunday's torso behind her front legs and picked her up, cradling her to his chest as he stood.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and absolutely fell in love as she looked up at him with big, sweet puppy eyes, "yes, hello, *Solnyshko*."

"Sun?" Shane asked, reaching out and scratching Sunday's head as he stepped a little closer to Ilya's side. Ilya could see Cliff taking a picture out of the corner of his eye and made a mental note to ask him to send it to him later.

"Sort of, yes, *Solnyshko* is like pet name, calling someone 'sunshine', is affectionate. The actual word for sunshine is *solnechnyy svet*."

Shane repeated it under his breath and nodded before looking up at Cliff and Victor, "one of Scott's buddies from college plays for Brooklyn and told me about a good sandwich place around the corner that does take out, that work for you?"

Ilya kept ahold of Sunday as they made their way down the street. Shane and Victor were chattering back and forth in rapid French. They were speaking so quickly that Ilya probably wouldn't have even

been able to follow if he'd known the language, but they were both laughing and it warmed Ilya's heart to see Shane bonding with his team. Cliff fell back into step next to him and reached out to pet Sunday who seemed to be struggling to decide between cuddling closer to Ilya's chest or leaning into Cliff's attention.

"She's a really cute dog," Cliff complimented.

Ilya just grinned and kissed the top of her head again.

Every time Ilya had seen her on FaceTime or gotten a picture of her she'd been wearing a pretty light blue collar but now, Ilya noticed, she was wearing a bright red harness. It could've just been red, but Ilya knew Scott and Shane had picked it out which meant it wasn't *just* anything, "Hollander," he said.

Shane paused his conversation with Victor and looked over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow in question.

"Why is she wearing Admirals red?"

Shane smiled, the edges of it just a little sharp and his eyes bright with humor, "not sure if you've heard, Rozanov, but I'm the Alternate Captain of the New York Admirals. Why shouldn't my dog be wearing my team's colors?"

Cliff let out a laugh that Ilya would've punched him for if he wasn't cradling his dog with both arms and entirely unwilling to let go of her for even a second.

Ilya narrowed his eyes at Shane, knowing that he couldn't argue that it was his dog too in front of Victor and whoever might be listening in as they walked by. He watched Shane's smile grow and wondered when his sweet Shane had turned into a total menace.

"Let's make a bet," Ilya said.

"Oh?"

“Yes,” Ilya decided, nodding to himself, “if I score hat trick tonight, I get to post picture of Sunny in a Bears jersey.”

“You’re not even playing my team tonight.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ilya argued, “we won’t play you until playoffs, so take the bet now.”

“Fine, fine,” Shane sighed, as if he were actually put out about the prospect of Ilya getting to post a picture of their dog, laying some sort of claim to her in the public eye even if no one would know that it was anything more than a stupid bet. He also kindly didn’t comment on the implication that Ilya had already purchased one of the tiny little Bears jerseys they made for dogs. “But I’ve got another one.”

“Oh?” Ilya said. “What’s that?”

“If the seeding works out and we’re matched up for a playoff series, whoever loses has to wear the other’s jersey for the first game of the winner’s next series.”

Ilya had a brief vision of Shane in a Rozanov jersey and nodded far too quickly to be casual, “deal.”

It was far more likely that Ilya was going to end up in the stands of Madison Square Garden in a Hollander jersey given how New York had been playing recently, but he wasn’t about to admit that in front of two of his teammates and he was well aware that Shane would glare at him if he made a statement like that.

The only reason Shane’s overly superstitious mind was letting him even make a stupid bet on a playoff series was that Boston and New York were already both locked in, it just came down to seeding within the Eastern Conference at this point.

Ilya also knew that thinking about stupid bets and trading jerseys was probably distracting Shane from the fact that New York was almost certainly going to be seeded first and it was currently looking like Montreal was going to nab the wild card slot.

Ilya kind of hoped they did.

He wanted to watch Shane, Scott, and Carter systematically destroy any lingering hope the franchise had left. He wanted to watch Scott and Matti Jalo go feral protecting Shane from whatever players were left on the ice after Ilya and Cliff were through with them on Saturday. He wanted to show up to Shane's first game at MSG on Friday and be able to report that the only people left standing were Hayden, J.J., and Shane's Rookies.

He mostly wanted to get checked over the boards in front of Montreal's bench so he could 'accidentally' smash Theriault's head in with his stick.

Ilya zoned back in when Shane emerged from the sandwich shop Scott's friend had apparently recommended. He had no clue how long he'd been zoned out, silently plotting the demise of the Montreal Voyageurs, but Shane, Cliff, and Victor had apparently just left him to it while they went in to order. Between Shane and Cliff they would've been able to guess what Ilya wanted to eat so he decided he wasn't annoyed that they hadn't snapped him out of it to ask.

"You good?" Shane asked softly, nudging their shoulders together and subtly steering Ilya down the sidewalk toward the park.

Ilya blinked a couple of times, trying to force his brain to come back online. He felt Sunday stir slightly in his arms and looked down to find her peacefully asleep. The cloying anger and biting need for revenge sputtered out, replaced by a gentle peace and overwhelming love, "yeah," Ilya whispered back, "perfect."

Chapter End Notes

next chapter shall feature: kip and shane in the kingfisher, ilya winning a bet, and a sickening amount of fluff

the chapter after that shall feature: hayden and j.j. looking away and whistling so they have plausible deniability while cliff and ilya actually murder the montreal voyageurs. stay tuned.

realized after i posted this that, in universe, the islanders were replaced by the Brooklyn Scouts so i changed the long island/nassau references to brooklyn/marine park ... the Aviator Sports and Events Center is where the now defunct Brooklyn Aviators played when they existed for like four years in the early 2000s

Chapter 21: hanging on holy days

Chapter Notes

title from diamonds & roses by kingfishr because 1. kip and shane are in the kingfisher and i love a good pun, 2. its a great gd song and you should all go listen to it, and 3. i am painfully irish and will promote irish artists & irish culture at *any* opportunity

March 2017

After Ilya, Cliff, and Victor headed back to their hotel, Shane walked Sunny through the park for a little while longer and then headed to his car and programmed in the directions to Scott's apartment.

The drive from Brooklyn into Manhattan was slightly stressful but, by the grace of God, he made it to Scott's building without accidentally committing vehicular manslaughter.

He typed in the code Scott had sent him and pulled into the garage, navigating his way through the maze until he found Scott's empty parking spot. Sunny happily followed behind him on his quest through the fucking labyrinth to find the goddamn elevator and then, like the wonderful dog she was, simply sat down at his feet as they took the elevator up to the penthouse level.

Shane hadn't exactly *told* Scott that he was leaving Sunny in his apartment while he and Kip went to some bar called the Kingfisher to watch the game, but he'd told Kip and Shane decided that was good enough.

Kip opened the door only a few seconds after Shane knocked with a bright smile on his face that only got brighter when he spotted Sunny.

Shane happily played second fiddle to his adorable puppy as Kip greeted her. He'd fed her and walked her before leaving Brooklyn and she'd spent a few hours at a time alone while Shane was at practice since he didn't bring her to the rink every day, so he really wasn't concerned about leaving her in Scott's apartment. Maybe if she acted more like a normal puppy he'd feel bad about it, but Shane was about 95% certain she'd just find a corner near a heating vent to curl up in and they'd find her there, peacefully asleep, whenever they got back.

“Okay, sorry, hi Shane,” Kip said, from where he was now fully laying on the floor while Sunny licked his face.

“Hi, Kip,” Shane replied with a laugh, “how was work?”

Kip spent the next several minutes ranting about some guy named Jeff who was apparently incapable of doing his job. Shane started by just nodding along but, by the end of it, he was actually pretty pissed off at Jeff, too, even though he had absolutely no goddamn clue who Jeff was.

Kip took a breath and then smiled as he climbed back to his feet and brushed off his pants. Sunny trotted across the floor toward Shane and nudged her nose against his shin until he leaned down to scratch her head. Once she was appeased with his attention, she made her way to the corner where, as Shane had guessed, she found a heating vent and curled up, her head resting on her little paws as she let out a giant yawn.

“Ready to go?” Kip asked.

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, taking one last look at his now sleeping puppy and then heading for the door, “can I just say, this apartment is great but the parking garage was designed by a masochist.”

* * *

Kip needed to discover something negative about Shane Hollander sometime in the next five minutes or he was going to start a religion in the man’s name.

He was smart, funny, insanely good at hockey, incredibly kind, and almost offensively attractive.

Also, he made enough money to purchase a house in Westchester County on a whim and still drove a Jeep that he’d probably paid off as soon as he could because he seemed like the sort of person who cared about his credit score. This was actually fucking ridiculous.

The fact that he was the new owner of the cutest golden retriever puppy Kip had ever had the pleasure of seeing was *not* helping matters.

Kip loved Scott. He really did. He did not want to leave Scott for anyone, including Shane Hollander. He was also well aware that he would be found dead in a ditch, murdered by Ilya Rozanov's bare hands, if he so much as *thought* about leaving Scott for Shane Hollander.

All of these things were true.

It was also true that Kip wasn't fucking blind.

As they drove toward the Kingfisher, Kip tried to get to know Shane a little better. They'd met already and had been texting back and forth, but everything was rather surface level. Shane sort of seemed like the type to keep things under lock and key until he could tell you could be trusted and then he'd let you in, layer by layer. They were almost exactly the same age, Kip was actually only two months older than Shane, and it was a little strange to think about how different their lives were. But even then, even though Kip had several self-deprecating thoughts about how far behind he felt in life that he was trying not to dwell on, they were still similar in a lot of ways.

By the time they pulled up down the street from the bar, he knew a few more things about Shane, nothing that seemed all that personal, but still enough that Kip felt like he knew him as more than just Scott's friend and teammate.

Shane turned around and reached into the back seat to grab a hoodie before climbing out of the car. He'd been in jeans and a plain t-shirt but it was definitely getting chillier as the night wore on so the hoodie was probably a solid choice.

He clearly hadn't checked which hoodie it was, though, because as he pulled it on right before approaching the door, Kip was the first to notice the slightly cracked white ink across the back of the bright red sweatshirt spelling out *PIKE 35*.

"Are you aware you're wearing Hayden Pike's sweatshirt right now?" Kip asked, biting the inside of his cheek to stop himself from laughing.

Shane's steps stuttered slightly as he looked down at his chest. He laughed quietly and shook his head, the fond smile on his face becoming visible as he turned back toward Kip. The front of the sweatshirt had the big red and white McGill 'M' with the school crest in the middle and 'HOCKEY' spelled out below it in white, block letters.

“Didn’t even realize I still had this,” he said, his voice pitched low, almost like he was talking to himself, and Kip was simply close enough to overhear. “I thought it was one of my new Admirals ones when I grabbed it, same color.” He sniffled slightly and Kip realized rather suddenly that he shouldn’t be laughing.

Just because the corner of the internet that liked to ship hockey players was objectively crazy and Scott, Shane, and Carter happily made jokes about it didn’t mean that the connection between Shane and Hayden was entirely made up.

Obviously they weren’t off doing whatever teenage girls thought they were doing, but they *were* best friends and Shane had been rather unceremoniously ripped away from home.

Shane shook his head again and blinked quickly before he looked back up at Kip, smiling again, “come on, puck drop’s soon.”

* * *

Hayden sat next to J.J. in the visitor’s locker room in Toronto sort of wishing the building would light on fire so they wouldn’t have to play.

He hadn’t told Shane shit about what was happening in Montreal, and he had absolutely zero plans to do so.

It’d only gotten worse since Shane left.

The quiet anger had gotten loud until it turned into something untenable. People were saying horrible things just because they thought they could – and with only J.J. and Hayden fighting back, it certainly seemed like the truth - and the fact that they were on a pretty impressive losing streak and were probably just going to barely grab the wild card slot after back-to-back Cup wins was not helping. It was becoming increasingly clear that they were a franchise built around one player and that player was gone. Not because he’d wanted to leave, but because they’d made him.

Hayden’s contract was up and he knew Montreal wasn’t going to pick him back up if they didn’t absolutely have to. He had no clue where he was going to end up or what sort of contract his agent might be able to get him. He wasn’t a franchise player like Shane even though he was a solid winger and had consistently good stats. He couldn’t just pick a team and go like Shane had, he had to wait

and hope that it'd all work out. Jackie was, as always, incredibly supportive but Hayden needed his best friend.

It was a shitty balance, knowing he needed Shane but not being willing to disturb the peace he'd found in New York by dropping his shit on Shane's shoulders.

His phone buzzed in his stall, and he almost didn't look at it, didn't want it to be another call from his agent with updates that meant nothing or a string of texts in the team group chat that made his blood boil.

But something made him look and when he saw Shane's name he nearly cried.

Hayden picked up his phone and all but ran into the hallway, sliding his thumb to answer the moment he was through the door.

Shane's smiling face filled his screen, and he immediately felt about ten pounds lighter.

"Hayd!"

"Shane!"

"I wasn't sure you'd pick up but I had to show you something," Shane said, he was really smiling, the one that normally only showed up after he'd been laughing too hard. His hair was a little messy and longer than Hayden had ever seen it. He looked good, happy. His cheeks had filled back out which was a clear sign he'd finally started properly eating again. His eyes were bright, especially compared to those last few months in Montreal where Hayden could now recognize they'd been nearly devoid of life.

Then the camera panned down and Hayden felt some mix of a laugh and a sob bubble out of his throat.

Shane was wearing his sweatshirt.

An old college hockey hoodie from the two years he'd played at McGill before being drafted. He'd played another year of AHL after that. He'd been frustrated back then, that he hadn't been good enough to be drafted right away. But now that he looked back, he was so incredibly grateful because if it weren't for those years, those years he'd thought were unnecessary detours, he wouldn't have been a rookie the same year as Shane. And then maybe he wouldn't have been out at that club the night he met Jackie.

That time that felt like a pause before he was 'allowed' to start his life had led him to his two best friends.

"Are you in a bar in New York wearing a Pike hoodie right now?" Hayden asked, laughing and pretending Shane wouldn't be able to see the way his eyes were watering; pretending he couldn't see the way Shane's were watering in return.

"To be totally fair, I thought it was an Admirals hoodie," Shane justified. Hayden just looked at him for a minute, feeling stupidly grateful for the change to simply see Shane's face before getting on the ice. "Hey, I'll let you go. Just wanted to say good luck. I'm proud of you."

Hayden felt a tear escape the corner of his eye, felt it cut a warm track down the side of his nose, and wished with everything he had that he could be in New York right now, that he could just be wherever Shane was, "thanks, man. I'm proud of you, too."

"Love you, Hayd."

"Love you too, bud."

Shane shot him one more grin and then the call cut out.

Hayden let himself stand in the quiet hallway feeling the aching absence of Shane for a full minute before he pulled up his agent's contact and sent one text: *Can we find a way to get me to New York?*

Then he walked back into the Montreal locker room and tried not to think about how playing for this team felt like betrayal.

* * *

About half the TVs in the Kingfisher were set to the either the New York Admirals v. Los Angeles game or the Brooklyn Scouts v. Boston Bears game except for one in the corner that was playing Montreal v. Toronto.

Shane wasn't sure where to look.

The puck dropped in Brooklyn first with Ilya easily winning the faceoff against the Scouts' first line center, a guy around Scott's age who really wasn't anything to call home about.

Ten minutes later the puck dropped in Toronto and Olsson, Montreal's brand new first line center, immediately lost the puck to Dallas Kent which wasn't even sort of shocking. Shane watched that screen for about three minutes before catching glimpses of Comeau with the C on his jersey became too painful. He knew there was something Hayden wasn't telling him, something beyond the way that Hayden and J.J. were clearly attempting to avoid telling him how much it sucked to be in Montreal. He wanted to pry, but he knew Hayden would come to him eventually. Hopefully after Shane got back on the ice and he could see that Shane wasn't about to fall apart.

Ten minutes after that, just as the clock was ticking down to the end of the first period of the Boston v. Brooklyn game, the puck dropped in L.A.

Scott won the face-off and immediately shot off a pass toward Carter who easily caught it and started up the ice. They had a good momentum right off the bat and Shane had a good feeling about the game. They looked strong, they'd been more and more consistent recently with shots landing and passes connecting where they were supposed to nearly every single time instead of just relying on bursts of energy that somehow ended in a goal.

As the clock on the first period of Ilya's game ended, Shane turned his attention back to that game, just wanting to see if Ilya would be interviewed in the break. Boston was up 2-0 and Ilya had scored one of the goals and assisted the other so there was a good chance he would be.

And, sure enough, he was stopped by a reporter about ten steps into the tunnel.

The sound wasn't on, but the TV was close enough for Shane to read the subtitles without his glasses if he squinted a bit.

The reporter essentially pointed out that Ilya was playing like a man possessed and asked why. Ilya looked directly into the camera, grinning broadly, his face flushed from both exertion and the cold, and said, "Hollander bet I could not score hat trick, I said if I did he had to let me put Bears jersey on his dog. He took the bet because he is stupid."

And then he walked away before he could be asked any follow-ups.

In the relative privacy of a loud, crowded bar, Kip leaned into Shane's side, mirth clearly shining in his eyes, and asked, "did you seriously make a bet over him putting a Boston jersey on his own dog?"

"To be totally fair, St-Simon was there when we made the bet and he doesn't know that she's not just my dog. We also made a bet that if we meet in playoffs, whoever loses has to wear the winner's jersey to the first game of the next series."

"That's incredible," Kip laughed. It was a good sound, warm and full. It made Shane feel like he was allowed to laugh too, like he didn't have to just smile in response and hope no one realized how out of place he felt.

The bar was nice, big enough for people to spread out but still cozy. It wasn't too loud like the few clubs he'd been dragged into against his will. It was a little crowded for his taste but, then again, any room with more than ten people in it was a little crowded for Shane's taste.

He was having fun, though. Genuine fun. No one had really recognized him and if they had they'd simply nodded or shouted a quick 'welcome' or 'hope you're back on the ice soon' and then moved on with their night. He was just one of a crowd here and that was a feeling he hadn't realized he'd been missing.

* * *

Montreal beat Toronto in an incredibly scrappy game that ended 1-0 with Hayden scoring their only goal. Boston beat Brooklyn 6-2 with Ilya getting his hat trick. He'd grinned straight into the camera after that third goal and Shane could tell it was meant for him.

Now they were just waiting for the New York game to wrap up. The Admirals were winning 4-1 with two minutes left on the clock and Shane sort of wanted to leave because he knew how it was going to end but he'd gotten to watch the end of his boyfriend's game, and he wasn't going to stop Kip from watching the end of Scott's.

Also, of lesser importance to him at the moment, it *was* his team.

Finally, the clock ticked down, they shook hands, and both teams filed off the ice.

Kip turned to Shane with a bright smile, and Shane had the sudden thought that he was pretty sure he'd successfully made a friend.

"Ready to head back?" Kip asked.

"Yeah," Shane agreed, draining the last of the beer he'd been nursing literally the entire night and setting the empty bottle on the table. He closed out their tab, waving Kip off when he tried to pay, and left at least double what he should've for a tip before following Kip out of the building and down the street.

Shane turned his car radio to the post-game coverage as they made their way back to Scott's building, but he wasn't really listening. He was tired, his social battery was fucking shot, and he just wanted Ilya.

But he was pretty sure he was now officially friends with Kip instead of just being a friend of Scott's and Hayden would attest to the fact that Shane was a good friend so, instead of just grabbing Sunny and taking off as soon as they walked into Scott's apartment, Shane took a breath, pulled together every last bit of his currently frayed social skills, and said, "you're from Brooklyn, right? Are you staying here tonight or were you planning to go back home?"

"Probably home," Kip said after he paused to think for a second, "I don't work in the morning so there's no reason for me to be here when Scott's not home."

"Do you want a ride? I'm driving back out to pick up Ilya."

“Oh, yeah,” Kip agreed, sending Shane a slightly surprised smile that told him he’d made the right choice, “that’d be great, thanks Shane.”

“No problem,” Shane shrugged, holding a slightly hyperactive Sunny to his chest even as she tried to wriggle out of his grip, “I just need to take her out and then we can go, do you need to grab anything here?”

Kip ducked down the hall and came back with a backpack and a jacket and then they made their way back down to the garage and out to the street for Sunny before trekking back through the - again - fucking *labyrinth* to find Shane’s car.

By the time they reached his Jeep, Kip was openly laughing at Shane’s constant muttering about mazes and fire safety and Shane felt himself smiling almost against his will.

It was properly dark outside so Shane put on his glasses, knowing he’d need them to safely see and, after he realized Ilya had never seen them, really hoping Ilya wouldn’t make fun of him.

Kip typed in the address to his parents’ house and then they were off again. Shane was starting to consider forcing Ilya to drive back up to Irvington because he was getting a little sick of being behind the wheel. Luckily, it didn’t take all that long to get to the Grady’s.

“Thanks again,” Kip said as he grabbed his backpack from the back seat, “I had fun.”

“Me too,” Shane said, and he found himself actually telling the truth. It shouldn’t have been a surprise but after so many years of doing everything he could to avoid social situations, it honestly *was*. “Have a good night.”

“Yeah, you too. Drive safely!”

“I will,” Shane promised, giving Kip what he hoped was a warm smile and not a grimace that gave away how exhausted he was.

Kip waved again as he reached the door and Shane - because his mother had once told him it was the right thing to do and she tended to be correct - waited until Kip was fully inside with the door shut

behind him before pulling away from the curb and heading toward Ilya's hotel.

He texted Ilya after he put the car in park and really wasn't all that shocked when he appeared less than 30 seconds later, speed walking out the front door of the hotel and clearly trying to stop himself from straight up running.

Shane smiled like an idiot.

He was so in love with Ilya it was absurd.

"Hi, baby," he greeted as Ilya pulled the door open. Sunny had fallen asleep in his lap as he drove, but her head popped up at the sound of the back door closing after Ilya had stashed his backpack and duffel. She scrambled out of Shane's lap toward Ilya the moment she spotted him when he opened the passenger door.

"Hello, *lyubimyy*," Ilya responded, picking Sunny up before she fell out of the car in her attempt to climb the front of his shirt. He sat down, pulled the door closed, and then leaned across the center console and pressed a soft kiss to Shane's lips. Just there and gone. Shane wanted more but they were right outside the Bears' hotel and even that quick of a kiss had been insanely risky. "And hello, *moyo solnyshko*."

"You can take your picture of her in the Bears jersey I know you've already bought her tomorrow," Shane said, laughing as Sunny started licking Ilya's face. He was grinning and attempting to kiss her face in response, but she was moving far too quickly for him to have much success.

"Ah, yes," Ilya said, laughing (to be totally honest, he was straight up *giggling* but Shane knew he'd never admit to that) in the face of Sunny's excitement. "Is only right, all the other guys have pictures of their kids in Boston jerseys."

"Of course," Shane agreed. He forced himself to look away from the scene so he could start driving. He wanted to get home. He wanted to shower and crawl into bed with Ilya with Sunny curled up next to them and he wanted to pretend like they had all the time in the world to just exist like that instead of only a short couple of days.

"Glasses," Ilya said about fifteen minutes later when Sunny had finally calmed down and was sitting peacefully in his lap, watching the world go by out the passenger side window. Shane had just gotten

through the traffic that always built up around JFK and turned onto the Expressway. They were still 45 minutes from home, and he wanted to go to sleep but at least his fiancé's attention was finally back on him instead of their dog, even if he was about to get made fun of.

"Yes," he answered. "I know they're nerdy, but I need them to see because it's dark and I don't want to get a migraine."

"No, no, not nerdy," Ilya said quickly. He reached over and ran his thumb along Shane's cheek; his touch was so soft it was almost reverent. And when Shane risked a glance over at him, he found Ilya gazing at him like Shane was the single greatest thing he'd ever seen.

"You..." Shane started before trailing off. He felt his cheeks warm up as Ilya's fingers slipped into his hair before his hand settled at the nape of Shane's neck, just resting there. Soft and warm and solid. The simple touch started to eat away at the stress that'd been building up behind Shane's sternum, it was enough to pull him back from the brink of the sort of exhaustion that tended to set in when he was overstimulated and he'd pushed his social battery too far. "You like them?"

"I love them," Ilya amended. His voice was gentle and earnest in the way it only ever got around Shane. "They look very good on you, sweetheart."

Shane felt his blush deepen at the pet name and all of the sudden he wanted to get home for reasons other than exhaustion.

He forced himself to take a breath and remember that he was driving a car very quickly down a crowded expressway. He leaned his head back against Ilya's hand and decided to change the subject, "tell me about what the fuck went wrong with your powerplay in the middle of the second, that was abysmal."

Ilya let out a startled laugh that somehow morphed into a huff of irritation, but he answered the question anyways.

* * *

Ilya had a lot of favorite things about Shane Hollander but somewhere near the top of that list was the way he seemed to inherently trust Ilya.

He'd been able to tell that Shane was somewhere in the realm of overwhelmed when he got into the car. He looked tired and like he'd been stretched too thin, so Ilya had decided to focus on Sunny instead of bugging Shane, but then he'd looked up and properly noticed Shane's face for the first time since getting in the car and he simply hadn't been able to stop himself from pointing out the, frankly, incredibly sexy glasses.

Shane's shoulders had gotten somehow more rigid and Ilya's heart had sunk when he'd realized that Shane was bracing for Ilya to make fun of him which was the exact opposite of what he wanted to do.

Then Shane had immediately relaxed when Ilya touched his face and he'd relaxed further when Ilya's hand settled on the back of his neck and Ilya had felt a sense of peace settle over his own body. It felt like, after all this time, they'd become attuned to each other's touch. Ilya always felt calmer when his skin was pressed against Shane's, when they were close enough that it was like he could feel Shane's warmth seeping into his bones.

Shane was always beautiful but at that very moment he was almost hard to directly look at. It was like staring into the sun and Ilya felt overwhelmed with how much he felt for Shane.

His hair was getting longer, long enough that it could get a little messy instead of seemingly just existing in a perfectly combed style. His eyes could never hide how he was really feeling and right now they were relaxed, making it clear that he felt comfortable and content. His freckles were just visible under the streetlights and against the taillights of the cars traveling in front of them. He was in a red hoodie which was a great color on him. He looked so soft, so incredibly relaxed, and then Ilya realized the number 35 was printed on Shane's upper arm and he was, quite tragically, forced to disturb his peace.

"Are you wearing Hayden Pike's sweatshirt right now?"

"Yes," Shane answered, offering no further explanation.

"Why?"

"I thought it was mine," he said, shrugging in a way that would've infuriated Ilya if he weren't so in love it made him stupid.

“How?”

“It’s Admirals red,” Shane pointed out, “I thought it was my hoodie when I grabbed it out of the closet, didn’t notice it wasn’t until I got to the bar with Kip.”

“Why do you even have it?”

“I think I accidentally stole it on one of the several nights I spent at his house.”

Ilya just stared at Shane, waiting to see if he’d realize how that sentence could be interpreted. But his beautiful fucking fiancé just kept staring out at the road, perfectly content and not at all concerned about the way it sounded like he’d just admitted to fucking his best friend. Ilya was well aware that that wasn’t what Shane had meant, but he was a little concerned that Shane was going around telling people that he spent a significant number of nights at Pike’s house.

The teenage girls Ilya spent his evenings fighting with on Twitter did *not* need more ammunition.

“I called him before their game to show him I’d accidentally put it on,” Shane continued and Ilya bit back a sound that might’ve come out as a whine as the stone dropped and he realized that Shane was saying he’d just spent several hours in a gay bar watching hockey while wearing Hayden Pike’s name and number. “He seemed pretty beaten down when he answered, I don’t think things are good in Montreal.”

Ilya *really* wanted to say, ‘no fucking shit,’ but he was a nice person, sometimes, so, instead, he said, “he scored though, won the game for them.”

Shane smiled, clearly pleased that Ilya wasn’t be a dick to Pike and Ilya wanted to keep that smile on his face so he forced himself to keep his mouth shut so he wouldn’t say ‘apparently even the worst player has to score sometimes,’

It wasn’t a kind thought; it also wasn’t even *sort of* true. But Ilya was hardwired to hate Hayden Pike and the fucking cult of people on the internet who thought his fiancé was in love with Hayden Pike certainly did not help improve his opinion of the man.

That thought made Ilya come to the unfortunate realization that his years of hating Hayden Pike might've just been really, *really* poorly concealed jealousy.

Ilya absolutely was not going to sort through that right now, though, so he shoved that horrifying epiphany straight into a mental abyss.

"He deserves better," Shane said, the end of the phrase getting cut off with an almost defeated sigh. "I'm sure he's still standing up for me when people talk shit even though I told him he should just put his head down and not put a target on his back."

That was one thing Ilya could appreciate about Hayden Pike.

He didn't give a shit if the target was on his fucking forehead, he'd still stand up for Shane.

Hell, he was at least a half foot shorter than Cliff and he'd dropped gloves *immediately* when Shane had gone down.

Ilya scoured his mind for something kind to say because he knew that pointing out the fact that Pike would take an actual bullet for him wouldn't bring Shane any comfort and finally landed on, "isn't his contract up this year?"

"Yeah, but he was already in extension talks and the girls just started Kindergarten. They've built a whole life in Montreal, I doubt he'll leave if there were any way he could stay."

Ilya just nodded. He didn't want to stress Shane out by putting the thought into his head that Pike had probably either backed out of extension talks on his own or been pushed out for taking Shane's side. He was nearly certain that Pike would be somewhere else by the end of the summer, but Shane didn't need that stress and if Pike hadn't brought it up, he clearly wasn't ready to talk to Shane about it.

"He'll be okay," Ilya said, scratching gently against Shane's scalp for a second before squeezing the back of his neck. He watched the tension that'd started building back up melt from Shane's shoulders and begged the minutes to move faster so he could get Shane into their house, into the shower, and then into bed.

Shane took a breath and nodded before glancing over at Ilya again. It only lasted a second before his eyes were back on the road, but it was enough for Ilya to see just how much Shane appreciated his words, just how much Shane loved him.

They made the rest of the drive in silence, only the sound of the car radio playing some sort of post-game coverage filling the air. It was comfortable, peaceful in a way so few things in Ilya's life had ever been. It was something he might've called boring when he had no other vocabulary to describe it, but now he knew what it truly was;

Stability.

It was Sunday's puppy snores and the warmth of Shane's skin beneath his palm and the feeling that he was, and always would be, welcome in this space. It was the knowledge that they were driving home, together. That he would get to walk into their house and immediately feel safe when he'd spent so many years walking into his house with his shoulders set and his jaw clenched; a body and mind prepared for pain. He'd get to open the fridge and find it stocked with things Shane knew he liked because he'd done a grocery order the day before and he'd known Ilya would be home. He'd get to go up to shower and find a clean towel already hung up for him and the body wash, shampoo, and conditioner he liked already in a line for him to use. He'd get to go to bed with Shane in his arms with the knowledge that he'd still be there when he woke up.

Some people might call it boring; *Ilya* might even call it boring. But it was boring in the most incredible way.

They pulled into the garage and Ilya felt his throat get tight with the emotions flooding his chest.

Shane put the car in park and then turned to him with a soft smile already on his face and if they weren't already engaged, Ilya would've asked him to marry him then and there.

"Hi," Shane whispered, like he knew Ilya didn't want to break the spell that'd fallen over their little family in Shane's stupid, boring Jeep that Ilya loved so much he felt crazy.

"Hi," Ilya responded, his hand that'd been settled on Shane's neck sliding around to cup his cheek.

Shane leaned across the car and pressed his lips to Ilya's and it was the sweetest kiss Ilya had ever experienced. It would remain the sweetest kiss he'd ever experienced until the very next time Shane

kissed him just like this.

He pulled back after a moment and kissed Ilya's cheek before climbing out of the car, "come on, she needs to go out and then we can shower and go to bed."

Ilya smiled and followed Shane through the garage and out into the yard.

* * *

Shane woke up to Ilya pressing kisses across his shoulders and the back of his neck and smiled as he turned over in Ilya's arms and tilted his head up for a proper kiss. Ilya's tongue slipped into his mouth, warm and insistent and Shane just relaxed and let himself be kissed.

It was the perfect Sunday morning. The sun was up and the air was warm when they ran Sunny down the driveway and back up. Ilya did his own work out while Shane went through the exercises he'd been assigned by the trainers and then they made breakfast. It was peaceful and wonderful and so, so perfect, and then Ilya opened his backpack and Shane realized he was engaged to a crazy person.

Ilya had traveled from Boston to New York with more toys for Sunny than Shane and Scott had purchased in what they'd both been referring to as their joint fugue state in the Yonkers PetSmart.

"You're bribing her."

"Am not," Ilya argued, looking almost offended, "I am just spoiling our child, Shane. She deserves all of the toys."

"The entire house is going to be covered in dog toys."

"Good," Ilya said, nodding decisively. Shane didn't even know where he'd found that many different toys and Shane was dead certain there were even more back in the house in Boston. He must've bought out every pet store in a ten-mile radius. It was absurd and so fucking adorable Shane just gave up on trying to rationalize with him. He had about a snowball's chance in Hell of winning a fight when Ilya was like this. "Come here, *malyshka*," Ilya said, patting the floor in front of him. Sunny immediately trotted over, dragging her new stuffed bear that was about the same size as her over as

well. “There’s my girl,” Ilya cooed and Shane felt a little like his heart was actually fucking melting. “You want to wear papa’s jersey?”

“Oh, you’re ‘papa’ now?”

“Of course,” Ilya said, not even looking Shane’s way. He’d officially been demoted, and he really couldn’t find it in himself to be offended. “You are dad, I am papa, keep up, Hollander.”

Ilya then dug into the front pocket of his backpack and pulled out a tiny little Bears jersey and Shane found himself feeling genuinely surprised that he hadn’t somehow found a way to get a customized Rozanov one.

And then Ilya said, “she will get one with my name when she is done growing, or when I have enough time to order one before seeing her.”

“Right,” Shane said, realizing that made far more sense than Ilya simply deciding their dog having a custom Rozanov jersey wasn’t a necessary purchase.

He watched as Sunny sort of just flopped over when Ilya tried to put the jersey on her and tried really hard not to laugh. It wasn’t like she was fighting him, it was just that she wasn’t helping *at all* which seemed to almost make it harder than if she’d stayed on her feet and tried to push him away. Eventually, Ilya got her into the little jersey and then spent an entire minute smoothing both the jersey and her fur out before taking a picture.

He then decided that the living room didn’t have good enough lighting and after trying out seven different locations and a few dozen different angles, all of which Sunny happily put up with, they ended up in the yard where Ilya decided he needed to put his sunglasses on her so she wouldn’t hurt her eyes.

Shane genuinely couldn’t decide if he was exasperated or endeared.

Ilya sat down on the porch, his legs hanging over the edge and Sunny cradled in one arm, sunglasses abandoned now that they were back in the shade and opened up Instagram. Shane watched as he carefully selected his favorite photo of Sunny before scrolling past the dozens of pictures he’d taken of her that morning, both in her jersey and before that, to find a downloaded clip of him talking about their stupid little bet in the tunnel the night before.

He typed out a caption and hit post before Shane could see what he'd said but the little smirk on his face made Shane sigh in advance.

Shane took out his own phone and opened Instagram. Ilya's post was right at the top when his feed loaded and Shane had to admit that the picture was really fucking adorable even though it'd taken Ilya thirty full minutes to take.

The caption read '*@shanehollander lost ... again. at least his dog is cute.*'

It was, sadly, accurate.

Shane opened the comments and found that several people had already seen it and commented in the few seconds since it'd been posted and typed, '*@ilyarozanov, I'll win the next one.*'

Ilya looked down and read the notification and when he looked back up at Shane, he was smiling.

the inspo for the sunny in a bears jersey bet:



Chapter 22: bad blood

Chapter Notes

one of you people just recommended this fic on tik tok and it high key made me tear up. the response to this has been so wonderful and has very much filled the gap in my life that has been missing since i was in the elementary school gifted program and got pulled out of class twice a week to be told i was smart. much appreciated.

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

March 2017

Boston played Montreal on Thursday.

The Admirals were back from their road trip and didn't play again until Friday at home against Pittsburgh and everyone, for some unknown reason, had invited themselves to Shane's house to watch the game.

It'd started with just Scott because Kip had a catering job and he didn't want to sit in his apartment alone. Then Carter had asked if Shane wanted company which had been an easy yes. Then Eric Bennett had somehow been invited which led to Greg Huff and then Cale Wagner and the next thing Shane knew, his (finally furnished) living room was full of nearly every single one of his teammates.

Shane was in the corner of the sectional between Scott and Carter. Scott had an arm thrown across the back of the couch behind Shane and Shane was tucked rather comfortably against Scott's side. He'd decided to ignore the fact that this was absolutely going to turn into a joke about the Twitter girls being right because, at this very moment, he needed the point of contact. Sunny was wedged into the space between Shane and Carter's thighs and their legs were stretched out on the ottoman Scott had dragged over. It was comfortable, he had two people who had very quickly become some of his best friends on either side of him, his dog was cuddled up next to him, and he was in the comfort of his own home.

He should've felt relaxed.

He was anything but relaxed.

Both teams were on the ice for warmups and Shane watched Ilya hug the center line until Hayden skated toward him. Hayden nodded, a bit tersely, in greeting and then ducked his head as Ilya started talking. Shane leaned forward as if he could hear what they were saying simply by changing his proximity to the TV. A minute later Cliff skated over and 30 seconds after that, J.J. appeared. When they skated away, Hayden looked like he wanted to be genuinely anywhere else, J.J. seemed almost resigned, Ilya's face was contorted with obvious rage, and Cliff was grinning.

Shane slumped back into Scott's side and braced for impact.

* * *

Scott had never actually been *afraid* of Ilya Rozanov. He'd been annoyed by him, genuinely pissed off at him. He'd even been a little wary of getting checked by him simply because the guy tended to commit. But he'd never actually been afraid.

That is, until the moment he watched Ilya skate away from the center line after talking to Pike and Boiziau.

Shane's eyes were locked on the screen but he looked almost defeated. It was the first time since he'd come to New York that Scott had seen Shane look like his old self, like the version of him Scott hadn't even realized was struggling. His shoulders were slumped and he was chewing on his bottom lip and Scott wanted to change the channel, wanted to just put on the Carolina v. Toronto game and pretend Montreal wasn't even playing, pretend that Shane's boyfriend wasn't about to commit several acts of violence that'd result in criminal charges if they happened anywhere outside of a hockey rink.

Scott let his arm slip down from the back of the couch and wrapped it firmly around Shane's shoulders, not giving a shit if it resulted in some locker room teasing.

Shane seemed to relax, just a little, but then he straightened up and leaned forward, clearing his throat, and Scott felt something like dread settle in his stomach.

Every head in the room turned toward Shane and Scott knew what was about to happen with an aching sort of certainty.

"I think it's probably time I told the truth about why I left Montreal," Shane started. Shane had told Scott, quietly and without prompting, almost like he'd had the thought and simply needed to speak it

aloud, that he knew Montreal wouldn't actually tell anyone why he left because it was mutually assured destruction. Even if there were rumors, Shane was certain none of his teammates and none of the staff who knew would tell the actual truth. Shane wouldn't tell the world why Montreal had pushed him out because it'd mean admitting to the world he was gay, and Montreal wouldn't tell the world that Shane was gay because it meant admitting to the world why they'd pushed Shane out.

Scott watched as Carter's hand landed on Shane's knee, squeezing once before simply settling there and realized that Carter knew. Probably had known the entire time and he hadn't told Scott. He'd protected Shane's secret. Even if he probably could've guessed that Scott knew as well, he'd left the actual *telling* up to Shane.

Shane took a breath, his nose twitched once, and then he said, "I came out to my team and they abandoned me. They stopped protecting me on the ice, stopped speaking to me in the locker room, refused to shower at the same time as me, started checking me in practice harder and harder because they knew the coaching staff wouldn't stop them. It was worse with management. The GMs built a franchise around my name. They took an 18-year-old kid who had no clue how to exist in the world and shoved him into the spotlight and the second I stopped being exactly what they wanted they showed me the door. Murdock knows, the GMs know, Scott and Carter know and I want to tell you now, before I get on the ice with you tomorrow night, that I'm gay. I'm not planning to come out publicly, there are personal reasons not related to hockey that'd make it unsafe for me to do so, but I want my team to know. I don't want to start off my time as one of your captains by lying to you."

Scott scanned the room, waiting for the disgust Shane had described experiencing in Montreal. He trusted his team, he did, but part of him still expected this to be met with anger.

It never came.

A couple people looked shocked, several looked supportive, and a few had turned toward the TV with bitter anger on their faces like they could jump through the screen and fight Montreal.

Eric Bennet was staring at Shane like he'd never seen him before.

It was a look Scott recognized viscerally.

This was his moment, he'd promised himself that he wasn't going to let Shane do this alone, no matter what the reaction might be.

Scott leaned forward, his shoulder brushing Shane's as he pulled his feet off the ottoman and set them on the floor, like his socks touching the rug might be able to ground him somehow. He rested his elbows on his knees and looked down at his hands. He could feel every single eye in the room trained on him but he didn't look up. Shane had looked them in the eye but Scott wasn't quite that brave. Not yet.

"Me too," he said quietly, before clearing his throat slightly. His eyes felt warm and his chest felt tight and he felt a little like jumping over the back of the couch and fleeing the scene but he powered through. "I'm gay. Murdock and Shane were the only ones who knew."

He felt Shane's hand land on his shoulder and the steady touch and the subtle warmth of his palm seeping through the back of Scott's t-shirt went a long way in pulling him back from the brink of panic.

"Oh my god, wait," Huff said, sounding almost excited and Scott braced himself for whatever insanity he was about to hear. He chanced a look up and realized every single eye in the room was trained on Shane's hand resting - comfortable and *familiar* - on Scott's shoulder and realized what was about to happen. "Scotty, is this why Hollzy came to New York? That's fucking sick. Well done, man."

That was followed by a general chorus of agreement with several people reaching over to clap one or both of them on the back or ruffle their hair. There was at least one comment of 'I'm straight and even I know they're hot together'. And when Scott looked over at Shane, he could physically *see* him fighting against the urge to cause total mayhem.

Scott shot him a look that he truly hoped translated to: *I swear to God, Hollander, do not do something that's going to get me murdered right now.*

Shane read the look right, but then he pouted and Scott realized that he'd spent so long feeling like he might die buried beneath the weight of keeping himself hidden that he might as well have a little fun. He'd also do just about anything in the face of those big brown eyes. He wasn't sure how Ilya ever won a fight without folding immediately, those things were fucking lethal.

He kept his eyes locked on Shane's and put on his best flirty smile, the one that'd worked on several nameless men in dark bars across Europe, and watched Shane's eyes light up with unholy glee.

"Well," Scott drawled, "I *do* have a boyfriend."

“As do I,” Shane responded, and then he simply leaned back into the couch cushions and let his hand slide diagonally across Scott’s back until it was wrapped around his waist.

Scott leaned back as well, snuggling into Shane’s side. Shane’s hand gripped onto his shirt in what Scott was certain was a physical attempt to stop himself from losing it. Scott wrapped his hand around Shane’s thigh, at least two inches too far above his knee to be interpreted as friendly, and then turned and buried his nose in Shane’s hair, pressing a quick kiss to his head before lingering there a moment until he was sure he wouldn’t start laughing.

This was one of the dumber things he’d ever done. It was stupid and juvenile and he was going to talk about it for the rest of his life because it was also incredibly fucking funny.

He turned back toward their team and rested his head against Shane’s.

The entire room was staring at them with identical expressions of open-mouthed shock.

Well, except for Carter who was looking at them like he was well aware it was bullshit but he was going to go along with it anyways.

“God,” Carter said after a second and Scott felt Shane twitch and just knew he wasn’t going to be able to keep a straight face for much longer. “I bet Hayden Pike is just heartbroken.”

They really did make a solid team of captains.

The Admirals should remember how lucky they were.

“What.” Huff said.

“Left him behind for Scott,” Carter sighed patting Shane’s knee. Shane’s entire ribcage was spasming now as he choked back his laughter and Scott was pretty sure he was about to burst a blood vessel with the force of holding back his own. “Makes sense, though. What was it you told me, Shane? You have a thing for older men?”

The laugh that burst out of Shane would be seared in Scott's memory for years to come.

It was hysterical and a little wild and so full of the sort of happiness that felt like relief that Scott felt like it'd infused the entire room with joy.

"Oh my god," Eric groaned, catching on to what was happening first, "you're fucking with us, what is *wrong* with you two?"

Scott was smiling so wide it hurt and Carter was cackling, clearly proud of himself for making Shane laugh and Eric was starting to laugh, seemingly despite himself.

"I do have a boyfriend," Scott felt the need to specify, needing them to know that he hadn't been joking about being gay, that the only joke was that there could possibly be a world out there where Shane and Scott were gay for *each other*, that there could possibly be a world where Shane didn't love Ilya and Scott didn't love Kip.

Scott couldn't imagine a world like that; he didn't even want to.

"I also have a boyfriend," Shane said, catching his breath. "He's the reason I can't come out publicly, at least not yet, it's not safe for him at home. It wouldn't even be safe for him to be platonically friendly with me if the world knew I was gay."

That sobered everyone up pretty quickly, like they'd finally remembered that there were real world implications to their captains being gay, implications outside of friendly ribbing and Twitter conspiracies.

"They really pushed you out of Montreal?" Huff asked, his voice almost soft even as it was edged with an angry sort of disbelief.

"Yeah," Shane said on an exhale, his shoulders slumping as reality crashed back down around them, "if I hadn't gotten injured, I probably would've played out the season there. But I've known since January that I'd be gone by next season, if not sooner."

“I fucking hope we play them in April,” Matti said, his voice nearly a growl. The force of it made Scott recoil slightly. Matti was rarely violent even if he was intense on the ice.

Scott sort of hoped they would too.

He could imagine it now; sending them home in a four-game shutout, humiliating them so thoroughly they knew for a fact that they were nothing without Shane.

“They might not make it to April,” Shane hedged.

“They’re the favorites for the wildcard slot,” Huff pointed out.

“No, I mean, they *physically* might not make it,” Shane said, nodding toward the screen where Ilya was skating toward the faceoff circle for puck drop with an intensity generally reserved for hostage situations, “Marlow and Rozanov know why I left.”

“Oh fuck,” Eric whispered, like keeping his voice quiet would somehow keep them all safe from the wrath of Ilya Rozanov.

Scott almost felt bad for Montreal. Almost.

* * *

For the first time in his entire life, Ilya was thankful he’d inherited his father’s anger.

He’d always hated moments that made his veins boil enough that his anger was brought to the surface, he hated losing sight of himself while he was lost in the blood red haze, but the moment he’d seen Gilbert Comeau with a C on his jersey that was meant to be Shane’s, he’d felt the anger rush in and he hadn’t done anything to stop it.

He knew Shane was watching this game, he knew that Shane was planning to come out to his new teammates because he felt they deserved to know the truth before Shane got on the ice for the first time as an Admiral tomorrow night.

Ilya had no clue how that was going to go. He hoped it would go well and he trusted Scott enough to believe that he'd protect Shane from any fallout, but Ilya wasn't there, he couldn't protect Shane while he was vulnerable. But he could make Montreal wish they'd never even been given a team charter. He could play like the machine Russia had bred him to be instead of a guy who genuinely loved hockey and just happened to be good at it.

So when he stood in front of his team in the locker room between warmups and puck drop, he let the anger wrap around his heart like a vice, he let it show on his face so every person in the room knew he meant it when he said, "we send them home crying."

Ilya stepped out onto the ice and let the anger flood every cell in his body, let it turn him into the version of himself he hated because he knew that as soon as this game was over, he'd get to go home to their Montreal condo. He'd get to shower with Shane's soap, get dressed in whatever clothes Shane had left behind over the years, and fall asleep on the phone with Shane while sleeping in sheets that smelled like his detergent. He could detach from himself now, he could let the anger overwhelm him, because he knew that simply existing in a space he'd shared with Shane would pull him back from the edge.

He let himself fall into the darkness where nothing mattered except for the complete and utter annihilation of his opponent. And when the red light went off only 30 seconds into the first period, Ilya knew he'd succeed.

* * *

Shane felt a little bit bad about the fact that he'd been shocked to realize Ilya was channeling his anger into playing like a fucking mad man instead of into violence.

But by the end of the first period Boston was up 3-0 and Montreal was starting to get angry. Ilya had scored the first goal of the game 30 seconds in and hadn't slowed down once. Boston was moving quickly, changing their lines with greater frequency than they normally did. The frequent shift changes had them coming off the bench with explosions of power that easily broke through Montreal's defense.

Montreal came onto the ice for the second period like they had a score to settle (which they literally *did*) but their anger wasn't focused on the puck, it was focused on the Boston players. They got scrappy almost immediately, pushing the boundaries of legal play and seemingly attempting to *literally* beat Boston into losing.

It wasn't working.

Marlow hit a perfect snap shot three minutes into the second because apparently they hadn't been embarrassing Montreal enough and needed to up the ante with a fourth goal and then, about six minutes and two line changes later, he broke Comeau's nose.

Comeau had just checked Ilya against the boards, hard enough that he'd be lucky if his ribs were only bruised. Shane had found himself flooded with a thirst for violence more intense than he'd genuinely ever felt before when, through the fog of anger, he saw Marlow's right glove hit the ground before his fist connected with Comeau's face so hard he quite literally *crumpled*.

"Oh. My. *God*," Carter whispered, sounding almost awed.

Shane didn't give a fuck about Gilbert Comeau. His attention was focused entirely on Ilya as he twisted his torso, testing his pain level and range of motion. Ilya grimaced slightly but he took a breath and shook out his arms before looking down at Comeau and Shane could tell he was fine enough to play. Shane watched a slow smile spread across Ilya's face before he looked back up at Cliff and nodded once, like a god accepting tribute in the form of violence.

He looked like an apex predator and Shane wanted to bite him.

"Is there like a sign-up sheet somewhere to get a massive Russian guard dog as a best friend?" Breezy, one of their younger guys, asked. "That was fucking hot."

"What, Marly knocking him out with one punch or Rozanov looking like a mob boss confirming a hit?" Tommy Andersson, their backup goalie, shot back.

"Both? All of the above? Man, I don't know."

Shane couldn't help but laugh at the exchange and then Tommy and Breezy both turned to him as if he'd be able to offer an actual answer and he just shook his head in amusement, "my Russian guard dog was assigned to me by the League, I'm not quite sure how to find one in the wild."

“Damn,” Breezy muttered, turning his attention back toward the TV where Ilya was almost single handedly decimating Montreal’s power play while Cliff spent his two minutes in the box. Shane was honestly a little shocked that he hadn’t gotten a five-minute major, but, Shane guessed, he hadn’t *technically* fought. He’d just very efficiently knocked Comeau out cold.

Ilya scored with about three seconds left on Cliff’s penalty on what almost looked like an assist from *Hayden* that Shane was choosing to believe had simply been a very, very unfortunately timed turnover from his best friend.

And then Cliff skated out of the penalty box and nodded in Hayden’s direction just as Ilya clapped Hayden’s shoulder as he skated toward the bench to receive his congratulations and Shane realized they were all in fucking cahoots.

To literally anyone else, anyone who hadn’t spent hundreds of hours playing with Hayden Pike, it would’ve looked like a genuine accident.

But Shane *had* spent hundreds of hours playing with Hayden Pike. He knew exactly what it looked like when Hayden lost track of the puck, exactly what it looked like when he was pissed at himself for a turnover. This was not that. He’d kept the puck loose. He’d, Shane was just now noticing on the replay, *tapped the puck toward Ilya* as he’d come in for the steal.

Hayden had just helped Boston score while they were man-down because Cliff had laid out Montreal’s new Captain and he didn’t look even sort of sorry about it.

Shane felt the overwhelming urge to kiss him on the mouth.

In a friendly, entirely platonic way.

The last few minutes of the second went scoreless and Shane decided to take Sunny out into the yard to force himself to breathe during the intermission. His phone vibrated three times in quick succession about five minutes before they were due back on the ice and he pulled it out, wondering who would be texting him right now when pretty much everyone he talked to was either in his house or currently in a locker room in Montreal.

Ilya: my ribs are just bruised, i am fine.

i will call you tonight, lyublyu tebya.

Hayd: *It was an accident. You saw nothing.*

Shane sent an 'I love you' back to both of them and then opened his texts with Jackie and typed: *I want to kiss your husband on the mouth.*

She responded less than thirty seconds later: *I knew that wasn't an accident.*

Shane huffed out a laugh under his breath and tucked his phone back into his pocket before opening the porch door and letting himself and Sunny back inside.

* * *

If the first and second periods had been a humiliation, the third was a fucking massacre.

Ilya scored twice in his first shift bringing the score up to 7-0 with four of those goals credited to him. He played less in that last period with the coaches using the buffer to give their 3rd and 4th line a little more ice time leading up to playoffs.

Hammersmith scored ten minutes in bringing them up to 8-0.

And then Ilya's line got put back in with 58 seconds left of regulation play. They were at the face off circle to the right of Montreal's goal and Ilya waited as Victor crouched in front of Pike. Pike won the face off because he was better than Ilya gave him credit for but his pass to Olsson was easily intercepted by Connors who tapped it back to Ilya who immediately chipped it over Drapeau's shoulder right into the top shelf for his fifth goal of the game and Boston's ninth.

The buzzer sounded and Ilya felt the anger that'd been strangling him all night let up just a bit, just enough for him to become an asshole rather than a robot.

He skated toward Drapeau and spoke low, quiet enough that no one else could hear him but loud enough that he knew the goalie could, "if you spent as much time practicing as you do being a bigot

you might get better, no?”

He smiled, a sharp nasty thing, and then turned and skated away just as his words sunk in and Drapeau’s eyes lit up with bitter anger.

* * *

The Admirals were sitting in stunned silence as the buzzer sounded.

A 9-0 loss wasn’t just rare. It was an embarrassment.

Shane watched as Ilya skated toward Drapeau and whispered something that had Drapeau screaming after him but too weighed down with goalie pads to be able to move fast enough to catch up and fight him.

Ilya just skated away with an almost pleasant closed-mouth smile on his face.

He was a fucking psychopath and Shane got to marry him.

He was the luckiest man alive.

Chapter End Notes

did anyone watch new jersey get the shit kicked out of them by the islanders the other night? bc i did. and i used the score sheet to space out boston's goals.

Chapter 23: i'll make a brand new start of it, in old new york

Chapter Notes

changed my mind on what game would be shane's first game back (i'm fully using the rangers actual schedule from march/april 2017) because i miscounted how many games were left in the regular season and i like multiples of five.

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

March 2017

Shane woke up slightly before his alarm on Friday morning to Sunny pressing her cold little nose against his neck as she seemingly attempted to crawl into his skin.

He wrapped his arms around his cuddly puppy and forced himself to take a breath.

Today was the day. After five weeks on IR, a mid-season trade, moving countries, and working his ass off with the trainers to come back *better* than he'd been, today was his first game as an Admiral.

His gameday routine looked different now, but he could follow the same pattern.

After a short run with Sunny, thirty minutes of yoga, a shower, and a breakfast that included both a smoothie *and* actual food recommended by the team nutritionist, Shane got dressed, gathered his suit bag and gear bag, and then loaded himself and Sunny (who'd be sitting in the press box with Christina for the game because the entire media team had ganged up on Shane when he'd said she'd be fine at home if he hired a dog walker) into the waiting town car.

He'd always driven himself to games in Montreal but MSG didn't have parking the way the Bell Center did. It was a change to his routine that he wasn't all that bothered by because it was measurably *less* soothing driving through Manhattan than it'd been driving through Montreal.

They had coaches meetings and captains meetings scheduled throughout the morning and Shane was doing everything he could to convince himself this was normal, that this was just another game.

He'd been doing walk throughs with the team for the past two weeks and he'd run through a full practice with them on Thursday afternoon. It didn't feel like enough, it felt a little like he was running in blind. He wanted to be on the ice in Montreal as starting center with Hayden to his left and Wilson to his right, with J.J. and Comeau behind him and Drapeau in the goal. He wanted the security of the line he'd known pretty much his entire career. What he really wanted, if he let himself think about it, was for that line he'd spent so many hours playing with to still feel like family.

But it wasn't, not anymore. Maybe it never had been.

Tonight, he'd get on the ice to Scott's left with Carter across the rink and Matti and Breezy behind them with Bennett in the goal.

He'd get on the ice with an entire shift who knew his secret and hadn't turned their backs.

The car pulled up in front of the player entrance and Shane shouldered his gear bag, picked up his suit bag, and made sure Sunny's leash was properly secured before thanking the driver and heading into the building.

* * *

Ilya was pacing a hole through the floor of his hotel room in Ottawa. They didn't play until the next day but it hadn't made sense, travel wise, to return to Boston for a single day when Ottawa was only two hours from Montreal.

Montreal was playing in Newark the following day and Ilya knew that J.J. and Hayden were directly defying management to drive into the city and watch Shane's first game in New York. Shane didn't know that. Hayden had only told Ilya the day prior right after the pair had happily agreed to turn a blind eye to Boston kicking the shit out of their teammates.

They were both in deep shit with Montreal management and Ilya now knew for a fact that Hayden had withdrawn from extension negotiations himself before they'd had a chance to step back. J.J. wasn't much better. The only benefit he had that Hayden didn't was that there was still a year left on his contract so Montreal either had to put him on waivers or find a trade. Hayden was sort of just existing in the ether until his agent secured a solution.

He was a solid player, though, and a good person to have tied to your franchise. He didn't create scandals and he didn't talk back unless it was in protection of a teammate or because he had a genuine issue with whatever was going on. He'd find a place; Ilya just hoped it was somewhere close to Shane. He hated to admit it, but Hayden was a great friend and Shane deserved to have his best friend back.

But back to Ilya pacing in Ottawa.

He wanted to be in New York, he wanted to be watching Shane, he wanted to be there to welcome him home after the game and tell him how incredible he was.

He was interrupted from his pacing by his phone ringing.

His brow scrunched in confusion when he saw 'Yuna Hollander' on the Caller ID. His first thought was that Shane had been injured but that didn't make sense because, at this point in the day, Shane would be sitting in an office under MSG either with Scott Hunter and Carter Vaughan or with the coaching staff. Or, if he were really unlucky, the media team.

"Hello?" he said.

"Ilya, hi," Yuna greeted. She sounded happy, relaxed, not like the mother of someone who'd just been mysteriously injured while they were safely ensconced in an office. "You're in Ottawa, right?"

"Yes, we just got here but I have nothing to do so I am pacing and thinking about Shane's game."

Ilya didn't know why he'd directly admitted that. He was starting to become convinced that the Hollanders had some sort of magical power that forced him to actually speak about his emotions. It was a little distressing.

"I'm doing the same thing," she said with a fond laugh. Ilya could tell it was fond because it was the same tone as Shane's. "How about I come pick you up and we can stress over Shane's game together? Maybe you could watch the game from our house?"

Ilya looked at his watch and realized it wasn't even noon. Shane's game wasn't until 7:10. If Yuna was calling now, she was offering to spend something like ten hours in Ilya's presence when he'd barely ever even spoken to her without Shane there. Ilya really wasn't sure what to do with the knowledge that it seemed like she genuinely wanted him to accept the offer; that she seemed to want to simply spend time with him, even if it was under the guise of watching Shane's game.

"Yes, okay," he agreed, trying his best to keep his voice steady, "I would like that."

"Good," Yuna replied, sounding almost relieved that Ilya had agreed which sort of made his head spin. "Text me which hotel you're at and I'll let you know when I'm almost there."

* * *

"If you had to be a sea creature, which one would you be?" Carter asked. He was in a spinning office chair, tilted probably a little too far back with his feet up on the conference table in the room they were hiding out in (Scott would probably argue they weren't hiding out, they were simply strategizing, but Shane was willing to admit that they were absolutely hiding out) (the media team had gotten them to agree to doing bits for the team socials once and since then they'd been hounding them like dogs) (they were absolutely going to give in ... again ... eventually ... they just needed a minute).

"Does it have to be a real sea creature?" Scott asked and Shane wasn't even surprised to realize that it'd been an entirely genuine consideration. Scott was actually entertaining Carter's line of questioning.

Carter thought about it for a minute before deciding, "no, it can be fake."

"How would you define fake?" Shane, for some godforsaken reason, found himself asking. "Like, mythological?"

"Sure, or like a creature from a movie or a book or whatever. Just a sea creature, which would you be?"

"I love a good whale shark," Scott said and Shane stared at him, wondering how the fuck the people of New York thought this man was cool. "Don't look at me like that, Hollander. Whale sharks are great."

“I’m sure they are,” Shane said, really trying not to laugh at how *earnest* Scott sounded. “I think sea turtles are cooler, though. I think I’d like to be a sea turtle, specifically an olive ridley turtle. They use the Earth’s magnetic field to navigate which is pretty sick.”

And, hey, Shane had never once claimed he was cool. Nor had anyone who’d ever met him.

“I’d be the kraken,” Carter decided, just staring up at the ceiling with a small frown on his face like he was trying to figure out a way to make that happen for himself.

“You want to be a massive, mythical Norse sea monster?” Shane asked.

“Why not?” Carter said with a little shrug.

“Sure, of course, why the hell not.”

* * *

Ilya panicked for a moment about what to wear to meet Shane’s parents and then remembered that he’d absolutely already met them and that they were two of three people who knew Shane and Ilya were engaged and that they’d actually, for some reason beyond Ilya’s understanding, been happy about it. Yuna had even suggested they get married as a way to keep Ilya safe before she knew. She’d liked Ilya enough to not only be worried for his safety, but to suggest a solution to the danger that legally tied him to her son.

He pulled on jeans and the only nice sweater he’d packed and called it a day.

Yuna was in the lobby, talking to Cliff Marlow of all people, when Ilya stepped out of the elevator.

She was smiling up at Cliff as he talked, his hands waving in the way they usually did when he was at least a little stressed out and trying to make a point.

“Ilya!” Yuna called when she spotted him. Her smile turned from something almost like Shane’s media smile to something genuine and Ilya was once more hit with a wave of emotion when he realized she was *actually happy to see him*.

“Hi, Yuna,” he responded, forcing himself to say her name instead of Mrs. Hollander given the fact that she’d told him to call her Yuna no less than a dozen times. “Is good to see you.”

She patted his arm as he approached and then seemed to mentally say ‘fuck it’ and pulled him into a real hug. It wasn’t as good as a hug from Shane, but it was good enough.

“Good to see you too,” she said, squeezing his waist twice as they let go and stepped away from each other. He’d watched her do the same thing to Shane every time he’d seen them hug and the fact that she was seemingly unconsciously doing the same to Ilya felt important in a way he didn’t quite have the words to express. “Cliff, do you have any plans today? We’re going to go get lunch and you’re welcome to join. Shane’s father is meeting us there.”

“Oh,” Cliff said, eyes widening in surprise and Ilya finally realized what he’d been talking to Yuna about. He’d clearly been apologizing for injuring Shane and Ilya wasn’t sure whether to laugh at how earnest he was sure Cliff had been or cry just a little about how much of a gentle giant his best friend was. “I, uh, don’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing,” Yuna assured him, “Hayden always comes with Shane when we get lunch before Ottawa games, it’s only right that Ilya gets to bring a friend too.”

That simple sentence made Ilya feel more emotions than were feasibly sustainable.

It wasn’t a smile he recognized as genuine or a hug he recognized as the same hug she gave her son; it was an explicit statement that she put Ilya at least somewhat equal to Shane in her mind.

Cliff was looking at Ilya like he was starting to figure something out and Ilya wasn’t quite so sure he was ready for Cliff to jump to conclusions so he nodded and forced himself to speak, “come on, Marly, you should join us. You can tell her all about how it felt to break Comeau’s face.”

“Absolutely,” Yuna agreed, nodding a little furiously, “I’d like to live vicariously through you.”

Cliff laughed a little and his shoulders relaxed, “alright, alright, I’ll join. Thank you, Mrs. Hollander.”

“Yuna,” she corrected, patting him softly on the forearm before turning and heading toward the door, “call me Yuna.”

* * *

After their mid-day coaches meeting, they ended up wandering down the street to get lunch and Shane was very happily eating his chicken sandwich, wondering why he’d ever limited himself to only eating fish, when Scott burst out laughing.

“What?” Shane asked as Carter simply grabbed Scott’s phone out of his hand to see what’d made him laugh like that. Scott didn’t put up any sort of fight so Shane relaxed a little from his immediate nerves over Carter just grabbing Scott’s phone. Scott’s phone that had evidence of Kip’s existence when he hadn’t yet told the team about him in any sort of detail. Scott’s phone that had evidence of Shane and Ilya’s relationship.

Carter started laughing too and Shane’s nerves were officially overrun by curiosity so he reached out and grabbed the phone for himself.

And there on Scott’s Twitter feed was a photo of Shane’s parents out for lunch with Ilya Rozanov and Cliff Marlow.

Ilya’s arm was thrown over the back of the booth behind his mom’s shoulders and Cliff was sitting across from them next to Shane’s dad telling some story that seemed to involve a lot of hand gestures. Ilya looked delighted and Yuna was leaning forward like she was hanging on to every word Cliff was saying. Shane couldn’t see his dad’s face from the angle the photo was taken but he was sure David probably had the same look as Yuna.

“Hollander, what the hell,” Carter said, catching his breath.

Shane just blinked a couple of times, trying to see if that might make the photo make any more sense. They were in the restaurant Shane, Hayden, and his parents always went to when Montreal played in Ottawa. The restaurant his parents always took their son and his best friend to and Shane got the odd (and overwhelmingly giddy) feeling that taking their son and his best friend out to lunch was *exactly* what his parents were doing.

“Roz was on bereavement when I moved to New York,” Shane explained, knowing Carter was going to see right through the half lie and somehow not feeling all that anxious about him drawing the correct conclusions, “he flew up to Ottawa to drive my car down so my parents wouldn’t have to make the drive again after they’d just driven to Boston and back. He’s a real charmer when he’s not trying to knock your teeth out on the ice, I think my mom’s considering the merits of adult adoption.”

His mom had actually been considering the merits of marriage for citizenship before finding out that Shane and Ilya were already engaged, but Shane absolutely wasn’t going to say that part out loud.

Carter just stared at him for a second before smiling softly, his eyes a little full of wonder, “you guys really have been friends this whole time, haven’t you?”

“The rivalry was a marketing ploy,” Shane shrugged, “I mean, we’re absolutely competitive and I promise you I find a whole lot of joy in kicking his ass, but we were never really rivals.”

* * *

Scott thought back to the day he and Kip had gone to see Shane’s new house, to the way Ilya kept smiling at him like he knew something Scott didn’t. He looked at the picture of Ilya entirely comfortable with Shane’s parents, the picture that looked eerily similar to ones Scott had seen before of Shane and Hayden out to lunch with Shane’s parents, and started to draw some pretty wild conclusions.

He wasn’t going to ask about it, especially not here in a restaurant where anyone could overhear, but he was *absolutely* going to add ‘Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov Married???’ to his mental conspiracy board.

* * *

The day after lunch passed by in a bit of a blur.

They’d wandered around Midtown for a while just enjoying the early spring weather that hung on for a few weeks between the winter chill and the way summer always got a little too muggy. Then they’d made their way back to MSG to change into their suits and move through the paces of pre-game

media and last minute meetings and a team meal and Shane's brain didn't slow down enough to actually process the passage of time until he was sitting in his stall in the Admirals' home locker room in his dress pants and shirt, his tie undone and his jacket already hanging up, staring down at his new jersey.

And then his brain sped right back up.

It felt like his first regular season game his rookie year. He remembered the way his mind had gone fuzzy and his vision had started to tunnel; he remembered the way his heart had sped up and his lungs had felt too tight. He remembered the way he'd gone quiet and no one had noticed except for –

"Hollander," a voice called from the door, cutting through Shane's spiral just enough for him to look up in question, "someone here to see you."

Shane's eyebrows furrowed, trying to figure out who could possibly be here. His parents and Ilya were in Ottawa, Rose was stuck at some event in L.A., Scott was sitting right next to him, Kip wouldn't be down here for *Shane*, and then he had a wild thought.

He nodded to the security guard who'd come to get him and set his jersey down in his stall before heading into the hall, pulling his tie all the way off and tucking it into his back pocket as he went.

And there, standing just outside the door to the family room, was Hayden. He was dressed in jeans and a bright red Team Canada sweatshirt that Shane recognized as one of his own that Hayden must've stolen at some point. It had the maple leaf on the front, #24 on the shoulder, and HOLLANDER across the back.

"J.J.'s on his way," Hayden said, his hands tucked into his pockets like he was nervous about Shane's reaction, "got stuck in traffic, Wilson covered for me but the kids were creating a distraction for J.J. and I think they might've done a little property damage but I'm sure it's –"

He cut himself off with an "oof" as Shane crashed into him, wrapping his arms around Hayden's shoulders and feeling his lungs finally draw in a full breath. Hayden's arms came up a half second later, wrapping around Shane like a vice, one arm locked around Shane's torso with hand spanning over Shane's ribs and the other across Shane's upper back with his fingers clutching onto the fabric of the shoulder of Shane's shirt.

Shane wanted to ask what the fuck Hayden was doing here when it'd required a multi-person distraction to get him and J.J. out of the team hotel in Newark, he wanted to ask why they were risking it, but he already knew the answer. He knew that Hayden, specifically, would do anything for him. He knew that J.J. wouldn't listen to directions from management that he thought were bullshit. So instead of asking, instead of forcing Hayden to admit that it hadn't gotten better in Montreal even though Shane had left, Shane just tucked his face into Hayden's neck and ignored the fact that he could feel a damp spot forming on his shoulder.

"Where are you sitting?" Shane asked.

"Your seats," Hayden answered, his voice muffled against the fabric of Shane's shirt, "Hunter told the box office we were coming."

Of course Scott was involved. Shane wasn't even surprised.

Shane held on a minute longer, the two of them just standing in silence as the world moved on around them, and then he took a deep breath and stepped back, clapping his hands onto Hayden's shoulders, "I'm glad you're here. I've missed you."

"I miss you too, bud," Hayden said, leaning forward and knocking their foreheads together before grabbing the sides of Shane's head and yanking him down so he could smack a kiss into his hair.

Shane let out a light laugh that had Hayden grinning and for just a second it all felt normal again.

"Alright," Hayden breathed, ruffling Shane's hair and then stepping back, "I'm gonna go sit down. I love you, I'm proud of you, kick some ass."

"I love you too, Hayd," Shane said.

"And when you score your first goal I expect you to blow me a kiss in the audience. Jackie said it'd be alright."

Shane laughed for real that time, loud and carefree and Hayden's grin only got bigger, "that's probably because I texted her last night and told her I wanted to kiss you on the mouth after you

‘accidentally’ assisted Boston.”

“Are you trying to get me killed?” Hayden asked, looking around like Ilya might pop out from the shadows.

“Shut up,” Shane said, the words barely even audible through his laughter at Hayden’s theatrics.

“I’m not kidding, Shane, he’s fucking scary.”

Shane just physically turned Hayden around and shoved him lightly down the hall, “go sit down, you drama queen.”

“Love you!” Hayden yelled again without turning back around.

“Love you too!” Shane called back just as he disappeared around the corner.

Shane blew out a breath and then headed into the locker room with a smile still fixed on his face that he couldn’t quite tamp down. He was more than ready to get back on the ice.

* * *

Scott skated out for warm ups a couple paces ahead of Shane and knew the moment Shane hit the ice, not because he could hear blades scraping behind him, but because every sound in the entire damn arena, the music, the sounds of players skating and line mates talking, was drowned out by the absolute cacophony of noise coming from the home crowd.

There were so many people screaming, so many front row fans banging on the glass, that it almost sounded like static. Scott was genuinely concerned he’d lost his hearing for a moment before the sound filtered through and he could finally make out the chants of, “*HOLL-AN-DER! HOLL-AN-DER!*”

He turned back around and looked at Shane who’d stopped about three paces onto the ice and was simply turning in a slow circle, his left foot planted as he used the right for momentum, taking in the

crowd.

This wasn't even as loud as it would get. The seats were only about a third of the way full with the fans die hard enough to come for warm-ups. It was a Friday night game in the final stretch of the regular season and the Admirals were on a winning streak; those seats would be *full* by puck drop and Scott couldn't even imagine how loud it'd get when Shane stepped out with the first line.

* * *

Ilya sat on the Hollander's couch, cuddled up in a blanket he'd stolen from Shane's room after dinner, and watched as Shane stepped onto the ice for warmups to the sounds of thousands of fans already chanting his name. He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture, leaving enough of the living room visible that Shane would be able to tell exactly where he was, and then texted it to him saying, *i'm so proud of you, i love you.*

* * *

Shane went through warm ups feeling excited about hockey for the first time in a long, long while. He went into the locker room and listened to Scott's pregame speech, hanging onto every word and feeling like a rookie all over again; but this time, it was in a good way.

Everything felt new and exciting in a way it hadn't since his rookie season. It felt like every moment brought new possibilities.

He checked his phone one last time as the team started lining up to head onto the ice and found a text from Ilya with a photo of the TV in Shane's parents living room showing Shane waving at the crowd during warmups. The little reminder that Ilya was family now, that his parents had accepted him with open arms and invited him into their home when Shane wasn't even there, was enough to settle the remainder of Shane's nerves.

He stepped into line in front of Carter and let the sound of 18,000 fans cheering wash over him as they skated out under the red and blue lights. He listened to the announcers call out their names and stood in the second row beside Scott and Carter for the Star-Spangled Banner without hearing O Canada played either before or after for the first time in his career.

And then he skated to the left side of the ice and watched Scott settle in for puck drop.

Everything sped up after that.

The puck hit the ice at exactly 7:10.

At 7:13 Shane scored his first goal as an Admiral, turning toward the seats a couple rows above the home bench to blow a kiss to Hayden as the light turned red.

At 10:00, the final whistle blew on yet another Admirals victory.

Chapter End Notes

fair warning people the next ones gonna be stupid fucking long bc i want to get their whole playoff run v montreal into one chapter so we can be done with the homophobes and live our lives in peace

Chapter 24: don't get sad, get even

Chapter Notes

i fucking lied ... this is only game one of playoffs v. montreal. this shit ran away from me. the next chapter will be the rest of this series.

also, fun fact, the new york rangers actually beat montreal in round one of the stanley cup playoffs in 2017. they then lost round two to ottawa. that will not be happening here, so sorry to the centaurs.

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

April 2017

By the grace of whatever god was out there looking out for losers and bigots, Montreal won their last four games of the regular season and grabbed onto the wild card slot by the skin of their fucking teeth.

New York had also won their last stretch of regular season games with a victory over Philadelphia at home, D.C. and Ottawa on the road, and one more against Pittsburgh at home.

Now they had two days of practice before Montreal landed in New York for Game 1 of the first round of playoffs.

Shane's entire team was playing through a scrimmage like they were preparing for actual fucking war and Shane really wasn't sure how to get them to calm down but he needed to figure it out because someone was going to get injured if they kept going like this.

"Jesus fuck," he muttered as he watched Breezy launch Carter through the air with a check that seemed like it'd been powered by one too many energy drinks and an unsustainable craving for revenge. "Hey!" Shane yelled, putting on his best captain's voice and really not giving a shit if Scott felt like he was stepping on his toes, "all of you, cut it the fuck out. We're going to beat Montreal because they suck and are incapable of playing as a unit. We do not suck but we'll only be capable of playing as a unit if we don't kill each other before Wednesday, alright?"

He got a rink full of blank stares in return, like not a one of them could figure out why he was concerned.

“Breezy you almost just hospitalized Vaughny, Carter twelve seconds before that you stole the puck from Scott like you were thinking about ripping his throat out with your teeth. You two are currently playing for the same team. I don’t want to show up on Wednesday and be forced to play like I’m the only person on the ice because we’re all in our own heads bottling shit up until everything detonates around us. I played all of January and February like that. I’m fucking over it. So, let’s stop playing like we’re in a fight to the death and start playing like we know for a fact we’re good enough to win this in four.”

That finally got a reaction.

From the volume of the cheers and the crashing of sticks against the boards, Shane knew they were ready and when they pulled it together and started up the scrimmage again, Shane could tell they’d listened.

* * *

Shane walked into the tunnel Wednesday night like it was any other game.

His parents were in his seats directly behind Scott’s where Kip was sitting with his friend Elena. Scott still hadn’t introduced Kip to anyone other than Shane and Ilya and Shane could feel a fight brewing from a mile away but that wasn’t something he needed to think about right now.

Maybe after they sent Montreal home crying he could remind Scott that Kip had introduced Scott to several of *his* friends and maybe he could return the favor. And, if that didn’t work, he could maybe bring up the fact that half of Twitter thought *Shane* was dating Kip because they’d been spotted at a gay bar together and the world hadn’t yet imploded so maybe, just maybe, it’d be alright if Scott introduced him to the team.

Just a thought.

A thought that could wait another few hours to be shared.

Shane was in a suit Rose had picked out that she, for reasons beyond Shane’s understanding, called his ‘Princess Diana Revenge Dress.’ Yes, the title caps were apparently imperative. He’d made that mistake once. Never again.

It was all black and, unlike the suits he'd been wearing most of his career, actually properly fit him. He'd also spent nearly an entire hour messing with his hair on FaceTime with Rose before leaving his house so she could educate him on the fine line that existed between 'artfully tousled' and a bird's nest.

He'd hired a dog walker (who'd come recommended by a couple of the guys who had dogs) to stop by his house to feed and walk Sunny during the game and then his parents would be at his house to take care of her after if this game went how Shane wanted and he ended up going out to celebrate with his team.

The locker room moved in an already familiar pattern.

A pregame playlist run by one of the equipment managers that was full of songs the team had requested be added throughout the season was playing over the speakers, players were moving in and out as they met with trainers or got pulled aside by coaches, Scott was in his stall pulling on blue banana printed socks while Carter sat next to him leaning back against his locker with his eyes closed meditating but refusing to call it that.

Shane methodically took off his suit, folding his pants over the hanger before adding his shirt and jacket, his tie untied and draped over top. He pulled on his compression layer and his first pair of socks and then waited, joining Carter in his non-meditation while Scott sat between them staring off into space.

Just before the coaches came in to read off the line ups, all three of them got up and started pulling on their pads and guards. Shane got dressed in the same order he had since the first game he'd declared he didn't need his dad to help him anymore.

The lines were read, the team cheering louder and louder at every name until the room was so full of energy Shane swore he could feel it reverberating in his spine.

They moved through warmups like it was an exhibition match. Shane got pulled into a game of keepie uppie with Carter that had both of them laughing as their fans started counting for them like it was a practiced chant. Breezy and Gillis had moved closer to them to stretch so they could egg them on. Every bit of it was unplanned, every bit of it was simply the way they interacted as a team, and every bit of it was a reminder of how much Shane Hollander had changed since leaving Montreal.

When they returned to the locker room, Shane settled into his stall and waited for Scott to start his speech but Scott simply stared at Shane until he got the idea.

Shane nodded and took a breath to steel himself before standing.

The room fell into an almost eerie hush as he rose to his feet and Shane felt the weight of it all settle on his shoulders. But instead of pushing him down, instead it making him feel like Atlas holding up the world, it settled over him like an aegis. Every eye turned his way, every ear tuned in to listen to his words felt like armor. These people weren't going to hang him out to dry on the ice, these people weren't going to turn their backs or hit him when he was most vulnerable. This team was different, and it was his.

"This game isn't for revenge," Shane said. He didn't raise his voice; he didn't have to. "This game isn't going to be a blood bath because we're playing violent or because we give into *their* violence. Because we're not gonna do that. We are going to go out there and play a clean game of hockey, a flawless game of hockey that no one, even our harshest critic, will be able to criticize. If they get violent, let them. Don't fall to their level. Because I can tell you for a fact that rising above it, acting like their vitriol and violence is beneath us, is only going to make them angrier and when they get angry they get sloppy. Let them get angry, let them get sloppy and for every mistake they make, we get more precise, more lethal. We stay consistent, we make our plays, we let them destroy *themselves*. We send them home crying not because we've caused them physical pain, but because we've destroyed them mentally. We are going to go out there and play such great fucking hockey that they don't even want to *show up* to Game 2. Let's get this done."

* * *

And thus marked the first time Scott Hunter had ever been afraid of Shane Hollander.

They lined up in the tunnel and skated out onto the ice to the cheers of a packed house and Shane didn't make a sound. His face didn't change the entire time, not when the crowd started chanting his name, not when O Canada was played in MSG for the first time since he returned from IR, not when he tapped gloves with Hayden as the Captains stepped forward.

The happy, smiling version of Shane that everyone had seen during warm ups was long gone and in his place stood Shane *fucking* Hollander.

And Montreal didn't even have the sense to look afraid.

* * *

From the moment the puck dropped, Shane knew Montreal was going to play a violent game.

Scott won the face off and shot a pass off to Carter who blew through the neutral zone and knocked it over to Shane. Before the puck hit his stick, Comeau was across the ice and crashing into him from behind.

He checked Shane into the boards hard enough Shane honestly worried it'd knocked a couple teeth loose but Shane didn't go down and he didn't fight back. He simply stared at Comeau as the absolute fucking dumbass got called for charging fifteen seconds into the first period. He stood impassive and watched Comeau's face, still bruised from where Cliff had decked him two weeks prior, twist in anger as the tape was reviewed and the refs doled out a 5-minute major for charging and a match misconduct for checking from behind and attempt to injure.

Not even a minute into the game and New York had a power play.

The refs dragged Comeau off the ice where he'd spend the balance of the game in the locker room and Theriault, who was quite clearly livid, pulled Wilson off to serve the 5-minute major.

Play resumed and Scott scored off an assist from Shane 45 seconds later.

Their shift got pulled off right after that and Shane watched as the second, third, and fourth lines spent each of their 50 second shifts running circles around Montreal while Montreal did exactly what Shane had said they'd do; got messier and messier.

When Shane's line jumped back in, there was still a minute left on the penalty clock and Shane decided he wasn't going to let it tick down without taking his revenge.

The moment Carter passed to him, he tore down the ice, using every ounce of speed he had and, just to prove Ilya and his constant needling about Shane's shitty backhand wrong, transferred his weight to his front foot and snapped the puck directly between Drapeau's legs before he even realized Shane was shooting.

New York was up 2-0 and the period wasn't even a quarter of the way over.

By the end of the first, Montreal had been called twice for roughing (one against Shane and the other against Wagner on the second line), once for tripping, and once for holding. And somewhere in the power plays Montreal just kept *handing* them., Shane scored a second time and Luke Gillis scored his first playoff goal in the first playoff game of his rookie season.

New York was up 4-0 after twenty minutes of play.

Shane really didn't think they'd be able to pull off a 9-0 win like Boston had. That'd simply be insane. But he decided he'd like to get close.

The locker room was buzzing during the intermission. Everyone had realized that Shane had been entirely correct; that playing really fucking good hockey would piss them off more than fighting back.

The second period went scoreless until the very last minute when Breezy broke the fucking sound barrier as he rocketed up the ice, sniping the puck right below Drapeau's glove to bring the score up to 5-0 with their first defensive goal.

By the third period, Montreal was falling apart at the seams; they were getting increasingly violent and were whispering threats and slurs to Shane that would probably haunt him in his dreams every time they had him up against the boards. But he refused to let any of it get to him while he was still on the ice. He just kept his head down, kept his face set, and kept playing like the guy who'd taken their failing franchise and turned them into back-to-back champions.

Actually, he played better than that guy.

Shane felt stronger than ever before, he felt faster and smarter and just a little unhinged and, on top of all that, he was playing like a guy who had something to prove.

On his fourth shift of the third period, Shane rocketed a pass straight between J.J.'s legs that Carter smacked into the back of the net on a one-timer. Fifteen seconds later, Carter returned the favor and Shane scored his third goal of the game.

They got a break, then, as hundreds of hats were cleared from the ice.

The game ended five minutes later in a 7-0 shutout with Montreal one minute short of breaking the record for most penalty minutes racked up by a team in a single game. Truly impressive.

* * *

Ilya stood shirtless just outside the visitor's locker room in Philadelphia after Game 1 of their series and put on his best cocky smile while he watched in amusement as their comms director attempted to corral the press pool.

Boston had played a great game, they'd won 4-2 in a rather evenly matched match-up and he, specifically, had played a really great game.

He was expecting questions about how they'd played or what he thought their prospects were for the rest of the series, if not the playoffs at large.

He was not expecting the representative from Sportsnet to ask him if he'd seen the score of the New York v. Montreal game.

He hadn't, much to his dismay.

He'd wanted to look but he'd been immediately dragged into this hallway so he was left uninformed to how his fiancé was doing after playing his old team. His old team who Ilya hated with the fury of a thousand suns, just in case you were wondering.

"No," he said, instead of saying *any* of that out loud, "I have not."

He was then told that New York hadn't quite pulled off the 9-0 shut out that Boston had two weeks prior but they *had* pulled off a 7-0 shut out with a Hollander hat trick and Ilya didn't even attempt to stop himself from grinning.

He knew he needed to say something to make it seem like he was teasing, say something that made it seem like he was still an asshole and not desperately in love with Shane Hollander. So, he did his best impression of the caricature of Ilya Rozanov and said, “but I bet he did not score with backhand like I did tonight, he may be great player, second best in the League, but he has very weak backhand.”

“He did, actually,” the guy from ESPN said. He then held up his phone with a clip already loaded like he’d expected Ilya to make that comment and Ilya was forced to stand there on a *live goddamn broadcast*, and watch Shane score one of the sexiest fucking goals Ilya had ever seen.

Jesus Christ. Ilya got to marry that man. His life was insane.

* * *

Shane was out of the shower and getting dressed while the entire New York Admirals roster discussed going to the Kingfisher to celebrate their first official murder of the Montreal Voyageurs (Carter had announced that it felt fitting to celebrate their demise in a gay bar) (everyone had immediately agreed) when his phone started ringing.

He didn’t pick it up, expecting it’d probably be someone calling for a comment or some other bullshit that could wait until tomorrow.

And then it rang again.

And again.

On the fourth time, Shane looked at his phone.

He saw Ilya’s name and his adorable grinning face from the All Stars locker room looking up at him and declined the call just to see how pissed he’d get.

He knew Ilya was fine, he’d checked their score sheet before showering, so he wasn’t concerned that this was a call saying he’d been injured and that someone, for some reason, had thought to call Shane about it.

Shane watched as three texts came through in rapid succession.

Ilya: pick up the phone hollander.

now.

sorry, that was mean. please pick up the phone.

And then the phone rang a fifth time.

Shane picked it up because, after all, Ilya *had* said please.

“Rozanov,” he greeted and the shouting in the locker room cut out entirely. Shane turned around to look at his team as if to say, ‘*what the fuck*’, and they all just continued to watch in interest. Shane felt a little like an animal in a zoo.

“Hollander,” Ilya said, his voice carrying through the room even though the phone wasn’t on speaker.
“That *goal*, what the fuck was-”

“I’m in the locker room, Roz,” Shane said before Ilya could continue because Shane had a pretty good idea of where he was about to go.

“Put me on speaker.”

“That sounds like a horrible idea.”

“I only have good ideas, Hollander. Put me on speaker.”

Carter looked like he was about to choke on his own tongue as he tried not to laugh and Scott was looking at Shane with eyes that very clearly communicated *you’re the one who decided to date him*.

Shane braced for insanity and put the phone on speaker.

Ilya must've heard the sound change or heard the faint beep of the button because he started talking without Shane's prompting.

"Shane Hollander, that backhand was a sexy fucking goal," Ilya said and Shane looked skyward. He wasn't sure if he was praying for patience or hoping that God might strike him down. "I am so happy to see that playing with Old Man Hunter didn't slow you down. Now, listen up," he said before Scott could cut him off, "all of you listen to me. You better be nice to Hollander or I will find your houses and kill you in your sleep. Actually, no, I will find your houses and *Marlow* will kill you in your sleep. Do you understand?"

Gillis looked a little like he was about to pass out and Shane honestly couldn't tell if it was because 'Mob Roz' (as the rookies had apparently taken to calling him after the Boston v. Montreal game) really did it for him or if it was because he was genuinely afraid for his life.

It honestly might've been both.

"Roz, we're going to the Kingfisher to celebrate the win," Shane said as everyone else just stood there in stunned silence. Apparently most of them had thought the whole 'Russian guard dog' thing was a joke. Shane sort of wanted to laugh at how very wrong they'd been. "The whole team."

Ilya paused for a moment and Shane, more familiar with Ilya Rozanov's expressions than he was with his own, could see him giving a decisive nod in his mind's eye before he said, "good, no deaths tonight. Good win, boys. Go get drunk"

And then the call cut out.

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose and forced himself to take a breath. His fiancé was insane. Like certifiably fucking insane. Shane loved him more than anything.

"Well," Shane said into the silence, "you heard the man, let's go get drunk."

* * *

Scott was packing up his stuff to bring home before going out when Shane quite literally scruffed him like a misbehaving cat and dragged him into the hall before shoving him into the first empty office he found and locking the door behind him.

If Scott hadn't literally just heard Ilya Rozanov salivating over Shane on the phone in front of God and the New York Admirals, he'd probably have a very different idea of what was happening right now.

But, instead, he found himself fearing for his life.

"Take out your phone and text Kip right now."

"What the fuck?" Scott asked, genuinely bewildered. Of all the things he thought he was about to get yelled at for, that was not one of them.

"Have you introduced him to anyone other than Ilya and me?"

"... no."

"We're changing that," Shane said, as if this were a group decision, "now, let's go. Invite him or I will. Twitter already thinks I'm dating him, might be fun to fan the flames."

"I know the last time I said this it nearly got me punched, but you are seriously starting to sound like him."

"I'm well aware, now text your boyfriend and invite him to the *gay bar* that our *entire team* is *willingly going to*."

"I don't know if I'm -"

"Ready, yeah," Shane cut him off, rolling his eyes and if it were literally anyone else Scott would probably be offended but Shane *wasn't* anyone else. He knew the exact position Scott was standing in right now and he wouldn't be forcing Scott to do anything if he didn't think it was a. safe and b.

necessary. “Scott, have you ever heard of *friends*? Don’t think about Twitter, they’re all fucking crazy. Think about our team. Think about the fact that Ilya just called me sexy and threatened to have them all murdered in my honor on speaker to our entire team and then consider the fact that I can *guarantee* that everyone in that room except for Carter and *maybe* Bennett probably still think Ilya’s straight. If you say ‘hi this is my friend Kip Grady, he’s lovely and you should all meet him’, they’re going to believe that he’s your friend because that’s their status quo. Also, of lesser importance, I just dragged you out of the locker room and into a locked office, you could kiss Kip square on the mouth and half of them would still think we were, for some godforsaken reason, in an incredibly poorly concealed secret relationship.”

Scott wasn’t an idiot.

He looked at the situation in front of him and came to several quick conclusions:

1. He trusted Shane.
2. Shane was fucking pissed at him.
3. Shane and Kip were friends which meant:
 1. Kip was probably at least a little pissed at him, and
 2. Kip had probably told Shane why he was pissed at him and Shane was now taking it upon himself to fix it before it got worse.
4. Their entire roster *was* willingly going to a gay bar.
5. He wanted to spend his night with Kip.

He took out his phone and texted Kip.

* * *

Shane and Scott got out of the car they’d called from Scott’s building to the Kingfisher (after taking a different car from the arena to Scott’s building so they could drop off their shit and change because Scott was kind enough to let Shane crash at his apartment) and were met with resounding cheers from their entire team who’d apparently decided to just gather on the curb instead of doing something normal like, oh, I don’t know, *going inside*.

A figure broke out of the pack and Shane barely had time to react before he was nearly laid the fuck out by Hayden.

“Holy shit,” he huffed, taking a full step back and silently thanking New York’s trainers for how quickly he’d built up muscle in the past month as he wrapped his arms around Hayden’s waist and caught him before they both went flying.

“I fucking love you.”

“I love you too, man,” Shane said, more than a little bewildered but also incredibly grateful that Hayden was here because this meant he could just sneak into Montreal’s hotel and have a sleepover with Hayden like they were twelve years old instead of having to spend the night in the same apartment as Scott and Kip. “What the hell is going on?”

“Comeau is suspended for the next game, they reviewed the tape again and then somehow some reporter caught him on camera saying he wished he’d hit you harder than Marlow had and some other shit about wanting to end your career and, anyways, the officials tore into the coaches, basically telling them to keep Comeau on a leash and the GMs suspended him to save face.”

“Are you saying you love me for my existence pissing Comeau off so bad he got himself suspended?”

“When you put it like that it sounds pretty shitty.”

Shane laughed and set Hayden back down on his own two feet, “how did you even know we were here?”

“I have your location.”

“You got here before me.”

“Yes, I have your location, saw you were driving this direction, so I started walking and happened to come across 20 of New York’s finest hockey players.”

“You’re insane.”

Hayden just grinned.

Shane looked back up and found the rest of his team still standing on the curb and raised his eyebrows a little as he asked, “what are you all doing outside?”

“We were waiting for -” Carter started before cutting himself off, his brows pinching as he thought over whatever it was he was about to say. He blinked a couple of times and then scratched the back of his neck, “uh, we were waiting for you and Scott?”

Shane looked over at Scott who was looking skyward, exactly as Shane had done in the locker room an hour before, “do you mean to say,” Scott started before looking around the street which was weirdly empty. Then Shane remembered it was a Wednesday and most hockey fans would probably not be at this specific bar so it probably made sense that this block was pretty quiet. Scott still lowered his voice and leaned closer to Carter as he said, “are you telling me that you were waiting for the two gay guys to show up before you went inside?”

Carter just stared back at him for a second before nodding.

“Right, okay, you’re all freaks,” Scott decided, “go indoors, now. Please, you’re embarrassing me.”

The team started filing through the door and Shane watched in amusement as Scott stood on the sidewalk, questioning every one of his life’s choices.

Hayden followed Shane like a puppy as they walked up to the bar to order drinks and Shane decided not to ask why he was here and, instead, simply enjoyed the familiar feeling of celebrating a win with his best friend. Hayden clearly didn’t care that his team had just lost 7-0. He was chatting happily with Shane’s new teammates and quickly making friends even though he didn’t leave Shane’s side once.

About a half hour after they showed up, the door opened and Shane watched Kip walk into the bar. He looked nervous and Shane wanted to step in and help but this was Scott’s thing and Scott needed to be the one to make the connection otherwise Shane was certain it’d just become another fight.

* * *

Scott’s eyes locked onto Kip the second he walked through the door and he felt a little lightheaded.

He looked over at Shane, hoping for some sort of direction because all logic had sort of fled his brain, and simply got an encouraging smile and a not at all subtle head nod telling Scott to just get on with it already.

Scott shot Shane a rather ineffective glare and then raised his hand, let the smile that always tugged at his lips when he saw Kip appear in full force, and called, “Kip, hey!”

Kip looked shocked and Scott felt like an absolute ass.

The half comment Shane had made about Scott having only introduced Kip to Shane and Ilya as *anything* was ringing through his brain.

He’d come out to his team and nothing bad had happened. He’d even told them all he had a boyfriend and they’d just been excited for him. He could introduce them to Kip and the world wouldn’t end. He wouldn’t even have to say the word ‘boyfriend’. They’d all probably just *know* so long as Scott didn’t do something stupid like continuously say that Kip was *just his friend*.

Kip walked over to him, looking a little wary, and Scott threw an arm around his shoulders, loose enough that Kip could step away if he wanted but enough to hopefully show Kip that Scott *wanted* him here, that he always wanted Kip in whatever space he was in.

“Guys, this is Kip. Kip, this is everyone.”

“Kip!” Carter said, clearly delighted about something though Scott really didn’t know what. He sincerely doubted it was just the fact that Scott had brought his boyfriend, that was far too simple for Carter Vaughan. “That’s the cutest fucking thing I’ve ever heard! Are you kidding me with that shit?”

“It’s, uh, short for Christopher?” Kip said, clearly not having a single clue what to do in the face of an adrenaline drunk (and making his way toward alcohol drunk) Carter Vaughan coming off of a win.

“Kip!” Carter repeated. He opened his mouth to say something else but then a hand landed on his shoulder and Scott watched as Carter looked down, saw Shane, and immediately shut up.

It appeared Ilya Rozanov wasn’t the only person Shane could walk like a dog.

“Hey, Kip,” Shane greeted, smiling now that Carter was no longer about to make a very loveable fool of himself.

“Shane,” Kip greeted, returning his smile, “great game tonight, you played like a beast. I think your mom lost her voice cheering for you.”

“Why does everyone else get to meet Hollander’s parents before me?” Huff grumbled.

“Who has met my parents?” Shane asked, entirely perplexed.

“I have,” Hayden said.

“Rozanov and Marlow!” Breezy said from somewhere behind Scott, “why are Boston Bears and Scott’s friend getting to meet your parents before your team!”

“I’ve also met Shane’s parents,” Hayden reiterated, apparently finding it necessary that everyone knew that.

“Christ,” Shane said under his breath before looking back up and clearly trying to stop himself from sounding completely exasperated, “you can all meet my parents tomorrow. They’re staying at my house; we can go over after practice. Now, everyone say hi to Kip and be nice to him or I’ll tell Rozanov to sic Marlow on you.”

The line of threats was getting quite tenuous.

Scott sort of wondered if Cliff knew that Ilya and Shane were offering him up for acts of violence.

Scott sort of got the idea that Cliff wouldn’t mind.

Shane wandered away and Hayden quickly introduced himself to Kip before turning to follow him. Luke Gillis, a 19-year-old rookie who’d seemingly decided he was going to get himself adopted by

Shane if it killed him, did the same thing.

Kip looked up at Scott as the room started moving around them again and Scott decided he was going to listen to everything Shane Hollander told him to do for the rest of his life.

Kip looked so damn happy. Just because Scott had invited him out with the team. Scott hadn't even introduced him as his boyfriend and it'd been enough to make Kip smile like that. He deserved more, *so* much more. And Scott was starting to think he might just be ready to give it to him. He wouldn't do anything drastic now, not in the middle of playoffs.

But this summer...

He could do something brave this summer.

Chapter End Notes

as a side note: my sister, ladies and gents

i'm actually reading this one and roughly once a chapter i have the impulse to screen shot something and send it to you before realizing that you wrote it

good job mags

no send it to me i exist on praise.

i hope you die

what the fuck

Chapter 25: it's new york, baby

Chapter Notes

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

April 2017

Game 2 happened on Friday and ended in another shut out.

New York won 4-0 with goals from Shane, Carter, Scott, and Luke.

On Saturday afternoon, they held practice in Tarrytown and then bussed over to the Westchester County Airport and flew to Montreal.

On Sunday afternoon, Shane stepped into the tunnel at the Bell Center flanked by Scott Hunter and Carter Vaughan and, for the first time in his career, walked into the Visitor's locker room.

It was completely and utterly surreal.

Playing the Voyageurs on his new home ice had been strange, but stepping onto the ice here as a visitor felt *wrong*. He was so used to skating out to the sounds of adoring fans, so used to going through his pregame ritual with the knowledge that he'd be playing in front of his home crowd. He knew Montreal had loved him once, but he'd left. And he, in a dark corner of his mind, wondered if he was even deserving of their love, wondered if the fact that he'd spent years lying to himself, his team, and his town meant that they'd never really loved *him*.

He knew he wasn't doing a great job of covering up how off he felt as he moved through the paces of pregame, but he didn't have a single clue what to do about it. He tried every trick he knew for centering himself but every time he stepped out of a coaches' office or a training room, his feet automatically turned toward the home locker room and he had to physically stop himself from following his instincts.

And then they went out for warm ups and Shane was hit by a tidal wave of sound.

The Bell Center was one of the largest NHL arenas, beating Madison Square Garden's game capacity by about 3,000. Shane had played in a sold out Bell Center dozens of times and he certainly expected

it to fill up by game time tonight; what he hadn't expected was to look up and realize the arena was almost at capacity for *warm ups*.

Nearly every one of the Bell Center's 21,000 seats was full.

And every single person was chanting his name.

The place was full of Hollander jerseys, both in Montreal's blue and red and New York's red and white.

Shane forced himself to move forward until he was nearly at center ice and then he pulled off his helmet and just let himself take it all in.

It was incredible and healing and, at the same time, it was all a bit much and it somehow stung, just a little, to be left wondering how many of these people would still be chanting his name if they knew *why* Montreal pushed him out the door. The world had changed and people were more accepting but hockey was a traditional sport with traditional fans.

"Hey, Hollzy," Luke said, skating up next to Shane and somehow quietly pulling him out of his head at the exact right time.

"Luke."

He grinned a little and nudged his shoulder against Shane's, "wanna make a bet?"

"What's the bet?"

"If we win this in four, you have to host a team sleepover at your house."

"That's not how bets work, Luke."

“I think it is,” Luke shrugged.

Shane couldn't help but smile as he shoved Luke away by his helmet, “fine, if we win, we can have a team sleepover at my house,” Luke started grinning and Shane grabbed him by the shoulder and took a bit of a shot in the dark based off of some complaints he'd heard Luke make about his roommates, a couple of AHL and ECHL guys playing for New York area teams, “but, I will only host the sleepover on the condition that you tell me how you really feel about the house you're living in.”

Luke's nose scrunched just a bit as he weighed his options, “fine,” he agreed, “fine, but only if we win in four.”

* * *

Scott watched as Luke rather effortlessly pulled Shane back from the edge he'd clearly been about to tip over in the face of thousands of adoring fans welcoming him to a rink he'd only recently been kicked out of and decided that being constantly teased was well worth it.

Shane was an entirely different person than he'd been when he left Montreal. It was clear to anyone who spent more than 30 seconds with him. He was still the same slightly neurotic guy who didn't exactly love loud noises and crowded rooms, but he joked far more often and laughed freely and he was making meaningful friendships with everyone on the team instead of just a select few.

Luke, though, that was the real change.

Scott hadn't even noticed the kid was struggling until Shane showed up and clocked it immediately. He'd been playing incredible hockey and always getting laughs in the locker room but Shane had pretty quickly seen through the façade. Scott knew for a fact it was because Shane had nearly a decade of experience in cutting through the asshole persona of Ilya Rozanov in order to see the person underneath; still an asshole, maybe, but an incredibly loyal person with struggles he refused to let anyone see.

Over the past month, Luke had all but adhered himself to Shane's side and Scott could tell it was making a difference. He was more sure of himself; the bravado that had served as a mask was morphing into actual confidence. He was putting up points every game and making the sorts of plays that won you the Rookie of the Year and he was only getting better every game.

Scott was honestly starting to wonder if he'd end up being demoted to second line so Shane could play center with Luke to his left. And, honestly, that thought didn't scare him as much as it would've at the beginning of the season.

Luke was 19, Shane was 25, and Scott was 33. He was getting old in hockey years and it was about time for the kids to step in. Shane was in his prime, he *should* be playing the position he was best at on the first line for a winning team.

But those were questions for next year and at that very moment, they had a game to win.

* * *

Comeau was back on the ice and Shane was contemplating homicide.

He jumped over the boards for his second shift of the night and decided that it was time to start scoring just so it would shut the asshole up.

They were only five minutes into the game, but that many minutes scoreless was too many for Shane's liking.

He'd thought the odd feeling of being back in the Bell Center would throw him off his game. He'd thought that the warm reaction from what'd once been *his* home crowd would make him a little less hungry for revenge. But then he'd seen Gilbert Comeau's stupid fucking face and his entire world had narrowed down to kicking the shit out of Montreal.

He caught a pass from Muller as he skated toward the bench and Shane re-entered play and thought to himself that it'd be nice for the 4th line rookie to have an assist on the scoresheet for a playoff game. With that in mind, Shane kept ahold of the puck as he dodged Gagnon on Montreal's defense and cut close to the crease to tap the puck just past Drapeau's left skate. The goal light blazed and Shane allowed himself a brief smile before returning to New York's half of the ice.

Scott won the faceoff and passed to Carter who, even after only a couple weeks of playing together, knew exactly where Shane was going to be as he left the neutral zone. Shane caught the pass easily and, just to be a dick, chipped it straight over Gagnon's head before dialing up his speed as he tracked the puck forward. He skated past it just enough to make Gagnon think he'd lost it and then let his

right foot hang back, kicking the puck straight into the face of his blade just as he approached Drapeau's crease for the second time in less than a minute.

He sniped the puck into the top shelf and stood there, just grinning at a fuming Drapeau, as Carter skated into his side and knocked their helmets together.

Six minutes later Shane watched as Luke chased down a loose puck on New York's half and sped down the ice, keeping control the entire time before driving the puck into the left side of the net, perfectly landing it between the goal post and Drapeau's glove with the sort of accuracy that Shane had always been known for. Shane was on his feet cheering before the light even went off.

With two minutes left in the first period, Shane caught a rebound off the boards and pulled around the back of Montreal's goal before tapping the puck into a slight opening just as Scott bullied his way past J.J.

Scott picked it up and snapped it through the five hole to put them up 4-0.

The New York locker room was *rowdy* during that first intermission, only calming down long enough for Scott to yell at them to keep playing like they had been before they were back in the tunnel and heading for the ice.

The second period was at least a better fight than the first had been.

Someone had lit a fire under Montreal and they started connecting passes like they'd actually played hockey before which only made the game more fun.

Shane loved a competition; it was what had intrigued him about Ilya in the first place.

Winning games against teams and players that didn't put up a fight was never as fun as beating someone who was actually *competing*.

But just because Montreal had remembered that they were a professional hockey team didn't mean they were gaining any ground.

Eric Bennett was playing like a *maniac*.

Every shot that made it past New York's defense was immediately eaten up by the black hole that Bennett had somehow summoned around his net. He was making saves that Shane was pretty sure were contrary to the laws of physics.

And New York's offense wasn't slowing down, either.

Carter scored on their second shift on the ice bringing the score up to 5-0 and Shane followed two shifts later bringing the score to 6-0 and giving them a minute to breathe as hundreds of hats were cleared from the ice.

The second Shane was back over the boards as their shift ended, Luke was on in his place, rocketing after Couillard who didn't even have time to react before Luke had stolen the puck from his cradle and spun around, darting back up the ice toward Montreal's goal. The way Couillard looked down and then over his shoulder before realizing that'd actually just happened was almost comical. Luke smacked the puck into the lower corner of the net with a textbook backhand.

He spun around and pointed at Shane and Shane just knew the little fucker was remembering Ilya telling Shane his backhand during Game 1 had been a sexy goal.

* * *

Ilya's game ended with enough time for him to watch the end of Shane's.

He escaped the press pool and ducked into one of the offices he knew had a TV, thankful that they were home in Boston so he wouldn't have to either scour Philadelphia's facility or watch this on the tiny screen of his phone. He turned on ESPN about a minute and a half into the third period.

The TV was muted and Ilya grumbled to himself for a second before finding the right button and then turning up the volume.

And then he had to check to make sure the volume was actually working ... and that he understood English.

“What the fuck,” he whispered to himself, looking at the remote and seeing if he could rewind, but then the announcers started talking again.

“Hollander might just be playing the best game of his career,” one of them said and Ilya watched as Shane hopped back over the boards for what must’ve been his second shift of the period. “New York is up 7-0. Hollander has scored three of those goals himself and assisted Scott Hunter’s single goal. Carter Vaughan scored one and assisted one of Hollanders, and the other two on the board are from rookie Luke Gillis who’s had an incredible season and only seems to be getting better as the weeks go on.”

There were 17 minutes left on the clock and Shane had already scored three times.

That was the second time in three games Shane had pulled off a hat trick and Ilya found his mind spinning as he tried to remember all of the scoring records for playoff games.

He was about to pull out his phone to Google it when he heard the announcers say, *“and there he goes again!”*

The announcers sounded genuinely bewildered and Ilya just knew Shane must’ve pulled off something crazy earlier in the game for them to be this shocked by Shane Hollander playing good hockey. It couldn’t just be that he’d already scored three times.

Ilya watched as Shane darted around J.J. like he was a test dummy instead of an actual human. The puck was in the back of the net before J.J. even reacted.

Ilya felt his eyes widen.

They’d been right. This really might be the best game of Shane’s career. Every move was precise but it was all backed by a fire that you just couldn’t replicate. He was playing like Ilya had after Sochi, like he had something to prove.

“A fourth goal for Hollander with sixteen minutes still left on the clock,” one of the announcers said and Ilya forced himself to pay attention, something about their tone made it seem important instead of

just a little bit insane. “*He’s one goal away from tying the record for most goals in a playoff game. The record hasn’t been touched since 1989 when Mario Lemieux scored five against Philadelphia.*”

Ilya knew as soon as he heard them that Shane wasn’t just going to tie the record.

Three minutes later, Shane scored his fifth goal.

* * *

Scott didn’t even know it was happening in the moment. Didn’t even realize he was quite literally watching history until he knocked the puck back toward Shane who rocketed it over Drapeau’s shoulder with less than thirty seconds left on the clock and the entire arena *lost their fucking minds*.

He turned around to look at Shane who looked just as bewildered as Scott did and then Hayden was crashing into Shane from behind and Scott’s instincts kicked in. He knew, rationally, somewhere in the haze of exhaustion and adrenaline, that Hayden wasn’t trying to fight Shane. He just couldn’t quite parse out what *was* happening.

“You’re a fucking *mad man*,” Hayden said just as Scott approached.

“What the hell is going on?” Shane asked, leaning forward to knock his helmet against Scott’s seemingly on instinct.

“I have no fucking clue,” Scott yelled back, not even sure if Shane could hear him over the riot happening around them.

Scott looked around, trying to see if there was anything that might give them any indication of what was happening and then he heard Shane’s voice, quiet and almost awestruck, “oh my God.”

“What?” Scott asked, whipping back around.

“Oh my God,” Shane repeated, his eyes locked on the scoreboard.

Scott turned back around and his brain finally started to process what was happening.

They were up 10-0.

That was assuredly crazy. But that wasn't what Shane was reacting to.

Right there, under New York's goal count next to the number 24 was a 6.

Clear as day in LED; six goals for New York's #24.

Shane Hollander had just broken the record for most goals scored in a playoff game. A record that hadn't been broken since Montreal's own Newsy Lalonde set it in 1919. It was later tied by another Montreal legend, Maurice 'Rocket' Richard, who scored five goals in the semi-finals against Toronto in 1944 before going on to win the Stanley Cup in a 4-0 sweep against Chicago.

Shane Hollander, Montreal's Golden Boy who they'd forced out the door, had just broken the record in Montreal's own goddamn barn.

* * *

The moment the buzzer went off, the Admirals bench cleared and Shane found himself in the middle of a dogpile.

He had no clue what was happening around him, his eyes were still locked on the number 6 next to his own jersey number on the scoreboard.

Somehow, he made it off the ice and into the locker room. He pulled off his jersey and pads, feeling a little like he'd forgotten how to breathe and just needing them gone. He left his compression shirt on but then even *that* felt like too much. He yanked it over his head and tossed it into his locker without caring where it landed and that was about when he realized he was starting to shut down.

Too much was happening, too many sounds and changing lights and people touching him. Too many emotions were fighting for limited real estate in his nervous system.

Too much.

It was all too much.

His phone rang in his stall and he answered on instinct.

“Hello?”

“Holy fucking shit, Hollander.”

“Ilya?”

The locker room was buzzing around him and Shane could feel himself tipping into an abyss.

“Shane?” Ilya said, his tone changing in a way Shane couldn’t quite track. He would’ve been able to, had it been any other day, any other time. He knew Ilya like the back of his hand, could tell you everything about him from the specific tilt of a smile, but right now he felt like he was lost at sea.

“Shane, sweetheart, what is wrong?”

“Too much.”

Ilya hummed in understanding and took in an audible breath that Shane followed on instinct, “good, keep breathing and listen to me, yes? Media is going to want to talk to you. It will be loud, there will be lights, it will feel like too much but you are good at media, better than me. You always know what to say. I am watching on ESPN right now, I will see you as soon as you go in the hall, just talk to me, okay? Listen to their questions and tell *me* your answers, okay?”

Shane forced himself to breathe, “okay.”

“Okay,” Ilya echoed, “and when it’s done you can shower and go home to our condo or you can go to Pike’s. Either way you will be home, yes?”

Shane hadn’t even thought about that. The thought made something settle in his chest, something warm enough to thaw a little of the ice that had started to encase his lungs. He felt like he could breathe a little easier, like the oxygen was actually making it to his brain.

“Home, yeah,” Shane repeated and he could hear the shift in his own voice. He sounded more like himself. Maybe not quite the version of himself that’d been appearing more and more the longer he was in New York, but at least different from the version of himself that appeared when his brain was waging a war against itself.

“Now go talk to the media so I can see that pretty face.”

“I have to put on a shirt.”

“You absolutely do not.”

“Rozanov.”

“Hollander, live a little.”

Shane breathed out a light laugh and could’ve sworn he could *hear* Ilya smiling through the phone.

“Thanks,” Shane whispered before hanging up and tossing his phone back into his stall.

He turned around right as Christina appeared, looking more than a little frantic, and put on his best smile as he stepped toward her before she could come across the room to drag him out into the hall, “I’m coming, I’m coming,” he said, holding up his hands in surrender.

She shot him a smile that looked almost apologetic and Shane found himself feeling incredibly grateful for her presence. She was really fucking good at her job. She knew how to market them, she knew how to make them comfortable, and she knew how to get the media to back the fuck off even

though she was about five foot two and didn't really give the vibe of someone who knew how to throw a punch.

* * *

Ilya honestly might've been more shocked by the fact that Shane actually walked into the hall to face the media shirtless than the fact that Shane had just broken a record that'd been held for nearly 100 years.

Ilya was really fucking glad he was in a locked office and not in front of cameras of his own because his jaw quite literally dropped when Shane Hollander in all his shirtless, freckled, sweaty postgame glory strolled into the hall. His hair was sticking up at all angles and when he ran a hand through it in an (unsuccessful) attempt to tame it, Ilya had the pleasure of watching Shane's bicep flex in Full HD.

Ilya wasn't even sort of paying attention to the questions Shane was answering, he was simply watching Shane which was why he caught it immediately when Shane's attention was pulled by something off camera. Ilya caught the moment Shane's media smile turned into something real; and not just his normal, real happy smile, but the megawatt one, the one that only showed up when he was genuinely goddamn *giddy*.

"You're kidding," Shane said, his voice pitched just slightly higher in excitement. Ilya couldn't tell who he was talking to, they weren't close enough for their voice to be picked up by the broadcast but whoever they were, they were officially on Ilya's favorite list of people simply for making Shane smile like *that*. "Who's with the kids? Are your parents here?"

"No and Jackie's can't get here until tomorrow," and that was clearly Hayden Pike. He must've gotten close enough to the cameras for the mics to pick him up even though he wasn't in the shot. Ilya wanted to revoke his previous statement about the mystery person going on his list of favorite people.

"I'll stay with them," Shane responded immediately, he turned back toward the camera and clearly attempted to give an apologetic smile though he couldn't quite seem to temper his *actual* smile, "sorry, thanks for your time, we gotta go."

Ilya watched as New York's media director stepped into the frame, smiling almost indulgently as Shane disappeared from view.

* * *

“You don’t have to do that,” Hayden said, picking up the speed to keep up with Shane as he moved as fast as he could while still in fucking skates back toward the visitor’s locker room, “Shane, c’mon man, you just broke a massive record, you should go out to celebrate.”

“If you think I give a shit about breaking that record right now, you’re cracked.”

“I think you probably *should* give a shit.”

“I’ll give a shit tomorrow,” Shane argued. He came to a stop right outside the locker room, the absolute cacophony of sound already grating on his nerves even through the closed door. “Hayd, seriously, I’m about four seconds away from having a mental breakdown. Too much is going on, too many people have been touching me and yelling and I cannot do it. If I have to get dragged to a bar right now, I’ll flee into the wilderness never to be seen again. Just let me grab my bag and we’ll go, I’ll shower at your house and you can get Jackie and go to the hospital.”

“Don’t you have practice in the morning?”

“The girls have school,” Shane said, trying to keep his voice calm, “and if Jackie’s parents aren’t here before I have to go to practice I’ll just bring Arthur with me, the media team will adopt him within the first five minutes. Let me help.”

“Okay, okay,” Hayden said, blowing out a harsh breath and nodding, “okay, put on real clothes though, or at least a shirt.”

“Deal,” Shane agreed. He pulled open the door and did his best not to cringe as he was hit by a wall of sound. “Hey!” he yelled. It didn’t go silent but it got quiet enough that he could be heard without screaming, “Hayden’s wife’s in labor, I’m staying with his kids tonight. Luke, tell them about our bet and we will celebrate my new record, this insane fucking win, and Luke’s crazy bet on Tuesday!”

With that he moved to his locker and got undressed and redressed faster than he ever had before. He was back in the hall and jogging toward the exit with Hayden before anyone could even attempt to stop him.

* * *

Shane woke up Monday morning to the wonderful combination of his alarm going off, Ruby Pike's elbow attempting to dig *underneath* his rib cage, and a crick in his neck from falling asleep on the couch.

"Uncle Shane!" Ruby yelled and Shane just grinned, ignoring the twinge of his muscles and the lingering exhaustion of an intense game of hockey followed by a sensory overload, and wrapped his arms around Ruby as she climbed fully on top of him. He held out his right arm on instinct and Ruby shifted until she was wedged between Shane and the back of the couch just as Jade climbed up beside her.

"Oh, my girls," Shane cooed, squeezing them tight and delighting in their giggles. "I missed you."

He let himself bask in the relative morning quiet for a minute before getting up to start the day.

He was less familiar with their morning routine than their evening routine, but he knew it well enough. He somehow got everyone fed, dressed, and into Jackie's car and wasn't even late dropping the girls off at kindergarten. His phone dinged with a text from Hayden telling him that Amber Pike had made her way into the world and thanking him for staying with the kids. Shane shot back a text telling him the girls were at school and that he'd keep Arthur with him for however long they needed.

He checked his team chat and saw that practice had been scheduled for the afternoon, meaning he'd be able to pick the girls back up and bring them to the hospital which was exactly what he'd done when Arthur was born, though he'd been picking them up from preschool back then.

That thought made him remember the day he'd moved into his house in New York, how he'd stood outside that room that was perfect for these kids and thought about how much it sucked that he wouldn't be here for the birth of kid number four. But here he was, following the exact same pattern he had the day Arthur was born.

Sometimes, the world worked in wonderful ways.

* * *

Ilya pulled his phone out of his pocket as he walked into their practice facility Monday afternoon to find a text from Pike with a picture of Shane looking down at a tiny little baby with a look on his face that Ilya would recognize anywhere. It was how Shane looked when he was entirely overwhelmed by the force of his own love.

That at least explained why Shane had sprinted off camera and then gone MIA.

He'd texted once the night before to say he was staying at the Pike's but Ilya hadn't heard from him since. He'd been a little worried, but after seeing that picture of Shane, he decided he'd had a pretty good excuse.

* * *

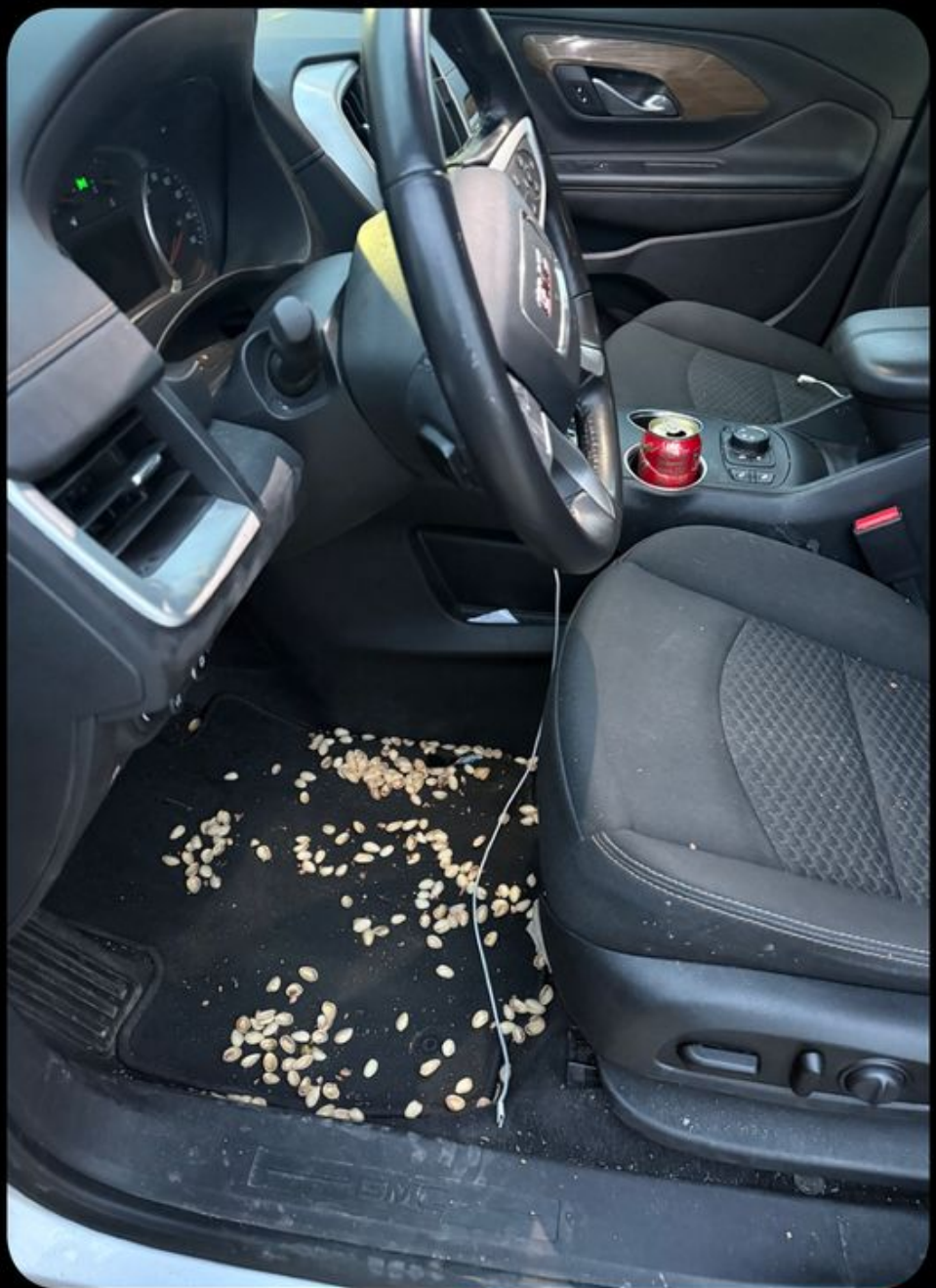
On Tuesday night, New York beat Montreal 5-1.

Shane was perfectly happy with the fact that it hadn't been a perfect 4-0 sweep *and* four perfect shutouts; Montreal's only goal had been Hayden's.

Chapter End Notes

on this episode of my younger siblings hate me: my brother borrowing my car
(not pictured: the half finished chocolate milk he LEFT THERE TO ROT IN THE SUN WHILE

I WAS GONE FOR A WEEK)



you are a zoo animal

Oh fuck I'm sorry 😂

Chapter 26: roommates

Chapter Notes

most of the sleepover shenanigans will be happening over in the socmed companion piece :)

the person who wrote the funniest goddamn socmed au on twitter just recommended this fic to their followers and i nearly passed out (twitter user @2444HOLIX i love you so bad everyone go read their stuff every tweet is the funniest thing i've ever read)

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

April 2017

On Wednesday morning, Shane boarded the plane at Montreal Metropolitan Airport and wasn't even sort of shocked when Luke immediately took the seat next to him.

"We won in four."

"We did," Shane agreed.

"I hate my house," Luke said without any prompting, "hate it. They're all disasters, no one understands the concept of a dishwasher, I'm paying way too much in rent for my ceilings to be leaking, the stove to never work, and the water to never be warm. Also, I have to take my clothes to a goddamn laundromat. And, another thing, I don't think any of them actually like me and I don't particularly like any of them but at least *I'm* not a dick about it. I hate it."

"When does your lease end?"

"Not until August and they're all talking about re-signing."

"How hard would it be for them to find someone to fill your spot?"

Luke paused, studying Shane's face for a moment before slumping back into his seat, "probably not very but I don't know where else I'd go. New York is expensive and I'm still on my ELC for two more years so I've gotta be responsible with my money."

Shane was suddenly immensely grateful he'd called Ilya the night before.

He'd had a feeling Luke hated his house and he'd wanted to offer a solution, but his house wasn't only *his*, it was Ilya's, too, even if he lived in Boston most of the year and they'd decided to spend their summers in Canada. It was still meant to be a place Ilya could live in and be comfortable in. But Ilya had been able to tell how much Luke meant to Shane, how quickly he'd wormed his way into Shane's heart, and he'd told Shane to just do whatever he thought was right and they'd go from there.

"Live with me," Shane offered. He choked down a laugh at the way Luke's jaw literally dropped and just continued talking, "I've got a massive house and there's a private room above my garage, has its own external entrance and everything. I've got a gym in the basement, a whole kitchen and a laundry room, and I always do my dishes. Also, you'd get unfettered access to Sunny."

"Shane, I can't ask you to do that."

"Fine, you're not asking. I'm telling you; you're moving in with me. It's playoffs. We can't have you not getting proper rest because you're stuck in a shitty house with shitty roommates. We've got at least a week before our next game because we won this one in four, so we've got a bit of a buffer to get you moved into somewhere that doesn't actively suck. The guest room at my place is furnished so we don't even have to move all your stuff yet if we can't find the time."

"Are you serious?"

"Luke, c'mon buddy," Shane said, dropping his voice lower so they couldn't be heard over the chatter of their teammates getting settled on the plane, "I already knew you hated your house before you told me. I've been planning to make the offer, I was just waiting for you to admit you needed it. Rookies live with vets all the time. Let's get you out of your shitty house that's probably infested with black mold and you can live with me and save your money."

"I can't not pay you rent."

"Buy your own groceries if you have to but I'm not taking money from you."

"Shane."

“Luke,” Shane shot back, giving him a look that Shane truly hoped translated to *you loveable idiot*, “I bought the house with last year’s Rolex contract. I don’t need your money.”

“Sometimes I forget you’re stupidly rich,” Luke sighed. Shane just stayed quiet and looked out the window, giving Luke the space to do whatever he needed to do to rationalize accepting Shane’s offer. After a full minute, he finally answered, “okay, okay, thank you. I really appreciate it. I can look for better apartments over the summer.”

“No. Unless you decide you hate me, you’re living with me until you’re done with your ELC. Also, I’ll barely even be here this summer, I’ll be at a lake two hours away from Ottawa where no one can even find me in order to bother me so you’ll have free reign, just don’t burn the house down.”

Luke went quiet again, but then, just as the plane’s engines started to roar signaling take off, he looked over at Shane and said, “I’m really happy you came to New York.”

It was earnest and sweet and different from the way he’d said the same thing on Shane’s first day, back when he’d just seemed like an overexcited rookie with a bit of a Shane Hollander obsession. Back then, he was saying he was happy to be playing with a guy he’d spent the past few years idolizing. Now he was saying he was happy to have Shane as a friend.

“I am too,” Shane responded.

By the time the seatbelt signs turned off, Luke was asleep with Sunny curled up in his lap and his head on Shane’s shoulder and Shane was texting Ilya to tell him they’d accidentally acquired a 19 year old kid.

* * *

They were given Thursday and Friday off of practice as soon as it became pretty clear that the Boston v. Philadelphia series was going to last the full seven games. They were given explicit orders to sleep, limit their workouts, and follow the team nutritionist’s instructions on caloric intake. At this point in his career, Scott was well versed in the playoff diet, he knew how much it effected your body to be practicing and playing consistently with no breaks for an entire playoff run, he knew how hard it became to keep weight on.

He also knew that when they were told to rest, the coaching staff probably hadn't meant that they should spend Thursday night having a team sleepover at Shane's.

They were doing it anyway. Bets were sacred, after all.

Which was how Scott found himself standing on one side of Shane's kitchen island just watching Shane and Luke in amusement as they tried to figure out what to feed 20 hockey players.

The pair of them had spent their free morning packing up all of Luke's stuff in the shitty house he'd been living in with some AHL and ECHL guys who apparently sucked nearly as much as the house. Then Luke had gotten the pleasure of watching what Rolex money can do when movers had showed up the same day Shane called to shuffle furniture around the house until the private guest suite above the garage was empty. Then they'd moved all of Luke's stuff into the suite.

It'd only taken them three hours.

A fact that Luke had mentioned to Scott no fewer than five times in the thirty minutes Scott had been at the house.

"Can't we just order pizzas?" Luke asked, jumping up to sit on the counter below the cabinets.

"We need *something* of nutritional value," Shane argued, "but yes, we can order pizzas. You pick the place, I have no clue where to order from around here."

"We'll order salads too," Luke decided, pulling out his phone to start his review of whatever pizza places were in delivery range of Shane's house.

Whatever Shane was going to respond was cut off by his open laptop ringing with an incoming FaceTime call. He glanced at the screen and from the distinctly fond way he rolled his eyes, Scott knew exactly who was on the other end of the line.

"Ilya," Shane greeted. "Scott and Luke are here, by the way."

Luke looked up at Scott, clearly wondering why that needed to be specified and Scott silently wished the kid well. He was in for a fucking treat.

“Shane, моя любовь, I do not care. It is almost time for pregame meetings and I need to see my daughter.”

“What the fuck?” Luke whispered, staring wide eyed at the screen.

“Hey, Luke, how are you at keeping secrets?” Shane asked, looking a little like he couldn’t decide whether he wanted to kill Ilya or kiss him, Scott got the feeling that it was a little bit of both.

“Steel trap,” Luke vowed, entirely earnest. “I’ve been keeping a secret for my best friend since third grade. Still haven’t told a soul.”

“Right, okay,” Shane said before running both hands down his face and letting out a deep breath, “Ilya, meet Luke my new roommate, Luke, meet Ilya my boyfriend.”

“Holy shit,” Luke said, nearly whispering again, his eyes going even wider before they darted toward Scott, “you were *serious* when you said Scott wasn’t your boyfriend?”

“That’s your reaction?” Shane asked, dumbfounded.

“Well, yeah! I thought you were kidding,” Luke sputtered. “The whole team calls you mom and dad, you’re always together when you’re not at practice, Scott looks at you like you hung the fucking moon, Shane. I mean, you adopted a dog together! What was I supposed to think?”

“You met Scott’s boyfriend a week ago, Luke.”

“I did?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” Luke asked.

“I was literally standing right next to you,” Shane responded.

And then Scott watched in real time as Luke’s brain caught up to what was actually happening. He set his phone down on the counter next to him and just pointed toward the laptop, “that’s Ilya Rozanov.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, “nice to meet you. Shane, show me my daughter.”

“Patience, Rozanov,” Shane chided.

“Pleaaaasee,” Ilya begged, stretching out the word. He was nearly whining, though Scott was dead certain that Ilya would never admit to that.

“Fine, oh my God,” Shane said, picking up the laptop and walking over to the couch where Sunny was sleeping.

Luke stared after him before turning back to Scott, “that was Ilya Rozanov.”

“Yes,” Scott agreed, “unfortunately.”

“What do you mean ‘unfortunately’? That was *Ilya Rozanov*!”

“You’re gonna have to get used to him,” Scott said, trying not to laugh at the look on Luke’s face and almost certainly failing, “he stays here whenever he’s in New York.”

“I’m living with Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov?”

“I’m sure the novelty will wear off pretty quickly.”

Luke took a deep breath, staring into space like he was trying to figure out what choices he'd made in life that'd led him to this moment just in case he got thrown back in time and had to perfectly replicate them. And then a disbelieving sort of smile spread across his face and Scott just watched some insane series of emotions pass across the kid's face before he shook his head and let out a little chuckle, "did Ilya Rozanov, the giant Russian guy the entire league is afraid of, just whine until Shane put a puppy on FaceTime?"

"Your life will become a whole lot easier if you learn to separate the Ilya Rozanov you see on the ice from the Ilya you see when he's around Shane in private."

"Who all knows?" Luke asked, sobering up slightly. Scott had to assume he'd finally understood the implications of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov being in a relationship, that he'd maybe remembered Shane saying that he had a boyfriend, but that it wasn't safe for him to be out, that it wouldn't even be safe for him for *Shane* to be out.

"Me and my boyfriend," Scott answered, "Coach Murdock, Hayden and Jackie Pike, Rose Landry, Cliff Marlow, Ilya's friend Svetlana, and Shane's parents. J.J. Boiziau might know but I'm not sure how *much* he knows and I think Carter's guessed. This is a big secret, Luke. It took Shane years to even tell Hayden. You really can't tell anyone."

"I won't," Luke promised and Scott could tell he understood the weight of what he'd been trusted with. "So, wait, that guy Kip is your boyfriend?"

"Yeah," Scott said, his smile feeling a little dopey even to himself.

"Cool, he was really nice. I'd like to meet him again, though, I was a little distracted by Shane and Hayden last time."

"I'd like that," Scott said, finding that he really meant it. It was insane to think that just a couple months ago, this kid had felt like a hyperactive annoyance that Scott sort of just had to deal with, that he'd felt like a reminder that Scott was getting old and that new talent was coming to push him out. Now, though, he was something else. He was a kid who needed mentoring, whose family they knew nothing about and whose home life apparently left something to be desired. A kid who was struggling even though none of them had noticed. A kid who made Scott laugh and whose teasing was always good-natured.

Luke just grinned, clearly pleased that Scott wanted him to be a part of his life, even in such little ways, and Scott found himself regretting letting Shane beat him to adopting their rookie.

But then Shane walked back into the room with his laptop, a smile on his face as Ilya rambled about Philadelphia's shift strategy for power plays and Scott watched as Luke's entire being reacted to his presence. The almost formal set to his shoulders that Scott hadn't even noticed was there faded away, his face went almost slack, and his lips tugged into a seemingly unconscious smile. He looked like someone who finally knew what it was like to feel safe at home and Shane was the reason for it.

Scott couldn't regret anything, then.

* * *

Luke hadn't even been living with Shane Hollander for an entire day and it was already the best place he'd ever lived.

He had his own space but could already tell that he'd never feel like he *had* to stay in it, like he had to avoid common spaces so he wouldn't step on anyone's toes. It was a new feeling. He'd never spent time in the living room in his childhood home, always opting to stay extra hours at the rink or spend every minute tucked safely away behind his bedroom door watching YouTube footage of Shane Hollander's best plays and dreaming of a day where he could play at that level.

He'd never felt welcomed in common spaces, but a few short hours at Shane's house and he was sitting on the kitchen counter, not quite able to stop smiling as Shane sat perched on the island opposite him with his phone on speaker between himself and Scott.

Luke barely even knew what was going on, but he was happy. He felt safe and cared for and, for once, it didn't feel like it was about to be taken away.

Ilya Rozanov had long since hung up in order to attend pregame meetings, but he hadn't hung up without telling Luke that he'd been playing great so far in playoffs. It was fucking *surreal* and Luke hadn't had a clue how to react in the moment. He honestly still wasn't sure how to react.

Now, though, Shane (and Scott, for some unknown reason) were on the phone with Shane's mom trying to figure out which photoshoot and interview he should agree to about his record-breaking game in Montreal because he only had time for one before practices picked back up for their next series against Boston or Philadelphia.

“He’s already done men’s health and I don’t think he should do it again,” Scott said, scrolling through something on his phone. Luke wasn’t sure if it was the team calendar or a Google search on Shane. “I don’t know what was wrong with their stylist, but Shane is so much hotter than that.”

If Luke hadn’t literally *just* watched Ilya beg Shane to show him their ‘daughter’ while addressing him as what Luke could only assume were Russian pet names, Luke would be having a really fucking hard time believing Shane and Scott weren’t a couple.

“Agreed,” Yuna said and Shane just sort of stared up at the ceiling like he was hoping something might abduct him so he wouldn’t have to listen to his mom and one of his best friends debate which creative team would do justice to his, frankly, ridiculous looks. “Scott, look at the proposals I just emailed you and tell me which one you like best.”

Shane snapped out of his silent daydreams, that Luke was imagining were about escape by alien, to send the phone an incredulous look before shaking his head, his eyebrows pinched in confusion, “why is *Scott* picking which campaign I do?”

“Scott understands vision,” Yuna said, entirely deadpan.

Scott grinned at Shane, his eyes literally fucking twinkling as he said, “yeah, Rook, I understand vision.”

“I am almost 26 years old *why* are you still calling me Rook?”

“You’ll always be my rookie,” Scott said, ruffling Shane’s hair which made him look quite a bit like a disgruntled cat. Luke had to try really hard not to laugh at that.

Shane turned his attention back to his laptop where he had his text thread with Luke pulled up so they could figure out what food to order. This whole thing was giving Luke a newfound respect for team moms back in Juniors and youth league. He never had any clue how stressful it was to feed an entire hockey team. He was going to have to text his best friend Drew’s mom to thank her because he clearly hadn’t thanked her enough if this was what she was doing nearly every week.

Eventually, after doing pizza math and deciding that they should grill some chicken and steaks too just for fun, Shane and Luke had sorted out dinner. Scott was still reading through whatever Yuna had sent him so they moved on to adjusting their grocery order to account for breakfast.

Finally, just as Luke was trying to figure out what the next step in planning a sleepover for 20 grown men might be, Scott decided, “I think he should do GQ and Timid. Both have a solid plan and both offered the option of a truncated shooting schedule. GQ has a wider market, but Timid’s proposal is really interesting, also, Shane, I know you hate the emphasis on representation, I know you just want to play hockey, but I think it’d be cool for you to be featured in an Asian-owned publication, it’d even give you a chance to talk about how difficult it can be to be seen as an icon for a single part of your identity.”

Shane dropped the pile of blankets he’d been carrying onto the coffee table in the living room and walked forward to lean against the wall at the entrance to the kitchen. It seemed, to Luke, that he was actually considering Scott’s words. Luke hadn’t really known that Shane struggled with being pin holed into a single aspect of his identity, but it made a good amount of sense. He wondered a bit how it might change if it were safe for Shane to be out; he wondered if people might let him just be Shane Hollander instead of making him into some symbol for inclusivity. Luke honestly doubted it, no matter how much he wished it could happen.

“Alright,” Shane agreed after a minute, “yeah, if you can get those two scheduled, Mom, I’m good with Scott’s idea.”

Scott smiled and set down his phone and Yuna promised to schedule the shoots and then it was just the three of them again.

“Right, c’mon,” Shane said, pushing himself off the wall and heading back into the living room, “I’m going to go start the grill. People should be here soon.”

* * *

If you’d told Shane four months ago that he’d have his entire team in his house and he’d actually be enjoying himself, he would’ve laughed in your face. Actually, probably not, because four months ago Shane was barely laughing at anything. His life had done a complete 180° in the months since Rose had (gently and lovingly) strong-armed him into admitting he was gay.

That had been one of (if not *the*) scariest moments of his life but it’d been worth it.

Beating Montreal in a 4-0 sweep in round one of playoffs had felt like vindication, it’d felt like proving he was *genuinely* better than them. But it hadn’t just been him on the ice like it’d sometimes

seemed in Montreal, he was now surrounded by an entire team of people who loved the sport and played it to the best of their ability every single game. And what was even better: they loved to win, but they also loved each other. Shane hadn't even known what he was missing until he experienced what it was like in New York.

To go from a team whose only idea of bonding was attempting to force Shane to go to some club to a team that did its best to meet every member where they were was, honestly, life changing.

Shane had spent his entire life feeling like he was perpetually on the outside, like he was a beat behind the crowd and that he'd never actually catch up. He'd spent so long feeling like that that he'd stopped even *trying* to catch up. He'd simply resigned himself to existing on the edge of crowded rooms wishing his ever-scrambled mind would let him find a place somewhere in the noise.

It didn't feel like that anymore.

Sure, he still much preferred smaller groups and comfortable places and predictable sounds, but he was comfortable enough with this team that existing in a crowd no longer felt like drowning.

"Having fun?" Luke asked, sidling up next to Shane out on the patio where Shane had let the younger guys take over his grill under the watchful eye of Cale Wagner.

"I am actually," Shane said, "thanks for suggesting it."

"It was a bet, you had to follow through."

Shane rolled his eyes but he couldn't help but smile, just a little, as he slung his arm around Luke's shoulders and let the chaos carry on around him.

* * *

Ilya checked his phone before heading onto the ice in Philadelphia and found a selfie of Shane and Luke grinning up at the camera. Just over Shane's shoulder Ilya could see a small crowd of who he recognized as most of the younger guys on the team, primarily the third line and Breezy, gathered

around the grill in Shane's backyard with Wagner directing them with all the intensity of a military commander.

It was a simple, stupid little picture but it made Ilya smile.

Shane looked so happy and the fact that he'd actually invited his team into their house, even if it'd been because of a bet, was incredible. He was clearly more comfortable in New York than he'd ever been in Montreal and it made it feel a little like everything had been worth it.

It sucked that it'd taken being ostracized by his team and injured by Cliff to get Shane to a place where he could smile like that and just *exist* in a space with people who knew and loved him, but that was how it'd happened.

Now Ilya just needed to beat Philadelphia so they could play against New York.

Ilya had the feeling that he'd been playing an almost repressed version of Shane Hollander for the past seven years and he simply couldn't wait to get his ass kicked by a Shane who'd been unleashed.

Chapter End Notes

back w more commentary from my sister:

do you actually need to eat food to live or is that just a lie

no that's real

really because the two cups of coffee are doing me just fine and the constant shaking should count as exercise right?

eating is just a liberal lie

Chapter 27: pictures of you

Chapter Notes

title from 'taking pictures of you' by the kooks :)

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

April 2017

Late on Friday morning, once the team had cleared out of his house, Shane showered and left Sunny in Luke's care and drove himself and Scott to the empty rink GQ had booked out in Yonkers.

He decided not to question why Scott was coming with. He'd long since abandoned any thought of teasing Scott for always following Shane home when he knew Kip was at work. Shane was pretty sure that Scott had been used to going home to an empty apartment for far too long. He also sort of got the idea that Scott wasn't used to people who wanted to just spend time with him and Shane sure as shit wasn't going to give Scott the idea that he wasn't welcome in Shane's space.

Also, Shane had been correct in the hospital two months prior; Scott and Yuna got along *great*. Shane wasn't sure if he hated it or loved it, but he *was* pretty sure that Scott would make an incredible manager after he retired and Shane was quite alright with Scott testing the waters by listening to how Yuna handled Shane's commitments.

The GQ shoot was fun and the interview was easy. The photos had been out of Shane's comfort zone but having Scott there had honestly helped more than Shane had imagined it would. He was there with a genuine compliment or a joke to pull Shane out of his head every time he got self-conscious. The interview had been exactly what Shane was expecting; easy questions that had been carefully screened by his mom and Farah that had answers Shane could've given in his sleep.

He let a little more of his personality show through than he normally would, though. He threw in a few quips and chirps, he smiled more than he normally would've and laughed a little instead of just locking up and falling into a practiced pattern. He didn't talk about why he left Montreal; he didn't talk about how freeing it'd been to find a team that actually liked *him* instead of just his skill, but for people who knew him it'd be obvious. They'd be able to see more of him in his answers instead of only seeing a company line and, to Shane, that felt like progress.

They ate lunch at the rink and chatted with the creative team and then got back in the car to drive to the location the Timid team had given them. The publication was based out in San Francisco and

Shane had no plans to be in the Bay Area any time soon, but they had contributors across the country so Shane would be meeting with a few from New York.

He was more nervous about this interview than the other one, he knew he'd need to show even more of himself than he had with GQ. He knew this was his chance to talk about tokenism in professional sports, he knew this was a chance to talk about the clash between personal identity and being a public figure. He couldn't talk about being gay, but he could talk about the aspect of his identity people could *see*, the identity that'd caused Voyageurs management to tell his parents how excited they were to have 'diversity' on Shane's draft day. He could open up a conversation that Scott (who Shane knew had been thinking about coming out publicly, even if he hadn't actually *told* Shane that yet) could someday continue.

The Timid shoot was less about hockey and more about *Shane*.

Shane wasn't quite sure whether or not that scared him.

* * *

After a day of questioning his identity and thinking about progress, Saturday morning's practice was a welcome distraction.

"I want to try a new first powerplay unit," Murdock said as they finished warm ups. Shane scrunched his nose in confusion but was careful not to show any other outward reaction. They'd just been playing their first line as their first unit and they'd been doing great, so he wasn't quite sure *why* they were making a change. But he respected Murdock (and wanted to kick the shit out of Boston), so he decided to just stay silent and listen. "Breezy I want you to stay on the ice at right and then I want Scotty to drop back and play Left Defenseman, Matti you'll come off because we need speed more than we need strength and it'll give you a break so you can go back out and deck some Massholes once the clock runs down. Vaughny you'll stay at right wing then I want Hollander at center and Gillis on the left."

Shane's eyes snapped over to Luke who was standing a step to his right; the kid looked *stunned*.

He'd been playing second line and second unit most of year, swapping between center and left based on what they needed but this would be his first time playing on the first line. Shane could remember when Montreal had officially made the swap part way through Shane's rookie year, he could remember how that, more than getting drafted, more than being put in for his first face off against Ilya, had felt like his 'I made it' moment.

He also remembered how pissed the veteran center, the captain who'd preceded Shane, had been. He *especially* remembered how the fear that he was on the outside of the locker room had started to turn into reality.

Luke's eyes locked onto Shane, clearly looking for some sort of reassurance that he deserved this or some sort of confirmation that it was *real* and Shane just grinned at him before skating a half step closer and knocking their helmets together.

If Shane had his way, Luke would never feel like he was too much.

If Shane had his way, Luke would always know he was welcome.

The new first unit ran a series of drills against both of their penalty kill units and it was fucking *electric*.

Shane had somehow already forgotten how much he loved playing Center.

He kind of hated it because he loved playing on a line with Scott and Carter, but this was absolutely the position he was meant to be playing.

"Jesus Christ," Bennet yelled as yet another drill ended in their unit scoring. "Scott, man, I'm sorry but Rook has you beat."

Shane immediately braced himself for anger.

They all teased Scott about being old and while he *was* older in hockey years, he was still an incredible player and the captain of this team. Shane didn't know how far their friendship stretched, didn't know if he was about to be put down in some way to make Scott feel better about what Eric had said.

He should've remembered he wasn't in Montreal anymore.

His reaction had been visible enough that everyone on the ice was looking at him with varying degrees of pity, a few of them tinged with anger that even *Shane* could tell wasn't aimed at him.

Scott took one look at Shane, immediately clocked his anxiety, and turned to Murdock, "I'd play second line, I don't care. I just want to win."

Now it was Shane's turn to look stunned.

Murdock only paused a second before nodding, "alright, you three stay on the ice as forwards, Matti get back out here. Scott play center with Wagner on your left and Huff on your right, second line defense stays the same. Shane's line, Benny's your goalie, Scott you guys play with Tommy. Let's scrimmage."

It made sense, having a first line that could play longer shifts with a second line full of tried and tested veterans to back them up. Not that Shane and Carter *weren't* veterans, but they were 25 and 26, they were young and hadn't developed joint problems yet. They could skate faster and play for longer and (sorry Scott) wouldn't be slowed down by someone who's left hip hadn't functioned properly in half a decade.

It also wasn't *entirely* out of the ordinary for the captain to be a second or third line forward. Calgary, Carolina, and St. Louis all had their captains playing in secondary lines. The captain didn't *need* to be the star player; they just needed to be a leader on and off the ice and a well-respected veteran like Scott was the perfect captain, even if he was no longer the star.

They played in bursts with the third line subbing in for Scott's team and the fourth line for Shane's and it became incredibly clear, incredibly quickly that Shane, Carter, and Luke were their best possible combination for a first line. All thoughts of potential anger and lingering anxiety from Montreal slipped away and Shane was left feeling weightless.

* * *

Scott watched, entirely helpless, as Shane, Carter, and Luke blew past their defense yet again. He felt genuinely fucking *crazy* for ever believing that he could out-play Shane at center. The three of them were grinning and laughing like children in a schoolyard while playing like they could win the Cup tomorrow without backup. It was some of the best hockey Scott had ever seen and, in the face of it, the slight sting of playing second line for the first time in years barely even registered.

And the best part of all of this? It was a closed practice.

Boston wasn't going to know what hit them.

* * *

Philadelphia won Game 6 in Boston putting their series at 3-3 and then on Monday night, Boston won Game 7 in Philadelphia sending them to the second round against New York.

Ilya had barely been on his phone that day, far too focused on the game, so when he picked it up following their win Monday night, he was greeted with a Twitter feed full of Shane Hollander.

Ilya nearly choked on his own tongue.

Shane had posted a picture of himself, shirtless in leather pants and a long black coat in front of an empty net with a link to the GQ article and a caption about how he'd enjoyed having the chance to talk hockey as if anyone gave a solitary FUCK about hockey when Shane looked like *that*.

The photo he'd posted to Instagram was somehow, impossibly, hotter.

Ilya needed to sit down.

This man was going to kill him.

On Tuesday morning, Ilya woke up to his phone ringing.

He picked it up and was greeted by Shane's voice, sounding somewhere between amused and ridiculously turned on, "I take it you liked the GQ pictures?"

"Hollander," Ilya groaned, throwing one arm over his eyes and thanking every god, of every religion, that this man was his.

Shane had gone to bed right after Ilya's game had finished so he could be properly rested for practice because he was responsible and reasonable. Ilya, meanwhile, had stayed up far too late tweeting absolute filth that he really hoped was never linked to him and sending Shane increasingly detailed texts about everything he was planning to do to him as soon as the New York v. Boston series was done.

Ilya almost hoped Boston would lose in a humiliating 4-0 streak like Montreal had just so he could get Shane in bed sooner.

Almost.

Shane breathed out a little laugh at whatever he'd heard in Ilya's voice and the sound went straight to Ilya's dick. He needed to get Shane horizontal (or vertical against a wall, honestly, he wasn't picky at this point) *immediately*.

"Well, the Timid article's out today, you want to pick which photo I use to post about it?"

Ilya's phone buzzed and he checked his texts to find a series of pictures of Shane, each one better than the last, "marry me, Hollander."

"Already planning on it, Rozanov," Shane said, "pick a photo, please, I can't decide. Also, I've gotta go, we're about to be late for practice. Luke's already in the car. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Okay," Ilya agreed, "I love you, Shane."

"I love you too," Shane said, his voice going soft like he still couldn't believe he was allowed to say that out loud. Ilya understood the feeling.

The line cut out and Ilya saved the photos Shane had sent him before sending the two he thought he should use for Instagram and Twitter back and then he dropped his phone onto the pillow next to him with a groan.

His fiancé was about to break the internet.

* * *

Shane spent the entire run up to the Boston games being relentlessly teased by his teammates about the two photo shoots he'd done. It was familiar in some ways. But the difference, here, was that they were all doing it in good fun. All of them were *happy* for Shane, happy that he'd done something incredible and was being recognized for it. They were even happy that he'd looked good enough doing it that Twitter was still in a tizzy days later.

He felt a little stupid about how happy that made him, but he forced himself to feel the joy anyways.

He'd earned it.

Boston landed in New York on Thursday morning and, as much as Shane wanted to see Ilya *immediately*, he wanted to win this game more.

It was the *smallest* percentage of difference, but he knew Ilya understood, he knew Ilya wouldn't be hurt, so he didn't feel all that bad about it.

If there were a genuine choice between hockey in general and Ilya, he would choose Ilya every time. He knew that now; he knew that it would hurt, that losing hockey would feel like losing his identity, but he also knew that losing Ilya felt like losing a piece of himself and he never wanted to do that again. He'd survived hockey almost being taken away, he'd barely survived a few short months without Ilya. And now that he knew what it was like to actually *have* Ilya? He'd never survive without him.

But this wasn't a choice between hockey and his relationship, it was a choice between focusing on winning an important game and getting Ilya alone after they hadn't seen each other in a month.

He could hold off for another week.

Though when reporters asked him what his motivation for winning was, he was going to need to come up with an answer other than 'the faster we win this series, the faster I get to suck my fiancé's dick.'

The pattern of home games at MSG was familiar now after a month in New York and Shane moved through the day easily. He joked with Amanda and Christina, he did media with Scott, he got dragged into some sewer ball with the younger guys, he and Carter teased Scott on Twitter, he met with the trainers and sat through coaches and captains meetings. And then they stepped out for warm ups.

Sports channels and fan pages had been buzzing all day after ‘unconfirmed’ word had come out of morning walk through that they’d shifted their first line and first unit for powerplay. Pundits would be watching warm ups to see who stuck with who, trying to spot which pairings would be used for the game so they could make their predictions and place their bets.

Shane watched in poorly concealed amusement as Carter started purposefully stirring the pot by spending nearly the entire warm up period with Cameron and Nick, the two wingers from the third line. Shane stuck with Luke which wasn’t at all out of the ordinary, even for games when they hadn’t been playing on the same line.

He and Luke were leaning against the boards in front of their bench, double checking one of the play sheets on the iPad when Shane felt something tug at his jersey.

“What the-” he muttered before he looked over his shoulder and cut himself off.

Ilya was standing just on the other side of the center line, unable to crossover to New York’s half without incurring a penalty or fine, and had apparently decided that instead of calling Shane’s name to get his attention like a normal person, he’d reach his stick across the line and hook it into the back of Shane’s jersey.

“Ilya,” Shane greeted. Luke had ducked his head so Shane couldn’t see his face but his shoulders were shaking with poorly concealed laughter.

“Shane,” Ilya responded, entirely unapologetic over his antics, “what is going on with your lines?”

Shane just shrugged and watched Ilya’s nose scrunch in frustration. Luke turned fully around and started talking to Wagner but Shane could hear his voice wavering slightly, still clearly trying not to laugh.

“I’m not the captain, Roz, you’re gonna have to ask Scott,” Shane said, smirking just a little. Ilya knew that; Shane knew that Ilya knew that. Teams had to submit their confirmed starting lineup to the opposing team’s captain and to the officials before the start of the game. Shane was well aware that both Ilya and Scott would be getting the lineups sometime in the next 20 minutes, so Shane really didn’t feel bad for teasing him about it.

“You are a pest, Hollander.”

“I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

“You shouldn’t,” Ilya muttered but Shane could tell he was trying not to smile. “We need to make our bet official, yes? Do you want to or should I?”

“I can do it,” Shane said. He knew he’d get stopped in the tunnel heading back into the locker room and, in the off chance he didn’t, he’d just text Amanda and Christina and ask them to post about it. Ilya had announced the bet with Sunny; it was Shane’s turn this time.

“Is Sunny here?”

“No, it’s too busy around here during playoff games, she got kinda stressed out when she came for the second Montreal game so I just have a dog walker coming by the house in a couple hours.”

Ilya looked like he couldn’t decide whether he was disappointed she wasn’t here or upset that she’d been stressed and eventually landed on, “I will see her soon, anyways.”

Shane smiled at that; at the reminder that the season was nearly over and soon he’d have uninterrupted time with Ilya.

But instead of saying that out loud, Shane said, “the confirmed starters should be in now if you want to go check.”

“Right,” Ilya said, shaking his head a little, like he’d forgotten the reason (or the cover for) why he’d come over to talk to Shane. “Good luck, Hollander.”

“You too, Rozanov.”

Ilya shot him a grin and then skated away and Shane turned back toward Luke to finish warm ups.

He was ready to win this game.

Chapter End Notes

up next: the ny v. boston series

my mother, btw:



Chapter 28: in all my dreams

Chapter Notes

title from paper rings ;)

April 2017

Ilya stared at the sheet listing New York's confirmed starters in silence for three full seconds before a laugh bubbled out of his chest. He felt hysterical. A month of missing Shane compounded by the stress of playoffs and the absolute fuck load of emotions that he hadn't yet processed had made him feel a little unhinged. He wouldn't have been able to keep his reaction to seeing *this* internal even if he'd tried; and he hadn't tried at all.

"What?" LeClaire asked, looking at Ilya like he was a little concerned he'd finally lost it.

"They changed their lines," Ilya answered, still smiling. He didn't really have a publicly acceptable explanation for why he was smiling when he was looking down at the opposing team's line up and realizing they'd essentially created *two* All Star forward lines by moving Scott back with Wagner and Huff, but he really couldn't help himself. He got to play against Shane.

* * *

Shane and Scott got pulled out into the hall between warmups and puck drop for pregame media and Shane wasn't at all surprised when the first question was about the switch up in lines.

Shane was about to answer with something that made it clear he'd actually passed media training when Scott gently nudged him with his elbow and started speaking before Shane could.

"We're lucky," Scott started, "we're incredibly lucky to have the sort of depth we have at this point in a playoff run. Playoffs are a marathon and we have to figure out how to best balance ice time and talent. But, beyond the boring utility of it all, I'll happily admit that Shane's a better player than I am. Shane's a better player than just about anybody, actually. He's an incredible Center, specifically, because he's not only a great player, but he's also always going to be the smartest guy on the ice. Shane's hockey IQ is genuinely, to me, the most impressive thing about him. He can see the rink in ways most guys only dream of. It made sense for us, as a team, to try out these combinations. Also,

I'll admit, I'm really looking forward to playing with Huff and Wagner again, I think we'll have a lot of fun following up the young guys."

Once Scott was done talking, everyone looked to Shane.

"Scott's right, we're incredibly lucky," Shane said, trying to collect his thoughts until they resembled something coherent. He was friends with Scott now, proper friends, but it still felt a little surreal when a guy he'd idolized since he was a teenager was saying things like *that*. "We're all looking forward to seeing how this new line up works out but, I will say, I think that having two All Star centers following each other in the first and second line is absolutely going to be a benefit."

They asked a couple other questions about lines and units and tactics and Scott and Shane answered everything the same way they always did because that was simply what they had to do to fulfil media obligations and then, just as Christina was about to step in and pull them back into the locker room, the reporter from NBC asked, "Hollander, this is the first time you'll be playing Rozanov as an Admiral, I've gotta ask, is the rivalry gonna live on now that you're no longer divisional rivals?"

Scott started laughing next to him and Shane sent him a rather ineffective glare before cracking a half smile and shaking his head in amusement. He looked up just as Ilya stepped out of the office he and Marlow had been pulled into for their own pregame media and grinned as he answered, "beating Rozanov is one of my favorite things to do but 'rivalry' might be a strong word for it. Ilya's one of my best friends and I respect him greatly as both a person and a player. It's fun to play him because it's always really, really good hockey but I don't think it's been a proper rivalry for a long time."

"Tell them about the bet, Hollander!" Ilya yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting down the hall just to be obnoxious.

"Ah, right," Shane said, rubbing his hand across his mouth in a poor attempt to hide just how wide he was smiling. "Roz and I have reached an agreement that whoever loses this series has to show up to the first game of the next one in the winner's jersey and he's already put my dog in a Bears sweater and I do not plan on matching with her so I think that'll be pretty solid motivation for winning this one."

* * *

Ilya slid to a stop on his side of the red line and didn't even try to tamp down his grin. Shane had said it best back in the hall; it hadn't been a *rivalry* in a long time, but it was really fucking good hockey.

Ilya had spent years counting down the days until he played Shane, and not only because he'd get to see Shane after.

They both took this game seriously; they both saw it as a lifeline.

And now that Shane's life outside of hockey was changing, they were starting to see the sport even more similarly. For so long, hockey had been all Shane was. It'd taken Ilya awhile to see it, to realize just how unhealthy Shane's relationship with hockey had become, but now that he was seeing Shane genuinely thriving *outside* of hockey, it was even more apparent. Hockey was still a massive part of his life - it was where nearly all of his personal connections stemmed from, it was his job, it was how he spent the vast majority of his time - but it was no longer the only thing that defined Shane Hollander.

Ilya loved it. He loved getting to watch Shane blossom, getting to watch him be a little selfish in all the best ways. He loved seeing Shane smile more and more, he loved getting to watch in real time as people fell in love with the Shane that used to be reserved for private moments after the layers and layers of masks had been peeled away, the Shane Ilya had only had the privilege of seeing a handful of times over the years, but the version of his fiancé he was finally starting to see more often than not.

Shane smiled back at him and then it all fell away.

The noise of the crowd faded to static, the slight chill rising off the ice settled into Ilya's skin, the low-level hum in the back of his mind that always grew louder the longer he spent away from Shane had gone quiet.

The puck dropped and it simply became hockey.

Ilya moved quickly but not quick enough.

Shane won the face off and immediately snapped a pass over to Luke who took off up the boards.

Ilya hardly had time to react before Shane was past him, moving through the neutral zone with the sort of speed usually reserved for drills and skills competitions, speed that was *rarely* achieved on the ice, surrounded by other players, in the middle of a game. But Vaughan was keeping up with him to his right and Luke had already looped behind Boston's goal and dropped a pass to Vaughan who

moved like he was going to shoot before deking out and tapping the puck back to Shane with the heel of his blade.

Just as Ilya started to catch up, Shane sniped the puck straight over Oregon's right shoulder. It hit the back of the net with a satisfying snap and Carter and Luke darted forward, crashing into Shane's sides and knocking their helmets together.

Nine seconds.

It'd taken them nine seconds.

The volume in MSG grew and Ilya knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that New York was going to win the Cup.

* * *

Shane let out a slightly disbelieving laugh as they dropped onto the bench after their first shift. Luke dropped down next to him and immediately wrapped both his arms around one of Shane's before tucking his head against Shane's shoulder and letting out a seemingly involuntary squeal. Shane just knocked his helmet against the top of Luke's and let himself really and truly *grin*.

"Holy fucking shit," Carter said from Shane's other side, smacking his gloved hand against Shane's knee in excitement, "holy *fucking* shit, guys."

"Yeah," Shane said, really not sure what else to say. Carter had pretty much covered it.

Shane watched Scott's new line closely, even as he continued half-listening to Carter and Luke chattering back and forth.

Scott, Cale, and Greg honestly worked perfectly. They'd played on a line together before Carter had been moved up to first line and then Cale had played to Scott's left until Shane had shown up. They read each other *perfectly* and moved as a unit in a way only veteran lines truly could. It was different from chemistry, different from the way Shane had been able to just tell where Ilya was on the ice at the All Star Games because he was in tune with *Ilya*, it was muscle memory.

It was almost like watching a really good goalie.

Sometimes, you could just tell that a save hadn't even processed in their conscious mind before it happened. They'd simply sensed the puck coming and moved because they'd done it so many times.

That was what it was like watching Scott, Cale, and Greg.

Every play just *happened*.

Maybe it wasn't as fast as Luke, Carter, and Shane could move and maybe people could call it boring but it was sharp and effective and made it *beyond* clear that they each had a lot of good hockey left in them. It also made it clear that Scott was a really fucking good center. He was reading the ice in the same way he'd praised Shane for, creating openings and keeping control with a single-minded focus. Scott was a star player, and even despite an early season slump, it was pretty damn clear that he was playing some of the best hockey of his career.

They moved through shifts quickly and the game reached that point where time just started to pass without Shane feeling like he was a conscious participant. He just moved; he listened to his coaches, fed plays, followed the puck, and kept possession.

At the end of the first, he answered a few brief questions in the tunnel and then moved into the locker room for intermission. The energy was palpable. They were up 2-1 with Scott scoring on his third shift and St-Simon scoring off an assist from Ilya just before the end of the period.

It was a great game, the hardest game they'd played in a while, and everyone was buzzing.

The second period moved the same way.

Luke scored, then Ilya scored, then the period ran out.

By the third, everything felt like it was happening in fast forward and the crowd had reached a fever pitch.

Killing Montreal in a 4-0 sweep had been exciting in the sense that it was always fun to watch your team destroy an opponent, but watching it four times in a row made it almost monotonous. That wasn't what was going to happen with Boston. Shane could already tell that this would be at *least* a six game series, if it didn't run all seven.

These close games, the ones that had you on the edge of your seat watching every single second of every single play, were the ones that made fans stay until the end, the ones that they talked about for weeks to come.

The game ended 4-2 with Carter scoring with two minutes left in the third and time finally started making sense again.

Shane felt his head spin as he readjusted to the world that existed outside of the ice.

He felt a little like there were bugs crawling over his skin, like his bones were too big for his body and like every sound was at least a notch too loud.

It wasn't the same as the overwhelm after his record-breaking game in Montreal, but it was similar. It was a sort of overstimulation that felt more familiar, one that popped up whenever he sunk too far into his head and then had to force himself to come back to the surface. It felt almost like the static that existed between radio stations, like he was so close to the right tune that you could almost feel it but he just wasn't quite there yet.

He moved through the motions of post-game press, he laughed at Carter's ribbing when he went into the hall in a compression shirt like normal instead of shirtless like Carter (and, apparently, Hayden) wanted him to, he showered and got changed back into his suit and then he walked into the hall with Luke and, finally, when they were alone in the back seat of a silent town car heading toward home, the static buzz running across his skin settled.

"That was incredible," Luke said after the car had navigated out of the traffic surrounding MSG.

"Yeah," Shane breathed, a smile spreading across his lips both at the relief of his nervous system finally finding a baseline and at the joy of playing a truly competitive game, "that was a lot of fun."

“Do you think I played alright?”

“You played great,” Shane said immediately. His voice sounded flat to his own ears and he knew it was a product of the slight emotional roller coaster his own brain had just taken him on but he was sure, to Luke, it’d sounded like Shane was apathetic. “Really, Luke, you played incredibly well. The way you set up Carter’s goal was particularly good. You read the space perfectly and a player with even a little less speed and accuracy than you wouldn’t have been able to execute that pass.”

Luke’s shoulders visibly lowered and he let out a soft breath through his nose as he nodded, “thank you.”

“Of course, bud,” Shane said, reaching across the middle seat to squeeze Luke’s knee before settling back into his own seat to doze.

By the time they got home, Shane was more than ready for bed.

Luke grabbed his post-game snack and wandered up to his room with a, “g’night,” that was heavy with sleep and Shane forced himself to eat his own snack in the kitchen so he wouldn’t wake up already annoyed at the day when he realized he’d brought food into his bedroom. He finished his snack, took Sunny out, and then started making his way toward bed.

He was halfway up the stairs when the front door opened.

Only two people had keys and one of them was already in bed.

“Ilya?”

“Hi,” Ilya greeted as he closed and locked the door behind him. He was still in his suit, his travel bag over his shoulder and a slightly sheepish smile on his face.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” Shane said before he could catch himself. He *wanted* Ilya here. He always wanted Ilya wherever he was, but they never met up during playoffs, they never broke curfew or snuck out at this point in the season where every single game mattered. Shane watched Ilya’s face

fall and immediately scrambled back down the stairs. He jogged across the foyer and wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck.

Ilya dropped his bag and wrapped his arms around Shane's waist and Shane could feel him start to relax but he was still holding himself taut, like his quick twitch muscles were primed to run.

"I want you here," Shane said softly, moving one hand up to tangle his fingers in Ilya's curls. "I *always* want you here, Ilya, I was just confused and I'm exhausted and I didn't think about how my words would sound."

"Is okay," Ilya whispered back, his whole body melting against Shane's. "I just missed you, did not think I could sleep knowing you were so close but not with me."

"I missed you too," Shane responded, turning his head to press a kiss into Ilya's hair, "I'm really happy you're here."

"What time is practice tomorrow?"

Shane took a breath and tried to make his brain sort through the information their coaches had given them. He'd wake up at the same time either way because he knew he was less likely to have a total breakdown if he followed the same routine every day of a series, but Ilya didn't need to be subjected to Shane's particular brand of crazy at 6 in the morning and Shane wanted him to be able to set his own schedule.

"I think 10?" Shane said after a moment, "yeah, I think we're on the ice at 10 and then you guys are on sometime in the afternoon. Where's your team staying?"

"Close to here, like seven minutes away? Coaches wanted us to be closer to practice facility than to the arena."

"Smart," Shane said, tightening his grip around Ilya's shoulders as his brain finally registered the fact that Ilya was actually *here*, standing in front of him in their house instead of on the ice in front of a crowd. Ilya was here and Luke was in bed in his private suite over the garage, the entire length of the house and a full floor away from the master bedroom.

He felt Ilya's fingers dig into his back and his hip where his arms were still wrapped around Shane's torso and realized pretty quickly that they were on the same page.

"You have to stop posting thirst traps while I am in different state," Ilya grumbled, his voice muffled against Shane's neck. The combination of the scratch of his playoff beard and the warmth of his breath against Shane's skin made Shane go a little weak in the knees.

"Sorry," Shane responded, not quite caring about just how breathy his voice had become.

"No you're not."

"No, I'm not."

"Shane," Ilya breathed, sounding almost amused even as his hands slid down Shane's back, landing on the backs of his thighs. Shane reacted immediately, pulling himself up just a little with his arms around Ilya's shoulders as Ilya lifted him, he wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist and felt something in his chest settle. He wasn't sure if it was the constant anxiety he felt when Ilya wasn't within arm's reach or the lingering stress from being forced back into his own mind from the almost fugue state he'd entered during the game, but he felt calm again, truly calm. "The Bears media girls will not shut up about how hot Shane Hollander is and you do not know how much I want to tell them to back off."

"I think I do," Shane said, tucking his face against Ilya's neck as Ilya backed them up against the wall by the entry way.

Ilya pulled his head back and narrowed his eyes at Shane and Shane could no longer hide his amusement.

"What do you mean?" Ilya asked.

"I think I know exactly how much you wanted to tell them to back off, Lily."

Ilya's eyes went wide, looking exactly like a kid who'd been caught with their hand in a cookie jar. He dropped Shane's legs and Shane quickly caught his footing, already laughing at the slight panic on Ilya's face.

“Nooo,” Ilya groaned, his cheeks turning bright red despite his many, many claims that Russians do not blush, “how did you find me?”

“Huff found you,” Shane explained, reaching out to take Ilya’s hand just to have the point of contact. Ilya was here, in front of him, and Shane needed to be touching him, he was *not* going to let teasing Ilya about somehow becoming a fixture of Shane Hollander Stan Twitter get in the way of that. “Texted me to say some girl named Lily was crashing out about me on Twitter. 1221, Ilya? Really?”

“No one else knows what that means,” Ilya argued, looking like he really couldn’t decide whether or not he was embarrassed. Shane was certain that if he *was* embarrassed, it was because Shane had figured him out, not because of what he’d been posting. Ilya didn’t have an ounce of shame when it came to sex. But Shane figuring out that he even *had* a burner account? That might just embarrass him a little.

“No, you’re right. My teammates all just think I’ve got a super fan. They miraculously haven’t noticed that your location, which you’ve failed to turn off, by the way, is always either in Boston or the cities Boston is playing in or that you never post while Boston is playing. Scott knows it’s you and mostly just complains every time you call him old. I’ve gotta say, the ‘birth of Christ’ comment was particularly inspired, well done with that one, Roz. Also, Hayden figured it out because someone tagged you while replying to him and he’s not as dumb as you think he is.”

“That is why Pike was posting about you?” Ilya realized immediately, looking far more annoyed about that than the fact that if he wasn’t a little more careful someone invested enough was going to start connecting dots. “He was trying to annoy me?”

“He used the words ‘rage bait,’ but yes, essentially.”

“I hate your best friend.”

“I know you don’t, but I’ll let you believe that,” Shane said, smiling a little before reaching up to cup Ilya’s cheek and saying, as earnestly as he possibly could given the rather absurd circumstances, “I like the account, Ilya. It’s funny and it’s a way for you to talk about me in public even if no one knows it’s you. I could do without my teammates reading your descriptions of all the ways you want to make me cry in bed, but it’s still funny and very you.”

“I made it so I would not accidentally like tweets about you with my verified account,” Ilya explained, “and then people made me angry and I could not resist.”

“That checks out,” Shane said, trying really hard not to laugh because Ilya just looked so damn sincere. “But you need to be a little more careful. Turn off your location and stop posting pictures of me that I only texted to you and didn’t post anywhere publicly. Just at least until we’re married. I couldn’t protect you if you somehow got outed right now and I worry about you all the time. That’s why Amanda and Christina have been not so subtly shoving Scott and I in people’s faces, they don’t know that you and I are together but I *did* tell them that even a rumor could be dangerous for you if it seemed like it was coming from someone official and they don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Ilya looked completely and utterly shocked.

And Shane knew it wasn’t because *Shane* cared. Ilya simply couldn’t fathom that other people, people in the Admirals association who had no skin in the game, who made no profit on Ilya’s existence, would care enough about him to devise a media strategy that would protect him from rumors started by fans on the internet.

“A lot of people care about you, baby,” Shane whispered, running his thumb along Ilya’s cheek and watching the realization set in. He hated that Ilya had gone so long thinking he wasn’t worth anything more than his wallet and skill. He hated that the knowledge that people cared about *him* was a surprise.

“I’ll be more careful,” Ilya promised, he untangled his fingers from Shane’s and then his hands landed on Shane’s waist, steady and warm. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

“Don’t apologize,” Shane said gently, “I’m not mad, not at all. I just care about you and part of caring about you is worrying.”

“You would worry less if we were married?”

“I’ll worry less *when* we’re married,” Shane corrected.

Ilya smiled, soft and fond, and nodded once, like he couldn’t help but affirm the fact that it truly was a *when* not an *if*, “Detroit is playing D.C.. Detroit is on the border. If Detroit wins, the one of us who loses *this* series can travel with during the two game stretch. It would be enough days to get license

and go to the courthouse. No one would be expecting to see us in Windsor, it would be safe and Windsor is in Ontario so your father probably knows some government people, yes?"

"I think his college roommate works for the local government, actually," Shane said, his brain simply supplying the information as he struggled to process what Ilya was saying.

They'd talked about this summer, about going to the cottage and making contacts so they knew they'd be working with people they trusted but, Shane guessed, a lot of that had to do with the Permanent Residency requirements and immigration paperwork. The marriage was always going to be the weak link in the secrecy chain. There was no way to *entirely* ensure that every person in whatever courthouse they walked into would keep a secret, but Shane had sort of been forcing himself not to think too hard about that.

Maybe this was the solution, maybe getting married in Windsor during a playoff run when no one expected either of them to be anywhere other than training and no one would expect whichever of them lost this series to be anywhere near the next round would be the safest way to avoid anyone realizing what was happening.

And Windsor *was* in Ontario. They wouldn't even need to transfer the documentation between provinces to start the citizenship process with the people Shane's dad knew in Ottawa.

"Okay," Shane agreed after he realized Ilya had just been watching him, waiting for a reaction beyond the fact that David's roommate maybe worked for the city of Windsor. "Okay, if Detroit wins this series, we get married during the two game stretch."

"Thank Christ," Ilya breathed, darting forward to press a quick kiss to Shane's lips before stepping away and picking up his travel bag that'd been abandoned on the foyer floor.

Shane was left reeling for a second at the loss of contact and sort of just watched, stunned, as Ilya headed for the stairs like nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

"What the fuck?"

"I have something for you," Ilya said, not pausing in his trek up the stairs. "I am not giving it to you down here where your rookie could appear at any moment."

Shane had honestly forgotten about Luke.

He nodded and followed Ilya toward the stairs, not at all sure what Ilya had for him but really not wanting to traumatize Luke when he'd only been living here for a week. Well, he didn't want to traumatize Luke at all, but as exemplified by Twitter user @lilyhollander1221, Ilya Rozanov had zero shame. Shane should probably warn Luke. That could wait until morning, though.

Ilya dropped his bag at the end of their bed and knelt down next to it, unzipping one of the side pockets and pulling out a box before settling fully onto the floor and looking up at Shane. His eyes were open and warm and his smile was so sticky sweet Shane felt it like a punch to the sternum.

It wasn't a ring box, it was a little bit bigger than that, but Shane still knew, somehow, in the back of his mind, that the box contained a ring.

Shane sat down on the floor next to him and leaned into his side.

"I used string while you were asleep last time I was here," Ilya explained, "is what the internet suggested."

Shane just nodded, entirely speechless as Ilya opened the box to reveal two perfectly simple, polished rings, one yellow gold and one white, along with a thin white gold figaro chain.

"I thought you'd like the silvery one but if you would rather have gold I will fix it. I can put mine with my cross during practice and games," Ilya explained, picking up the gold ring before handing the box over to Shane, "you do not wear a chain, though, so I got you one."

He said it like it was simple.

Like the fact that he'd figured out how to get Shane's ring size and had put enough thought into it that he'd also found a way for Shane to keep the ring with him during games was nothing at all. Like him noticing that the earrings Shane had been wearing and the other jewelry they'd put him in for photo shoots was silver rather than gold, that he'd likely noticed that and decided that Shane would prefer white gold to yellow.

And then Shane realized that they absolutely could not be seen wearing wedding rings. But just as he opened his mouth to say exactly that, Ilya's hand landed on his knee and he said, "in Russian Orthodox tradition you wear rings on your right hand. Is not the same here, people here would not question you for wearing ring on your right hand. And, if they did, you could just explain that moving to New York made you more fashionable."

Shane let out a huff of laughter before looking up at Ilya, *his* Ilya, who was perfect and beautiful and had thought of everything.

"What about you?" Shane asked softly, "would you be questioned for wearing a ring? Would people back home notice?"

"They do not pay enough attention to notice," Ilya said and it was the way he said it more than the words themselves that broke Shane's heart. He said it like he was past resigned, like he couldn't even imagine why anyone would've *ever* paid attention. "You will wear the ring?"

"Ilya," Shane whispered, reaching up and combing Ilya's hair away from his temple with soft fingers so he could press a kiss against his warm skin. "Of course I will."

Ilya grinned, his entire face lighting up like the summer sun. He picked up the white gold band and slid it onto Shane's right ring finger before handing Shane the golden one, matching but for the shade of the metal, and holding out his own hand expectantly. Shane just smiled and kissed his cheek before sliding Ilya's ring onto his finger.

A set; perfectly matched.

It was how they'd always been; the only two who could keep up, the only names in conversations about who was the best, the pair who'd been pitted against each other since before they were even drafted because of how evenly they were matched. It just wasn't a rivalry like everyone had wanted, it was something so much better.

Ilya's hands came up to cup Shane's cheeks and Shane leaned forward, closing the distance between them to press his lips to Ilya's.

It'd been far too long, nearly an entire month since he'd last seen him and after years of going much longer, it shouldn't have been so hard, but it was different now. *They* were different now. They couldn't pretend anymore, couldn't act like this thing wasn't killing them. It was in the open now, or as open as it could be. They were on the same page, taking steps together and figuring it out as they went.

Chapter 29: when i run out of road

Chapter Notes

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

April 2017

Luke was having a normal day.

He woke up to his alarm and did his fifteen minutes of morning yoga in his room, appreciating the way the sunlight was filtering through his windows and how the trees he could see were properly green with some of them starting to bloom with late spring flowers. Then he made his way downstairs to fill his water bottle in the kitchen before going down to the gym and his day became decidedly less normal.

“Rozanov?” he said before his brain had properly caught up.

He’d known, in theory, that Shane and Ilya were together. He’d also known, in theory, that Ilya sometimes lived and/or stayed in this house.

None of that theory, however, seemed to matter when faced with Ilya Rozanov, shirtless in their kitchen at 7 in the morning, staring at the Keurig like it’d personally wronged him.

“Gillis,” Ilya greeted, “what is wrong with this stupid machine.”

Luke blinked a couple of times and then took a step closer to see what the issue was. He figured it out pretty quickly once he realized the machine wasn’t actually plugged in.

He decided to just plug it in himself instead of telling Ilya he was an idiot.

“Ah,” Ilya hummed, “yes, that makes sense.”

“Right,” Luke said, trying to come up with a sentence other than *what the fuck are you doing in our house* and landing on, “uh, what are you doing here?”

Not much better, but Luke decided it sounded less accusatory than his first option so he was going to count it as a win.

“Is my house,” Ilya responded, shooting Luke a look that clearly said *I was pretty sure you were smarter than this.*

“Right, I just meant, well, playoffs, you know?”

“Yes, playoffs,” Ilya agreed and Luke wondered if there might be any merit in going back to sleep and trying this again tomorrow.

He was pretty sure life didn’t work that way, though. So, instead of attempting to manufacture a Groundhog Day situation, he said, “good game last night.”

Ilya’s eyes were twinkling in amusement. A look that Luke recognized from moments before Carter decided to make Scott’s day significantly more exhausting.

“We lost,” Ilya deadpanned.

Luke kind of wanted the Keurig to explode and take him with it.

“Stop terrorizing my rookie,” Shane said, appearing in the kitchen like Luke’s knight in shining armor. Luke would’ve kissed him if he wasn’t entirely certain that Ilya Rozanov would actually fucking murder him. Also, maybe more importantly, if Luke weren’t disappointingly straight. “Luke, antagonizing people is how he shows love, trust me. Ilya, stop being a dick. Please.”

“Fine,” Ilya agreed, rolling his eyes even as he visibly melted at Shane’s presence. “Luke, is nice to actually meet you,” he said as Shane started moving around the kitchen to make them breakfast. If Luke’s day had continued to go normally, he would’ve been done with the shortened version of his strength training he’d been assigned for playoffs with just enough time to rinse off before Shane was finished cooking. Luke’s day, however, was not going normally. “Shane talks a lot about you. You played a very good game last night. Good passes, good shooting, better backhand than Shane already.”

Luke just blinked again, trying to process the past five minutes of his life, “thank you?”

He hadn’t meant for it to come out as a question. It did anyway.

“Go do your workout,” Shane said, clearly recognizing that Luke’s brain was stuck in some sort of weird loop and deciding to just yank him out of it. Luke loved Shane. He was going to tell him that someday, as soon as he figured out how people expressed platonic, familial love outside of hockey. Until that point, he was just going to continue falling asleep on Shane on team flights and sitting way too close to him on the bench. “I’ll have breakfast ready when you’re out of the shower and then we’ll make our list and head to the rink, alright?”

Luke nodded and blinked again as his filled water bottle was placed in his hand. He hadn’t even noticed Shane pick it up.

“Thanks,” he said, wondering just a little if Shane would make fun of him if he teared up at how quickly they’d fallen into a routine, at how genuinely at home Luke already felt in this house.

Shane must’ve seen something in his face because he reached out and ruffled Luke’s hair before shoving him lightly by the shoulder and nodding toward the stairs.

Luke turned and went.

He’d finish his workout, shower, eat breakfast, and then he’d get to make his list of things he wanted to work on when they got to the rink. It was what they’d been doing after game days since a few days after Shane got off of IR. If they were at home, they’d go to the rink. If they were on the road, they’d find some open space and do a walk through. But now that Luke lived here, with Shane, they’d been doing it every morning, not only on post-game days. Now, breakfast was at home instead of at a diner near the rink or in whatever conference room their nutrition team had commandeered. And every time, Luke got to feel what it was like when someone paid attention, he got to learn what it felt like when someone consistently showed up.

* * *

As soon as Luke's footsteps faded away, Shane turned toward Ilya and let out a slightly disappointed sigh and Ilya immediately knew he'd done something wrong.

"Sorry," he said preemptively.

"No, don't apologize," Shane said, running his hand down Ilya's back before moving toward the fridge. "You didn't know any better. It's just that I'm used to your teasing, he's not. He's a little like me, I think. Sometimes struggles to read what people really mean. But he's a lot like you, Ilya. I don't know much but he barely talks about his family and I heard him on the phone with his best friend saying that he felt like he could be in the living room and the way he said it, it was like it was something monumental. I don't think he's had many places he feels at home."

"So when I teased him, it might have made him feel like he was not welcome?"

"I wouldn't go that far; he looked confused not hurt. I think he's just already used to our routine and you threw him off."

"I will be nicer," Ilya promised. He'd teased because he was trying to lighten the tension, because he thought maybe Luke would laugh. He should've known that the kid was probably exhausted and would've been confused to find someone he wasn't used to in the place he'd been told was his to call home. He hated to think that Luke's family was anything like Ilya's, but if what Shane said about him being excited to just exist in Shane's space was true, Ilya was fairly certain he and Luke grew up in similar houses.

Ilya knew, though, that if Luke really was like Shane in any way, if he paid attention to patterns and followed routines, he'd be even more confused if Ilya just started behaving entirely differently. Ilya had already disturbed their routine simply by being here, but he didn't have to force it to change entirely. So, he asked, "what happens next in your day?"

Shane looked at him like he'd just fallen in love all over again and Ilya felt an incredible sense of pride swell up in his chest.

"Breakfast and game tape," Shane said. "He makes a list of things he wants to work on and then we go to the rink and work through it."

Ilya was shocked to realize that Shane was *training* Luke. It wasn't just mentoring during practice and opening his home to a rookie. Of course it wasn't. Shane didn't do anything halfway. He'd taken Luke under his wing and Ilya should've known that'd mean Shane putting in several extra hours a week to actually, properly train the kid.

Yet, somehow, Ilya found himself stunned by just how wonderful Shane could be.

Ilya stepped up beside him, kissed his cheek, and decided to help make breakfast.

* * *

By the time they left for the rink that morning, Shane could tell that Luke had settled back into his routine. He'd been thrown by Ilya's presence, but after breakfast and after Ilya had joined them to make Luke's practice list, he seemed genuinely comfortable.

Still, Shane apologized, "I'm sorry I didn't warn you he was going to be there," he said as they pulled out of the driveway, heading toward Tarrytown, "I didn't even know he was going to be there, he just showed up last night after we got home."

"It's his house to," Luke shrugged, "I was just a little surprised. I think I actually like him though, and not just as a player. He's nicer than I thought he'd be."

"I think he just finds it fun to piss people off," Shane said with a soft laugh, "he can be pretty sweet when he wants to be, though."

"Do you think he'll stay with us after we kick Boston's ass in this series?"

Shane let out a proper laugh at that, "yeah, I think so."

Luke just grinned.

* * *

May 2017

After the second game, Ilya stayed at the hotel with his team and when New York flew to Boston the day after, Shane stayed in the hotel as well. Getting to spend the night together after a month apart had been wonderful, but they still had playoffs to focus on and neither of them was willing to do anything to screw up their chances and sneaking off and skirting curfew was a great way to get themselves in trouble.

New York won Game One. Boston won Game Two with St-Simon scoring with less than 30 seconds left in the third after they'd been tied 1-1 since the middle of the first. New York won both games in Boston putting the series at 3-1 and then Boston won Game Five in New York bringing it up to 3-2.

Now, Shane was sitting in the visitor's locker room at TD Garden, just off the ice from warmups, buzzing with anticipation for Game Six.

Either they won tonight or they flew back to New York and played Game Seven.

Shane didn't want to play Game Seven.

The next day was his birthday and he'd much prefer finishing this series tonight so he could actually go out and celebrate the win and his birthday with his team and then go back to Ilya's for the night instead of going back to the hotel and going straight to bed so he could be properly rested for another game.

Shane was exhausted. His shoulder was starting to ache and he had a nasty bruise on his stomach from catching someone's elbow near the boards during Game Four. He wanted this series to be over *now* so they could have a tiny break. In a perfect world, the Detroit v. D.C. series would go to Game Seven so they'd get a couple of extra days to recover.

"Listen up!" Scott said, only having to raise his voice a little to pull everyone's attention. "Let's finish this tonight, I want to be done with Boston for this year, I want to win this game and then go out and celebrate Shane's birthday and then I want to go home and sleep for 36 hours without any of you bothering me. Sound good?"

"Yes, Captain!" came the automatic reply as everyone started grinning and banging their sticks against the floor or their stalls. Shane just looked at Scott in amusement. Amanda was in the corner

recording him and Shane just knew that clip was going to get posted on Twitter and result in an absolute deluge of posts from people who were entirely convinced that Scott and Shane were in some sort of relationship.

Somehow, the internet and his team alike had yet to notice Shane's ring.

Then Scott turned to wink at him and Shane got an idea.

He just had to win this game first.

* * *

Ilya slid to a stop at the faceoff circle, took one look at Shane, and narrowed his eyes, "what are you planning, Hollander?"

"You'll see," Shane said, a look in his eye that probably would've made a lesser man turn tail and run. It just made Ilya love him more.

The puck dropped and Ilya won the face off only to immediately have his pass to Connors blocked by Vaughan who took off up the ice with Shane keeping pace. Vaughan chipped the puck directly over Cliff's head and it landed a half step in front of Shane who easily took it into his cradle and carried forward for barely a second before passing to Luke who, as far as Ilya could tell, had appeared out of thin fucking air directly in front of the crease only to smack the puck straight through the five hole before Oregon could react.

It was insane.

No one should be moving at that speed by Game Six and New York's *entire first line* was just as fast now as they'd been during Game One. In a world where this line wasn't led by Shane Hollander, Ilya might've just assumed that all three of them were doping. But in this world, there was no explanation beyond the fact that they were just that damn *good*.

Scott's line subbed in 30 seconds later and Ilya had to admit that, despite having witnessed the signing of the Magna Carta, Scott was distressingly good at hockey.

Ilya sort of wanted to petition the League to get rid of the salary cap and, instead, introduce some sort of rule that made it so teams couldn't have more than one player of this caliber. He was well aware that Shane's salary had barely fit under the cap this year and the only reason it *had* was that Montreal had retained part of it. He was going to end up taking a pay cut on paper the following season which made sense, partially due to the lack of space in the cap and partially due to the fact that he was no longer Captain.

But what people wouldn't realize is that Shane's manager was Yuna Hollander and he'd just moved from Montreal, a respectable major market to New York City, the world's *biggest* market. Shane was going to be swimming in brand deals to the point where he'd probably agree to play for New York for free, meaning the salary cap meant jack shit.

Ilya watched, feeling almost a little helpless, as Scott scored on the second line's first shift bringing the score up to 2-0 a minute and fifteen seconds into the first period.

He had no clue what Scott had told them all in his pregame speech but, whatever it was, it was working.

By the end of the first the score was at 3-0 and every single one of the Admirals was grinning as they stepped off the ice.

Ilya scored half way through the second bringing them up to 3-1 but Shane answered two shifts later with a backhand that made Ilya want to pin him up against the boards; teammates, audience, and Russian government be damned. Carter scored his first goal of the game the shift after and they went into the second intermission with the score reading 5-1.

Victor St-Simon scored on their second shift of the third and New York let them ride the brief excitement of closing in on them for five whole minutes before Luke and Carter scored back to back goals in a single shift.

Both goals had been assisted by Shane.

That thought hit him a shift later when Cliff Marlow, Ilya's beloved best friend who he may just have to kill, decided to be the biggest idiot on planet fucking Earth and check Luke from behind.

Luke hit the boards and went down, eerily similar to Shane only a couple of months prior and as Shane actually dropped gloves for the first time in his career, the only fully formed thought in Ilya's mind was that Shane was about to record his first Gordie Howe Hat Trick.

The second thought to filter through the chaos was that Shane was really fucking sexy when he was angry.

Ilya saw Carter speed over and, for some unknown reason, assumed that he'd pull Shane off.

That was not what happened.

Instead, Ilya watched stunned as Carter Vaughan, a guy who was known for fighting just about as much as Scott and Shane were, dropped his own gloves and joined the fray.

And by 'fray', Ilya meant Cliff sort of just standing there in shock while two people who never fought landed several shockingly effective punches.

Ilya didn't even know how to begin reacting to that situation and he sincerely doubted that Shane would take well to Ilya attempting to pull him off so, instead of getting involved, Ilya skated toward Luke who was, thankfully, fully conscious. He'd sat up and backed himself against the boards to catch his breath and was now just staring in shock as Matti and Breezy finally yanked Shane and Carter away from Cliff.

Carter was attempting to fight back, looking quite a bit like a cat trying to escape a bath.

Shane, though, Shane had gone quiet which was exponentially more terrifying.

Ilya had to say Luke's name twice to get his attention.

"Yeah?" Luke finally responded, looking up at Ilya wide eyed.

"You okay?" Ilya asked.

“Just got the wind knocked out of me,” Luke responded, shaking his arms out as if physically shaking off the sensation of hitting the ice. “Are Shane and Vaughny alright?”

Ilya looked over his shoulder to where Carter had finally calmed down enough to notice that Shane had gone quiet, to where the pair of them were now clearly attempting to explode Cliff with their minds, and then turned back to Luke, “they are fine.”

Luke looked at Ilya like he didn’t believe him for a second but pretty quickly changed gears and, instead, started trying to climb back to his feet while still half in shock and potentially injured.

Ilya took the last step forward and reached out to steady him and was only slightly surprised when Luke automatically took his hand.

“Thanks Rozy,” Luke said, as he got his feet under him, looking much more stable now that he was actually standing. Ilya decided not to comment on the fact that literally no one called him Rozy. He found didn’t actually hate it when it was coming from Luke. He also only realized once Luke was standing and clearly in one piece that the thought of jumping to Cliff’s defense had never once crossed his mind.

His first thought had been Shane, his second had been Luke.

He really wasn’t sure when he’d ended up co-parenting New York’s rookie with his secret fiancé, but he wasn’t exactly mad about it. Ilya clapped Luke on the shoulder and decided to skate away before he did something crazy like hug the kid and tell him he was glad he wasn’t injured.

Cliff was called for checking from behind and given a five minute major and Shane and Carter were both given five minute majors for fighting, leaving Boston one man down and New York two.

Ilya skated to the bench as their shifts changed and had to suppress a genuine shiver when he caught sight of Shane and Carter both still glaring absolute daggers at Cliff from behind the glass in the box. He knew they’d both calm down as soon as they were out and could check on Luke themselves, but for right now, Cliff was Public Enemy Number One and Ilya had no clue what was going to happen when their penalty time ran down.

His question was answered three and a half minutes later when Murdock changed shifts at the exact moment Carter and Shane stepped out of the box, leaving their first shift on the ice at full power with a minute and fifteen seconds left on the game clock.

No one had scored during the five minutes Carter, Shane, and Cliff had been in the sin bin.

45 seconds later the score was 9-2 New York with Carter and Luke both completing hat tricks within seconds of one another.

23 seconds after that, Shane scored his third goal of the game and brought them up to 10-2 with all three of their first line forwards pulling off hat tricks in Game Six of a playoff series against an actually competitive opponent.

Ilya was pretty sure teams were going to be quite a bit more careful when it came to checking Luke Gillis from here on out.

* * *

They poured into the locker room, rowdier than they'd been since that first victory against Montreal, and Shane found himself actually enjoying the noise for once.

He felt good, like the adrenaline from the game and the fight and worrying about Luke had steadied into a low buzz instead of making him crazy or sending him into a crash. He was proud of his team, he was proud of himself, he felt a little sorry for punching Cliff in the face but not sorry enough to bring down his mood. So, when Christina popped her head into the room to ask Shane to come do press, he gave into Carter's perpetual demands that he do media shirtless.

* * *

Scott watched Shane peel off his compression shirt at Carter's insistence and was momentarily shocked that he'd actually agreed. That had been a normal amount of shock, a little surprise that Shane was really going to play along with the team's constant ribbing about him posting thirst traps and pretending they were about hockey. That little surprise was nothing in comparison to the full body reaction he had when he noticed the chain around Shane's neck.

The chain that was holding a ring.

He caught Shane's eye, probably looking like a deer in the headlights, and Shane, the absolute fucker, just winked.

* * *

Ilya stepped into the tunnel for post-game press and pulled up short when he found Shane Hollander shirtless in the hall, talking to the press and grinning like he was having the time of his fucking life.

His hair was sweaty and sticking up from where he'd run his fingers through it, his cheeks were flushed making his freckles stand out even more, his jaw was lined with the faintest stubble, still barely visible even a month into playoffs which was stupidly endearing. He'd put on weight and a significant amount of muscle since moving to New York, since their team nutritionist had decided he needed to bulk instead of always attempting to cut and he looked incredible. Stronger than he'd ever been and just slightly soft in all the right places. Ilya was stuck somewhere between wanting to hug him just to feel the warmth of his skin and wanting suck his dick on live broadcast just to ensure the entire world knew he was off the market.

And that was about when he realized Shane was *shirtless*.

As in, nothing was covering his chest.

As in, nothing was covering what was hanging from the chain around his neck.

Ilya actually stumbled, having to reach out and catch himself on the wall before he fully ate shit.

Shane looked up, having somehow heard Ilya's brief battle with gravity, and smiled. His dimples popped, his nose scrunched, and his eyes lit up and Ilya felt genuinely fucking *crazy* with the force of his love.

"Ah, there he is," Shane said, as if he'd just been standing here waiting for Ilya to show up instead of standing here fulfilling his media obligation. "Roz, ready to wear a Hollander jersey next week?"

Ilya had somehow forgotten about that.

How was it that a stupid little bet between ‘rivals’ meant he’d get to wear his almost-husband’s last name in public the week of their wedding?

God, their lives were crazy.

Ilya couldn’t say any of that out loud, but the softness in Shane’s eye, the softness that was only ever meant for Ilya, told him that Shane knew where his thoughts had strayed. Shane’s hand came up for the barest second, brushing against the ring resting against the center of his chest before dropping back to his side. Ilya copied the motion, letting his eyes linger on Shane just a moment too long before saying, “it could be worse, I could be wearing a Hunter jersey.”

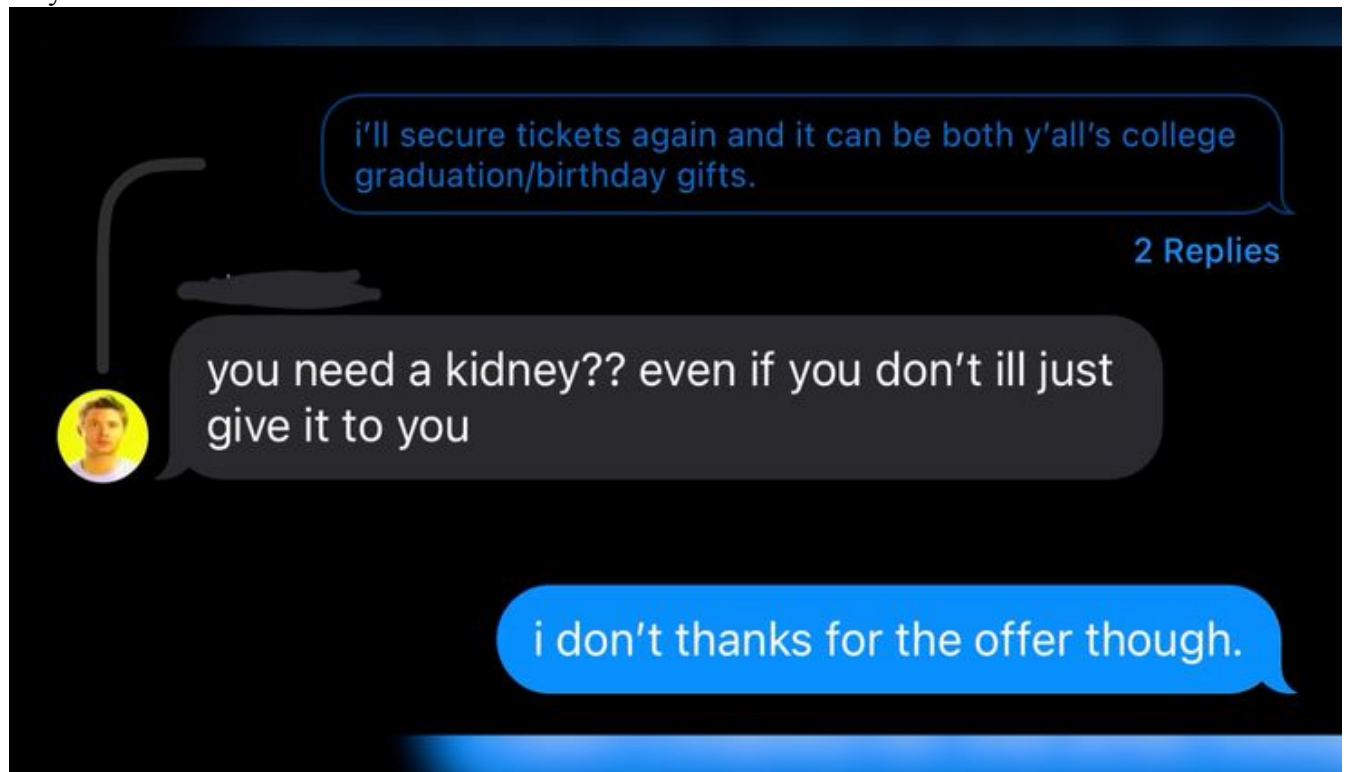
Shane laughed, bright and free, and then Scott stepped out of the locker room, clearly perfectly timed by their media team to make it seem like he’d realized Shane had been gone a minute too long and had just *needed* to come look for him. Ilya felt a wild burst of jealousy before he forced himself to remember that they were doing this for *him*. Christina and Amanda had found out that mere rumors would put Ilya at risk and, without even knowing why Shane cared, had devised a strategy that would keep him safe.

“There’s only one person I want wearing my jersey, Roz,” Scott said, shooting Ilya a grin that went a long way toward reminding Ilya that he actually *liked* Scott now and that he probably shouldn’t kill him for letting people on the internet believe he was in love with Shane.

Ilya rolled his eyes and blew a raspberry in Scott’s direction before saying, “good game, guys.”

“Good game, Rozanov,” Shane said before turning over his shoulder to look at Christina who quickly stepped in and wrapped everything up. By the time the cameras turned toward Ilya, Shane and Scott were gone and Ilya’s hand unconsciously landed on his chest, on the ring sitting next to his mother’s cross. Ilya took a breath and wrapped his fingers around the physical reminder that Shane was his, no matter what anyone wished or believed, and then he zoned back in and answered the press pool’s questions.

yes, my sister's contact photo is a really bad promo photo of jensen ackles from like 2005. why do you ask?



Chapter 30: you bring me home

Chapter Notes

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

May 2017

“Shane!” Luke shouted, his footsteps thundering down the stairs into their basement. Shane had a moment to set down the dumbbells he’d been holding before Luke skidded to a stop at the door to the gym.

“Luke!”

“Guess who just liked the video Amanda posted.”

The video Luke was referencing was one of Shane, Luke, and Carter getting a little too into singing along to Midnight Memories in the locker room after Scott had pulled Shane back in from postgame press after the game in Boston. The video had featured all three of them shirtless, Luke and Carter ‘on elevated surfaces’ (as McCormick put it), and an honestly unnecessary amount of air guitar.

Unsurprisingly, over the past day and a half, the video had gone spectacularly viral.

Now, Shane’s Friday morning workout was being interrupted by his live-in rookie freaking out over ... something.

“Who liked the video?”

“Guess.”

“Uh, Ilya?”

Luke looked wounded, like he simply couldn’t believe that was the best answer Shane could come up with, “he liked the video like minutes after it was posted, no. Harry Styles.”

Shane just sort of stared at Luke for a second before saying, “what?”

“Harry Styles liked the video. Now twitter has started a rumor.”

“And what might that rumor be?” Shane asked, already dreading the answer.

“Please keep in mind that this rumor was started by a very specific subsection of teenage girls who have long since lost their minds and are much happier for it,” Luke said, “also, please keep in mind that my feed has been irreparably fucked by interacting with Shane Hollander fan accounts in my free time and that is the only reason I even saw this.”

“What’s the rumor, Luke.”

Instead of saying anything, Luke just turned the phone around to show a Tweet that was simply a screenshot of the fact that Harry Styles had, in fact, liked the video with the caption, ‘i’m starting a #rumor.’

“That doesn’t feel like a very substantial rumor,” Shane said.

“Oh, it gets worse,” Luke responded, clearly delighted. Shane decided to continue his workout while Luke walked him through the absolute insanity of the internet.

People had found ‘evidence’ that Shane and Harry had been in the same place (New York City, by the way, population 8.5 million) on multiple occasions, that they followed each other on Instagram (which was news to Shane), photos of Harry performing a concert in a Montreal jersey (paying no mind to the fact that the other four were also in Montreal jerseys or that they’d worn jerseys of several different teams at several different tour locations), and, best of all, that Harry was apparently currently in New York and, rumor had it, was planning on attending the New York v. Detroit game that night.

Shane had a headache.

It was only 8 in the morning.

* * *

Ilya had stayed in Boston after Game Six against New York to go to the last few coaches meetings of the year that he needed to attend in person and to pack up his car to spend the rest of playoffs in New York and a summer in Canada. He'd made lists, several of them. Shane would be proud. He was double checking his hockey-specific list, making sure he had everything he'd need for training, when his phone rang.

He saw Scott's name and answered, slightly worried that Shane might've somehow gotten injured the morning of his first game against Detroit but mostly just wondering what could possibly have Scott willingly calling him instead of communicating with him through Shane as he tended to do now that Ilya was emotionally stable and back to being a menace.

"Hunter?"

He was met by loud laughter, loud enough that he knew there were several other people in the room and he mentally told himself to not say anything unhinged about Shane.

"You've got some competition tonight," Scott said.

Ilya blinked a couple of times and tried to realign his brain. He knew for a fact Scott wouldn't be outing them to room full of people which meant this was a joke, Ilya simply had no context for what that joke might be.

"What?" he asked, hoping Scott would give him context without making him actually *ask*.

"You'll be here tonight in Hollzy's jersey but I don't think you're the only one vying for his attention," another voice, Ilya was about 64% certain it was Greg Huff, said. "Management just confirmed that Harry Styles is gonna be here."

Ilya had taken a break from packing only thirty minutes prior to tell several clearly insane teenagers that there was no chance in hell that Shane Hollander was dating Harry Styles. The rumors of who Shane *was* dating were getting crazier by the day. It'd gotten to a point where Ilya was pretty sure that even when they did come out publicly there would still be people who thought Shane was dating Scott or Hayden. Ilya had genuinely seen someone theorize that the brawl between Shane and Cliff the other night had been a lover's quarrel.

He wasn't quite sure which bit of that was more insane; the concept of Shane and Cliff dating, or calling Shane and Carter just wailing on Cliff while he stood there and Connors half attempted to fight them back a brawl.

And now Harry Styles was apparently attending this game. It wasn't abnormal for celebrities to attend games, especially in markets like New York and L.A. and especially during playoffs, but Ilya was weirdly jealous of his Hollander jersey thunder being preemptively stolen.

"I have things to do, Hunter," Ilya said, pinching the bridge of his nose and wondering if it was possible to get a pop star induced migraine.

"You're still coming tonight, right?" Scott asked and Ilya could hear traces of real concern in his voice. He was clearly worried that he'd somehow actually offended Ilya. Sometimes, Ilya wished the man had less empathy. And then he'd remember the way Scott had driven to Boston when Shane was injured and spent the entire morning in Shane's hospital room helping Ilya plan his father's funeral and he'd remind himself that empathy is a good thing.

"Yes, I am driving," Ilya explained, "leaving soon, just need to pack my car for summer."

Scott didn't ask where Ilya would be spending his summer, he didn't have to.

According to Shane, he'd spotted the ring (as had everyone who'd ever made a Twitter account), but he hadn't yet asked about it.

Ilya sort of wanted him to wait to ask until the following week when Shane could simply answer that they were *married* instead of engaged.

"Well, drive safely," Scott said, pulling the phone closer so his voice was actually audible as the laughter and teasing carried on around him. "Shane will probably be here soon, we're just early because we were playing poker. But when *you* get here, Shane's tickets are at will call for you and I think security's been told you can come back to the family room because we've got a jersey for you and I think they want to take pictures of the pair of you, sell the rivalry turned friendship, you know?"

“Okay,” Ilya said, he’d already gotten all of that information from Shane but he knew Scott was just trying to be helpful and Ilya really didn’t need to take his misplaced anger at the fact that he and Shane couldn’t be in a public relationship right now out on Scott, who’d simply been calling to joke around and who was actively helping steer the internet away from Shane and Ilya’s scent.

“See you later, Roz.”

“See you,” Ilya echoed before hanging up the phone. He didn’t know why he was annoyed; it was more than a little stupid, but he was quickly learning that emotions were not rational and that he didn’t need to *make* them rational for them to be real.

He finished going through his lists, plugged the address to *their* house in New York into his phone, and counted down the minutes until he was back by Shane’s side.

* * *

Shane was cornered by Amanda the moment he left the pre-game captain’s meeting and he preemptively braced himself for chaos. But then she said, “Rozanov just got here, security brought him down to the family room so we can do pictures if you want to go say hi.”

“Thanks,” Shane said, feeling the knot in his chest that always grew when Ilya was too far away fade away.

“I’ll come back in a few minutes to do pictures, I just have to find my camera and the jersey that the equipment managers set aside for him.”

Shane nodded his thanks and then turned to head down the hallway.

He found Ilya lounging on one of the couches in the room a few doors down from the locker room. He looked exhausted but he lit up when he saw Shane.

Shane quickened his pace and dropped down onto the couch next to him and let his head rest against Ilya’s shoulder. He’d stand up and sit at the table in a minute, he’d put the right amount of distance between them before the door opened again, but for just a moment, he was going to let himself simply soak in Ilya’s presence, “hi.”

“Hi,” Ilya echoed, turning to press a soft kiss into Shane’s hair, “long day?”

“It’s just getting to that point,” Shane said, knowing that Ilya understood without him having to explain. His muscles hurt and his joints were sore and his shoulder was constantly in pain. He felt like he was never getting enough sleep no matter how early he went to bed and he’d been spending so much time in sweaty hockey gear that he was genuinely starting to feel like he’d never once been clean.

“You are half way there,” Ilya said softly, squeezing Shane’s knee. “And I will be here the rest of the time, yes? I can cook and do laundry and do the little things so you and Luke do not have to.”

“Maybe I should have them add you to the WAG chat.”

“I am not a WAG,” Ilya argued, “they would have to change name, Kip and I will have our own chat.”

“Of course,” Shane said, smiling as he turned just enough to kiss the top of Ilya’s shoulder before settling back into the cushions. “You’re sitting with him, by the way. He’s using my second ticket and his parents are using Scott’s. They’re only a row apart but yeah, you and your fellow HAB are sitting together.”

“Perfect,” Ilya said, resting his head on top of Shane’s, “does he get a jersey too?”

“Nope, just you.”

Ilya’s shoulders relaxed at that and Shane wasn’t sure why, but he was glad to have made Ilya feel better no matter the reason.

Amanda came in a few minutes later, by which point Shane had forced himself to move from the couch to one of the tables which was good seeing as she didn’t knock. Shane had been pretty sure she knew exactly which of the internet rumors was true, but the not knocking on a closed door made him wonder.

“Here you go,” Amanda said, tossing Ilya Shane’s actual home jersey, not one of the ones they sold in the fan shop. Shane could tell, partially because of the higher quality fabric and the stitching around the logo and Shane’s name and number. But, mostly, he could tell because of the blood stain on the white A and the white stitching around the primary Admirals logo that they apparently hadn’t quite been able to get all the way out after Connors gave him a bloody nose with an accidental elbow in Game Five against Boston.

“So, we’re wearing alternate jerseys tonight?” Shane asked.

“Lady Liberty,” Amanda answered. Shane smiled at that. He hadn’t gotten to wear their third jersey yet and he was excited to have the chance. The logo was cool and he knew the fans would be excited. Also, it was navy blue and he’d sort of missed wearing a blue jersey, even though he absolutely did not want to be playing for Montreal anymore.

Ilya pulled the jersey on and put on an entirely fake frown that had Shane rolling his eyes.

“Why do I make bets with you, Hollander?”

“Because it’s fun,” Shane answered, “now take your pictures so we can remind the internet who won this one.”

Ilya grumbled but dutifully turned around for Amanda to take pictures of Shane’s name and number on his back before she directed Shane to step in so she could get a picture of them together.

She clicked through her little digital camera that she tended to use in the locker room and halls instead of the giant DSLR she used when they were on the ice for a second and then smiled, “perfect, I’ll post these before the game. Also, Shane, Luke was looking for you, said something about a ball stuck in the rafters.”

“Tell him I’ll be right out,” Shane said. He really wasn’t sure why the kids always came to find him when they got a ball stuck when they could just as easily sort it out themselves but, he guessed, he was more likely to do something like find a chair and use a stick to knock it out whereas Luke and Breezy were more likely to attempt to perform a circus act. Shane’s version was absolutely the safer option.

Amanda gave him a slightly distracted thumbs up, already pulling out her SD card and the little converter she carried around to load the pictures to her phone as she shouldered the door open and left the room.

Shane turned back to Ilya who was holding the hem of Shane's jersey and looking down at it with an odd look on his face, "what is it?"

"I like it," Ilya said, sounding somehow sad about that.

"What do you mean?" Shane asked, stepping closer and wrapping his fingers around Ilya's forearm.

"I like being here to cheer for you," Ilya responded, "maybe as much as I like playing, is weird feeling, like I can see where I will be when I retire and it is not so scary."

Shane blinked, trying to sort through that statement in a way that made sense, "you think you'll retire before me?"

"Maybe," Ilya said, shrugging just a little, just the barest twitch of his shoulders, like he was nervous about what Shane might be thinking.

"It's your career, Ilya," Shane said after a moment, putting thought into every word so he didn't scare Ilya off from speaking his mind or make him think that Shane was in any way disappointed in him, his choices, or his talent. "I'll support whatever decision you make whenever you make it."

Ilya nodded, his nose twitching slightly with some hidden emotion, and then he looked back up at Shane and smiled like none of that had just happened, "go help Luke, I will see you after game."

Shane's brain short circuited for a second, struggling to keep up with the hills and valleys of Ilya's emotions. He was certain he was missing something, but he didn't have time to figure it out right now and Ilya deserved more than a distracted conversation. Shane leaned forward to press a soft kiss to Ilya's lips, delighting in the fact that he had the chance to kiss his fiancé before a game, and then stepped away, "I love you, Ilya. Only you. No matter what."

It felt important, like something in him was screaming at him to remind Ilya of that fact, like something in him *knew* Ilya needed to hear it.

Ilya just stared at him for a second and then he nodded again, “I love you too.”

* * *

Ilya watched Shane leave and felt more than a little stupid.

The theories of who Shane was dating, and especially the fact that every new theory was immediately seen as more likely than the fact that Shane was dating *Ilya*, were starting to get to him. He knew it was irrational, but that didn’t change the fact that it hurt, it didn’t change the fact that he was still seen as a womanizing asshole with no depth who could never possibly deserve Golden Boy Shane Hollander.

He couldn’t wait to marry Shane mostly because he couldn’t wait to be married to Shane, but also because the added security of it would give him a buffer, a little extra room to act more like himself in public, to be seen as acting softer with Shane without risking his passport. One of his meetings before leaving Boston was sitting down with Coach LeClaire and their GM to change his emergency contact and tell them that he was engaged to a man. He hadn’t told them who, but he was pretty sure they’d guessed, especially when they’d looked at his paperwork and seen Shane Hollander’s name and number listed as his primary contact and next of kin.

They’d taken it well, but they’d also reminded him that the NHL Commissioner probably *wouldn’t* take it so well. Ilya was fairly certain they’d stand behind him if the Commissioner came for him, but not as sure as he was that New York would stand behind Shane.

It was a lot.

A lot of considerations, a lot of questions, a lot of feelings and he hated that he had to pay attention to so many moving pieces when all he wanted was to just be with Shane. He hated that he had to think about citizenship and contracts and optics when all of his teammates just got to introduce their wives to the team and move on. No one else was being told that their marriage might result in a mandatory meeting with Roger Crowell.

But Shane loved him, only him, and today Ilya got to wear his jersey in public.

He tapped his thumb against his ring and went out into the hall to find his way up to his seat.

* * *

New York beat Detroit 2-1 and the camera operators hadn't been able to decide between showing the smattering of celebrities in attendance or Ilya Rozanov, Captain of the Boston Bears, in a Shane Hollander jersey at every possible opportunity. Ilya had fun, sitting with Kip and getting to meet his parents. He'd talked to a few fans and hammed it up for the cameras.

Shane and Scott had both scored, which Kip had declared meant the HABs were beating the WAGs which had made Ilya laugh a lot too loud, but it'd felt good. He'd felt like he really was just part of the crowd, just there as Shane's fiancé instead of as part of a bet.

As the crowd cleared out, Ilya went down and returned Shane's home jersey to the equipment managers and then followed the directions Shane had texted him for where to wait.

Shane and Luke came out a half hour later; Shane was laughing as Luke told some story that involved a lot of hand gestures and Ilya wanted to bottle the feeling. Shane's smile widened as he caught sight of Ilya and they all climbed into the back seat of a town car headed for home.

Luke was asleep with his head on Shane's shoulder before they left Midtown and Shane passed out with his head on Ilya's shoulder by the time they crossed the Henry Hudson Bridge. Ilya dug his phone out of his pocket and snapped a picture. It was blurry in the low light, only lit up by the headlights of oncoming traffic, but you could just make out the pair of them, Luke's mouth hanging slightly open as he slipped past dozing into actual sleep and Shane's face lax and peaceful as he let himself rest.

Ilya felt like he was part of an actual family.

* * *

Game Two happened Monday night and Ilya watched from their couch at home with Sunny as New York lost 2-3.

On Tuesday morning, the Admirals flew out of Westchester County to Detroit and Ilya and Sunny flew out of JFK. It was Sunny's first commercial flight after only ever flying on the chartered jets with Shane and the Admirals but she slept the whole way and, also, she was a dog so Ilya was pretty sure she didn't notice the difference. If you asked him, she deserved to fly private all the time, but sometimes you just had to settle.

They met Yuna at the Detroit airport where they rented a car, picked Shane up at the practice rink, and crossed the border into Windsor where they went to City Hall and filled out their application for a marriage license. It was an annoying process involving several pieces of documentation and then several more pieces of documentation to certify English translations of Ilya's documents. Thankfully, though, Yuna had thought ahead and made an appointment and an hour later they walked out with a valid Province of Ontario marriage license and a civil ceremony scheduled for Thursday morning at 9:00.

On Wednesday, Ilya watched New York beat Detroit 3-2 from his hotel room.

On Thursday morning, Ilya, Sunny, and Yuna got in the car and went to pick David up from the airport before driving to Shane's hotel to pick him up.

Seeing Shane walk out the front door of his hotel in dress pants and a button down with his jacket draped over his arm and a tie carefully folded and tucked into his front pocket was what made it all real.

They were getting married *today*.

At 9:00 they would be married and Ilya was fairly certain that by 10:00 Shane would have Ilya's Permanent Resident application submitted. He hadn't said anything, but Ilya was more than certain that he'd already created the profile and filled out every line he could without needing their marriage certificate.

They'd talked about inviting other people, about Luke and Scott coming with Shane or Hayden and Cliff flying in, but eventually they'd decided on just family. It was less likely that they'd be noticed and photographed if it was a smaller group and it also, to Ilya at least, made it feel more special. He'd felt like a welcomed member of the Hollander family since that first day in Ottawa but this was what would make it real. In less than an hour, these people would *legally* be his family.

“Hey, baby,” Shane greeted, leaning across the back seat to kiss Ilya’s cheek as he climbed in the car. Sunny immediately scrambled off Ilya’s lap and climbed into Shane’s, curling up as best she could now that she’d grown past puppy size. Shane’s hand immediately landed on her head, his fingers stroking through her soft fur and Ilya felt his heart squeeze. Shane had changed so much since leaving Montreal. He was calmer, more sure of himself, stronger both mentally and physically, and he was finally admitting when he needed help. The fact that he’d adopted Sunny, that he let her sleep in his bed because the weight of her head pillowed on his stomach calmed him down, was a clear sign of how much more he was allowing himself to seek comfort.

“Hello,” Ilya responded, reaching over to run his thumb across Shane’s cheek, across the freckles that were the first thing he’d noticed behind that rink in Saskatchewan nine years prior.

“You boys ready?” Yuna asked, turning around from the passenger seat with a soft smile as David pulled away from the curb.

“Yeah,” Shane said immediately, smiling like he just couldn’t help it. Ilya loved him. Had loved him for a long time and would be loving him for even longer. Forever, if he had his way.

“Yeah,” Ilya echoed.

It was a short drive to City Hall, even with the border crossing. They arrived 15 minutes before 9:00 and entered the building through a back entrance that David’s college roommate, who just so happened to be the City Clerk, had left open for them.

The hall outside the designated marriage room at City Hall was, blessedly, empty. Shane tied his tie and pulled on his jacket and Ilya watched as Yuna brushed her hands over his lapels, fussing over him in the way mothers were meant to do. He felt his throat get tight as his mind strayed to thoughts of his own mother, to the question of what she’d think of all this. He knew she’d love Shane, simply because Ilya loved him. But he wondered what she’d dreamed of for her son’s wedding, if she’d imagined herself straightening his tie and making sure his jacket was properly buttoned.

This was his family now, but part of him wished his old one were here.

“Ilyusha,” a voice greeted from just over his shoulder and he felt the band around his lungs release its grip.

“Sveta,” he responded, turning around to find his best friend, *his* family, smiling up at him.

“You didn’t think I would miss this, did you?”

“How did you even know?”

“Your Jane called me,” she said.

Ilya should’ve known. Should’ve realized that Shane would absolutely think of this; that when he’d heard Ilya say it should just be family he would make sure that Ilya had family here too.

He didn’t even know how Shane had Svetlana’s phone number but he really should’ve guessed. Later, after he was finally married and after his emotions had stabilized, he might be terrified of the combined forces of Shane Hollander and Svetlana Vetrova, but right now he was simply grateful.

At 9:00, the door opened and David looked over his shoulder at Ilya just before walking in. He tsked slightly, clicking his tongue against the back of his teeth, then stepped forward and adjusted the knot on Ilya’s tie before smoothing out the fabric, “there,” he said, “much better.”

It’d been unconscious, the exact same thing he’d done to Shane’s tie a minute before, and Ilya could count on one hand the number of times he’d felt that sort of simple love from a father.

Ilya followed him into the room and thought briefly of his 18-year-old self, sitting on the floor of a hotel gym asking his new rival if Boston was a nice city, scared out of his mind about moving somewhere new and unknown but unwilling to admit that out loud. If only he’d known then what he knew now; that Boston would become his city, but that the boy sitting opposite him, drinking from Ilya’s water bottle without breaking eye contact, would become his home. Maybe if he’d known, he wouldn’t have been so anxious, so scared. Maybe he would’ve behaved differently or made different choices to get him to this moment sooner.

But he hadn’t known, and he’d ended up here anyway. And maybe that was better, maybe moving through life without ever knowing what, exactly, was coming next was what made it an adventure.

The ceremony lasted 15 minutes and they stuck to the standard vows which Ilya was glad for. He'd nearly lost it simply at hearing Shane say *til death do us part*, he didn't think he'd have been able to handle hearing Shane's own words, hearing how much Shane loved him as they stood across from each other, hands clasped and their rings swapped in each other's pockets.

They traded rings, sliding them onto their right ring fingers which had started as a suggestion for helping conceal their marriage but had become so much more every time Ilya remembered flashes of a beautiful ring on his mother's right hand as she rested her palm against his knee when he got a little too restless during a church service.

He'd been in a church once since her death and it was for his father's funeral. He sincerely doubted he'd ever find himself in a church again, but the traditions of the religion she'd followed, of the church she'd found peace in, lived on in little ways. He wore her cross, an Orthodox cross rather than a Latin Cross, and he'd wear his ring on his right hand. She was here, with him, despite it all.

When Shane kissed him, he cupped Ilya's cheeks. Ilya could feel the cold press of white gold metal against his jaw and every insecurity he'd had over public perception and questions of whether someone else might be better for Shane than he was faded away.

That was his ring on Shane's finger, his lips pressed against Shane's as they promised forever.

Shane Hollander, one of the most superstitious players in the league, loved Ilya enough to marry him mid-playoff run. He loved Ilya enough to massively disturb his routine, to sneak their dog into City Hall because Ilya had decided she simply couldn't miss the ceremony, to cross borders and work through the anxiety that the world would hate him and his life would end if they got outed simply because he *loved Ilya* and wanted to spend his life with him.

There was no question of whether he might be able to love someone else, someone better, not in the face of that devotion.

"I love you," Ilya whispered, his lips still brushing Shane's.

"Я тебя люблю," Shane responded. Perfectly, no accent.

my russian translated harry potter books are currently holding up this couch



trying to write ilya and shane playing hockey and genuinely just fucking typed "scared, potter?" and i'm choosing to blame that on you.

Chapter 31: every kiss, it gets a little sweeter

Chapter Notes

this was posted from a rest stop in REDACTED in the middle of my 6 hour drive to see my sister because the fact that i couldn't stop thinking about this chapter was becoming a genuine risk to my ability to safely operate a car :)

also, side note, i cannot write smut to save my life. like it would decrease the quality of my writing by at least 60% so let's all just use our imaginations RE: wedding night. i'm sure it was loud and freaky. good for them.

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

May 2017

Shane was very possibly going to kill Ilya.

They'd only been married for 32 hours and Shane was already on the verge of killing him.

Shane had gone back to Ilya's hotel the night prior after practice because he wasn't going to let playoffs stop him from spending his wedding night with his husband, but now he was starting to question that decision.

Shane hadn't even noticed when he was getting dressed to leave Ilya's hotel in time to be back at the team hotel to leave with Scott and Carter. He hadn't thought to look in a mirror, but now, as he stood in the locker room while Scott stared at him in some mix of confusion and horror with Carter on the ground behind him cackling so hard it sounded like he was at real risk of passing out, the cocky little grin Ilya had been wearing while he leaned back against the pillows and watched Shane get ready to leave was starting to make a lot more sense.

"Possessive bastard," Shane muttered, staring down at the *several* prominent bruises blooming across his chest, his abs, and the line of his hips. He wasn't going to be able to do media shirtless for a week.

"Shane," Scott said. Shane really couldn't tell if his tone of voice sounded more like someone approaching a rabid animal or someone begging for patience. "I can't not ask anymore. I've been losing my mind and I was holding out, waiting for you to tell me, but this is a step too far. What's with the ring?"

“Ring?” Shane said, somehow sounding casual even while standing in the middle of a locker room, shirtless and covered in hickeys. He could just make out bruises starting to form on his hips in the pattern of Ilya’s fingers. Considering the fact that the thumb prints were on his back, those ones would be pretty hard to explain away as anything remotely straight if someone caught sight of them. “What ring?”

“The ring you’ve been wearing since at least Boston.”

“Oh, this one?” Shane asked, holding up his right hand, “yeah, fun fact, in Eastern Orthodox tradition you wear wedding rings on the right hand.”

Scott’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head and Carter’s laughter cut off so abruptly that Shane turned around to make sure he hadn’t spontaneously snapped out of existence.

“Wedding?” Scott got out, his voice strangled.

“Yeah,” Shane said, nodding as he reached out for his compression shirt and pulled it on. It’d be a while before he got into his actual uniform, and normally he’d just be wearing a team t-shirt at this point in the day, but he *really* didn’t want to be shirtless in front of the whole team at the moment so the compression shirt went on early. He’d thankfully been wearing a shirt through their coaches meetings and through his private meeting with Murdock to tell him that his marital status had changed.

Murdock had not looked shocked.

Shane had made a mental note to remember that his coach had some sort of insane skill for seeing *everything*.

Someone knocked on the door before Scott could respond and it opened a second later to reveal Amanda, “hey, Shane, your parents just got here with Sunny and Christina wants to take some pictures to put on the insta story if that’s alright with you?”

“Fine by me,” Shane agreed. He pulled on an Admirals hoodie so he wasn’t just wandering the halls in a skin tight shirt and then headed for the door, “oh, by the way,” he said, just as he started to pass

Amanda, “Ilya’s application for Permanent Residency in Canada got submitted last night so you don’t need to be as careful with Hollanov.”

“Did you just say Canada?” Amanda asked.

“Yep.”

“He lives in Boston.”

Shane checked the hall quickly and made sure it was empty - made sure that the only people who could hear him were Scott, who already knew, and Carter and Amanda who he knew without a doubt could be trusted with secrets – before he answered, “his spouse doesn’t.”

“His -,” Amanda started before cutting herself off. Shane grinned and headed down the hallway, toward the entrance where he assumed Christina would be waiting with his parents and his dog, “SHANE HOLLANDER!”

Shane just kept walking.

* * *

Scott stared at the open door where Shane had just disappeared and literally pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t trapped in some sort of fever dream.

Amanda whipped around, wide eyed, “did he just say spouse?”

She whispered the last word, like that would somehow make it better.

“Yeah,” Carter said after a second, he was sitting up now, his legs splayed out in front of him, just staring at the door looking quite a bit like a slumped rag doll. He turned to look at Scott and narrowed his eyes, “did you know?”

“Not about the marriage.”

Carter just nodded and then shook his head for a second before blinking several times in rapid succession. It was like watching one of those tiny robot dogs that played music that Wagner’s daughter had been obsessed with a few years back boot up. It was an odd comparison to make, but Scott was going to give himself grace because he was pretty sure his brain had stopped working sometime between seeing Shane Hollander fucking *covered* in hickeys and Shane Hollander casually admitting to being married to Ilya Rozanov.

“Well,” Carter said, “good for him. Roz is hot.”

“Shane’s the hot one,” Scott said, as if that were even *remotely* important right now.

“Shane’s pretty,” Carter argued, “Rozanov’s hot.”

“What is *happening* right now?” Amanda cut in.

“Weigh in,” Carter said, “which one’s the hot one.”

“Shane, obviously,” Amanda answered, seemingly on instinct, “not important, since the fuck *when* were those two together?”

“A while,” Scott said, “like, maybe the whole time. I don’t actually know. They refuse to tell me, I think they think it’s fun watching me suffer.”

“You *think*?” Carter asked, incredulous, “watching you suffer might genuinely be Ilya Rozanov’s preferred pastime.”

“Oh, he’s not even the worst offender. For some godforsaken reason, I’ve let Shane team up with Kip. I’ll never know peace again.”

“Kip?” Amanda asked, “do you mean Very Hot Man?”

“Do I mean *who*?” Scott asked.

“That’s what Twitter calls the hot guy Shane went to a gay bar with, I think his real name’s Kip.”

“What.”

“He’s like option number three for who Shane’s dating according to the internet,” Amanda explained, as if Scott had no clue who she was talking about, as if the man she was talking about wasn’t currently sitting in Scott’s apartment back in New York. “I think it goes you, then Hayden Pike, then Very Hot Man, and then Rozanov with Harry Styles as the dark horse.”

“Let’s just go down that list in order,” Scott said, holding up five fingers, “I’m not dating Shane,” he started, putting down his pinky finger, “Pike’s married, Kip’s *my* boyfriend, he’s married to Rozanov so there’s our winner, and he’s never even *met* Harry Styles.”

“Wait, *your* boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“You have a boyfriend.”

“I do, his name is Kip and I’ve somehow missed the internet calling him Very Hot Man even though I was fully aware that some people thought he was dating Shane.”

“I kind of thought you were just incredibly secure in your masculinity when you let us purposefully feed the rumors about you and Shane,” Amanda said, a look on her face that told Scott she was methodically sorting through several interactions and seeing them in a brand new light.

“No, I’m definitely gay, though I’m also pretty secure in my masculinity. And it really wasn’t difficult to act like I was in love with Shane because I do love him, platonically, and, as mentioned, he’s really hot.”

“I maintain that he’s pretty,” Carter said.

“Have you looked at him recently?” Scott asked, incensed for some reason beyond his comprehension. “Sure, he was pretty when he was younger, I always thought that, but he’s put on like ten pounds of pure muscle since he got to New York. He’s absolutely hot now.”

Carter paused a moment and tilted his head in consideration, a little frown on his lips that Scott, at some point in the distant future when his brain wasn’t actively breaking, would probably think was pretty funny.

“You know what,” Carter mused, nodding a little, “I think you’re right.”

“I need to be anywhere else,” Amanda said, her voice flat, “and the two of you better keep his fucking secret because this is absolutely still a secret, he checked the hall before even vaguely joking about it. I have access to your files, I know where you live and I will kill you in your sleep if you fuck this up for him.”

Carter and Scott both went still, like prey sensing a predator.

“Yes, ma’am,” Carter said. It would’ve been funny, watching a 6’ 1” 26-year-old professional hockey player immediately defer to the direction of their 23-year-old, 5’ 5” fresh out of college social media director, but for the fact that Scott was about to do the same exact thing and he had another couple inches and a full decade on her.

“We won’t tell a soul,” he promised.

She nodded once and said, “good,” before stepping back into the hall, letting the door slam shut behind her.

“Well,” Carter said after a full minute of silence, “you’ve gotta admit, life’s never boring with Hollander around.”

Oh, how the times had changed.

* * *

Shane reached the back entrance of Detroit's arena and found Christina, his parents, his dog, and his *husband* waiting for him.

Shane felt a stupid grin take over his face as he jogged the last few yards across the lobby and scooped Sunny out of Ilya's arms.

"Oh, hello, Sunny girl," Shane cooed, scrunching his nose as she started licking his face and holding on tighter as she started wriggling in excitement. She was getting bigger now that she was in her 'teenage' phase and it was becoming increasingly difficult to carry her around but that didn't mean Shane was going to stop.

"She missed her dad," Ilya laughed, scratching behind her ears as he stepped closer to Shane's side. "She was not happy when she realized you were not in the car."

"Are you coming to the game tonight?" Shane asked, trying to act like a normal human being who wasn't fighting literal demons trying to stop himself from kissing Ilya while Christina was recording them.

"Yes, I had meeting at GM today about sponsorship opportunity with Cadillac and don't fly out until tomorrow. There's nothing else to do in Detroit, so here I am."

Shane was about 92% certain that this 'Cadillac sponsorship' had somehow been orchestrated by his mother sometime in the past two days, but it was a decent enough excuse.

"We got a third ticket for Hayden but he decided he'd rather go to a game in New York," Yuna explained. Shane was entirely certain that was bullshit and that the ticket had been purchased for Ilya the moment they told his parents about their insane City Hall marriage plan but he just nodded along anyways.

Shane was about to respond when the doors banged open and his team started spilling in. He heard Luke's voice rise above the chaos and he quickly passed Sunny over to Ilya. Ilya shot him a confused look that immediately cleared as Shane bent his knees on instinct as Luke shouted, "Holly!" before jumping onto his back.

Luke had gotten explicit permission from Hayden to call Shane ‘Holly’ instead of ‘Hollzy’. Hayden had told Luke he could only call Shane Holly if he had an assist in Game 1 and 2 against Detroit. Luke had completed the deal and then done him one better and scored his own goal on top of assisting Shane’s on Wednesday night.

“Gilly!” Shane responded, laughing as Luke somehow wrapped himself around Shane like a koala without sending them both careening toward the ground.

“Luke,” Ilya greeted, clearly trying to tamp down his amusement and affection in some strange attempt to keep his public mask on even while he was struggling to hold onto a wriggling five month old golden retriever.

“Rozy!” Luke said, clearly delighted. He was the only one who’d known they were getting married before it happened outside of their families. It’d been difficult to keep it from him given the fact that they lived in the same house. He’d been shocked for about half a second before asking if this made Ilya his stepdad. Shane hadn’t asked who his original dad was, Luke had stopped calling Scott by his name sometime in April. “Didn’t know you were coming.”

“Neither did Hollander.”

“I wish my best friend would surprise me,” Luke grumbled, slumping against Shane’s back and rather quickly turning into dead weight. Shane had to hook his arms under Luke’s knees to hold him up.

Shane had heard ... a lot ... about Luke’s best friend, a kid named Drew McLean who’d grown up down the street from him. They’d played on the same teams up until Luke entered the NHL draft and Drew didn’t. He’d had several different NCAA offers from really competitive programs and had ended up choosing Yale where he was somehow balancing a Division I Hockey schedule and pre-med classes, meaning he’d had exactly zero time to come down for Luke’s games.

Shane had found their academic calendar online, though, and he knew exams ended this week so he was hoping Luke would get a surprise of his own sometime soon.

“You can have Roz,” Shane said, squeezing Luke’s leg in silent reassurance, a quiet reminder that people were here watching and supporting him.

“We still haven’t given Sunny a middle name,” Luke said out of absolutely nowhere. Shane was getting used to the way Luke sometimes seemed to start conversations in the middle but it still threw him for a loop every once in a while. He was pretty sure this time it was an attempt to change the conversation before anything got too real. Shane understood that urge on a soul-deep level.

“Does she need a middle name?” Shane asked.

“Absolutely she does.”

“I don’t have a middle name.”

“You don’t have a middle name?” Ilya asked, looking at Shane in total confusion.

Shane really wanted to say, ‘we signed a marriage certificate together *yesterday*, you idiot’ but he didn’t, instead he just said, “no, I don’t.”

“Do *you* know *my* middle name?” Ilya asked, looking at Shane like he’d somehow heard his inner thoughts.

“Yeah, it’s Grigoryevich.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know your father’s name and I understand Russian naming conventions, Ilyusha.”

Ilya almost dropped their dog.

“Mine’s McGregor,” Luke said, entirely unaware of what’d just transpired.

“Your name is Luke McGregor?” Ilya asked, his accent thicker than normal. Shane wasn’t sure if it was because of the number of consonants in Luke’s name or due to the fact he was slightly

overwhelmed by emotion. If Shane had to guess, he'd say the latter.

"Lucas," Luke corrected. "No one calls me Lucas, though. Anyways, we need to name the dog. I, personally, think her middle name should be Freddy."

Shane looked over at his parents and Christina, all of whom were just watching them in amusement. Christina was still holding her phone up and Shane wasn't sure if she was taking pictures or recording. If she was recording, he was kind of hoping that she'd cut out him calling Ilya *Ilyusha* before she posted any of this to Instagram. That felt like a pretty giant leap from friends who make fun bets and go to each other's games when they 'happen to be in town'. He wasn't as close with her as he'd gotten with Amanda, but he still trusted her enough to just vaguely suggest she cut that bit out without worrying about the implications of her googling why it mattered.

"Alright," Shane agreed, patting the outside of Luke's thigh before dropping his legs. He landed on his feet and immediately reached out for Sunny. Ilya passed her over with only a small amount of grumbling. "If it means that much to you that she has a middle name, I guess it can be Freddy."

Shane really couldn't believe what he was saying but Luke was already sitting cross-legged on the ground with Sunny crawling all over him, grinning wide enough Shane was sure his cheeks hurt, and Shane really couldn't find it in himself to deny the kid anything.

"Sunny Freddy Hollander," Ilya said, he was biting the inside of his cheek and wouldn't quite meet Shane's eye which was a sure sign he was trying his absolute hardest not to laugh.

"Sunday, actually," Shane corrected, tapping into some well of calm he hadn't even known he had to stop himself from cracking up, "her full name's Sunday, Roz, get it right."

"Apologies, Hollander."

Shane shook his head and looked down at his watch, "alright, we gotta go get ready. Mom, are you taking her back to the hotel or what's your plan?"

"Yeah, we're staying just down the street so one of us will go over during one of the intermissions to take her out and then she can fly back with you guys tomorrow or we can take her and bring her to New York when we come for the game on Sunday."

“Can she come with us?” Luke asked, holding Sunny up by his face and subjecting Shane to the combined force of *both* of their puppy eyes.

“Sure,” Shane agreed immediately. He was pretty sure Luke could’ve asked him to light the building on fire and he would’ve agreed at that moment.

Luke grinned and looked down at Sunny, “hear that, girly?? You’re coming with us!”

“Come on, Luke, we’ve got a game to play,” Shane said. Luke pouted but handed Sunny back to Ilya before climbing to his feet.

“Wait, before you go, let me grab a family picture,” Christina said. Shane was confused when Ilya immediately handed Shane Sunny and stepped out of the way. But then he realized that people couldn’t know, that even though Ilya’s Permanent Residency application had been submitted and he had that extra layer of security that’d allow them to be a little more open, a little more friendly without worrying about the smallest thing ending in Ilya’s deportation, it still wasn’t *entirely* safe. Their teams knew, they’d start to tell their friends, but they hadn’t told the Commissioner and they weren’t quite ready to tell the world.

Shane posed for a picture with his dog and his parents while his husband watched on and felt his heart break, just a little.

Christina wandered down the hall with a half audible comment about posting schedules and Shane took out his phone and handed it to his mom, “family picture,” he said before stepping closer to Ilya and then adjusting his grip on Sunny so he could reach out an arm to tug Luke into the frame.

Yuna smiled, a look in her eye that Shane easily recognized as pride.

“Me?” Luke asked, stumbling slightly into Shane’s side.

“Yes, you,” Ilya answered, reaching behind Shane to flick Luke’s ear. Luke laughed which, judging by the little smile that tugged at his lips at the sound, had clearly been Ilya’s goal.

Shane smiled as his mom took the photo; a real one that time, one not tinged by the melancholy of realizing that he couldn't tell the world that Ilya was his quite yet.

"Good luck," Ilya said as Shane and Luke started to actually move toward the hall.

"Thanks," Shane replied, sending him a soft smile that was instantly returned. This was his first game as Ilya's husband; the first game Ilya would be watching as Shane's. It felt important. Hockey had always, obviously, been a massive part of their relationship and even if hardly anyone *knew* that this would be the first game Shane was playing while lawfully wedded to Ilya Rozanov, they knew, and it meant something.

* * *

Ilya sat next to his in-laws and watched New York beat Detroit 5-0. Shane had scored twice and after both goals he'd kissed his glove and then tapped it to the center of his chest where Ilya knew his ring was resting.

Chapter End Notes

inspo for sunny's middle name from the fact that my youngest brother was allowed to give a middle name to one of our dogs and chose freddy. the dog's name is lucy freddy. the other two were lexie oreo (courtesy of me) and lincoln joe (courtesy of my other brother), my sister chose the name lucy.

also, my brothers, ladies and gentlemen:

Brother#1



give him a blanket wtf

Brother#2

I'm saying

Brother#1

They are on the way up calm down



Chapter 32: forever night stand

Chapter Notes

sorry. i'm back. i was with my sister over the weekend and then someone got charged with 100 counts of a really!! bad crime and i momentarily became important at work. please don't commit crimes people, your local judicial clerks will appreciate it, i promise you.

May 2017

Shane was rather thankful that post-game media made it so their entire team was through the showers before Shane and Scott came back into the locker room. He didn't think he'd be able to explain away the sheer number of hickeys across his torso *and* the whole ring situation without immediately exposing *everything*. As Shane pulled his clean undershirt on before stepping out of the shower stalls, Scott shot him a look that he easily interpreted as *I have questions*.

Thankfully, Scott kept his mouth shut as they put on their suits and made their way out of Detroit's arena and onto the team bus. It wasn't until they got back to the hotel and Shane found himself very un-subtly flanked by Carter and Scott as they herded him toward the elevator that he realized Scott wasn't planning to leave the state of Michigan without subjecting Shane to an interrogation.

It was quite clear that this wasn't going to be a normal post-game tape review meeting.

They stumbled into Shane and Luke's room, knocking into the door frame as they all tried to walk through at the same time. New York always tried to pair the young guys up with veterans on roadies and when Shane had started travelling with the team, Luke had been paired up with Shane and Scott had gotten to go back to having his own room or rooming with Huff. On this trip, Scott had been put with Huff and Shane was at least thankful that Scott had chosen Shane's room to have this discussion instead of bringing another person into the mix.

"Can I at least change out of my suit?" Shane asked.

"No," Scott responded.

"Right," Shane muttered, pulling off his coat and draping it over the back of a chair before loosening his tie and undoing his top buttons. Carter did the same thing and then flopped across the foot of

Shane's bed.

Shane wasn't sure how long they had before Luke got back, he'd be in the room Carter was sharing with Breezy right about now hanging out and playing video games, but they'd been on a long run of games and practices and even the 19 year old had to get tired at some point. Even then, Shane wasn't going to start this conversation. Scott was the one who'd shoved him into this room, Scott got the honor of starting them off.

"Married?" Scott said after he'd taken off his own jacket and tie.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday," Shane said.

Scott pulled out his phone and Shane watched as he opened the calendar app, went back a day, and then added a yearly repeating event on May 18th titled *HR Anniversary*. Leave it to Scott Hunter to take the time to add a calendar notification to wish them a happy anniversary even while existing in a state of shock.

"Why?"

"Because I love him?" Shane answered, officially a little annoyed. He knew Scott would have questions, but he didn't think Scott, of all people, would be asking him *why*. Shane was sick and fucking tired of scrolling past random tweets saying that there's no way Shane would be with Ilya because Ilya wasn't good enough. Ilya was more than good enough; he was *perfect* for Shane. He was patient and kind and pulled Shane out of his shell. He challenged Shane and made him want to do better while, at the same time, always taking opportunities to tell Shane that he was amazing. Shane felt an irrational level of anger toward every asshole on the internet who thought differently.

Scott must've been able to see Shane's annoyance because he quickly amended his question, "no, not like that. I know you love him, I've seen you two together, Shane, you don't need to tell me that part. I meant why now? And why in Detroit?"

“Windsor, actually,” Shane corrected, “it’s the closest we’ve gotten to the border since we got engaged. Part of it is because of Ilya’s citizenship, we couldn’t publicly be anything more than friends while he was still at risk of punishment in Russia. That’s why it had to be in Canada, that way we wouldn’t have to get an American marriage certificate certified by *this* government before submitting it to the Canadian government.”

“Are you two going to come out now?” Carter asked, his voice surprisingly gentle as he propped himself up on his elbows and looked at Shane, his face open and earnest. Shane had honestly never appreciated Carter Vaughan more.

“No,” Shane answered, “not yet, I don’t know when we’ll be ready but at least now if we get outed, Ilya’s protected. And we get to know we’re married. Our families get to know and we’ll tell the friends we trust the most.”

“So, you’re just going to stay hidden?” Scott asked, looking almost horrified.

“Yeah, for now,” Shane shrugged, “hidden in plain sight, really, but we’re not going to come out explicitly or anything like that.”

“I don’t know how you do it, I’m planning to come out this summer, I don’t want to keep Kip hidden.”

“Yeah, can we talk about Kip while we’re at it?” Carter asked, “you’re talking about coming out for him, about taking flak from the League and risking sponsors, this must be a long term thing, right?”

Shane immediately felt a little bit of a bad friend. He hadn’t actually asked when Scott and Kip met. He knew it’d been in the smoothie shop Kip worked at but he’d never actually asked *when*.

“We met in January,” Scott answered, a soppy little smile on his face.

Shane was dead certain he could actually *hear* the record scratch in his own brain.

January.

It was May.

Scott had met Kip in *January* and was talking about coming out publicly because he couldn't handle keeping it hidden.

"January?" Shane heard himself say, "as in, the one that just happened?"

"Yeah," Scott answered, clearly not understanding why Shane was so confused. Shane had never been more aware of how different he and Scott were. "I mean, when did you and Rozanov get together?"

"2010," Shane answered. "CCM shoot before our rookie year."

He wanted to say something about how insane he thought it was that Scott and Kip had only *known* each other for *five months* and were already talking about coming out publicly. He wanted to say something about how insane he thought it was that Kip was basically *living* in Scott's apartment already, but it wasn't his relationship, he wasn't in it, it wasn't his place to say anything.

Scott, apparently, didn't have the same qualms, "it took you and Rozanov *seven years* to sort your shit out? Seven years? I mean, I'd assumed you were into each other the whole time but I didn't realize you'd actually already gotten together, that's insane, Rook."

Shane did not appreciate Scott's tone.

"Scott, we were both closeted, hell I was so deep in the closet I wasn't even able to admit I was gay *to myself* until this year. We were constantly in the public eye, Ilya had some struggles at home that are not my place to talk about, he was in danger in Russia, I was in danger in Montreal after I came out. It never seemed like anything more would even be *possible* in the face of all of that. You don't get to comment on it from the outside, you weren't in it. Also, *you* of all people don't get to comment on it when you bringing it up on the ice is a key example of why I was so fucking scared of *anyone* knowing so just don't."

Scott's face fell and part of Shane wanted to feel bad but he really didn't. He knew Scott was shocked, but that wasn't an excuse to act like an ass.

“Woah,” Carter said, sitting all the way up now and angling himself so he was not at all subtly between Scott and Shane. But, to Shane’s absolute shock, Carter’s back was to *him*. Carter had put himself between Scott and Shane in a manner that was clearly protective of *Shane*. “You knew and you brought it up on the *ice*? *That’s* what your fight was about? What the fuck, Scott?”

“We already talked about it, Carter,” Shane said, taking a step to his right so they were standing in a triangle again rather than in a standoff with Carter acting as the line in the sand. “Everything’s fine, I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, you were right to,” Scott said. He sounded almost defeated as he ran a hand down his face before rubbing at his mouth. His eyes were shiny and Shane really did feel like an ass but he still didn’t feel sorry. Scott needed to understand the difference, needed to know that no matter how scary it’d been for *him*, it was scary in a different way for Shane, and in an even more complex and terrifying way for Ilya. “I’m sorry, Shane, I was just surprised.”

“I get it,” Shane responded, and he really did. He knew it was a shock, he knew he probably could’ve broken the news more gently instead of just dropping it and walking out of the locker room. “I love him, he’s my husband, and we’re not ready to come out yet. All of those things get to be true at the same time. I’ll still stand behind you when you come out, just not beside you quite yet.”

Scott just stared at him for a second before nodding, “okay, yeah, okay, I’m sorry, Shane. Really. I’m happy for you and I’m glad this makes Ilya safer.”

“Thank you,” Shane said, nodding in response.

“I’m also happy for you, for the record,” Carter butted in, “you guys are a really fucking hot couple.”

It took a second for Carter’s words to register. He’d said them so seriously, like he was declaring a matter of public importance, that Shane was half certain he’d misunderstood. But Carter was still staring at him, all big eyed and earnest and Shane realized he’d heard him exactly right.

“Earlier he was convinced Roz was the hot one and you were pretty,” Scott added in the same tone, “I told him he was wrong, obviously.”

“I think it’s time for bed,” Shane said, wondering, briefly, if there were other Alternate Captains across the league who had to deal with their Captain and Co-A debating whether they were hot or

pretty. He was pretty damn sure he was entirely alone in this particular experience. He was done with this conversation, they'd asked their questions and gotten their answers and Shane was exhausted.

"We still have to review tape," Carter said, suppressing a yawn as he laid back down at the foot of Shane's bed. Shane let out a groan but complied. He finished unbuttoning his shirt and swapped it for Ilya's hoodie, the one he'd stolen in Boston and had yet to even attempt to return, and then pulled off his dress pants, grabbed his iPad, and climbed under the covers. He watched as Carter literally rolled off the bed to strip out of his own suit. He dug a clean hoodie out of his gear bag and then climbed under the covers next to Shane.

And then Scott followed Carter's lead and Shane suddenly found himself in between two other 6+ foot tall professional hockey players in a full size bed. Shane decided he was too tired to complain and simply unlocked his iPad and swiped over to the app their coaches used to upload tape.

* * *

Luke stayed an extra half hour in Breezy and Carter's room because it'd been clear that Scott and Carter wanted to talk to Shane about something, likely about the Great Hollander-Rozanov Wedding of 2017, and Luke simply did *not* need to be involved in that. Carter hadn't come back yet but Luke was exhausted and sort of hoping that the reason Carter was still gone was that he was somewhere with the vets who liked to play poker or hiding out somewhere calling his girlfriend he claimed didn't exist.

As he opened the door to their room, he expected to find Shane either asleep or still talking to Scott and Carter, instead he found all three of his captains quite literally cuddled up in one bed with Shane's iPad balanced rather precariously between Shane and Carter's laps, still playing the tape of the fourth goal of the game, an absolute smasher from Greg Huff, on a loop.

Luke could've woken them up and sent Carter and Scott back to their own rooms, he could've turned off Shane's iPad and the lamp on the nightstand and let them sleep peacefully, he did neither of those things. Instead, he pulled out his phone, took several photos, and immediately sent them to Amanda before deciding to be nice and going with the 'turn off iPad and lamp' option.

He changed out of his own suit, climbed into bed, set an alarm, and mentally prepared himself for the way all three of them were going to be complaining about neck pain for the entire flight back to New York.

* * *

Shane settled into the window seat with Sunny, who his mom had dropped off at their hotel that morning, in his lap. Luke dropped into the seat next to him and immediately moved the arm rest up so he could lean more comfortably against Shane's side.

Shane was genuinely shocked to realize that Luke's touch didn't send him over the edge.

He'd woken up sandwiched between Scott and Carter and the fact that his neck hurt from the weird angle he'd fallen asleep at paled in comparison to the way every nerve in his body was revolting against having two people crowded into his space, to the way he felt overwarm and overwhelmed. He'd assumed that Luke would exist in the same category as Hayden, J.J., Scott, and Carter, the same category as his own parents; the category that essentially included everyone he trusted except for Ilya and Ilya alone.

He'd been prepared to gently ask Luke to not sleep on him this flight, entirely convinced that one more person touching him would be what finally broke whatever industrial dam had been holding back his emotions since late February. But, instead, the moment Luke settled against his side, Shane's brain went quiet.

He looked down at Luke in surprise and then decided not to question it and simply rested his cheek against the top of Luke's head and let the newfound peace exist.

* * *

When they landed in New York, Scott squeezed Shane's shoulder once in silent apology as they stepped onto the tarmac and Shane nodded back. They'd been overwhelmed the night before, confused and a little angry, and it'd turned into a fight before they'd had a chance to calm themselves down. Now, in the morning light, it didn't feel so serious. They were fine, they were friends, they were on even ground.

Shane didn't want to spend any longer thinking about it.

He picked up his gear bag and said quick goodbyes before making his way to the parking lot, Sunny trotting on ahead of him and Luke on his heels.

“Is it bad to say I need a break,” Luke asked the moment the car doors were closed. Shane hadn’t even started the car yet; they were simply in a bubble of silence where the outside world couldn’t get them. It felt a little like his drive from Ottawa to New York with Ilya, where within the four doors of Shane’s ‘boring’ Jeep, they could just exist without anyone’s commentary or outside opinion.

“No,” Shane answered, blowing out a breath as he let his head thunk back against the headrest. “I need one too.”

“Can we lock our doors and speak to no one until practice tomorrow?”

“Do you want me to ask Ilya to get a hotel room?”

“No,” Luke said immediately, looking at Shane in confusion, “he counts in the ‘our’, Shane. I meant I just wanted it to be us, not everyone else invading the house just because we have an afternoon off.”

Shane looked over at Luke and, for the first time in his entire 26 years on this planet, mourned the fact that he hadn’t grown up with a sibling. He’d never felt lonely as an only child, he’d loved it, actually. He’d loved the fact that no one was in his space, digging through his stuff, and pulling attention that could’ve been his. With Hayden, he’d always felt like they met at the exact right time. Like they’d met the moment they needed each other and had become brothers *then*.

With Luke, it didn’t feel like that.

It felt like Luke had needed him a long time ago and Shane hadn’t been there. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t even *known* Luke before March, some part of him still felt guilty for having missed it, for having been somewhere unreachable when this kid, this kid he *loved*, had been alone and hurting and in dire need of an older brother.

“Yeah,” Shane said after a second, “just us, I’d like that.”

Luke smiled and Shane was hit with a memory of having to go pick up Ruby from preschool. Jackie and Hayden had been at a doctor’s appointment with Arthur and Shane was the alternate contact on the school’s list. Shane remembered walking into the office to find Ruby’s teacher looking disappointed and Ruby looking entirely unapologetic, a smug little smile on her face that looked a little too much like the one J.J. wore after getting sent to the penalty box for Shane’s taste. Ruby’s teacher had explained that the reason Ruby needed to be picked up was that she’d punched one of the

other kids. Shane had knelt down in front of Ruby and asked her, as gently as he could, why she'd hit her classmate.

Ruby, all of four at the time, had looked at Shane and simply said, "*he was mean to Jade.*"

Shane hadn't quite understood at the time.

He'd understood in broad strokes, of course, that siblings were meant to defend each other. But back then, he'd equated it to J.J. as Shane and Hayden's enforcer.

Now, though, looking at Luke's thankful smile and tired eyes, Shane felt the need to call Ruby and tell her he finally got it.

Shane started the car, pulled out of the parking lot, and set a course toward home.

* * *

Luke had never known that home could feel like this.

Ilya's flight had left Detroit stupidly early so he'd beat them home by a couple of hours and had just been waiting for them to show up. He'd looked so happy to see them, so different from the Rozanov that Luke had seen on the ice and so different from any welcome home Luke had gotten growing up.

Their Saturday moved forward and every moment felt safe and warm. Shane and Luke had gone through their own post-game, off day routines and Ilya had just let them. He hadn't made a single comment about them taking too much time or lodged a single complaint about any step of the process, even about the blender whirring when they made smoothies for lunch or the fact that the food they were eating for dinner was objectively boring and bland because it was part of the nutrition plan they'd each been given by the team with a focus on protein and 'healthy' carbs. He'd simply helped them cook and then had sat down to eat.

And it wasn't just that Ilya, as a fellow player, knew the reasons for the routines, it was that Luke could somehow tell he'd be acting the same even if he *didn't*.

Then, after dinner, they just sat down on the couch and watched a movie.

No one bugged Luke about the pass he'd missed near the end of the second, no one told him he needed to get his act together, no one forced him to socialize when his brain felt like mush. They just sat down on the couch and turned on *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and argued about which magical creature would be the worst to keep as a pet.

Luke dozed off part way through the movie and woke up some indeterminate time later by someone brushing his hair off his forehead.

He startled slightly and then settled immediately, something in his base instincts telling him the touch was safe.

"Luke," Shane's voice said, finally filtering through the fog of exhaustion. Luke blinked his eyes open and Shane came into focus, kneeling next to the couch with a soft smile on his face. Ilya was nowhere to be found and Luke had to assume that he'd made his way up to the shower or to his own bed. "You're probably gonna want to go up to bed, you'll get sore if you sleep on this couch after playing nearly 22 minutes and then having to travel."

Luke nodded and let out a slight grumble as he forced himself to sit up.

Shane laughed a little, soft and lighthearted, as Luke shoved himself off the couch and headed for the stairs that led to his room above the garage.

"Night, Shane," he said on a yawn.

"Night, bud," Shane said, his voice a little distant as Luke moved further away, "love you."

"Love you too," Luke responded.

He didn't realize until he was tucked into his own bed, seconds away from falling asleep, that the words had finally been said aloud.

* * *

Shane had showered before starting the movie so he simply pulled off his t-shirt and sweats and crawled into bed and waited for Ilya to join him.

Ilya stepped out of the bathroom a few minutes later, looking like sin with a towel slung low around his hips and Shane actually could not believe that this vision of a man was his *husband*.

He pulled on clean boxers and toweled off his hair before climbing into bed next to Shane and immediately snuggling up, pressing as close as humanly possible. His skin was warm from his shower and he smelled like the body wash Shane loved and the weight of him pressing Shane into the bed was the single most relaxing thing Shane had ever experienced.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” Ilya whispered, his lips moving against Shane’s throat as he tilted his head up to press a kiss to the underside of his jaw.

Shane had never liked pet names before.

Jackie calling him babe was different; it was friendly and teasing and had somehow started to sound more like a nickname than a term of endearment. With Rose it was similar, at least after they’d broken up. Now when she called him babe or baby it was said with a laugh and the knowledge that it was friendly.

But romantically?

Shane had never understood the appeal.

Not until Ilya had called him *моя любовь* in that hotel room in Florida. Not until he’d called him sweetheart just down the hall from this room as Shane had started breaking down when he’d realized he’d really left Montreal.

“Goodnight, Ilyusha,” Shane responded, tucking his finger under Ilya’s chin to tilt his head up for a kiss.

Ilya sunk into it, melting entirely against Shane as he adjusted himself enough to kiss Shane properly. Ilya's hand ran up Shane's chest and wrapped lightly around his throat for a moment before his fingers slid up into Shane's hair. Shane parted his lips immediately and gave himself over to the sensation of being kissed, of being safe under Ilya's weight and cradled in his arms.

This was it for him, *had* been it for him since Ilya had knocked and Shane had answered. Since Ilya had backed him up against that wall and crowded into his space, since Shane had felt the sensation of Ilya's thumb and fingers cradling his jaw, since he'd experienced what it was like to watch Ilya Rozanov lose control at the barest touch of Shane Hollander's lips to his.

It'd never been casual; it was never going to end with a one night stand in room 1410.

"I love you," Shane breathed out as Ilya pulled back for air.

"I love you," Ilya repeated.

* * *

On Sunday, Ilya watched from home while New York beat Detroit 3-0.

Shane and Luke both scored.

Shane kissed his ring after his goal and after Luke's he kissed Luke's helmet. Ilya had never felt pride quite that intense. He'd never realized that pride was an emotion that could choke you if you felt it with enough force. His husband and this kid he'd claimed as a little brother, the kid who'd shown Ilya that sometimes having a brother wasn't all that bad, were going to the Stanley Cup Finals.

Shane was going to the Stanley Cup Finals for the third year in a row.

Chapter 33: violet shrinking down

Chapter Notes

one more before the site goes down and i have to actually do my job for a day (everyone boo)

title from 'unsteady' by gracie abrams :)

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

May 2017

They had an entire week off before gearing up for Game 1 against Los Angeles. They were on the ice every day, spending hours outside of the rink reviewing tape, and following strict schedules set by both the trainers and nutritionists, but the pause in constant travel made it feel like a real break.

Ilya stepped right into Shane and Luke's routine with them like he'd always been there. He was up with them every morning, making breakfast while they went through their morning workouts, he was there when they got home and listened to them ramble on about practice and plans, he was there every night to watch movies and pull them away from hockey if only for a few hours, and by the time Sunday rolled around and Shane and Luke were getting in the car to drive to the airport, Shane found himself absolutely *abhorring* the idea of ever playing a game without knowing that Ilya was at home waiting for him.

He hated that thought a little bit because hockey was Ilya's job as much as it was Shane's and Shane would never, ever want him to step away from it for Shane's benefit. He just wanted Ilya closer, not three hours away in Boston.

It wasn't in the cards right now, Ilya still had another year on his contract with Boston and if he went into free agency there was no guarantee he'd be picked up by one of the three New York area teams. And, aside from that, he *loved* Boston. Boston felt a little like it'd been grown in a lab to be the perfect city for Ilya Rozanov. He loved his teammates, he loved the city, and Shane didn't want to pull him away from it. Especially considering the fact that if Ilya played for Brooklyn or New Jersey their schedules wouldn't match up at all, they'd barely ever be home at the same time, and it'd probably still feel like they were living in two different places even if they were sharing a house.

With Ilya in Boston, they weren't living at the same house but they could still see each other, they'd be able to plan out time to *intentionally* spend together instead of existing like two ships passing in the night. But that was a thought for later, a thought for after a summer they'd get to spend together at the cottage and another guaranteed year of Ilya playing in Boston.

Anyways, Game 1 against Los Angeles.

This was the first step of the series where New York was the lower seed, meaning they were starting the series out in L.A.

They'd play Games 1 and 2 on the road, 3 and 4 at home, and then trade off after that.

Shane had genuinely never wanted the Cup more.

This was the Cup that could've made Montreal a dynasty but, instead, he was doing it with New York. If he won this one, his name would be on three sequential Cups, would be engraved into the metal in three sequential years. *He* would be a dynasty.

He wanted it, he was hungry for it in a way he'd never been before which was, honestly, saying something. He'd always wanted to win, he'd always thrived on success, but this was something bigger, something so much more emotional than the simple satisfaction of a season well played. Winning this Cup would be proof that he could be himself *and* play good hockey. It would be proof that Montreal had been wrong, that there *were* locker rooms out there that wouldn't push him to the corner and feed on his fear.

He needed this win.

* * *

Scott wasn't sure how to describe Shane other than locked *the fuck* in.

This was the Shane he'd been used to for years, or at least closer to it. He wasn't laughing as much or joking around and teasing, he was locked in on hockey with a single-minded focus that might've been concerning if Scott couldn't tell the difference. This *wasn't* the same Shane he'd known; he wasn't hiding, he was simply focused.

That first game against L.A. was tough. It became immediately clear that this was going to be a battle. It ended 1-2 with L.A. winning. Shane had scored their only goal off an assist from Scott during the

powerplay.

They lost the second game, too. The score had been 2-3 and Shane had scored again with Scott scoring their second goal.

The flight back was silent, and Scott quickly realized that Shane's focus had turned into something harsher.

Practice the next morning felt more like a military training exercise than hockey. They were all chomping at the bit, desperate to prove themselves and desperate for this Cup, but none of them were fighting harder than Shane.

Scott nearly stepped in. He wanted to grab him and hold on until Shane calmed down, but Luke had stopped him. His hand on Scott's forearm and a single shake of his head had been enough to get Scott to back off.

But Scott had still been worried. Had stayed worried until he walked into the parking lot and watched as Shane and Luke walked toward a bright orange Porsche that could've only belonged to a person as loud and obnoxious as the car.

Scott felt himself calm down.

Ilya was here; Shane would be fine.

* * *

June 2017

They fought tooth and nail and won Game 3 on Saturday 2-1.

Shane and Scott had scored their two goals, again, and Shane felt like he could breathe, just a little.

It wasn't until they won Game 4 on Monday 4-1 with goals from Shane, Scott, Cale, and Carter that Shane's mind truly gave him a break.

He moved through post-game press in a bit of a fog, he just wanted to get home to Ilya to where everything was warm and safe, to a place he could actually *breathe*. He was focused, maybe too focused, on winning this Cup and his mind needed a moment to settle.

Shane and Luke climbed into the back of the town car headed North and Shane willed traffic to move. Of course it didn't listen, they were in Midtown on a Monday night after a playoff game. Traffic was insane. But that didn't stop Shane from wishing time would just speed up.

Luke fell asleep by the time they left Manhattan but Shane was wired.

His brain felt like it was on fast forward, calculating every possibility for the rest of the playoff run while also throwing random thoughts about what could happen if they somehow got outed or someone got injured or Shane's work visa fell through and he couldn't play in the U.S. anymore. It was all disjointed, more than half of it was irrational, and he couldn't make it stop.

It did, at least, make it seem like time had sped up.

They pulled into the driveway before Shane had even processed the fact that they'd turned onto the highway. The driver typed in the gate code and then let them out at the top of the hill, just before the second gate that blocked the garage from the driveway.

Luke grabbed his post-game snack from the kitchen and disappeared into his room where he'd likely fall asleep half way through eating. Shane ate his slightly disgusting protein rich yogurt while standing in the kitchen with the fridge door hanging open for light and then went in search of Ilya.

He hadn't come to the game. He'd been to two of the Detroit series and Shane wanted him at the later games of this series, wanted him to be there when Shane won or lost the Cup, more than he wanted him there in these early moments, and there were only so many times he could show up in the stands before the reason became *glaringly* obvious.

He finally found him on the couch upstairs, on the sectional that'd been in Shane's Montreal apartment for six years. He was curled up in the corner with Sunny's head on his hip, a blanket tucked up under his chin, peacefully asleep with post-game commentary still running on the TV.

Shane wanted to just curl up next to him, wanted to let Ilya sleep without disturbing him, but he felt a little like his mind was shattering and he didn't know how to even begin explaining why. All he knew was that he needed Ilya.

"Ilya," he said, trying to keep his voice soft but having a really fucking difficult time regulating his tone. He felt like he'd lost all grasp on his emotions, on everything that made him human. He felt like a shell, like his thoughts had frayed beyond recognition and nothing made sense anymore.

"Shane?" Ilya mumbled, only stirring slightly from his spot on the couch. Shane watched Ilya's eyes blink open and wondered why he wasn't moving, wondered why it felt like his feet were stuck to the floor when his brain was screaming at him to get closer to Ilya. "What's wrong?"

"Don't know," Shane replied. His voice felt flat, toneless in a way it rarely got. He felt like that dam that'd been holding everything back had sprung a leak, like the hurt of getting pushed aside, the fear of moving somewhere new, the anxiety of making friends, and the pressure of holding a legacy were all existing simultaneously. He felt like his brain was attempting to process so many emotions, so quickly, it'd simply stopped trying.

He watched, from some distant shore, as Ilya sat up and really looked at Shane, his eyes roving over Shane's face until he reached some conclusion.

Ilya stood up and made his way across the room until he was standing a step away.

"What do you need?" Ilya asked and Shane wanted to reply, *you*, but the words wouldn't come out. His tongue felt like it was made of lead and his thoughts were swimming through honey. Shane watched Ilya's eyes light up, almost like he'd finally understood what was happening, and Shane really wished that Ilya would explain because Shane had no fucking clue. "Too much, yes?"

Shane's mind strayed to a locker room in Montreal, to the moments following his record-breaking game, to a wall of sound closing in around him and emotions threatening to freeze his lungs in place. He remembered Ilya's voice filtering through the chaos, the way he'd been so steady even from hundreds of miles away.

"Yeah," Shane whispered.

“Okay,” Ilya responded, “is okay, sweetheart. It’s time for shower, yes?”

Shane just nodded and turned to walk out of the room.

A shower sounded logical.

He’d showered at the arena, of course, but he liked to shower after getting home, too. He liked using his nice soap, not the industrial shit he kept in his gear bag. He liked the consistent water pressure of his own shower rather than the game of roulette you had to play in every arena. He liked drying off with his fluffy towels instead of the slightly threadbare ones in the locker room.

Ilya followed behind him, matching his steps and not getting too close. He was close enough that Shane could *sense* he was there, but he wasn’t touching and Shane honestly couldn’t tell if he’d prefer to feel Ilya or not.

Shane stripped out of his suit and turned on the shower mechanically. He felt almost robotic, like Ilya had told him to shower and his brain was simply responding.

He stepped into the spray and felt a little of the tension melt away as the warm water hit his back, but not enough to feel human again. He could hear Ilya moving around their bedroom and forced himself to focus on the sounds, to try and guess what Ilya might be doing as he washed his hair and body, rinsing away any lingering sweat and grime from a hard fought game.

He could hear a drawer opening and guessed Ilya was pulling clean boxers out of Shane’s side of the dresser, receding footsteps meant Ilya had left the room and the returning patter meant he’d come back, a light thud indicated Ilya’s clothes had been dropped into the hamper, a soft rustle sounded like he’d pulled back the duvet so it’d be easier to climb right into bed.

Shane rinsed the conditioner out of his hair, an extra step added to his routine now that he was keeping his hair longer than normal, and then shut off the water, pulled his towel from the hook, and stepped out onto the bath mat. He brushed his teeth, ran a comb through his hair, and moisturized his face and then stepped into the bedroom to find Ilya standing there in just his boxers, just waiting for Shane.

Shane pulled on the clean boxers Ilya had set on the bed for him and then turned toward Ilya, his brain needing some sort of direction.

He didn't know what was wrong, didn't know why his mind was *entirely* offline when normally he at least felt *something*, but some part of him knew that Ilya would be the solution.

Ilya held out his arms, his elbows still tucked close to his sides, and just looked at Shane, waiting. Shane felt himself nod, just slightly, and then he stepped forward. His hands came up to Ilya's chest and Ilya's fingers wrapped gently around Shane's elbows, tugging him forward softly, not insistently, but enough to keep Shane moving. Shane slid his hands up Ilya's chest as he stepped closer, closer, until he was close enough to wrap his arms around Ilya's shoulders.

Ilya's arms wrapped around Shane, one hand rubbing gently up and down his spine and the other arm locked securely around his waist as Shane tucked his face against Ilya's neck and just breathed.

"I took Sunny for walk before your game," Ilya said, his voice soft, hardly above a whisper. His hand kept up its soothing path along Shane's back and his other arm stayed locked around Shane's waist, holding him tight so they were pressed together chest to chest. Shane could feel Ilya's ribs expanding with every breath, could feel the way his stomach moved as he inhaled. "We went down the street, explored the trees a little bit, walked five whole miles and she didn't get tired. Well, she was tired when we came home, took a nap until the game started and then she watched the whole thing, like she knew what was happening. I made dinner after the first, good dinner, not the meal plans you and Luke have been eating. When this series is over, I am making you two dinner to enjoy instead of just eat. I finished laundry during the second, we have fresh sheets. I even washed the duvet, Hollander. I am a very good husband."

Shane breathed out a little laugh at that, just imagining Ilya battling the duvet cover simply so Shane could have *completely* fresh bedding when he got home.

"Ah, there you are," Ilya whispered, his arm around Shane's waist tightening just a little more, "I cut up fruit for your snacks, too, Shane. Cut a whole pineapple and did not complain once."

"You cut fruit for me?"

"Yes," Ilya responded, shifting the hand that'd been running up and down Shane's back up to squeeze his shoulder, "I texted Yuna, asked her how to cut it properly, I guessed there would be a 'right' way and I was right. Everything is cut the right way, everything is in different bins. I sent pictures to make sure."

“I love you,” Shane murmured, his voice muffled against Ilya’s shoulder.

“I love you too, любимый,” Ilya said, “sleep now?”

Shane nodded and pulled away from Ilya for only as long as it took to climb into bed. Ilya paused to grab a water bottle off the nightstand before crawling in next to him.

“Drink half,” Ilya directed, “at least, you need to hydrate.”

Shane took the bottle and drank.

Ilya was right, he was dehydrated from the game and he’d have a headache in the morning if he didn’t drink water now.

“Thank you,” Shane whispered, handing the half-empty bottle back and then settling down against the pillows.

“Do you want me?” Ilya asked.

In response, Shane just opened his arms. Ilya burrowed under the covers and then laid himself out over Shane; his head resting on Shane’s chest, his leg slung over Shane’s thighs, one big arm wrapped around Shane’s waist.

Shane didn’t feel quite steady yet, but he felt less like he was actively falling apart. He felt like every time Ilya’s breath fanned across his chest, the pressure against the dam in his mind eased just a little until, finally, the emotions started to stream through one at a time, like a release valve rather than a flood.

“I’m really happy you’re my husband,” Shane said into the quiet darkness of their room. He’d said it before, Ilya knew, but Shane felt like he deserved to hear it often, like Ilya deserved to know that Shane didn’t yet, and never would, regret the decision.

“Me too,” Ilya said, turning his head to kiss Shane’s chest, just above the space where Shane’s ring was currently resting, still hanging from his chain.

* * *

“You played very well, Hollander. You will win this Cup, you will win MVP, you will win all of it and I will get to watch,” Ilya whispered against Shane’s skin.

He paused before saying *and I will get to tell everyone you’re mine*, because he wouldn’t get to do that, not yet. He daydreamed about it sometimes, but he wasn’t ready for the thought to exist in reality. His application for Permanent Residency had been processed, they’d been in contact with various government officials, everything was moving how it was supposed to.

But the citizenship process wasn’t the only thing holding them back. They’d spent so many years living in the closet, afraid of stepping into the light, there wasn’t a world where they got over that fear after a spare few months of existing in this chaos together. It was going to take time; it was going to require serious conversations that couldn’t happen while Shane was half distracted by playoffs and clearly living in some state of dissociation.

“I could play better,” Shane whispered.

Shane had broken a record during that night’s game, another one.

He officially held the record for the longest single-season playoff point streak. He’d broken the goal streak record during the last game against Boston and ended up beating the record by 2 during the Detroit series. And, as far as Ilya could tell, he hadn’t actually noticed. It was clear to anyone with half a brain that the Conn Smythe was going to Shane Hollander, whether or not New York won the Cup, and Shane was still sitting here, clearly terrified of being left behind again.

The environment here in New York could only go so far in convincing Shane that what happened in Montreal wasn’t going to happen again, the rest would only come with time.

He needed a minute to let himself process, to feel emotions as they came instead of bottling them all up until he broke.

“You played beautifully,” Ilya responded, knowing that Shane might not believe him but needing Shane to hear it anyways. “I am very proud, Shane.”

“I love you,” Shane said. It wasn’t an acknowledgement of what Ilya had said, but Ilya hadn’t honestly expected one. Ilya was starting to realize that Shane was harder on himself than Ilya had ever assumed and he knew that there was no ‘fixing’ that with a few pretty words. It was just another thing that’d take time, but they had time now. They weren’t living in the spaces between games ending and flights taking off, they were *married*, building a life *together*, they had nothing but time.

“Я тоже тебя люблю,” Ilya whispered back.

Ilya stayed awake and simply held on tight until he felt Shane’s breathing even out and only then did he let himself rest.

* * *

On Wednesday they flew back to L.A. and Shane felt steadier.

He was still locked in, but he was smiling more and breathing a little easier.

They won 2-0 on Thursday night and then it was back to New York.

The series stood 3-2 and Shane wanted to win this Cup at MSG. He wanted to win it with Ilya and his parents in the crowd, on the ice he now called home.

Chapter End Notes

both of these texts are old but felt applicable to this chapter 😊 trust, i understand shane hollander.

this one's from my mother (mind you i do not have, nor have i ever had, a dick to be circumcised. that feels important to note.)"

We did get you circumcised really early.

what the fuck



RFK Jr. suggests
circumcision is linked
to autism. Here's what
experts say.

33 minutes ago

 CBS News



More news >



rfk jr. needs to take a long walk into the
ocean and not come up for air.

this one's from my sister:

we should have your brain scanned

that doesn't sound safe for anyone involved

you are what rfk jr is afraid of

what a kind way to call me autistic

i also like to call a fork a utensil

Chapter 34: where's the trophy?

Chapter Notes

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

June 2017

Shane woke up Sunday morning to sun streaming through the bedroom windows. Ilya was snuggled up behind him, his nose pressed to the nape of Shane's neck and one of his arms wrapped around Shane's waist. The clock on Shane's side of the bed read 6:27 a.m. meaning he'd woken up 3 full minutes before his first alarm.

It was a good way to start the day; waking up peacefully to sunshine and Ilya's warmth rather than the blaring siren of his alarm.

The alarms were set in a pattern.

The one on his watch went off first, the traditional alarm clock went off five minutes later, and his phone would go off five minutes after that.

He refused to let his routine fall apart because of an alarm failure.

Shane rolled over just enough to kiss Ilya's cheek softly and then disentangled himself, tucking his pillow into Ilya's arms so he'd have something to hold onto.

His routine was set, now. After months of playing in New York the slight changes from his routine in Montreal no longer felt odd. He walked Sunny and used the time to start clearing his head. The fresh air and morning sunshine, the now familiar scenery, the sound of Sunny's excited little yips whenever she found something interesting, all of it helped push Shane's nerves down. When he got back to the house he went down to the gym and moved through his gameday yoga routine and the PT he was still prescribed for his shoulder. After that he showered and by the time he went down to make breakfast, Ilya was awake and Luke was down in the gym. Shane went down to the kitchen while Ilya rolled out of bed, he was cracking eggs into a bowl when Ilya came downstairs and greeted him with a kiss good morning before moving toward the coffee maker.

Luke jogged up the stairs, heading toward his bedroom to shower, just as Shane was pulling the containers of fruit Ilya had cut out of the fridge. Breakfast was plated and on the table by the time Luke came back down.

At noon, Shane ate lunch, made sure he had everything he needed in his gear bag, and then waited for the town car to pull up. Luke would arrive later, closer to warmups, and Ilya would arrive after that with Shane's parents.

"I'll see you later," Shane said, leaning over the back of the couch where Ilya was sitting with Sunny to give him a quick kiss. Ilya reached up and grabbed onto Shane's tie to hold him in place so he could press exaggerated kisses all over his face until Shane was laughing and trying, half-heartedly, to wriggle away.

"See you later," Ilya said, smacking one last kiss to the tip of Shane's nose, "play good, yes? I want to watch my husband win."

"I will," Shane promised, nudging his nose against Ilya's and then pressing a softer, sweeter kiss to Ilya's lips because he simply couldn't help it. "Love you."

"Love you too," Ilya said, finally letting go of Shane's tie.

Shane climbed into the back of the town car feeling steady. It was Game 6, they were up 3-2 in the series, and they were playing damn good hockey. This Cup was theirs.

* * *

Scott kissed Kip goodbye and reminded him for probably the sixth time since he'd gotten home from his last shift at Straw + Berry that there were tickets at will call for Kip and both of his parents. Kip, the wonderful man he was, simply kissed Scott again and thanked him instead of telling Scott he was repeating himself.

"Have fun with Maria and Elena," Scott said, leaning forward to kiss Kip's cheek simply because he couldn't help himself.

"I will," Kip responded, pressing another quick kiss to Scott's lips. "I'll see you later."

"Go meet your friends."

“Go win the Stanley Cup.”

“Deal.”

Scott smiled as he left his apartment and made his way down to the lobby. His relationship with Kip was incredible, the best thing in his life. It was the reason he'd finally started to love hockey again, the reason he felt less lonely. It was part of why he'd approached Shane in that bar in Florida, part of what had made him a person Shane could trust. It felt good, knowing that Kip's family knew about them and that Scott's team knew who Kip was (even if several of them still thought he was dating Shane), but Scott wanted the world to know.

He wanted to win this Cup, and he wanted to kiss Kip at center ice once he did.

Scott's car pulled up to MSG just as Carter was climbing out of his. They walked into the building together and found Shane changing out of his suit and hanging it up in his locker in the same methodical way he always did. Carter and Scott changed too and then they locked themselves in the same conference room as always. A captains' meeting probably wasn't necessary at this point in the season, especially when they had no notable injuries to account for in their play calls or line formations, but it was part of the routine so they did it anyway.

They left their hide out with enough time to be a few minutes early to the coaches meeting; a meeting that also probably wasn't necessary, but it happened anyway. Everything happened the way it always did and the flow of it almost convinced Scott that this was just any other game, that there wasn't a Cup on the line.

Around 4:00, the rest of their teammates started trickling in and by 5:00 they were cycling between training rooms, coaches offices, and the biggest conference room where the team nutritionists had laid out dinner and pre-game snacks. The locker room playlist was on full blast and the energy was palpable.

At 6:00, Shane and Scott walked into the pre-game media pool first. They answered the same questions they were always asked with just a little added intensity given the fact that this was the game that could end the season. Carter and Eric stepped out a few minutes later and Shane and Scott said their goodbyes and moved back into the locker room to get dressed.

* * *

Shane pulled on his pads in the same order he always did. Luke waited until Shane had on everything but his jersey to walk over with his shoulder pads so Shane could help make sure the straps across his back were even. Luke turned around and Shane was just about to make sure the pads were centered on his chest when he heard, “*teen drinking is very bad*,” boom through the locker room speakers and knew he was about to lose Luke. Shane quickly adjusted his pads, laughing as Luke started bouncing on his toes, and then stepped back just as Breezy materialized out of thin air and threw his arm around Luke’s shoulders.

Shane shook his head in amusement and moved back toward his stall as Luke, Breezy, Cameron, and Nick sang every goddamn word of J-Kwon’s *Tipsy* while somehow still pulling on their uniforms.

Scott stepped up next to him and shot Shane a crooked grin, “ready for this, Rook?”

“Yeah,” Shane answered, leaning over and knocking his shoulder against Scott’s before reaching forward for his jersey, “you think if we win this Cup you’ll stop calling me Rook?”

“Unlikely,” Scott responded, reaching out to ruffle Shane’s hair once he’d pulled on his jersey.

* * *

The magnitude of it all didn’t hit Ilya until he was sitting with Hayden, David, and Yuna a row behind Kip, his parents, and his friend Elena. It wasn’t just a Stanley Cup Final; it was the first final being played by two gay captains who were out to their team. There still weren’t any *openly* gay players, but this was as close as they’d ever gotten.

It was that thought that made Ilya realize just how stupidly, wonderfully brave his husband was.

Five months ago, Shane had stood in the locker room in Montreal and told his team the truth. Five months ago, as far as they knew, an NHL player had come out to his team for the first time. Two months after that, Shane had done it again. He’d been brave enough to take a chance, to hope that his new team would accept him for who he was, and Scott had been brave enough to follow him off the cliff.

Now Ilya and Kip were sitting here, in plain sight of every fan and camera, watching as Scott clapped Shane's shoulder as he skated out for puck drop.

* * *

Cale Wagner put up their first point of the game on an assist from Greg Huff near the end of the first.

Los Angeles scored a minute into the second.

Shane responded three shifts later off an assist from Luke and then Los Angeles tied it again.

The third period was agony.

Scott could feel the tension in the crowd, on the bench, and in his own chest. It felt like he was standing on a fault line, like a single misstep would be his ruin.

They were nearly at the end of the period and neither team had scored. Los Angeles was on the powerplay with Matti sitting in the box on a two minute minor and Scott was pretty certain he could feel every single second of it passing by as if they were being etched into his bones, but they killed the play without L.A. scoring.

And then it happened.

Los Angeles' right defenseman got called for roughing.

Scott started to stand up, ready to jump on the ice, but Murdock laid a hand on his shoulder and held him down, "second unit first."

Scott blinked and looked over at Shane who looked just as confused and then Scott looked up at the scoreboard. The scoreboard that said there were two minutes and three seconds left on the clock. If the second unit went on first, Murdock would pull them in a minute leaving Scott, Shane, Carter, Luke, and Breezy on the ice for the final minute of the game.

It felt like Scott had barely blinked before the second unit got called off 55 seconds into the penalty.

They jumped over the boards and the crowd fell away.

Scott saw the puck, loose in the neutral zone, and moved on instinct. Shane was five paces ahead of him, rocketing up the ice like hellfire was licking at his heels and Scott picked up the puck, dodged L.A.'s left forward, and passed without even having to look.

A second later, the goal light went off.

Shane lined up for the face-off, 47 seconds left on the clock with New York winning 3-2, and Scott just knew Shane didn't think that was good enough.

Shane immediately took control of the puck and passed to Carter, Scott moved forward to help pinch the puck out of the neutral zone and watched Shane drop back out of the corner of his eye.

Carter moved up the boards and Scott fell into the open spot Shane had left, keeping pace with Carter as they moved up the ice.

Shane falling back had drawn the attention of L.A.'s kill unit, leaving Scott entirely open when Carter looped behind L.A.'s goal and passed directly into Scott's waiting cradle. He sent the puck soaring over the goalie's right leg and, for the second time in under a minute, the goal light blazed red.

Now all they had to do was run out the clock.

Shane lined up for the face-off again and won easily. His path through the neutral zone was a master class in maintaining possession and Scott was dead fucking certain that Shane was about to score *again* but at the very last second, just as L.A.'s defender stepped out of the penalty box, just as the clock read 3 seconds remaining, he switched his hold for a backhand and, instead of shooting, he tapped it back and darted out of the way a moment before Luke came screaming in from his left to smack the puck straight into the space between the goalpost and the goalie's left glove.

The light blared red less than half a second before the timer ran down.

5-2.

They'd just won the fucking Cup.

* * *

Carter, Breezy, and Scott crashed into Shane and Luke ten feet away from L.A.'s goal as the volume in MSG skyrocketed.

For the barest second, it was just the five of them and then their teammates jumped over the boards and everyone skated toward Eric Bennett who was standing in front of the goal with his hands raised in victory.

Luke jumped onto Shane's back in the chaos and, somehow, Shane stayed on his feet.

"You just scored in the fucking *final*," Shane yelled, smacking the outside of Luke's thigh in excitement and smiling so wide his cheeks were starting to hurt.

"You scored *twice!*" Luke shot back, smacking Shane's chest in response.

It was *surreal*.

They somehow sorted themselves out enough to go through the ever-awkward handshake line and Shane tried not to feel bad about the fact that he didn't feel bad that most of the L.A. guys were crying.

For the third year in a row, Shane watched as the Conn Smythe and Stanley Cup were carted out onto the ice, but he was barely paying attention to that, his eyes were locked onto the empty space in the stands behind Kip and his parents, the space he knew had been filled by *his* parents and Ilya only a few short minutes prior. He wanted to know where they were, he wanted to find Ilya.

He was so focused on that spot, so focused on the question of where Ilya was, that he quite literally missed his name being announced as the playoff MVP.

Scott shoved him forward and Shane very nearly lost his footing.

He looked back at Scott in confusion, wondering why *Shane* was being shoved toward the Conn Smythe when Shane was pretty certain Scott was the one who deserved it; that Scott was the one who'd led this team through a historic run, who'd kept them all sane through playoffs. Shane hadn't won the Conn Smythe during his first two Cup wins and he hadn't been expecting to win it this time, either.

It'd stung the first time, when the trophy had gone to the Captain of the opposing team, but the guy had been a veteran, nearing the end of his career, and he'd played some incredible hockey. It was well deserved.

It'd stung less the second time because Shane hadn't let himself think the trophy could be his.

Ilya had won the Conn Smythe and the Hart the year he'd won the Cup, that didn't mean Shane deserved the same.

"It's yours, Rook," Scott said, grinning like a mad man as he nodded toward Roger Crowell and the trophy Shane had stopped believing he'd ever hold.

Shane shook his head once, not sure if he was trying to say that it should clearly be Scott's or trying to say that it *couldn't* be Shane's.

But Crowell was looking at Shane, not Scott, and it was Shane's face being projected on the jumbotron, and it was Shane who'd broken four playoff records in a single season even after a deadline trade and a rather severe injury.

Shane skated forward, through the crowd of his cheering teammates and the first few family members who'd made their way onto the ice, and slid to a stop at the edge of the carpet Crowell was standing on.

“Well done, Hollander,” Crowell said, smiling as he shook Shane’s hand. “Incredible season.”

Shane was pretty sure he said thank you before posing for the photo, but he wasn’t entirely sure. He took the trophy from Crowell’s hands and skated back toward his team just as his parents stepped onto the ice followed immediately by, “Hayd!” Shane shouted, speeding up. He hadn’t known Hayden was here, he didn’t have a single clue how his parents had gotten a fourth ticket, but having him on the ice made the win feel real.

Shane passed the Conn Smythe to his dad and then slammed into Hayden, wrapping his arms around his waist and taking him clean off his feet.

“Holly!” Hayden shouted back, his laughter echoing in Shane’s ear as he wrapped his arms around Shane’s shoulders in a desperate attempt to prevent himself from crashing back onto the ice. Shane spun slightly with the momentum, just enough to see Luke’s face light up over Hayden’s shoulder. Shane grinned as Luke broke away from the crowd of their teammates and skated toward a person Shane had only seen in pictures, even though he’d communicated extensively with him over the past week in order to make this moment happen.

“Drew!” Luke’s voice called out just before he slammed into his best friend in a stupidly cinematic parallel of the way Shane had slammed into Hayden.

“It’s mini us,” Shane laughed, setting Hayden back on his feet and nodding toward Luke and Drew.

Hayden chuckled and ruffled Shane’s hair, “your boy’s hiding out in Amanda’s office.”

Shane nodded, feeling something in his heart settle now that he knew where Ilya was. Part of Shane wanted Ilya here, on the ice, celebrating with the other spouses and family members. But Roger Crowell, the reason Montreal had been entirely comfortable pushing Shane out the door, was fifteen feet away and now did *not* feel like the time to announce to the world that a decade-long rivalry had really just been two people whose sexual tension was equally as impressive as their hockey.

Shane stepped away from Hayden and took the trophy he’d unceremoniously shoved at his dad back so his mom could take pictures and then he set the trophy aside as Scott was handed the Stanley and skated forward to stand next to Carter as Scott completed his victory lap before bringing the Cup back to them.

Carter held it second, kissing the metal at least five times before lofting it above his head, and then passed it over to Shane and Shane could no longer keep himself from tearing up.

This win felt so much bigger than the first two.

This win was his. He'd done this for himself, not for a legacy. Those first two wins had felt like an instruction; like someone had told him *Montreal picked you, now you need to win*. This one felt like a *victory*, like every single member of this team was fighting for it together because they believed in themselves and they believed they could win.

And then he watched as Scott's eyes locked on Kip, and all thoughts of winning and legacies came to a screeching halt.

"I'm gonna do it," Scott said.

Shane looked over at Carter, knowing they were both wearing identical expressions of wide-eyed shock.

"Do what?" Carter asked, still looking at Shane like, somehow, if they just kept staring at each other, Scott would start to make sense.

"Come out," Scott replied.

Shane blinked a couple of times and then tore his eyes away from Carter's to look over to the microphone Crowell had been using to award the Conn Smythe and present the Stanley and found himself thinking that Scott stealing that microphone and announcing that he was gay would be *painfully* cheesy.

He was just about to tell Scott that there simply *had* to be a better way when Scott started to skate away.

"Oh boy," Carter muttered and Shane finally realized what was about to happen.

“Oh,” Shane said, “you’re really gonna do this in the most dramatic way possible, alright.”

Scott just sent them a thumbs up and kept skating.

“Odds this goes badly?” Carter asked, sidling up next to Shane as they watched their captain, their best friend, skate across the ice to make history.

“Crowell can’t burn him at the stake in front of the cameras.”

Carter tilted his head and frowned a bit in consideration before shrugging, “you’ve got me there.”

* * *

Shane, as Scott had long since realized was most often the case, had been entirely correct.

This was *absolutely* the most dramatic way he could be doing this, but wasn’t drama what made life fun?

He skated over to the glass in front of Kip and waved his hands which immediately pulled seemingly every single person’s attention *except* for Kip. But then Elena nudged him and said something Scott had no chance of hearing over the crowd and then Kip was looking at him and smiling in a way that made Scott’s heart beat too fast. God, he loved this man.

Scott gestured toward the penalty box and Kip stared at him in confusion so Scott just gestured more dramatically. Elena, again, said something to Kip and then finally, Kip was making his way down the stairs. Scott skated over and climbed into the box to meet him, paying no mind to the way *everyone* was watching this happen.

It wasn’t their moment, it was Scott’s.

He’d just won the Cup and he was going to celebrate this win on the ice with the man he loved.

Kip climbed over the glass and then he was in Scott's arms. Flushed and grinning and adorable.

"You did it!" Kip said, his hands on Scott's waist and the sort of smile on his face that Scott would move mountains to see.

"I did it," Scott agreed. "Come on."

"What?" Kip asked, his smile falling slightly as confusion flitted across his face.

"Come on," Scott repeated, moving one of his hands down to hold onto Kip's to pull him back onto the ice.

"You don't have to do this," Kip said, finally cottoning on to Scott's plan.

"Yes," Scott responded, "yes I do."

They made it a few steps onto the ice and then Scott gathered every ounce of his courage, shot one look at Shane who was standing next to Carter with Hayden's arm wrapped around his waist, looking at Scott like he'd just opened the door to heaven, and then turned around and kissed Kip in front of God, 18,000 fans, and anyone watching ESPN, TNT, or ABC.

He kissed Kip like it'd been months since he last saw him instead of mere hours, he kissed him like they were behind the locked doors of their apartment instead of being broadcast on network television, he kissed Kip like a man who finally had everything he'd ever dreamed of.

"I love you," he said as he pulled back, his lips still brushing Kip's.

"I love you, too."

* * *

Ilya stood in Amanda's tiny office tucked away behind the home locker room and watched the live broadcast as Shane was *finally* awarded the Conn Smythe. As far as Ilya was concerned, it was an actual fucking *travesty* that this was the first time he was getting it. He kept half an eye on the celebrations, mostly just counting down the seconds until Shane was off the ice and making his way here so Ilya could congratulate him properly, but then he watched Shane and Carter's eyes snap toward each other in shock as Scott stared into the crowd and something told him he needed to start paying actual attention.

Ilya watched, hidden in the shadows of MSG, as Scott Hunter kissed his boyfriend on live TV after winning the Stanley Cup. Ilya watched as his husband immediately put himself behind Scott as the reporters crowded in, as his husband fielded questions about identity and the importance of being able to live your truth even in a sport that hasn't historically been accepting. Ilya watched as his husband talked about *himself* while everyone thought he was talking about Scott and every second of it felt like a knife to the chest.

Scott had done it.

He'd come out, publicly.

There was now, officially, an openly gay hockey player. Never mind the fact that two of the best in the League were *married*, it was always going to be Scott Hunter who'd come out first.

Ilya knew his pain was irrational, knew that there was an incredible benefit to Scott going first, knew that if he walked out there right now and kissed Shane like Scott had just kissed Kip, the consequences wouldn't be anywhere near as bearable.

Scott might lose sponsors, he might get a slap on the wrist from the Commissioner; Shane and Ilya would get blackballed. People would claim that every game they played against each other had been fixed, that every moment of their careers was rife with scandal. The trophy Shane had just won, the one he'd deserved to win for three years now, would be overshadowed. Their teams might stand behind them, but Ilya didn't know if that would be enough.

So, for now, Scott got to do it.

Kip got to live in the sunshine while Ilya stayed hidden in the shadows.

Ilya swallowed hard and then turned off the TV and tried to imagine a world where they all got to be in the light.

Chapter End Notes

up next: post-game celebrations and some hollanov :)

after that: hungover admirals on good morning america, a little press tour, and a stanley cup parade

then: (probably, if i actually follow my outline) NHL awards & scott hunter night

Chapter 35: he just comes running over to me

Chapter Notes

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

June 2017

Shane broke away from the cesspool of reporters, feeling more emotions than he knew what to do with.

Scott had just made history.

He'd kissed Kip on the ice after winning the Cup. He'd called Kip his boyfriend on camera with a microphone shoved in his face. He'd just, theoretically, paved the path for people like Shane to do the same and Shane had stood at his back in staunch support as he did it.

So why did everything suddenly feel so much more impossible?

If the League supported Scott now, they'd have cover for *not* supporting Shane and Ilya later. They could say it was an issue of integrity in the game rather than an issue with inclusivity.

He wanted to be happy. He'd just won the Cup for the third year in a row and he'd finally won the Conn Smythe. Two of his best friends had just gotten to step into the light instead of hiding out. Hayden was here, his family was here, he'd just scored twice in the final game of the series and Luke had scored the final goal. He wanted to be happy, but his husband was in Amanda's office, hidden from the world, and Shane hated it with a fervor he hadn't thought possible.

He wanted to do something drastic, something a little insane, he wanted to steal Scott's thunder and drag Ilya onto the ice and say *hey, everyone, remember Number One Overall Draft Pick and Stanley Cup Winner Ilya Rozanov?? Fun fact, his name's actually Ilya Hollander-Rozanov! We considered combining names and calling ourselves the Hollanovs for giggles but decided that doing a bit on legal paperwork was a little too immature.*

But he knew that once the emotions died down, and the consequences sunk in, he'd regret making the impulsive choice.

So instead of dragging them kicking and screaming into the sunlight on Scott and Kip's coattails, Shane used the insanity of the on-ice celebration to slip into the shadows. He stopped in the locker room to pull off his skates and switch to his slides because he was sick of clomping all over the building like a prize Clydesdale and then he made his way down the now-familiar halls to Amanda's office.

He was just about to open the door when a hand landed on his forearm and he turned his head to find Amanda looking up at him with a soft smile and a knowing sort of sadness in her eyes.

"Let me get a picture of you celebrating with your husband," she said quietly, pulling out the camera Shane recognized as *hers*, as the little digital one she brought out to bars or when they were wandering the city between coaches meetings and game time. The camera with the SD card that was only ever plugged into her phone and her laptop, not the one that got uploaded to the team drive.

"Thanks," Shane whispered back. Amanda pressed up onto her toes and kissed his cheek lightly before pushing him toward the door. It was the softest congratulations he'd gotten that night but it might've been his favorite so far. Because it wasn't only about the Cup or the Conn Smythe, it was an acknowledgement of the fact that she was one of the only people who knew about the person Shane had wanted to run to first.

Shane pushed open the door, Amanda a step behind him, and found Ilya standing silently, staring at the dark screen of the TV Shane knew had been playing a broadcast earlier in the night, and Shane could just tell that he was struggling with the same complex emotions.

"Ilyusha," Shane said, keeping his voice quiet so he wouldn't startle Ilya too badly out of his daze.

Ilya whipped around and the moment his eyes landed on Shane his whole face lit up, like every bad thought, every ounce of jealousy and bitter anger had evaporated like morning mist in the face of the rising sun.

Shane grinned back and took a step forward and the next thing he knew Ilya had lifted him clean off his feet, gear and all, and was spinning him, his laughter echoing through the tiny office, "Hollander!"

"Roz, put me down!"

“Never,” Ilya said, his voice holding a note of finality. Shane just held on tighter, not caring that he was sweaty and disgusting and getting Ilya all sweaty and disgusting. “I knew you would win.”

Shane pressed his face into Ilya’s neck and felt a little like *this* was his real prize, like his relationship with Ilya, their marriage and this stability, was the best thing to come out of this whirlwind of a year.

The Stanley and the Conn Smythe, the record breaking playoff run, none of it mattered quite as much as the man in his arms.

And then Ilya set him back on his own two feet, kept his arms wrapped firmly around Shane’s waist, and kissed him. Hard. Shane let out a low groan as Ilya’s tongue slipped past his lips and, distantly, he heard Amanda mutter a, “Jesus Christ,” before the camera shutter went off once more and then the door clicked shut.

Shane slid one hand into Ilya’s curls, grappling for anything to hold onto as Ilya kissed him like nothing else mattered. He felt Ilya’s hands run along his sides before they were sliding up the front of his jersey and then pulling up his compression shirt, like getting his hands on Shane’s skin was a matter of life and death. Shane suppressed a moan as Ilya’s big hands splayed out across his stomach as he walked them back until Shane hit the wall. He felt wild, like his entire nervous system had short circuited and every neuron was firing on high.

Shane tightened his grip on Ilya’s hair and kissed him harder, ignoring the biological alarm bells ringing in his brain telling him he needed to come up for air; oxygen could never matter as much as Ilya’s lips on his.

He had no concept of how much time had passed before Ilya pulled back and Shane let out a whine he refused to be embarrassed about in the privacy of Amanda’s tiny, stupid office. Ilya nudged their noses together before pressing a series of soft, breathless kisses to Shane’s lips and then his cheeks, his nose, his forehead, his jaw, down his neck and up his throat, everywhere he could reach.

“I am so proud,” Ilya said between presses of his lips against Shane’s skin. Those words, those words and the warmth of Ilya’s touch, meant more than any trophy ever could. “You were beautiful, Shane, amazing. Two goals in the final game? I don’t know how you do it, is just more proof you are the best.”

That was the first time Ilya had called Shane the best.

He was always reminding Shane that he was *one of* the best, that he was at the top of the game, that he was Shane *fucking* Hollander, but those reminders often came with a quip about being second best, second only to Ilya.

“Not the best,” Shane corrected, shaking his head slightly, the movement pressing his nose against Ilya’s cheek, “one of two. It’s you and me, Rozanov.”

“You don’t like ties.”

“I don’t,” Shane confirmed, kissing Ilya’s jaw before tugging him into a hug, “but they’re not so bad if I’m tied with you.”

He felt Ilya’s fingers dig into his abs, like he was trying to burrow himself inside Shane’s skin, and Shane just held on tighter, like by strengthening his grip he could somehow fuse them into a single being so he’d never have to be separate from Ilya again.

“You have to go celebrate,” Ilya whispered, his voice muffled against the shoulder of Shane’s jersey. Shane knew he smelled awful, the combined scent of pads that could never quite be cleaned no matter what tricks Shane tried and the fresh sweat from the game he’d just played, but Ilya didn’t seem to mind.

“Come with,” Shane whispered back, his lips pressed to the skin below Ilya’s ear. “Please.”

“Will it be okay?”

“I want my best friend with me, Ilya. Please.”

“Pike is already out there.”

“Not Hayden, baby. You.”

“I’m your best friend?”

Shane's heart broke a little at the tone of Ilya's voice, at the disbelief and something that sounded a little like wonder.

"Of course you are," Shane answered, holding on somehow, impossibly, tighter. "My best friend, my husband, love of my life, still an asshole and maybe a little bit the bane of my existence and a total menace, but absolutely my best friend. Please come celebrate with me."

Ilya pulled back and looked into Shane's eyes and Shane could tell he was trying to make sure that Shane was serious. He knew Ilya felt like he was on the outside looking in right now, he knew Ilya would question if he was *truly* wanted, but Shane didn't have time to give Ilya an entire lecture on just how loved and wanted he was, someone was going to come looking for him soon enough. So, in the face of a time crunch, he pulled out the big guns.

* * *

Ilya watched Shane's eyes get a little wider and braced himself for a heart attack.

"Please," Shane said again, his voice barely above a whisper, whiny in a way it *rarely* got and still a little breathy from the exertion of 23 minutes of ice time and making out like teenagers in a hidden corner. His brown eyes were nearly molten and glistening with unshed tears that he'd somehow conjured out of thin fucking air, his bottom lip was jutting out just a little, not quite a pout but something close.

"Christ," Ilya said, sliding his hands across Shane's stomach to grip onto his waist, trying to anchor himself in reality as he nearly blacked out in the face of Shane's *begging*. "Yes, yes I will come with, Hollander, stop that."

Shane grinned and just like that the tears were gone and the pout was a distant memory and Ilya was fairly certain he was suffering from whiplash. Maybe a head injury. It was *something*, that was for damn sure.

"Come on," Shane said, darting forward to press one last kiss to Ilya's lips and then heading for the door. His hair was a mess and his jersey was crooked and half tucked into his compression shirt that'd been rucked up to expose his stomach and anyone with half a brain would be able to tell he'd been up to something at least PG-13. Even then, Ilya decided he wasn't going to straighten him out. He ran a hand through his own hair, making a barely even halfhearted attempt to cover up the fact that Shane

Hollander, 3 Time Stanley Cup Champion, hadn't just had his fingers tangled up in his rival's hair while being backed up against a wall and decided that was good enough.

Let people wonder.

Let the internet ask questions, let the fans speculate.

Ilya was pretty fucking certain that the League wouldn't even dare to *mention* it unless there was stone hard proof. It'd be easier for them to pretend nothing was happening, to pretend that Scott Hunter was the only one who'd broken the mold.

Ilya followed Shane down the hall, the volume growing with every step, and then they reached the locker room and Ilya could feel his ears already starting to ring. It was *wild*. Rowdy in a way locker rooms only got after a championship. Breezy was drenching Jalo with champagne, Huff and Wagner were cracking and dumping beer cans into the Cup, Carter was standing on the bench in front of his stall shouting something incoherent while Scott – who was drinking directly out of a bottle of champagne - cheered him on, there were wives and girlfriends and parents and children and reporters jammed into every corner of the room and Ilya was entirely certain it couldn't *possibly* get crazier and then the room noticed Shane.

The volume hit a pitch Ilya hadn't previously been aware was humanly possible.

Eric Bennet and Tommy Andersson had Shane up on their shoulders before Ilya could even blink and then Ilya heard a shout of, "Rozy!" and that was all the warning he got before Luke was jumping onto his back.

"Luke," Ilya greeted, laughing his *real* laugh in clear view of the cameras. He couldn't help it, this kid who lived in his house, who loved Shane like a brother, had just won the Stanley Cup in his rookie year.

"I'm so happy you're here," Luke said, his voice quiet enough that Ilya wouldn't have been able to hear him if he wasn't clinging onto Ilya like a koala.

"You played very well," Ilya complimented, reaching up to squeeze Luke's arm.

“Thanks,” Luke whispered, knocking his head softly against Ilya’s and squeezing him in an odd sort of hug before dropping back down to his own feet, “come meet Drew, it’s gonna be awhile before they put Holly down.”

Ilya looked over his shoulder to where Huff and Wagner were now up on the benches with their beer-filled Cup while Shane - still on Eric and Tommy’s shoulders and somehow missing his jersey - was drinking out of it. Though, ‘drinking’ was maybe a strong word. It seemed a little more like Shane, Eric, and Tommy were simply getting drenched while their teammates cheered.

Ilya followed Luke through the crowd to a corner where Hayden, Kip, and a boy he recognized from Luke’s Instagram were standing in an odd little group.

“Drew,” Luke greeted, a megawatt smile breaking out across his face, “this is Ilya, Rozy, meet Drew, my best friend.”

It was entirely possible that witnessing Ilya passed the fuck out, snoring on the couch with a golden retriever asleep on his chest several times over the past couple of weeks had desensitized Luke to the fact that his buddy Ilya was *Ilya Rozanov* because he seemed *genuinely* confused when Drew nearly choked on his tongue.

Ilya really wanted to tease the kid, but he was Luke’s best friend who Luke had been talking about non-stop for weeks and it was maybe time that he started chipping away at the edges of his public persona.

“Is good to meet you,” he greeted, holding out his hand for Drew to shake, “Luke talks about you. A lot.”

He had to tease someone. The fact that he’d chosen Luke felt like an improvement.

“Good to meet you,” Drew stuttered out and then his eyes went wide and Ilya looked over his shoulder to see what’d caught his attention only to find a now fully shirtless, soaking wet Shane Hollander being deposited a step behind him, grinning like an absolute loon.

It was also entirely possible that the kid, in his excitement to see his best friend play in the Stanley Cup Finals, had overlooked the fact that the person he’d been messaging for the past week to plan this surprise was *Shane Hollander*.

“Buddy,” Shane greeted, grabbing Luke by the shoulders and shaking him.

“Holly,” Luke replied, leaning back into Shane’s touch like it was the most natural thing in the world. Watching it made Ilya’s chest feel warm. Luke, who’d clearly never quite experienced familial love, and Shane who almost *always* shied away from physical touch, had finally found comfort in this little family.

“I think Greg and Cale are trying to waterboard people.”

They all looked back to find that, indeed, Huff and Wagner were climbing across the benches, pausing periodically to add another can of beer into the Cup, and just drenching their teammates, half of whom were in the process of pulling off their jerseys to replace them with their Championship t-shirts, meaning the beer was being filtered through fabric that was covering their heads. It really, honestly, *did* look like Scott’s wingers were trying to waterboard the team using Bud Lite and the Stanley Cup.

“Oh, good,” Kip muttered, looking somehow fond, amused, and exasperated all at once and Ilya watched as Carter shoved Scott’s entire, sweaty head into the Cup and then proceeded to drink out of it.

Ilya was having trouble processing the sheer number of germs being shared in this room so he had no fucking clue how Shane wasn’t losing his goddamn mind.

“If any of that beer actually finds its way into my mouth I’m walking into traffic,” Shane said.

There he was.

Ilya just grinned and reached out to ruffle Shane’s hair, not caring that the action meant he and Luke both got sprayed with whatever beer and sweat was drenching Shane’s head. Shane grinned back and Ilya felt the sudden urge to marry him all over again.

“Dad!” Luke yelled and Drew immediately snapped to attention, clearly protective and clearly expecting to see Luke’s *actual* father instead of Scott Hunter. Luke didn’t even notice the reaction but Ilya did. Ilya noticed it and filed it away for later.

“My son!” Scott yelled, clearly already drunk as he clapped his hands on Luke’s cheeks and yanked his head forward to smack a kiss to his forehead. “My wife!” he added, grabbing Shane’s face and kissing his cheek which got him matching glares from Ilya *and* Hayden. Ilya, sort of hysterically, hoped that one of the dozens of cameras in the room had caught that exact moment. Scott kissing Shane while Ilya and Hayden glared him down and Kip just grinned like he was having the time of his life. The whole tangled web of gay Twitter hockey fame.

“Gross,” Shane muttered, wiping his cheek and Ilya let out a bark of laughter that he couldn’t have choked down if he tried. The fact that Shane hadn’t even attempted to rid himself of the beer and sweat but had immediately wiped off Scott’s kiss was simply too wonderful for Ilya to ignore. “I was joking when I said I was into older men, Scotty.”

Scott smacked Shane upside the head and then kissed his cheek again.

“I’m taken, Rook.”

“You’re the one kissing me you dipshit.”

“It’s like you have no fear,” Hayden said, looking between Scott and Ilya like at least some part of him *wanted* Ilya to punch Scott.

Scott’s eyes lit up and Ilya let out a preemptive groan as Scott’s hands shot out and grabbed onto his cheeks with surprising speed for an elderly man who’d just chugged an entire bottle of champagne. Scott’s lips landed on his forehead before Ilya could even think about stopping him.

“I need a shower,” Ilya grumbled, covering Scott’s entire face with his hand and shoving him away by the head.

Getting kissed by the crypt keeper was worth it, though, because Shane was *giggling*. His eyes were crinkled up and his dimples were out in full force and his stomach was shaking, making his abs flex in a way that was a little obscene and Ilya, in a last ditch effort to stop himself from dropping to his knees and sucking Shane’s dick in front of his entire team and several members of the press, reached out and yanked Luke between them like a human shield.

Luke just blinked a couple of times, took one look at whatever expression was on Ilya's face, and then nodded and stayed put.

Ilya *almost* ignored Hayden's cackling but then he remembered that Hayden got to be the first person Shane hugged on the ice and smacked him instead.

"Hey," Hayden whined, rubbing the back of his head and pouting, "Holly, tell him to stop."

"What makes you think he listens to me?" Shane asked, grinning in the face of Hayden's pain. Ilya loved him. So fucking much.

"You walk him like a dog, Rook, don't even start," Scott laughed.

Shane rolled his eyes but didn't deny it and Ilya found that he couldn't exactly deny the accusation, either. All Shane had to do to have Ilya entirely at his mercy was flash those pretty brown eyes and say please in that specific tone with that sweet little pout on his lips. It was absolutely ridiculous, the things Ilya would do in the face of that lethal combination.

"Hey," Carter greeted, throwing his arm around Shane's shoulder, "they're kicking out everyone who's not part of the team but some of us were talking about going out after? You guys down?"

"I go where Shane goes," Hayden shrugged and Ilya sort of wanted to hit him again.

He'd seen Hayden talking to New York's GM before the game and had a bit of a suspicion about just how true that statement was. If what he thought was happening was happening, he'd be happy for Shane, of course. But he'd also sort of want to murder Hayden Pike. Ilya wanted to play with Shane, Ilya wanted to move to New York and move fully into their house and never leave again but he had another year on his contract in Boston and there wasn't a world in which a team could afford Ilya, Shane, *and* Scott at the same time.

"I'm down," Kip said, cuddled up against Scott's side and Ilya got the strange urge to hit *him* too. He needed to get a grip; this jealousy was not healthy. He had Shane, he *knew* he had Shane. His ring was currently plainly visible on a chain around Shane's neck.

“Ilya?” Shane asked, looking at him with those eyes and Ilya melted immediately.

“Yes, yes, would be fun,” Ilya said, suddenly incredibly thankful that he’d had the foresight to use Luke as a buffer. He was having an incredibly difficult time stopping himself from kissing his husband.

Then Shane darted around Luke, pressed a there-and-gone kiss to Ilya’s cheek and headed for his locker, leaving Ilya standing stunned in his wake. His heart was racing in the best of ways and he felt a little like that kiss, that barely there brush of lips against his cheek, was better than the kiss they’d shared behind the door of Amanda’s office. He blinked a couple of times and then forced himself to move. He led Hayden, Kip, and Drew out of the locker room and into the hall on autopilot and then he let Kip, who’d thankfully been smart enough to ask Carter where they were planning to go, lead the way.

* * *

Shane genuinely didn’t know how they’d gotten from MSG to the Kingfisher but he was pretty sure they were going to have to give the janitorial staff and their equipment managers a massive cash bonus and possibly each of their first born children in thanks.

But he was here now, finally showered and no longer covered in sweat, champagne, and beer, and the Stanley Cup was being carried around a gay bar while their Captain made out with his boyfriend like a drunk teenager at prom and Shane was having the time of his goddamn life.

He wove through the crowd until he finally located Ilya at a booth in the back corner with Hayden and Drew and realized that Ilya had finally taken off the jacket he’d been wearing the entire time they were at the arena and Shane fell in love all over again. Ilya was in Shane’s crewneck. His navy blue Admirals crewneck that had his name and number printed on the back.

It wasn’t quite his jersey, but it was close enough. His husband had just watched him win the Cup while wearing his name and number.

“You look good in 24, Rozanov,” Shane greeted, realizing that he’d maybe had a little too much to drink back in the locker room when he sat himself in Ilya’s lap without even thinking about it. Ilya froze for a second and Shane nearly moved to sit next to him like a normal person but then Ilya’s arm wrapped around his waist and he found himself pleasantly trapped. He felt Ilya’s nose press into his hair as his lips brushed against the nape of his neck and he relaxed fully back into Ilya’s hold.

Maybe he'd sit on Hayden's lap next, really sell the whole *sorry, I was too drunk to think properly* thing. Though maybe Hayden wasn't the best choice, that might actually fuel *more* rumors than him sitting on Ilya.

Drew was staring at them wide-eyed and Shane just winked before turning to Hayden to ask about the kids.

* * *

Scott finally came up for air and decided it might be about time to switch to water when his eyes caught on Shane sitting in Ilya's lap in clear view of every single one of their teammates and the *several* other patrons packed into the bar.

But then Greg Huff slammed into his side and whisper-shouted, as drunk people were wont to do, "is Hollzy sitting in Rozanov's lap?" and Scott realized that either he *wasn't* seeing things, or he and Huff were somehow drunk enough to share hallucinations.

"Yes," Scott answered, "he absolutely is."

"Right, okay," Greg said, blinking a couple of times and then grinning, "god that chick Lily is gonna be pissed someone beat her to it."

Scott honestly wasn't sure what to react to first.

The fact that Greg had come to the drunken realization that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov were together and his first thought had been of a random girl on Twitter. Or the fact that the random girl was, in fact, *Ilya*.

"She'll be heartbroken," Scott agreed, doing a rather incredible job of keeping his composure if he did say so himself.

Greg just laughed and then disappeared back into the crowd.

Scott had come out on live TV and someone else had figured out the Hollanov secret and the world hadn't imploded. They still had a long path toward change, but this felt like progress.

He looked down at Kip and felt himself start to grin again. This was, without a doubt, the best night of his life.

* * *

Somehow, by the grace of a God Shane hadn't been entirely sure he believed in, they made it home in one piece.

For some unknown reason, they'd ended up calling a rideshare instead of a town car meaning a very lucky random citizen had had the wonderful experience of driving Shane Hollander, Luke Gillis, Hayden Pike, Ilya Rozanov, and some kid named Drew from the East Village all the way out to the suburbs at 3:30 in the morning. Shane had tipped handsomely and then tried not to think about the fact that he and Luke were supposed to be up and back into the city by 7:00 to appear on Good Morning America.

Shane woke up two and a half hours later to the alarm he'd somehow, miraculously remembered to set and found himself asleep on the couch cuddled up in the corner of the sectional sandwiched between Hayden and Ilya. He shut off his alarm and then swiped over to the camera and took possibly the worst selfie of his life, simply needing to document the occasion.

He felt like death warmed over, his hair looked like it hadn't been combed in weeks, and the bags under his eyes were dark enough it looked like he'd been punched in the face.

He heard a groan from the floor and sat up enough to lean over Hayden so he could see what had made the sound.

Luke was on the ground, snuggled up under a blanket from Sunny's kennel that was barely big enough to properly cover his torso.

"Do we have to?" he asked, his voice cracking from the amount of screaming they'd all done the night before and also probably from a decently severe case of dehydration.

“Yes,” Shane responded, feeling a little like something had crawled down his throat and died.

“Kill me now.”

Chapter End Notes

sister update btw.

the voices have started communing with me

well what are they saying?

either burn down this liquor store with me
and everyone in it or drop out of school and
join a commune

dealers choice

well liquor is a solid accelerant

Today 7:22 PM

that is the crux of my plan yes

i am so tired i'm starting to see shadow
people

tell them hello for me

Delivered

1 Reply

what combination of symptoms of a
psychotic break do i have to reach before i
check myself into a psych ward

tell them hello for me

they're asking where you've been,
apparently you haven't been returning their
calls

Chapter 36: let our friends crash in the living room

Chapter Notes

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

June 2017

Shane wasn't entirely convinced he was actually alive.

He and Luke had somehow changed into jeans and Admirals merch like the 14 texts they'd all gotten from Christina had instructed them to do and now they were in the back of a town car headed into the city after having only gotten home three hours prior.

Shane was drinking water but he was swallowing manually.

Like every single sip he took he had to tell himself to swallow so the water wouldn't just dribble back out of his mouth.

He had never, in his life, been *this* hungover.

Luke was sitting there - his sweatshirt on inside out which was something Shane was planning to tell him to fix as soon as he remembered how to speak - staring into the empty space in front of him, entirely catatonic. They both had sunglasses on, Luke's hair looked like a small family of squirrels had moved in, and Shane was absolutely certain his own hair didn't look much better.

They looked like a scene out of a bad comedy.

Somehow, they made it through the drive without actually dying and then stumbled their way out of the car and into the building. Times Square was at least 400% too loud and Shane felt a little like his brain was about to start leaking through his ears. Four months prior, he'd been slammed into the boards by Cliff Marlow so hard his helmet had come off and he *genuinely* would've preferred the headache he'd had waking up from that to the one he was suffering from at that very moment.

They found Carter leaning against a wall in the lobby and he was, quite literally, asleep standing up.

“Vaughny,” Shane said, his voice still stupidly raspy, “Carter, wake up.”

Carter just continued snoring.

Shane, feeling less charitable than normal given the fact that his blood may have been entirely replaced by alcohol, reached forward and flicked Carter’s nose. He startled awake and then slumped forward, buried his face in Shane’s neck, and let out a groan that sounded less like a human and more like a demon being exorcized. Not that Shane had ever *heard* that particular sound to make the comparison, but he was pretty sure it would sound at least a little like the noise Carter had just made.

“Why,” Carter asked, his voice muffled.

“I don’t know,” Shane responded, patting Carter’s back in sympathy. He sort of just wanted to put his own head against Carter’s shoulder and see if they could fall asleep propped up against each other in the lobby of GMA’s studio. Then Luke fell into the pile, burying his face in the other side of Shane’s neck, and Shane decided that he wasn’t going to move until someone forced him.

That time came far sooner than he would’ve wished.

Scott came into the lobby, possibly still drunk and clearly still riding the high of making out with his boyfriend at center ice, and said, so cheerfully Shane wanted to go purchase a gun, “good morning! Isn’t it a wonderful day?”

“Die,” Shane said, comedically in sync with Carter. Luke just let out a hiss. Sounding *exactly* like a feral cat. It was honestly impressive.

Shane wasn’t sure how they were supposed to go on live television without ending their day by being scolded by the entire communications team and forced into mandatory media training. He was also forcing himself not to think about the fact that Luke was a year and 4 days short of 21 and *clearly* hungover, meaning it was obvious that *someone* (read: Shane, Ilya, and Hayden) had plied a minor with alcohol.

Eric walked in next, far more quietly and looking nearly as dead as Shane felt. Shane appreciated him. He, unlike Scott, clearly understood the vibe.

“Good morning,” Eric said. It was more of a grunt, really, but it was the thought that counted.

“Morning,” Shane replied, attempting to smile in greeting and probably missing by a mile. Carter groaned out something like a greeting and Luke, upon further inspection, was asleep. “This is gonna be a long day.”

* * *

Ilya woke up and immediately regretted it.

Every part of his body hurt, his mouth was drier than the fucking Sahara, and he could feel the pounding of his head in his teeth. He buried his face in the back of Shane’s neck in an attempt to block out the sun streaming through their windows.

And then Shane mumbled, “good morning,” and Ilya realized that the person he was actively spooning was not, in fact, his husband but was, instead, Hayden fucking Pike.

He let out a string of profanity in an impressive mix of Russian, English, and even a few French curses he’d picked up from St-Simon. Hayden shot up and looked down at Ilya, visibly dizzy, and said, very intelligently, “you’re not Shane.”

Ilya was going to burn this house down with himself and everyone else in it.

“You woke up with someone cuddling you and your first thought was *Shane*?” Ilya asked, running over everything he’d picked up from watching late night television in hotels across North America about how to get away with murder. “Not your wife?”

“Jackie’s not here,” Hayden responded, like that made it better. Like saying that it was obvious he’d be cuddling Shane because he *was* here would make Ilya want to deck him any less. “It’s too early for this.”

Ilya glared because he couldn’t come up with any sentence that wasn’t an agreement. As much as he hated to admit it, Hayden was correct. It was *far* too early for this.

It was at that moment that Ilya realized the TV in the living room was turned on and tuned to ABC, where Good Morning America was currently running a segment on budget summer vacations. It took Ilya another thirty seconds to realize that the fact the programming had started meant that Shane and Luke were long gone. He had zero goddamn clue how either of them were even standing.

He got his answer five minutes of awkward silence (while Hayden sat as far away from him as possible and glared into space) later. The camera cut to a feed of all of the Admirals, most of them wearing sunglasses, several of them clearly dozing on each other's shoulders, sitting on a sound stage with couches that'd been placed on different levels so you could see all of their faces.

The couch closest to GMA's anchors had been made to comfortably sit three grown adults, *maybe* four if those adults were smaller than average and alright with a bit of a cuddle. Instead of that rational number, though, the couch was holding Scott, Shane, Carter, Eric Bennett, and Matti Jalo.

Eric was on the far right with his arm slung over the back of the couch, at least half asleep with his head resting atop Shane's. Shane was pressed into his side, sunglasses on, his hair in a state of total disarray and looking unfairly adorable for someone who'd drank an entire distillery and was now running on two hours of sleep. Luke was sitting at his feet, leaning back against the couch between Shane's legs with his head resting on the inside of Shane's thigh.

Shane's right hand was combing through Luke's hair in what looked less like an attempt to make him presentable and more like an unconscious need to keep a hand on him. Shane's left arm was wrapped fully around Scott's shoulders. Scott was slumped into the couch but Ilya could tell it was because he'd simply wanted to make himself smaller so he could cuddle up with Shane instead of because he was in the throgs of a hangover like the rest of his team. Both of those facts made Ilya hate Scott. Just a little.

Carter was on Scott's other side, clearly attempting to smile and failing spectacularly and Matti was on his left, squinting into the sun streaming through the studio windows like he could glare it into submission.

Breezy was on the ground next to Luke leaning back against Scott's shins looking a little like he was regretting ever being born and McCormick was on Breezy's other side leaning back between Carter's thighs and staring into space like he needed someone to remind him he was alive.

The rest of the team was crowded onto couches a riser above them, all of them in varying states of consciousness, and Ilya was wondering if the comms team was already regretting putting them all on live television or if it was going to take one of them opening their mouths for the regret to actually sink in.

“Oh, this is gonna be bad,” Drew muttered, Ilya whipped around, having entirely forgotten that there was another person in his house. Drew was in one of the arm chairs and had apparently been functional enough to find an actual blanket which was impressive considering the fact that the little yellow sunshine blanket on the floor by the couch was a decent indication that Luke had stolen one of the dog’s blankets to sleep and Ilya, Shane, and Hayden had simply huddled for warmth like a bunch of drunk penguins.

“Understatement.” Hayden replied.

* * *

The interview started off normal enough. They answered questions about their playoff run and team chemistry, they joked about how the Cup didn’t hold as much alcohol as they’d thought it would, they teased each other and made the hosts laugh and Shane was pretty sure they were doing a great job of following Christina’s instructions to keep it light and fun.

Things were going great, so incredibly great, and then Robin said, “so, I have to ask, were any of you shocked to see your Captain celebrating with his boyfriend?”

Shane felt a little like he was in an action movie watching a bullet whistle toward him in slow motion.

“Yes,” Breezy answered immediately and Shane just closed his eyes. “I mean, we all thought he was dating Hollzy.”

Scott slumped forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, his shoulders shaking with laughter as Breezy looked up at him from the floor in confusion, “why are you laughing?”

“Rook,” Scott got out, his voice shaking and Shane had no fucking clue why this was now *his* problem.

“Yeah,” Nick said from somewhere over Shane’s shoulder, his tone of voice telling Shane that he clearly thought he was about to save the day. Shane was pretty sure he was actually about to dig a bigger hole. “Like Shane and Scott are mom and dad, you know? Now we have a stepdad? It was a little shocking.”

Shane looked over at Eric like he'd somehow do something to fix this but Eric was just looking skyward, probably praying for patience or possibly for lightning to strike him down, Shane couldn't be sure.

"Kip's not our stepdad," Luke started, turning over his shoulder a look of pure, adorable confusion on his face, "They're not even ma-"

"Kip's great," Shane cut in, squeezing the back of Luke's neck and hoping he'd get the signal to stop talking *immediately*. Luke's jaw snapped shut with a click and he tucked himself back between Shane's thighs, wrapping his right arm around Shane's leg like he could somehow hide behind it like a little kid in a grocery store. "It was a bit of a shock to see Scott choose that moment to come out. I'd known he was thinking about it but had sort of thought he was planning on releasing a statement, not pulling his boyfriend out of the stands after winning the Cup. This way was far more romantic, though. Well done, Scotty," he said, patting Scott's back and then just leaving his hand there, thinking that Scott might be in need of a comforting touch at the moment.

"Thanks, Hollzy," Scott said, his voice reaching an even keel again. Shane could not believe this was happening while they were all hungover, sweating alcohol, on live TV.

* * *

Ilya stared at the screen, his mouth literally open in shock, as he heard the words "they're not even ma-" come out of Luke's sweet, innocent mouth. The poor kid was probably more hungover than he'd ever been in his life on top of living the past week on a lethal combination of sleep deprivation and an adrenaline high. Ilya had no doubt in his mind that Luke was going to simply say *they're not even married*, and end it there. Ilya was entirely certain that Luke wouldn't out them, especially not on live television, no matter how hungover he was.

"Oh holy fuck," Hayden said, a disbelieving laugh escaping his lips. He was staring at the TV like Ilya imagined a member of the bomb squad would be staring at a suspicious package that'd just detonated; like he'd expected something was going to go wrong, but had been a little surprised by it anyway.

"Oh, Luke," Drew sighed, looking impossibly fond and overwhelmingly amused.

* * *

They made it off air without further incident but Shane wasn't at all surprised when he and Scott were immediately corralled into an empty office by Christina.

"We were already planning media for you two this week, MVP and Captain, you know? But now I'm extra glad it's *just* you two," she started, huffing out a little laugh as her eyes stayed glued to her phone, seamlessly multitasking in a way that had always impressed Shane. "Get some sleep today because starting tomorrow morning you're booked and *busy*. I've already talked to both of your agents and managers and made sure nothing we agreed to was on your hard no lists but you need to tell me now if you want out of any of this. Shane, you're not ready to come out right?"

Shane hesitated for barely a second, hardly a moment at all, before he said, "no, not yet," but it was enough to catch Scott's attention. Enough to earn him a quizzical look that Shane did his best to ignore.

Christina passed her phone over and Scott and Shane ducked their heads together to read the list.

It was absolute insanity, more media than Shane had been forced into for his last two Cups combined, but he guessed that was the difference between a major market and *New York City*.

The pair of them reading thirst tweets for BuzzFeed, Scott on the cover of Out Magazine, Shane on the radio with Andy Cohen, Scott on Bravo being interviewed by Andy Cohen, Scott on some random radio show, taping their workouts for Men's Health, call-ins to several random hockey podcasts. It was just one thing after another until the parade on Saturday and then a brief break until the NHL awards.

"You need a date for the awards," Christina said, pointing at Shane, "and it can't be Rozanov or Pike."

Shane blinked a couple of times, trying to sort that statement out in his head. But then he decided against questioning it and simply pulled out his phone, ignored several hundred unread texts, and called Rose.

She picked up on the third ring, "Shane?"

"Wanna be my date to the NHL awards?"

He could hear her brain short circuit through the phone before she answered, “yeah, sure, okay. Whatever the fuck is going on right now, I’m in.”

* * *

On Tuesday, Ilya and Shane drove Hayden to Lagaardia to fly back to Montreal and then drove to BuzzFeed’s Gramercy office on Park Ave. Shane wasn’t entirely sure how he was going to explain away the fact that Ilya was with him, but Ilya had woke up clingy and there was a distance to his gaze that made Shane want to keep him in his sight at all times, so he was simply going to deal with the consequences later.

“What do you want to do for your birthday tomorrow?” Shane asked as they emerged from the Queens Tunnel. Ilya leaned over and rested his head on Shane’s shoulder where his arm was resting on the center console and Shane reevaluated how close he wanted to keep Ilya today; his eyeline didn’t feel like enough anymore, he was starting to think he needed to keep Ilya in arm’s reach. Shane moved his arm just enough to drop his hand onto Ilya’s left thigh, squeezing softly and ignoring the way stretching across the car made his shoulder twinge.

“I just want you,” Ilya answered, “what do you have tomorrow?”

“Men’s Health,” Shane said, squeezing Ilya’s thigh again, “we’re recording at the practice facility, though, so why don’t you come with and I can show you around?”

“Don’t want to intrude,” Ilya mumbled, turning his head and effectively hiding his face between Shane’s shoulder and the back of his seat. Shane was fairly certain that if he weren’t actively driving, Ilya would’ve crawled into his lap by this point.

“You’re not intruding if I want you there.”

Ilya went quiet for a minute, long enough that Shane had turned onto the street where Christina told him he’d be able to find parking, and then he whispered, “okay.”

Shane felt his heart break a little.

Something was off, something had shifted in Ilya's mood that was making him a little shy, a little more sad, and Shane wasn't sure if he should pry or let Ilya come to him. He didn't know what buttons to press, didn't know what to ask without stepping on a landmine, and all he wanted was to make it better.

“Я тебя люблю,” Shane said softly, pressing a kiss into Ilya's hair once he'd finally found a spot to park in the garage.

“Люблю тебя,” Ilya responded, kissing Shane's shoulder before sitting up. Shane watched in real time as a mask slid into place; the emptiness he'd been able to see in Ilya's eyes faded, the stoic set of his lips curved into his normal smirk, his shoulders rolled back, and the sadness that'd been clinging to him like a cloak fell away. It left Shane reeling, wondering how many times Ilya had worn this mask so Shane wouldn't notice something was wrong, so he wouldn't ask or worry.

But now wasn't the time to wonder, now wasn't the time to shatter the fragile peace Ilya had manufactured. So instead of pressing, instead of saying something that'd make it worse, Shane leaned across the car and smacked an exaggerated kiss to Ilya's cheek and then opened the door and stepped out onto the pavement.

Ilya followed him down the stairs and out onto the street and if Shane hadn't woken up next to him, hadn't seen the mask come into place in real time, he never would've known that something was wrong.

They made their way into the building and Shane forced himself into his media mindset, forced himself to tear his focus away from his husband. They ran into Amanda in the lobby and she didn't even question Ilya's presence as they headed toward the office Christina had told them to report to.

“I'm with you today,” Amanda said, her voice cracking on a yawn. She shook her head slightly, clearing away whatever sleep had still been clinging to the edges of her mind, “Christina's with Scott. You've got radio after this and then I'm supposed to ask if you'd prefer to do your Men's Health video today so you have tomorrow free.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed immediately, he'd absolutely prefer having all day with Ilya for his birthday rather than having to drive into Tarrytown. “That works for me.”

“Cool,” Amanda said, her smile a little too knowing for Shane’s tastes, “I’ll get that switched around.”

Shane ignored her teasing smile in favor of asking, “has anyone reviewed these tweets?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p’ obnoxiously, “this is gonna be so fun.”

* * *

Fun, Amanda had said.

Amanda was a dirty filthy liar.

Shane was four tweets in, wondering if it’d be too much to ask for the fire alarms to go off or maybe for the rapture to occur.

Scott didn’t look like he was having a much better time than Shane was.

Some of the shit people put on the internet ... Shane suppressed a shiver and just picked up the next card. He read it silently, and then read it again, and then a third time just to make sure.

“What?” Scott asked, his brows pinched in concern. Shane was pretty sure that Scott was about one quip about either of them being hot enough that they could kill someone and they’d thank them away from shutting the whole thing down.

Shane just looked down at the card he was holding again and a little laugh bubbled up in his throat, and once that escaped, it was enough to break the dam. His shoulders were shaking and his stomach was starting to hurt and he just passed the card over to Scott and ducked behind the table, like hiding would make it better.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Scott got out before throwing his head back with the force of his laughter. Shane was dead certain they looked entirely insane but he simply couldn’t help it because printed out on that little index card was a tweet from his own goddamn husband.

Shane was laughing so hard he hadn't even realized the production crew was trying to get their attention until Amanda stepped into the frame and picked up the card, seemingly planning to read it for the cameras while Shane and Scott were indisposed, only to end up cackling on the floor next to Shane.

Shane wasn't quite sure when she'd figured it out, but by the force of her laughter she clearly had.

Finally, Christina stepped in, visibly annoyed with all three of them. She picked up the card and squinted at it before looking up at all of them like she couldn't possibly figure out why they'd all lost their minds.

"It just says 'starting a cult to worship Shane Hollander's freckles and back arch. I am not recruiting members. It will just be me. I do not share.'," Christina read off, her voice entirely flat before she turned back around to the two hockey players she'd been forced to corral and her employee who she'd clearly expected to be able to keep it together despite all evidence to the contrary, "what is so funny about that?"

"The account," Scott choked out, glancing off to the side of the room where Ilya was sitting, looking unmistakably smug. Shane wanted to kiss him stupid.

"Lilyhollander1221?" Christina said, pulling the card a little closer to read the fine print. "Do we know Lily?"

"Oh, we know Lily," Amanda said, now hiding fully behind Shane like that'd somehow keep her safe from the wrath of Christina. Shane wasn't so sure it would.

"I don't know Lily," Christina muttered, looking a little disappointed by that fact.

"That's probably for the best," Shane said, his voice commendably even if he did say so himself. "She's a bit of a menace."

"A loveable menace," Amanda said, nodding in agreement and looking entirely earnest even as her eyes were still dancing with humor.

“Just read the next Tweet,” Christina sighed, apparently deciding that she wasn’t going to get anywhere with them and she might as well just move on.

Scott readily complied. After that, everything felt a little more fun. The tweets were still unhinged and Shane was still deeply concerned for several people’s wellbeing, but they were laughing more and it didn’t feel as uncomfortable.

An hour later, Shane collapsed into the driver’s seat of his Jeep while Ilya, who’s presence had only been met by several confused stares before everyone had apparently decided to just move on, climbed into the passenger seat. Amanda got into the back. She’d taken the subway to the studio but had happily accepted Shane’s offer to drive around with them for the rest of the day.

“I cannot believe that happened,” she said, still giggling a little under her breath.

“I can,” Ilya said, turning over his shoulder to shoot her a grin. He seemed lighter than he had that morning, in a way more genuine than the mask Shane had watched him weave. “I am very popular, Amanda, you know this.”

“I’d forgotten,” she teased. “God, that was hilarious.”

Shane just shook his head and started the car.

* * *

Ilya woke up Wednesday morning to Shane trailing messy, open-mouthed kisses across the crease of his hip and decided, right off the bat, that his 26th birthday was his best birthday yet.

He’d felt foggy the day before; detached from himself and a little bit adrift, but Shane had been there, had been an anchor even if he hadn’t known what he was doing. He’d simply let Ilya trail behind him without a single complaint; he’d made space for Ilya in every moment of the day even when there was no good explanation for Ilya’s presence. It’d made Ilya feel *wanted*, like he was actually meant to be there, like the simple fact that Shane was somewhere meant Ilya could be there, too.

Ilya tangled his fingers in Shane's hair and gave himself over to bliss.

The morning moved slowly, syrupy in a way that Ilya was starting to recognize as peace. They moved through every moment in tandem, from their bed to the shower, to the kitchen where Shane made him breakfast while Ilya stayed attached to his back like a barnacle, his arms wrapped entirely around Shane's waist and his lips hardly ever disconnecting from Shane's neck. He had no clue where Luke and Drew were, but Ilya simply resigned himself to the fact that, if they made an appearance, they'd be privy to Ilya Rozanov at his most lovesick. The thought didn't bug him as much as he'd thought it might've.

After breakfast they took Sunny out into the yard and watched as she ran around, rolling in the grass and getting distracted halfway through fetching any ball they threw.

"I've got a present for you," Shane said, Ilya startled slightly at his voice, having sunken a little too far into the mid-morning quiet. "It's not here, yet, but well, anyways. Christina is friends with Ottawa's social media manager, I'm really not sure how since he literally *just* got the job, but she said he grew up near Ottawa, his family has a farm near the city, an orchard, actually, and they've got a bunch of dogs, like an ad hoc rescue, honestly, and, apparently, they just found this little puppy who got left somewhere out by a neighboring farm but they've got so many dogs of their own that they're looking for someone to take her. I don't know why Christina mentioned it to *me* but, long story short, I'm now sort of friends with this guy named Harris in Ottawa and he said he'd hold onto the dog for us. I know there are other places to look, but something about it felt right, like I was meant to hear about her or something, I don't know."

Shane was, well and truly, rambling.

He was still talking, something about signs and being open to the universe, things he'd probably picked up from Amanda or maybe even Rose. Ilya hadn't heard him ramble like that in a long time. He sounded nervous, like when he was 17 and telling Ilya he wasn't supposed to be smoking next to the building, and it was so stupidly, heart-wrenchingly endearing that Ilya couldn't help but kiss him.

Shane's voice cut off abruptly and he froze for barely a second before melting with a little sigh that Ilya wanted to bottle up and keep in a safe.

"Thank you, милый," Ilya whispered, nudging his nose against Shane's and speaking against his lips. "Is a very good gift."

"Really?" Shane asked, his voice soft and tinged with nerves.

Ilya nodded, knocking his forehead against Shane's and wondering if it was possible to get high off a mere brush of skin, "really, I wanted a dog but did not know where to look."

"I think it'll be good," Shane said, pulling away for just a moment, just long enough to lay back in the grass and pull Ilya down with him. He reached out and tangled their fingers together. The sun was streaming down, making Shane's freckles stand out in stark relief and Shane's hand was warm against his, the metal of his wedding ring pressed into the space between Ilya's ring and middle fingers, solid and real.

"Me too," Ilya agreed, turning his head to kiss Shane's temple.

"Happy birthday, Ilyusha."

Chapter End Notes

harris got the job a year early and anya is being temporally displaced. don't ask me to explain the timeline, i won't be able to answer.

Chapter 37: sunshine on the street at the parade

Chapter Notes

saw someone on twitter.com saying that if the gcu was real, scott hunter would've been in the you need to calm down music video and i found that both accurate and hilarious and felt the need to honor it :)

also, just like as general context, i know it might seem like shane is a little ooc with some of the decisions he's making but i'm writing him from my own neurodivergent perspective and there have been so many times in my life where something blew up or didn't go the way it was supposed to and my mind was simply like "well ... fuck it, we ball" and then i just kept making increasingly unhinged decisions until i somehow looped my way back around to an even keel so that's sort of where shane is coming from. like shit hit the fan in the montreal locker room and then every decision he made after that was existing on that idea that things went bad and he didn't die so he might as well take some risks and now, as the dust is starting to settle, he's sinking back into his baseline where he's very methodical in his decisions meaning some of the impulsivity people have been getting used to seeing from him is back to making him panic. this isn't to say that he hasn't had some actual character development or that he's not in a much better place mentally in this situation than he was in canon (especially in the long game) but is more just as an explanation for why mr. neurotic has been living with the "fuck it" mentality.

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

June 2017

Scott's week was feeling weirdly normal.

He spent time with Kip, went to his different media obligations, and did his best to ignore what people were saying online; good, bad, or otherwise.

It wasn't until Wednesday morning, when he sat down with a writer for Out Magazine, that things felt a little less normal.

For every appearance up until that point, he'd focused largely on hockey, only mentioning Kip off-handedly, like how anyone would mention their significant other. Christina and his team must've finagled incredible contracts because no one had attempted to force him to talk about the kiss. This interview would be different, though. He'd agreed to it knowing that he'd have to talk about the experience of being a queer athlete, about the stress of living in the closet, about how he'd finally made the decision to come out.

And he'd have to tell that story while leaving out a massive part of it.

He wouldn't be able to say that the main reason he'd come out to his team when he had was because Shane went first, he wouldn't be able to say that he'd been able to navigate his relationship with Kip without massive pitfalls because he'd had Shane to tell him when he was being an idiot, he wouldn't be able to say that the joy he felt stepping into the sun was dampened, ever so slightly, by the knowledge that two people he cared for deeply were still stuck in the shadows.

He'd have to talk about the fact that the League had been supportive without mentioning that he was well fucking aware that they'd be able to use that support for cover when Shane and Ilya eventually came out, he'd have to talk about the fact that he felt safe with his team and in his city without mentioning that the reason he was able to truly appreciate that safety was because he knew there was an application for Permanent Residency in Canada out there with Ilya Rozanov's name on it, flagged with a note about the potential need for political asylum.

He'd have to talk about everything, about the moment he'd decided to come out, while forcing himself not to think about the way Shane had paused when Christina confirmed he wasn't ready to come out yet. Without thinking about the longing that'd been more than clear in Shane's eyes before the shutters had slammed shut and his face went blank.

Every one of those thoughts remained locked in a tight box in the back of his mind as he smiled for the cameras and answered the reporter's questions. He talked about hoping other athletes would feel safe living their true selves, he denied knowing of any other closeted athletes (and hadn't much appreciated the fact that the question had been asked in the first place), he talked about Kip and how wonderful he was and found that was the only time he hadn't had to even sort of fake a smile.

And when it was all over, he went out for Ilya's birthday and watched as he and Shane existed in each other's orbit, their love so blatantly on display with no one even noticing. Everyone who wasn't explicitly in the know seemed to assume the pair were just friends, best friends maybe, friends who were a little more touchy than average, but friends. nonetheless. The assumption meant safety, Scott knew that, but he wondered, just a little, if it also felt like a trap.

He wondered what would have to happen for them to feel safe enough to tell the truth, he wondered if they'd exist in this liminal space until one of them retired, and he wondered how much living on that edge hurt.

* * *

Luke's birthday fell on that Friday and the whole team plus a few scattered significant others had gathered at Shane's house for dinner and a bonfire with several people planning to sleepover so they could carpool into the city for the parade in the morning.

Shane was sitting on one of the couches in the backyard between Carter and Luke and Ilya had settled on the ground in front of him, tucked between Shane's legs and making a concerted effort to not rest his head against Shane's thigh, slightly worried that it'd seem distinctly *not* platonic. No one had questioned his presence, no one had asked why Ilya was still at Shane's house, why he hadn't returned to Boston, it'd simply become a known fact that wherever one of them went, the other followed, but Ilya still wasn't sure of how far he could go.

He felt Shane's fingers comb through his hair before his hand settled at Ilya's nape, his thumb rubbing softly up and down the muscle at the back of his neck. The gesture was mindless, born of an easy sort of familiarity, and Ilya melted into it, all worries slipping from his mind at the simple comfort. He relaxed back against the cushion of the outdoor furniture Shane had painstakingly chosen and let his head fall against Shane's thigh, a pleased hum escaping his throat before he could stop it.

Shane paused slightly and Ilya wondered if he'd finally gone too far, but then his fingers were back in Ilya's hair, scratching gently at his scalp in the way he knew calmed Ilya down without fail, and Ilya let himself settle.

“Это нормально?” Ilya asked, knowing Shane would understand the cadence, if not the exact words, and momentarily grateful that New York's only Russian player had been traded to Montreal to get Shane.

“Да,” Shane responded, his voice soft, “конечно.”

Of course.

Like there was no question about whether or not Ilya cuddling up and showing obvious affection in front of his teammates was okay.

It was so different from the Shane of a few short months ago, from the Shane who'd shied away from physical touch and affection, from the notion of *anyone* knowing his secret, let alone Ilya's, that Ilya couldn't help but press a little closer into Shane's space before whispering, “я тебя люблю.”

“Я тоже тебя люблю,” Shane responded, squeezing the back of Ilya’s neck gently.

“You speak Russian?” Wagner asked, looking at Shane in something like confusion. He was in a lawn chair just to Carter’s left, close enough to have overheard.

“A little,” Shane answered, his voice almost passing for casual.

“Since when?”

“Uhh,” Shane hummed, “awhile? I’m not very good at it, though.”

“That is a lie,” Ilya cut in, not willing to let Shane talk down on himself even if it revealed too much, “you are learning fast, Shane, and you already know three languages, is very impressive.”

“You know three languages?” Scott asked, stunned enough that he actually leaned away from where he’d previously been attempting to crawl underneath Kip’s skin.

“English, French, and Japanese,” Shane answered, squirming just a little as everyone’s attention turned toward him.

“And now you’re learning Russian?”

“You knew that, Scott.”

“Oh, right, I’d forgotten that I ranked fourth in importance somewhere after the Duolingo owl when you woke up from your concussion.”

“I lost my streak,” Shane grumbled, “Hayden wouldn’t let me use my phone.”

“I’m sorry,” Carter said, his amusement clear in his tone, “are you saying that you woke up in the hospital with a broken collar bone after being knocked out cold and, what, tried to get Pike to let you

do Duolingo while you were drugged up?”

“Yes and he refused to let me,” Shane said, clearly not realizing how insane he sounded, “he wouldn’t even let me just listen and tell him the answers.”

Ilya narrowed his eyes slightly, a realization starting to form in his mind. He looked over his shoulder and Shane’s expression turned guilty the moment their eyes met, “Hollander.”

“Rozanov.”

“When did your new streak start?”

Shane just stared at him for a second before answering, “after I left the hospital?”

“*When* after you left the hospital?”

“The next day,” Shane muttered, clearly realizing he’d been caught.

“How?” Ilya asked, really not sure whether he should be amused or angry.

“You thought I was asleep?”

Ilya just stared at him, running over the two days Shane had spent in Boston after he and Scott had checked him out of the hospital, and tried to figure out if there was ever actually a moment he’d left Shane alone for long enough to finish a Russian lesson.

“You left me alone when you went to work out,” Shane finally admitted, pouting a little like he knew that’d keep Ilya from actually getting annoyed.

“You were asleep,” Ilya responded, vividly remembering Shane’s peaceful, sleeping face, tucked snuggly in Ilya’s bed. He’d looked so soft and Ilya had been able to convince himself that Shane was

fine for long enough to work out, long enough to let his treadmill and weights burn off some of his stress.

“I woke up,” Shane shrugged.

“You are a menace, Hollander.”

Shane just grinned, a smile that clearly said *you love it*.

“Wait, you stayed with Rozanov after you got injured?” Bennett asked.

Shane’s grip on the back of Ilya’s neck tightened, clearly realizing how much he’d just inadvertently revealed and Ilya wanted to make it better but he didn’t know how. He didn’t know if telling the truth would make the stress bleed out of Shane’s posture or if it’d only make it worse.

“Что ты хочешь делать?” Ilya asked, wrapping his fingers around Shane’s ankle and holding tight. He wanted to do more, he wanted to climb up onto the couch and wrap him in his arms and tell him that no matter what he decided, it’d be alright, that he’d still have Ilya at the end of it.

“Я не знаю,” Shane answered which didn’t surprise Ilya at all. He looked a little like he was stuck in decision paralysis, or at least that was what an article Ilya had read had called it. His eyes had gone distant and he was worrying at his bottom lip, just a little, not enough to be noticeable to anyone except Ilya.

“Это твой выбор любимый,” Ilya said. He hated himself, just a little, for forcing the decision onto Shane’s shoulders. He wanted to just make the decision like he had when they were unpacking and Shane’s gaze had gone distant, clearly stressed over the number of things that needed to be done and unable to decide where to start. Ilya had been able to simply declare that they’d start in the kitchen and go from there. But this wasn’t unpacking boxes, this was the decision of whether or not to share their most dangerous secret with Shane’s team.

Ilya knew, deep down, what option he wanted Shane to choose, but this wasn’t a decision he couldn’t make.

* * *

Shane didn't want to make this decision; he had no clue what to do.

He was stuck somewhere between wanting to scream it from the rooftops and worrying over when they were going to hit critical mass. There were only so many people you could let in on a secret before it was no longer a secret, only so many people you could add to a tangled web before the walls collapsed around you.

This team had stood behind him when he told them his first secret and they'd easily accepted Ilya into the fold as Shane's friend, but there was no guarantee that the support would extend to the knowledge that Ilya was his *husband*.

He'd never hated himself more than in the moment he opened his mouth and said, "that's what friends are for, right?"

Scott visibly winced and Ilya's face fell and Shane knew in an instant he'd chosen wrong and then Ilya started to pull away, trying to put some sort of *friendly* distance between them and Shane felt weightless, detached in a way he'd only ever felt twice. Once in an elevator leaving a Vegas penthouse and again standing at the end of a driveway in the Boston suburbs waiting for his car to arrive, the taste of Ilya's first name still burning the back of his throat.

Eric stared at him, one eyebrow raised like he was waiting for Shane to give him the real answer, like he somehow knew Shane had just fucked up and was silently offering him a redo. Shane grasped at the chance like a man drowning, "boyfriends," he said, his voice sounding choked even to his own ears. Ilya went entirely still and Shane just barreled forward, forcing his voice to steady, "that's what boyfriends are for."

Ilya collapsed back against him like his strings had been cut, one arm wrapping around Shane's lower leg and his head immediately falling back into place on Shane's thigh.

It went silent, the echo of it making it seem like even the crickets had stopped chirping, and Shane braced for impact.

"Oh my God, I had no idea," Carter said, entirely deadpan, and the tension in the air snapped like a twig.

Shane let his head fall back against the cushions, feeling like he'd just run a marathon as air rushed back into his lungs. Luke leaned into his side, a steady pressure that made warmth seep back into Shane's extremities.

"You sold me short, Hollander," Ilya said, holding up his right hand, his ring glinting golden in the fire light.

"You weren't my husband then, Ilyusha," Shane said, huffing out a little laugh like the admission didn't feel like tossing himself into a pit of venomous snakes and hoping someone might save him.

"Oh, holy fuck you *were* going to say married!" Nick shouted, pointing at Luke in almost hysterical accusation. His eyes were wide and he looked like he was about to vibrate out of his skin and somehow, through the fog of cloying anxiety, Shane could recognize that he wasn't actually mad.

"Yeah," Luke huffed, turning his head slightly toward where Kip was sitting behind Scott, "sorry, Kip, I'm sure you're great, but I've already got a stepdad."

"Yeah," Ilya agreed, nodding seriously, his hand that wasn't gripping onto Shane's leg reaching out to pat Luke's knee, "Luke is ours, you two can find your own rookie."

"I volunteer!" Nick said, raising his hand straight in the air and nearly falling out of his chair.

"No fair!" Cameron shouted, throwing his empty can at Nick and hitting him square in the head, "I want gay dads too!"

"This is, without a doubt, the weirdest birthday I've ever had," Luke said, his voice only carrying to Shane, Ilya, and Carter over the chaos of Cameron and Nick arguing over which of them should get to be adopted by Kip and Scott. Shane just slung his arm around Luke's shoulders and hugged him tight.

* * *

It wasn't until they were both showered and tucked into bed that Shane finally seemed to realize that whatever fallout he'd expected had never come. Ilya watched in real time as his expression crumpled,

the anxiety that'd dug its claws in falling away, leaving behind an exhausted, broken shell.

"Shh," Ilya hushed, wrapping Shane in his arms, holding on as tight as he possibly could. Shane buried his face in Ilya's neck, his breaths coming far too quickly and Ilya was honestly concerned he was going to black out. Ilya rolled them, putting Shane entirely under his weight, only a little worried he was crushing him but not knowing how else to make Shane's nervous system accept that he was safe. "Hush, Shane, is okay, everything is okay."

"What if someone tells," Shane said, his voice more broken than Ilya had ever heard it and he hated that the joy he'd felt when Shane had told his team the truth had resulted in *this*, that the little thrill he'd felt when Huff's wife added him to the NY WAG chat as 'Lily' (which had resulted in about five too many knowing looks for Ilya's taste) existed alongside Shane's panic. "What if someone tells and we get kicked out of the League? What if we never get to play again?"

"Then we still have this," Ilya responded, forcing his voice to stay steady.

He expected Shane to fight back, to fixate on hockey, on the fact that this thing he loved could very easily be taken away. But the fight never came, the words Ilya had been expecting to fall from Shane's lips - the rambling about how much hockey mattered, the questions of whether or not Ilya would *really* choose him over a game - never came.

Instead, Shane's whole frame went slack. The panic that'd filled his eyes slipped away like it'd never been there at all. "You mean it?" Shane asked, his voice no longer quite so broken. He simply sounded tired.

"Of course," Ilya said, tilting his head to press a soft kiss to Shane's lips, "forever, любимый."

"Okay," Shane said, nodding his head slightly, like the movement was necessary for his brain to process his own words, "okay, forever."

"Sleep, sweetheart," Ilya whispered, "everything will be okay."

Shane's eyes locked on his and Ilya did everything he could to exude confidence, to make Shane's weary mind latch on to Ilya's words and accept them as truth.

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispered and Ilya knew what he was apologizing for without him having to say it. He didn’t want Shane to apologize, he’d put the decision in his hands, knowing the choice he’d wanted Shane to make but relinquishing control. He simply hadn’t been able to mask his reaction when Shane had chosen differently and a nagging part of his brain was telling him that it was his fault - that reaction’s fault - that Shane had jumped into the deep end. “I panicked, Ilya, I’m so sorry.”

“Shane, it is okay,” Ilya said, stressing every syllable. “I am sorry for reacting, I told you it was your choice.”

“It was our choice,” Shane corrected, his big brown eyes were flooding with tears and Ilya had no clue what’d caused them. He didn’t know if it was the overwhelming mix of emotions, the lingering fear of a bad reaction, or the adrenaline crash of realizing the threat had never materialized. “I want everyone to know, Ilya, I just don’t know how to tell them.”

“I don’t either,” Ilya admitted. Shane had put into words what he’d been feeling for weeks; that confusing mix of wanting to tell the world and not being able to bring yourself to speak.

“Can we just keep doing it this way?” Shane asked, sniffing slightly. Ilya had no fucking clue what he was talking about because *this way* seemed to involve a lot of unnecessary panic. “Just act like ourselves and answer honestly when people we trust ask?”

“Soft launch,” Ilya said. He’d learned the phrase from Amanda while Shane was getting ready for the Men’s Health shoot and it seemed like a strategy he could get behind. He’d thought before that no one from the League would mention it unless there was hard proof so, just as long as they didn’t start making out in front of Roger Crowell or post a picture of their marriage certificate online, Ilya was pretty sure they’d be alright. It was what they’d been doing, it was how Ilya had been moving through the past couple of weeks, but he was realizing now that Shane maybe wasn’t on the same page, that Shane’s mind probably needed it to be spelled out.

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, his eyes lighting up just a bit. “I want to ask my agent to make a contingency plan for if we get *properly* outed, but I like that idea.”

“I think I should sign with your agent,” Ilya said. He started to move to lay next to Shane instead of directly on top of him now that he’d calmed down but Shane let out a little whine and wrapped his arms around Ilya’s waist so Ilya decided to simply stay put. Shane settled back down immediately and Ilya happily resigned himself to spending the rest of the night using Shane as a pillow. “Or at least an agent in America or Canada, I do not think it is smart to keep Russian agent.”

“Yeah, that’s probably smart. We can talk to Farah this summer, she’s a good agent, you’d like her.”

Ilya nodded in agreement and then kissed the bridge of Shane’s nose, “we will figure it all out this summer after your parade and after the awards. Celebrate now, plan later, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane agreed softly, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, “I love you.”

“I love you,” Ilya echoed, kissing Shane’s lips once more before wriggling into a more comfortable position, his head pillowed on Shane’s chest, one leg tangled up between Shane’s, and his arm wrapped snugly around Shane’s waist.

* * *

Shane seemed settled the next morning as they piled into cars to drive into the city and Scott felt the anxious knot that’d developed in his own chest begin to unwind. He climbed into the back seat of Shane’s jeep and somehow ended up crammed into the middle seat between Kip and Luke. Ilya got into the passenger seat and grinned at Scott’s clear discomfort at being squashed into the one seat not meant for anyone even close to his height.

“Quit,” Scott grumbled, glaring in the face of Ilya’s obvious delight.

“No,” Ilya shot back. He was in jeans and one of Shane’s bright red Admirals t-shirts and Scott sort of wanted to create a group chat with every member of the Boston Bears whose number he had saved to tell them that their captain had very fickle loyalties but he held himself back.

Ilya was apparently meeting up with David and Yuna to watch the end of the parade and whatever drunken speeches any of them decided to give at the rally from the office of a friend of David’s who worked in the Bankruptcy Court. He wondered whether Ilya felt like he was missing out by not riding along the route with the team and the other spouses and assorted family members but he decided not to bring it up; they’d gone through quite enough emotional turmoil the night before and Scott was pretty fucking sure that the last thing they needed was him pointing out one other way that they were currently forced to be different.

The 45 minute drive to South Broadway was filled with Luke and Ilya bickering over who got to pick the music while Shane and Kip talked over them, chattering on about all of the options Kip had to choose from for fall semester classes for his graduate program and Scott just sat in the middle of the

chaos and let it exist around him. They somehow found parking in the general vicinity of City Hall and split off from Ilya to find the busses they were meant to be riding on.

Ilya smacked a kiss to Shane's cheek, murmured something in soft Russian that Shane easily repeated, and then wandered down the street with a little bit of a skip in his step.

Scott slung his arm around Shane's shoulders and steered them down the street.

The parade was *wild*.

It took them an entire hour and a half to navigate through the Canyon of Heroes, a mile-long stretch from City Hall to Battery Park, and every single minute was spent getting spectacularly, mind-meltingly *plastered*. Scott was fairly certain he'd done permanent damage to both his liver and his hearing but every moment of it was worth it.

Shredded paper and colored confetti were raining down from the windows of every building in the Financial District, music was blaring from industrial sized speakers, the Cup was being passed around along with the seemingly limitless supply of alcohol, and Scott felt a little like the King of the World.

He'd thought the crowds gathered along the street were massive, but it was nothing in comparison to the sea of people gathered for the rally.

He had no recollection of anything that happened between the time they got off the busses and the time they left the stage, but he was certain there'd be ample footage online for him to look back on. He knew that speeches had been given, that fans had been thanked and the city had been praised, but nothing specific had woven its way into his memory.

All he knew was that Kip's smile when Scott beelined towards him after jogging down the steps coming off the stage was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Chapter End Notes



if i had a horocrux...it would be suicidal irish
dominatrix dobby

Edited

Chapter 38: starman and starboy

Chapter Notes

you know those tiktok edits that start with bowie's starman and then fade into starboy by the weeknd?? that's scott and shane. and also shane and luke.

everyone please note that none of our boys are moving to vegas. i simply mentioned the expansion draft because i like being 'historically' accurate and to help explain the absolute insanity that i'm about to make happen trade wise within the eastern conference.

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

June 2017

On Sunday, peace finally fully settled for the first time in a while.

Shane sat on one of the stools at the kitchen island, Luke to his left, his mom to his right, as they watched his dad and Ilya make dinner. Ilya had insisted that Luke and Shane finally let him cook a meal for them to actually enjoy instead of just to fill their calorie requirement and David had been more than happy to offer a hand.

Drew had gone back to New Haven to move out of his dorm on Friday after taking Luke out for a birthday lunch but he was coming back on Monday to fly down to Vegas with them on Tuesday for the NHL awards which were happening Wednesday so it was just the five of them. Luke had his head resting on his arms where they were crossed on the countertop, his eyes darting around the kitchen like he was trying to take it all in.

Yuna was chattering on about some sponsorship opportunity she found for Ilya and some interview she thought the two of them could do together if Ilya ended up signing with Shane's agency and David was fully focused on the process of breading his meticulously tenderized chicken while Ilya split his attention between the sauce he was making and whatever Yuna was telling him so Shane was the only one who heard it when Luke looked at him and whispered, "this is what it's supposed to be like?"

Shane felt his throat tighten as he reached out and squeezed the back of Luke's neck, "yeah, buddy."

"I get to keep this?"

“Promise,” Shane said softly, running his thumb gently over the curls at Luke’s nape.

Luke just stared at him for a second before letting out a heavy exhale, his shoulders slumping and the slight, ever present pinch of his brow finally relaxing, “okay.”

Shane let him sit with that for a second, let him finally realize that no one was coming to take this away, and then ruffled his hair and asked, “so, do you have a suit for the awards yet or do we need to go get one?”

* * *

Ilya really wasn’t sure why they’d let Svetlana and Rose team up to pick out their outfits for the NHL Awards when they’d landed in Vegas a day early because Shane Hollander in a normal tux was one (beautiful, incredible) thing, but Shane Hollander *shirtless* in a black suit was another thing entirely. Ilya was entirely certain that if Rose and Svetlana weren’t literally in the hotel room with them getting ready, they’d never even make it to the awards.

In fact, he was so focused on how damn *good* Shane looked that he’d just about been able to forget that they’d been forced by circumstance to bring other dates.

All of the Admirals were staying at the New York-New York Hotel & Casino, right across the street from T-Mobile Arena, because Carter had joked about it while sloshed out of his ever-loving *mind* after the parade and they’d all drunkenly decided to commit to the bit.

But New York going somewhere now apparently meant that Boston was following because at some point in the past two months, their teams had just decided they were all friends. And Boston and New York making joint decisions had somehow led to New Jersey and Brooklyn joining them and Brophy’s college roommate played for Philadelphia and Cliff’s best friend from juniors played for Washington and the next thing Ilya knew, most of the Eastern Conference was booking rooms next to each other in a themed hotel all because Carter Vaughan had taken about seven too many tequila shots.

Ilya was sort of glad they were all sticking together, though, because this year’s awards had been made exponentially more chaotic by the Expansion Draft for Las Vegas’ new team. Every existing team had their lists of protected players, whether selected by the team or required by contract provisions, but everyone else was, essentially, free game. There was going to be a *significant* amount

of movement in the League, most of which had already been decided behind closed doors, but Ilya knew that everyone would be on edge until the final decisions were announced, even if no one was actually saying it aloud.

Then there was the fact that the media circus that'd been surrounding the Admirals, and specifically Scott Hunter, had followed them across the country, meaning *everyone* was now caught up in the chaos.

Ilya wanted this day to be over. He wanted to fly back to New York and pack up Shane's boring Jeep and drive up to the cottage where no one could bother them until pre-season. He wanted to have more than five minutes at a time to genuinely talk to his husband, he wanted a minute to breathe so he could actually sort through the storm of thoughts that'd been clouding his head, he did *not* want to be in Vegas living with this incessant buzz of anxiety that came with the knowledge that the League would be watching them.

There were, however, several benefits to the fact that Shane's team now knew the full truth. Chief among them was that Ilya no longer felt a little like a dirty secret, but also incredibly beneficial was the fact that they now had 20 watchful eyes serving as backup.

The day prior, sitting at their gate at JFK waiting to fly out, Eric Bennett had dropped into the seat on Shane's other side and had whispered something about always having Shane's back. He hadn't quite been loud enough for Ilya to overhear every word, but the gist of it was that Bennett had apparently decided that Shane was now his to protect. The pair of them were maybe a bit of an unlikely friendship; the 26-year-old sweetheart golden boy married to his male long-time rival and the 39-year-old gruff goalie with a wife and a picket fence, but there was something in the way Bennett was fiercely protective of Shane and Scott (but *specifically* Shane) that made Ilya wonder, just a little, if they might all have a little bit more in common.

"You two ready?" Shane asked holding onto both sides of the bathroom doorframe as he leaned in to check on Rose and Svetlana. His voice sounded casual but he had a white knuckled grip on the metal frame which was a decent enough sign that he was starting to stress out.

Ilya took one last look in the mirror above the desk to make sure his hair looked alright and then joined Shane in harassing their dates to leave the hotel sort of on time. He was a little shocked Shane hadn't just left already seeing as he was presenting the Calder Trophy and probably wanted to introduce himself to every member of the event staff he hadn't had a chance to meet earlier in the day, but they *did* have to walk the carpet, so Ilya could guess that media obligations had won out over adhering to a schedule in the battle within his mind.

“Almost,” Rose answered reaching out to poke Shane’s nose. He went cross-eyed as he scowled and Ilya had to use every last ounce of his self-control to hold himself back from pinching Shane’s cheeks. He did not think the action would be well-received at that very moment.

They finally made it out of the hotel fifteen minutes later, joining up with a ragtag group of Eastern Conference players in the lobby as they made their way across the street. They paired off and walked the carpet and Ilya tried his hardest not to look obviously jealous at the fact that Shane was walking with Rose. They smiled and took their pictures and then, finally, they made it into the arena. Ilya and Svetlana were at a table with other Boston players but they were right next to the table of Admirals players who’d been nominated for individual awards and Ilya was delighted to realize that his seat was just about as close to Shane’s as it could get without them sitting at the same table.

Shane was next to Carter, with Rose Landry at Shane’s right and Gloria Grey at Carter’s left, the four of them looking more like they belonged at the Academy Awards than an NHL event. Luke was on Rose’s other side with Drew to his right and the table was rounded out by Scott and Kip and then Eric and Holly Bennett.

“Hey, Rozy,” Luke greeted, turning around in his seat as soon as he spotted Ilya, a blinding grin on his face.

“Gilly,” Ilya responded, squeezing Luke’s shoulder instead of ruffling his hair like he normally would. He didn’t want to stress him out by mussing up his appearance.

“You think I’m gonna win?” Luke asked, his voice quiet and clearly nervous.

“Do I think the guy who put up a point in almost every game of the playoff run in his rookie season is going to win rookie of the year?” Ilya asked, raising an eyebrow. “Yes, Luke, I think you are going to win.”

He caught a glimpse of Shane’s painfully fond smile out of the corner of his eye and turned to shoot him a grin and a wink, delighting in the way Shane immediately blushed.

45 minutes later, Luke won.

* * *

This was the second time Shane was presenting an award and it felt so much more special.

The last time, it'd been a bit; two rivals presenting an award for sportsmanship. He'd panicked in the bathroom and had ended his night existing somewhere outside of reality while *we didn't even kiss* looped through his mind.

This time, Ilya was his husband and the guy who'd ghosted him for months as a way to deal with his own rightful anxiety was long gone.

This time, Shane actually cared about who won the award.

He smiled for the cameras and read off the teleprompter script and then he opened the card and knew that everyone would be able to tell who'd won before he even said the name simply by the force of his smile, "Luke Gillis, New York Admirals."

He looked up and his eyes locked on Luke, sitting stunned at their table while Drew shook his shoulder and Rose smacked a kiss to his cheek and a couple of tables back, Shane could see his parents sitting with some other non-date family members grinning just as wide as they had when Shane had won this award six years prior. Yuna had her phone out, taking pictures and videos of her own despite the fact that the room was littered with professional photographers because that was simply what mothers did, or so she'd told Shane the last time he'd mentioned it.

Luke finally snapped out of his shock long enough to get out of his seat and approach the stage and then he was jogging up the steps and straight into Shane's open arms. Shane wrapped his arms around Luke's waist and held on tight enough that Luke's feet left the ground for a moment.

It took thirty full seconds for Luke to finally release his grip enough for Shane to step away and pick up his award to pass it over, "congrats, buddy."

"Thank you," Luke said, clearly thanking Shane for more than just his congratulations. Shane smacked a kiss to the side of Luke's head and then stepped back into the wings to give him his moment.

“Wow,” Luke breathed out as he approached the podium, the mic just barely catching his voice, but it got a fond sort of laugh from several people in the audience. “Um, hello,” he said once he got close enough to the microphone to actually be heard. “Uh, first I want to say that everyone who was nominated for this award was equally deserving and I’m really thankful to be talked about in the same conversation as each of you, it’s an honor. I have so many people to thank, which just a couple of months ago wasn’t a problem I ever thought I’d have. In any dream I had about winning this award, I’d come up here and thank my coaches and my teammates and my best friend Drew, but now I have a whole freaking list. I do want to thank my agent and my manager and coaches and my teammates and my best friend Drew McLean, who’s been my teammate since we were four and who’s been my family for nearly as long, but the person I really need to thank is the guy who just handed me this award.

“He’s spent hours on the ice with me, long past the end of practice, just making sure I felt confident. He’s taken time out of his life to train me and that made all the difference, but it wasn’t what was most important. Shane opened his house to me when he didn’t have to, he let me into his life after only days of knowing me, he saw a kid who needed a place to call home and made sure I had it. And, now, after so many years of only really having Drew, I have so many people I can call family.

“So, to any of you vets out there, if you see a kid on your team who looks a little out of place, who maybe seems a little obnoxious, I hope you do what Shane did, I hope you ask yourselves if they’re actually a class clown or if maybe they’re just posturing, if maybe they just need someone to see beneath the surface. This sport is full of young talent, of people who never got the chance to learn to be adults before we were thrust into the spotlight, and it’s easy to get lost in the noise. So, yeah, thank you, Holly, thank you for seeing me, thank you for being my brother. And thank you, all of you, for this honor, I really, *really* appreciate it.”

He raised the award and flashed a grin for the cameras and then he made his way off the stage, as calmly as he could, and right back into Shane’s arms. This hug was different from the one they’d shared on stage, it was calmer and softer and Shane’s hand immediately went to the back of his head, holding him in place and hiding him from the world and Luke just held on tighter.

“I am *so* proud of you,” Shane said softly. “So fucking proud, Luke.”

“Aren’t you up for the next award?” Luke asked, though he made no move to disentangle himself from Shane’s arms.

“If I stay here, I’m closer to the stage if I win.”

Luke breathed out a laugh and burrowed closer as the world moved on around them and whoever was presenting the Ted Lindsay made their way onto the stage. The award was explained and the nominees were announced and, somehow, after playing some of the most insane hockey Luke had

ever seen, after making friends on every team along the Eastern seaboard, Shane was still shocked when his name was called as the winner of the only trophy that was voted on by the players themselves.

Shane held onto their hug a second longer and then let the PAs rush him back onto the stage to accept his award.

He gave a short speech, thanking the players for voting for him, thanking his family in the non-specific sense when he'd always just thanked his parents, and thanking New York for embracing him with open arms, and then he was back off stage, his arm slung around Luke's shoulder as he led him back into some random hall that Luke was pretty thankful Shane had known how to navigate to where they took quick pictures before returning to their seats.

Luke knew that the moment his speech hit mainstream media, he'd have an angry call or two, that he'd have texts full of words he'd long since realized were manipulation, telling him that he *had* a family, that he was selfish to have gone off and created his own, but he didn't care.

Those words didn't matter anymore, not in the face of everything he'd built.

* * *

Scott squeezed Kip's hand as the nominees for the Hart Trophy were read out. He was nominated, but so were Shane and Ilya and Shane had played a fucking *ridiculous* season and Scott was fairly certain the award was his. Kip squeezed his hand back, a silent reassurance, and then the presenter said his name.

It felt exactly like that moment on the ice when Shane's name had been called for the Conn Smythe and he'd looked back at Scott like he was confused it wasn't *Scott's* name that'd been announced. Now, though, it was Scott sitting in shock. He stared at Shane, like that'd make it all make sense, and Shane was just grinning at him, pride shining in his eyes and that smile on his face that always made Scott smile automatically in return.

"Go, Scotty," Shane said, nodding his head toward the stage as Carter reached around Gloria to clap Scott's shoulder in celebration.

Scott, in a daze, let out an exhale and stood. Kip smiled up at him and Scott let that smile, the pure, unfettered love in every inch of Kip's expression, push his feet forward until he was climbing the stairs and accepting the trophy.

"Hi. First of all, thank you for this. All of my fellow nominees are just as deserving. Even Rozanov," he added which got a laugh out of the crowd that made oxygen finally flood back into Scott's lungs. "A week and a half ago, I achieved my lifelong dream of winning the Stanely Cup. Those of you who have done that know how it feels. I really can't describe it. But, something else happened that night. Something that, you've probably noticed, has been getting just as much attention as the Admirals winning the Cup, if not *more*. It's been an interesting week," Scott said, pausing as he huffed out a laugh at that insane understatement. "In case you somehow missed it, I came out as gay in a ridiculously public way. I don't regret that, and I never will. I know it was a shock to most people. But I need to say that it wasn't a shock to the people closest to me, the people who matter the most," he said, his eyes locking on the table where Shane and Carter were sitting together, flanked by their A-List Actress dates and looking at Scott with the same exact love and understanding they always had.

"The first person I told about Kip was Hollander. In a hotel room in Florida with Pike's kids' beach toys littered across the floor and a burning hope that a person I'd long seen as a friend wouldn't turn me away filling up my chest. And, not only did Shane not turn me away, he accepted me, he accepted *Kip*, with open arms. The day after Shane moved to New York, his arm still in a sling and the effects of being slammed into the boards by Marlow still ringing through his skull, he invited Kip and me into his home."

Scott had to pause slightly as he heard someone let out an incoherent noise of offense followed by a poorly concealed snort of laughter. He looked up to see Shane grinning at Marlow who, quite maturely, was sticking out his tongue. It was stupid and childish and it made Scott smile, it made him remember the strides they'd made toward building an actual *community* instead of just a network of vaguely acquainted players.

"Shane did what I'd never even dreamed someone would do for me. He made a space for me to exist with the man I love without judgment, without watching eyes, and without fear. He stood by me while I told our team, he stood by me on the ice, pausing his celebration of winning his *third* Cup and finally winning the Conn Smythe to tell every reporter who asked that he supported me. I lucked out with my Alternate Captains, more than just in the talent department, which both of them have in spades, Carter and Shane are the pinnacle of what it means to be a friend. They reminded me at every turn that anyone who wanted to get at me was going to have to go through them, first. And, to me, that's what it means to be a teammate.

"I love hockey, I love being able to do this for a living. But, I know what it feels like to not fit in. I know what it feels like to know, in your heart, that you're *different*. I know what it feels like to be afraid that no one will look at you the same, that no one will accept you in their space if you admit just how different you are. But, now, I also know what it feels like to admit you're different and still be loved. Now I know how important it is to live your truth, not only for yourself but also because someone else might look at you and see themselves.

"Fans have been sending me messages, a lot of young fans, telling me how much it meant to them for me to come out," he paused again, drawing in a shaky breath and holding himself back from

mentioning the emails he'd received from other players, people beyond himself, Shane, and Ilya who saw themselves in what Scott had done. He wasn't here to brew rumors or create speculation.

"But coming out is hard, it's terrifying and for a long time I convinced myself that living in the closet was the better choice, that someone, anyone, finding out my secret would be my ruin. But living with a secret like that is exhausting. It's a non-stop effort, trying to remain hidden, and that fear, it consumes you. It makes you lonely. And for a long, long time I was *incredibly* lonely. I'm not anymore. I have my team, I have my friends that have become more like family, and I have Kip.

"Over the years, I've attended several weddings for friends and teammates and I've heard speech after speech about true love. But I never thought I'd find it, I just assumed that love wasn't for me, that I'd live my life scared and hiding and lonely. For a long time, fear outweighed hope. But I finally found my person, I finally found the thing more powerful than fear.

"So, I share this honor with my teammates, and my coaches," Scott said, ready to wrap this speech up and get back to his table where all his favorite people were watching him with tears in their eyes and proud smiles on their faces, "but I also share it with you, Kip. You have made me better, in every way. I love you."

Kip mouthed *I love you too* back at him and Scott smiled so wide his cheeks started to hurt.

"And, uh, one of the gay clubs down the street is having a Scott Hunter night tonight, so that's where I'll be later, if any of you wanna come dance."

There was scattered laughter and a distinct *whoop* that Scott immediately placed as Carter. He smiled and shook his head a little. He was so damn lucky.

"Thank you," he said. Then, he picked up his trophy and left the stage to the sound of roaring applause.

* * *

Ilya had never been more thankful to escape an awards after party.

And he could tell he wasn't alone because no one was being even sort of subtle.

The awards winners took their pictures with their trophies and the commissioner, everyone had a drink or two and kissed the asses of whoever signed their paychecks, and then half the room seemingly came to a silent consensus that it was time for mass exodus.

Ilya was sure that there was some other timeline out there where ‘Scott Hunter Night’ was a half dozen New York Admirals and maybe one or two other players brave enough to show face, but that was *not* what was happening now.

A couple dozen players and their dates left the arena to head to their hotels to change out of formal wear and a half hour later, whatever random gay club on the strip that’d planned this event was packed to the fucking gills.

“Jesus,” Shane muttered, gluing himself to Ilya’s side as the club climbed toward capacity.

“Tell me when you want to leave,” Ilya said, wrapping his arm around Shane’s waist and wondering just how far he could go before someone called them out. Shane was in the jeans Jackie had made him buy that made his ass look so good Ilya had literally sent her a text thanking her as they walked out of the hotel so Ilya wasn’t very confident in his ability to keep his hands to himself.

“I’m fine,” Shane responded, “just don’t leave me alone.”

“Never,” Ilya promised, using the cover of dark lighting and drunk people never paying attention to their surroundings to press a soft kiss to the back of Shane’s neck.

* * *

Scott really wasn’t sure how to react to anything that was happening right now.

He was up in the VIP area, looking over the balcony with Kip pressed against his side and Carter standing next to them well on his way to wasted, watching Matti Jalo and James Brophy dance with several random gay men. Shane and Ilya were in a corner with J.J., Cliff, Zane Boodram and Evan Dykstra from Ottawa, and Wyatt Hayes, Toronto’s backup goalie who, as far as Scott knew, didn’t really have a reason for being at the awards.

That combination of people was *almost* more confusing than two (probably) straight massive defensemen grinding with the random assorted gay men of Las Vegas.

“What is happening over there?” Carter asked, pointing to the truly bewildering huddle of a Voyager, two Centaurs, two Bears, an Admiral, and a Guardian. There was probably a joke in there somewhere, but Scott was too drunk and far too confused to find it.

And then another Guardian appeared and Scott was pretty sure his eyes were about to bug out of his fucking head because Troy Barrett, Dallas Kent’s best friend and asshole extraordinaire, had just joined the pack.

“I’ve got no goddamn clue,” Scott answered, closing his eyes for a second and then refocusing like that would make it start to make sense.

He watched as J.J., Cliff, and Ilya all immediately straightened up, clearly seeing Barrett as a threat, and wondered if he was going to have to sober up enough to break up a fight. But then Shane put on that winning smile and held out his hand and Barret went a little starry eyed and shook it and Scott started to worry about a fight breaking out for a whole new reason.

“Oh, be more subtle,” Carter complained as Ilya grabbed onto Shane’s waist and yanked him back against him, hooking his chin over Shane’s shoulder and splaying one hand out over Shane’s stomach as the other held onto his hip. Scott felt a little like they were watching something dramatic and scripted happen on daytime television instead of just watching one of their friends not at all casually laying claim to his secret husband while in a goddamn gay club.

Cliff threw an arm around Ilya’s shoulders like that would make any of what was happening seem more normal and Scott decided to just turn around and pay attention to Kip.

“Hi,” Kip said, an amused little smile on his lips.

“Hi,” Scott echoed, “our friends are insane.”

“They are,” Kip agreed, “but they’re ours.”

Scott laughed and then held out his hand, “dance with me?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to ask.”

Scott just grinned and kissed him. Because he could. Because he’d done the brave thing, because he’d found something that outweighed his fear and he’d held onto it with both hands and now here they were, surrounded by the most tolerant members of the NHL in a gay club in Vegas and Scott was allowed to kiss his boyfriend.

Shane could control his gathered pack of guard dogs on his own, Scott was busy.

Chapter End Notes

i've seen several people on threads saying they hope i've seen the wonderland photoshoot which is doing incredible things for my ego & i am here to tell you that yes, i have seen the pictures. they're all saved to my phone. like every picture of hudson williams is saved to my phone. to the point that i opened my camera roll at dinner the other night to show my gramma something and she asked if the cute guy was my boyfriend. i had to explain that no, he is not my boyfriend, he's just a celebrity i've never met who i've developed an unhealthy obsession with and she goes "oh, like niall horan?" so, ya know, at least my grandmother is used to my fangirl ways.

Chapter 39: anya

Chapter Notes

i've just been lurking on threads the past couple of days liking posts about myself and living in fear that one of you is going to figure out who i am.

June 2017

Shane was very dutifully gathering everything from their packing lists for their summer break after spending his morning in the city doing a photoshoot for Cosmo seeing as he'd been named the hottest man in the NHL. Again. He hadn't actually done a cover shoot for them before, but apparently the magazine had decided that winning his third consecutive Stanley Cup, being named playoff MVP, and being selected as the hottest hockey player for the 5th year in a row was enough for them to finally put him on the cover.

Ilya was sitting on the floor of their room, distractedly petting Sunny and ignoring him entirely in favor of reading through the Boston WAG chat on Shane's phone.

He and Kip had been added to the NY chat during Luke's birthday dinner - Kip being introduced by his real name and Ilya as 'Lily' so he could choose who to reveal his real identity to outside of the few wives and girlfriends who'd been at Shane's Friday night – and Shane had been added to the Boston chat as 'Jane' by St-Simon's wife somewhere after the fifth tequila shot on Scott Hunter night. Only a couple of people from Boston knew they were married because they hadn't had the same opportunity to just tell everyone at once like they had with New York, but a couple of his teammates knew now and they'd taken it in stride.

Ilya had very quickly realized that these ladies had a better handle on League happenings than any pundit or podcast host he'd ever come across. Several of them were partners of players who'd been traded between different teams meaning they had an entire network of women spread across North America who knew what was happening before ink had even dried. So, he was reading the chat, trying to figure out what was going on with his own damn team as free agency started following the shuffle that'd happened to create the new Vegas team.

Ilya had one teammate, Andrew Feller on the fourth line, who'd played in Montreal for a total of three months during the early 2015-16 season before being traded to Boston. That information hadn't really been important to Ilya until Claire Feller added a contact Shane already had saved late on Thursday afternoon.

Shane hadn't even gotten a call from Hayden yet and Claire had known to add Jackie to the chat.

For the barest second, Ilya was about to congratulate Shane on getting to play with his best friend again, and then he remembered he was holding *Shane's* phone.

"Fuck," he muttered, dropping his head into his hands. Sunny let out a whine of protest when he stopped scratching her head and if Ilya weren't in the middle of a crisis he might've made a comment about dogs taking after their owners.

"What's wrong?" Shane asked, stopping in the middle of folding a pile of t-shirts the moment he heard Ilya's distress.

The phone started ringing before Ilya could reply.

Ilya pressed answer and then put the phone on speaker, "buddy," Hayden greeted, "you are not going to believe what just happened."

"What's going on?" Shane asked, dropping down onto the floor next to Ilya with a concerned little frown on his face that, at any other moment, Ilya would've kissed because it was simply *adorable*, but right now he was reeling from the knowledge that he was now going to have to spend hours upon hours in Hayden Pike's presence.

"I just got picked up by Boston," Hayden said, sounding like he was delivering news of a fatal diagnosis.

Shane took one look at whatever expression was on Ilya's face, likely something justifiably dramatic, looked back down at the phone, and then burst out laughing.

"This isn't funny!" Hayden shouted through the speaker at the same time Ilya grumbled, "not funny, Hollander," which only made Shane laugh harder.

"It was supposed to be New York," Hayden said before muttering a string of curses under his breath and then pausing for a moment, clearly trying to calm himself down, "it *was* New York until, like,

yesterday. I think maybe someone who was planning to retire signed an extension and then there was the whole shit storm of Vegas getting a team and now I'm moving to *Boston*."

"You'll like Boston," Shane said, clearly delighted at his husband and his best friend being trapped in some sort of forced proximity situation. He probably thought this was going to end with them being best friends. Ilya thought it was going to end with Shane and Jackie having to bail them both out of jail.

"I'm sure Boston's great," Hayden said, "the coach is wonderful, I've loved the few people from management I've talked to, but *Rozanov*?"

Before Shane could attempt to defend Ilya's honor, which he was absolutely about to do, Ilya could tell by the way his nose had scrunched up like an angry little kitten, Shane's phone started ringing with a call from J.J.

He put Hayden on hold, likely giving himself a second to calm down without blowing up at his best friend and telling him to be nicer to his husband, and answered J.J.'s call, "allô?"

"Allô," J.J. responded, sounding a little distracted.

"Ça va? Quoi de neuf?"

"Pas mal, pas grand-chose, j'ai été transféré à Toronto."

Shane blinked a couple of times in shock, looking at Ilya for some sort of reaction before apparently remembering that Ilya didn't speak French, "you got traded to *Toronto*?" Shane asked, clarifying in English which Ilya greatly appreciated.

"I think it'll only be a year or two," J.J. said and Ilya had no shot of placing the emotion in his voice. He sounded almost defeated, and then Ilya remembered that J.J. had had another year left on his contract in Montreal, meaning the organization had probably used the shuffle to get rid of him, meaning his agent wouldn't have had as much leverage to get him a solid contract with any sort of long-term assurances which sucked because J.J. was a really fucking good player and deserved to have an equally good contract.

“Have you talked to Hayd?”

“Non?”

“Right,” Shane muttered, quickly pressing the right buttons to add Hayden into the call. Ilya was impressed, every time he tried to do that he accidentally hung up on everyone. “Hayden?”

“I’m sorry for being a dick about your husband,” Hayden said as soon as the call connected, “I’m working on it.”

“I forgive you,” Shane responded, “J.J. got traded to Toronto.”

“Does this mean we have access to kill Dallas Kent and make it look like an accident?”

“Okay, I think I like you now,” Ilya decided.

Hayden let out a huff of laughter and even J.J. made an amused sort of grunt.

“Kent’s going to Montréal,” J.J. said.

Shane’s jaw dropped, Ilya felt his brain short-circuit, and Hayden made a noise of surprise that sounded a little like he’d been punched in the gut.

“My agent explained it all to me but it honestly sounded like someone wrote every available player’s name on index cards and then threw the stack in the air and just waited to see where they’d land because half of the movement isn’t even proper trades, it’s the expansion and just a bunch of free agents,” J.J. continued, his accent getting thicker as he got worked up, to the point that Ilya was starting to have trouble understanding him, “like Hayd you’re going to Boston, right? And then I’m going to Toronto, Kent’s going to Montréal which I don’t even know how they pulled off because he was their franchise center so Montréal must’ve given him fuck you money to make it happen. But Hayes is leaving Toronto too, I think to Boston with you guys? I don’t know. Mitty’s going to Vegas and then, Shane, your kids got split up. Dillon’s going over to Ottawa and Laine’s going down to Vegas with Mitty. I think New York lost Janmark in the expansion, right? And Armstrong’s going

fuckin somewhere I don't remember but now I'm stuck in motherfucking *Toronto* and I'm gonna lose it."

"What contract did you sign?" Shane, ever the pragmatist, asked.

"One year guaranteed, just the end of my existing contract, but there was a lot of talk of extension and I'm just worried it's going to be the same environment as Montréal."

"With Kent gone maybe we've contained the asshole epidemic."

"But Barrett's still there," Hayden argued.

"Barrett might not be so bad," J.J. hedged and Ilya let out a noise akin to a growl.

"Woah," Hayden yelped, "what the fuck."

"Barrett was hitting on Shane at Scott Hunter night," J.J. said, clearly *delighted* and Ilya decided it was about time he redid his ranking of Shane's best friends, "doesn't matter that it was the clumsiest flirting known to man, our boy Roz has made a new enemy."

"He wasn't flirting," Shane said, looking at Ilya in confusion and, oh, he was so clueless, Ilya loved him dearly.

"Sweetheart, he was flirting," Ilya told him, leaning forward to press a soft kiss to the bridge of his scrunched up little nose. "You are very pretty, hottest man in the NHL, so I understand why he did it, but he will not do it again."

"I don't know about that," J.J. laughed, "he seemed almost as clueless as our Shane, he might not have realized what you were doing. He might not have even realized what *he* was doing."

"We will just find him someone else to flirt with," Ilya decided. He liked that plan, it felt like a good plan. Now he just had to find someone cute and nice and not named Shane Hollander. He doubted it would be that hard.

“Whatever, play gay fairy godfather matchmaker, I don’t care,” J.J. said, “I’m going to make friends with Barrett and prove to you all he’s not an asshole and then when this year is over maybe we can get the fuck out of Toronto together.”

“Are you on the phone with Shane?” a voice that must’ve been Jackie called in the background on Hayden’s line.

“Yeah?” Hayden responded, “why?”

“Hey babe,” Jackie greeted, talking over a slight grumble indicating she’d taken the phone clean out of Hayden’s hands, “care to explain why the Boston girls are welcoming me, someone named Lisa, *and* Ilya Rozanov’s girlfriend to the chat?”

“Oh, yeah, Jane and Lily got added to the WAG chats,” Shane said, “we can be Boston WAGs together, Jack.”

“How are we playing this? Do I know you? Does anyone know you’re not really Jane?”

“Carmichael and St-Simon’s wives know for sure, and if whatever blatant flirting Rose was doing the other night pays off, Cliff’s girlfriend will know the whole story first hand. They all know I’m Ilya’s Montreal girl, though, so it wouldn’t be weird for us to know each other.”

“Will you help me find a house?”

“I don’t live in Boston?”

“You also didn’t live in New York and still found the perfect house so help a girl out, Jane.”

“Yes, fine, I’ll help.”

“Thank youuu,” Jackie said in a sing-songy voice, “love you, babe, I’m gonna go find movers to hire.”

“I’ll send you the number of the guys who packed up my apartment,” Shane promised, “love you too, by the way.”

“Mwah,” Jackie responded, smacking a kiss near the speaker.

“Okay, I’m back,” Hayden said after a second, “I need crazy shit to stop happening for a minute.”

J.J., Shane, and Ilya all let out sounds of agreement.

* * *

Shane stared at the game of Tetris he’d been playing with the back of the Jeep and decided it was good enough.

Two full gear bags, their suitcases and duffels full of enough clothes for two months at the cottage, both of their backpacks, Sunny’s kennel (which thankfully folded down), her food, toys, and bed, and then needing to make sure they had extra space for things for Ilya’s dog they were picking up outside Ottawa that afternoon on top of all that had made packing a bit of a nightmare.

The sun hadn’t even risen yet, but he’d thought he was done packing the night before remembering Sunny’s kennel and he’d had to start all over.

Shane closed the trunk and then went inside to round up Ilya.

He found Luke at the counter, half asleep with a cup of coffee in front of him and paused to give him a hug, “remember you can come visit whenever you want and if you’d rather do preseason training in Ottawa than here you’re welcome, alright?”

“Alright,” Luke agreed, tucking himself closer to Shane’s chest.

“Don’t light the house on fire and text me every once in a while to let me know how you’re doing.”

“I will, Holly, promise.”

“You will light our house on fire?” Shane asked, leaning back and raising one eyebrow.

“No,” Luke laughed, shaking his head a little, “no fires, but I will text.”

“Good,” Shane said, pressing a kiss into Luke’s hair, “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

“I will also miss you,” Ilya said, appearing in the kitchen with Sunny at his heels and dropping a kiss of his own onto the top of Luke’s head.

“I’ll miss you, too, Rozy.”

“Right, let’s get going, we’ve got a long drive,” Shane said, ruffling Luke’s already messy hair and then heading for the door, “love you, buddy. See you later.”

“Love you too,” Luke responded, resting his chin on his arms where they were folded on the counter, “send me pictures of the new dog.”

“Promise,” Ilya vowed, holding the door to the garage open for Shane and Sunny.

Luke smiled and Shane waved goodbye once more and then headed for the car. They got Sunny into the open half of the back seat where her bed was laid out with their gear bags taking up the space behind the passenger seat and then Shane climbed into the driver’s seat, letting Ilya have a break.

He stopped for gas and to take Sunny out once before they hit the border and Ilya woke up long enough to make sure Shane didn't need him to drive before dozing again, only really waking up when they hit border patrol.

It took them a little longer to get through border patrol because of the added documentation but they made it through without any real issues and then Ilya was *awake*. Awake and giddy. His knees were bouncing and he was grinning like a kid on Christmas and Shane was rather thankful that the Drover farm was only 30 minutes from the border because he was pretty sure Ilya was about to ascend to a different goddamn dimension.

They pulled up to the property somewhere after the fifth time Ilya had asked, "how much longer?" which was good because his adorable excitement was only going so far to dissuade Shane from telling him to just look at the ETA clearly displayed on CarPlay. The trees lining the gravel road were a rich, bright green, heavy with June apples that Shane knew would soon drop, leaving room for the smaller blooms to grow and mature for the fall season.

Ilya very nearly jumped out of the Jeep while it was still moving in his excitement but was foiled by the automatic locks on the doors.

"Baby," Shane said, trying really hard not to laugh, "breathe a second."

Ilya calmed down slightly, though it was clearly a struggle, "I am just really excited."

"I know," Shane said, reaching across to tuck a stray curl behind Ilya's ear. His hair was getting longer, brushing the back of his neck and getting a little shaggy around his ears and Shane loved it. His curls, even when properly cared for and carefully tamed, always got a little wild as he moved throughout the day, making him look boyish and so goddamn cute Shane sort of wanted to bite him. "Do you think we should bring Sunny now or wait a minute?"

That question was quickly answered when Shane noticed the *several* other dogs running around the yard as a man about their age who Shane guessed was Harris stepped out front door, "maybe wait a minute," Ilya said, plucking the words straight out of Shane's mind.

Shane smiled softly and pinched Ilya's cheek because he simply couldn't help himself and then unlocked the car so they could both climb out.

Ilya went straight for the dogs while Shane decided to introduce himself to the human.

“Harris, right?” Shane greeted with a smile. Smiling was getting easier the longer he was away from Montreal, it made him wonder just how much longer he would’ve let himself stay miserable if things hadn’t happened the way they did.

“Yeah,” Harris responded, meeting Shane’s smile with a grin of his own, “good to meet you.”

Shane’s attention was pulled by the high pitched giggle Ilya let out. He turned to find his darling husband lying in the grass with three different dogs trying to climb on top of him at once. He let his gaze linger a moment and then turned back toward Harris who was looking at the scene in complete and utter confusion, “*that’s* Ilya Rozanov?”

“Sure is,” Shane answered, constantly amused by people’s reactions to learning that Ilya wasn’t actually a heartless Russian mobster. Ilya Rozanov might be a menace on the ice and a bit of an asshole when he wanted to be, but he was also the softest person Shane had ever met. Shane was pretty sure one leaked picture of a sleepy, messy-haired Ilya using him as a body pillow would ruin his image for good.

“Isn’t he supposed to be, like, a dick?”

“He’s sure can be, just ask Scott.”

“Scott moved up my rankings,” Ilya announced from under his pile of dogs, “my new target is Troy Barrett.”

Harris just stared at Shane like he’d be able to explain any of what was happening. Shane probably could explain, but that’d involve telling this man he’d only just met that Ilya was pissy because Asshole #2 from Toronto had flirted with Shane in a Las Vegas gay club and there were just several layers to that story that Shane didn’t necessarily feel like explaining.

“What if we just all focus our energy on Dallas Kent?” Shane asked, some part of him wanting to save Troy from Ilya at his most Ilya™ for some reason.

Ilya went silent for a second before deciding, “no.”

“Right,” Shane responded, holding in a sigh as he turned back to Harris, “sorry about him.”

“He seems pretty entertaining,” Harris decided, flashing Shane another grin, “the dog I told Christina about is inside, we think she’s a duck toller, maybe mixed with some other sort of retriever or setter. Our vet said she’s probably about four months old, super sweet, lots of energy but loves to snuggle.”

“Sounds like Ilya,” Shane said before he could even think of filtering that thought. Harris looked at him in confusion before just shrugging it off and Shane got his first taste of interacting with a person (who wasn’t directing one of the several photo shoots or media appearances he’d had to do in the past two weeks) who either didn’t know Shane’s sexuality or who hadn’t spent a significant amount of time around him and Ilya. It was pretty fucking weird to go back to the baseline of people assuming he was straight and that Ilya was just his friend. “Rozanov,” he called, forcing himself to just steamroll past the weirdness, “c’mon.”

“Coming!” Ilya replied, letting out a grumble as he pried himself away from his new friends, “Hollander, how many more dogs can we get?”

Harris was looking at Shane again. Looking at Shane like he was starting to connect the dots that’d been laid out in front of him in glaring neon but wasn’t entirely convinced any of the dots actually made sense. Maybe this summer they could try to figure out how to be just a little bit subtle. But, at the same time, being subtle would take away the fun of watching people come to the realization that the Great Hollander-Rozanov Rivalry had long since become the Great Hollander-Rozanov Relationship, and Shane didn’t think it’d be nice to himself or Ilya to take away their fun.

“Let’s stick with two for now, Ilya.”

“Fine,” Ilya grumbled, stepping up next to Shane and slinging an easy arm around his shoulders as he finally greeted Harris, “hello, thank you for telling Shane about dog.”

“Harris, this is Ilya,” Shane said, since Ilya had clearly decided an actual introduction wasn’t necessary, “Ilya, meet Harris.”

“Right, yes, polite,” Ilya nodded seriously, extending his hand toward Harris, “nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you,” Harris echoed, shaking Ilya’s hand, clearly bewildered before shaking it off and turning toward the door.

They followed Harris inside and between one heartbeat and the next, Shane lost his number one ranking in Ilya’s heart because curled up on the couch, her little head pillowed on her front paws, was the (second) cutest dog Shane had ever seen.

“Ути-пути!” Ilya exclaimed in a whisper-yell as he knelt down in front of the couch, his eyes lighting up with affection. “Ohh, Малышка,” he said, gently scratching the top of her head with one finger. He looked so damn soft, Shane fell in love all over again. Ilya looked up at him, his eyes a little shiny and a massive grin on his face, “это самый милый щенок, которого я когда-либо видел!”

“I don’t speak that much Russian, Ilya,” Shane responded, his chest almost burning with the warmth he felt.

Ilya shook his head slightly, clearly not even realizing he’d defaulted to Russian in his excitement, “she is cutest puppy I have ever seen.”

“Don’t tell Sunny that.”

Ilya looked almost pained for a second, like he didn’t even want to imagine one of their dogs feeling like he was playing favorites, “of course not, they are same cute, equally cute? The same.”

“Of course,” Shane agreed, smiling a little at Ilya’s rambling. He rarely stuttered over phrases like that anymore, after seven years of living in the U.S. and primarily speaking English, and it was oddly adorable when he got flustered enough to stumble over his words.

Shane chatted with Harris a little while Ilya spoke in soft tones to his new best friend; they talked about Ottawa, about how Harris was liking his new job, about plans for summer, and pretty soon, Shane found himself back in the Jeep with Ilya sitting in the passenger seat, holding onto his puppy like he never planned to let go. Sunny had her head resting on the center console, just staring at the new dog in interest.

“Did you pick a name?” Shane asked.

Ilya studied the dog for a second before deciding, “Anya, I think her name is Anya.”

Chapter 40: living love in slow motion

Chapter Notes

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

June 2017

Ilya was on a roller coaster of emotions but Sunny - who'd gotten sick of being left in the back seat after they'd stopped at a pet store in Ottawa and had decided to crawl up front while Shane went into the grocery store - was curled up on the floor at his feet, Anya was asleep in his arms, and Shane was next to him and the further they got from Ottawa city limits, the more he felt like he could breathe.

Eventually, they turned off the main road onto a narrower road and Ilya started to feel weirdly nervous. He'd lived with Shane for the past couple of weeks in New York, but this felt different. The cottage was Shane's place; it was where he went to escape the crazy, where he went when he didn't want to be bothered, and he was letting Ilya join him.

They turned twice more before they pulled into a gravel driveway leading up to a house nearly the size of their home in New York. Ilya had seen it on TV before, but he'd convinced himself that it wasn't actually as large as it seemed because it was either that, or someone involved had a fundamental misunderstanding of the definition of the word *cottage*. The plot of land was massive, bordered on three sides with trees and the fourth by the lake. Ilya hadn't even caught a glimpse of another house in at least five minutes so it was truly secluded.

They parked in the driveway outside the attached garage and Ilya silently trailed after Shane as he climbed out of the car. Anya perked up at the change of scenery but didn't really seem to be itching to be put down so Ilya kept ahold of her. Sunny, on the other hand, immediately darted past him and started running circles around Shane as he walked up the front path.

Shane let out a laugh that warmed Ilya to his very marrow and then paused on the steps to find the right key.

The place was *gorgeous*; all hard wood and natural light, too many throw pillows on the couch and family photos on the walls and shelves, it was silent except for their footsteps and the water lapping at the shore and the late afternoon sun was bathing every room in shades of gold and Ilya never wanted to leave.

"Welcome home," Shane said, flashing Ilya a soft smile.

Ilya felt tears well up in his eyes as his lungs constricted with overwhelming emotion.

Hadn't it just been February? Hadn't he just been sitting in a Moscow condo, realizing he was leaving Russia for good? It'd been four months. Only four months and his concept of home had been flipped on its head. He'd long since started to suspect that 'home' looked more like Shane's brown eyes and perfect freckles than crowded streets and the walls of the house where he'd been raised.

But now it was real; home was right in front of him.

Home had become more than a person who meant safety, it was houses in New York and Boston and a condo in Montreal and this cottage somewhere in the depths of Quebec. Home was something solid; it was a place he had a key to, where he could shut the door behind him and never fear what came next. It was a place he could share with the man he loved, the man who'd shown him what home was supposed to feel like.

Ilya set Anya down, careful not to drop her as she got her sleepy little legs under her, and then crossed the room in three quick strides to wrap Shane up in a crushing hug. He wrapped his arms around Shane's waist, holding on as tight as he could as he buried his face in his neck and Shane didn't even hesitate to reciprocate. His arms came up around Ilya's shoulders, one hand immediately settling on the back of Ilya's head, holding him close and keeping him steady.

"Thank you," Ilya whispered, his voice muffled against Shane's skin.

"For what?" Shane asked softly, his fingers gently twining with Ilya's hair.

"Everything."

* * *

After everything had been carried inside and put away, after dogs had been walked and dinner had been eaten, after they'd watched the sun set through the living room windows, after they'd showered and crawled under the covers with Sunny and Anya curled around each other in a bed in the corner of the room, Ilya pressed himself as close to Shane as he physically could and whispered into the dark, "I think I am like my mother."

Shane stilled.

Ilya never spoke about his mother.

He knew Ilya's father was dead, of course, and he'd assumed the same could be said about his mother, but he didn't know for sure and he hadn't known how to ask.

"What do you mean?" Shane asked, as gently as he could.

"She died when I was 12," Ilya responded, "accident. I found her."

"Accident?"

"Accidentally swallowed whole bottle of pills," Ilya said, huffing a laugh through his nose that was devoid of all humor. "She was sad."

"And you feel..." Shane started, trailing off for a second and holding onto Ilya just a little tighter, "sad?"

"Да, sometimes. Sometimes tired, sometimes empty."

Shane's first instinct was to fix it; to get out of bed at that very second and find a therapist and do hours of research on medication and coping mechanisms, to create a plan that would make it all make sense, but that wasn't how Ilya operated, that wasn't what would help Ilya now. So, instead of letting that instinct take over, he sunk a little deeper into the mattress and just kept holding on.

"What do you mean empty?" Shane asked, rubbing his thumb softly against Ilya's shoulder. He didn't know how the answer would help, but he wanted to understand.

"Like all my emotions are on mute," Ilya said after a minute. He shifted slightly so his nose was pressed to the side of Shane's neck, his lips brushing against Shane's collar bone as he spoke, "like I do not feel anything. Not sad, not happy, just nothing."

Shane turned just enough to press his lips to Ilya's temple, "how can I help?"

Ilya pulled away and looked at Shane in confusion, "you are not mad?"

"Mad?" Shane asked, hoping against hope there'd been some error in translation. "Why would I be mad?"

"I did not tell you until now," Ilya said, sounding almost disappointed in himself, "I let you marry me and did not tell you. I lied."

"You didn't lie," Shane responded, sliding his right hand to cup Ilya's cheek, purposefully pressing the metal of his ring against Ilya's jaw, "I'm not mad, Ilyusha. I promise. I just want to help, you deserve to be happy."

"You make me happy," Ilya argued.

"Baby, you make me happy too, but that'd different from your mental health, it's different from something chemical. You could be in your favorite place with your favorite people doing your favorite thing and still be sad if the chemicals in your brain are making you sad. That's not your fault, it's not my fault, it's just what happens sometimes."

"Chemicals?"

Shane thought back to the gray walls of an office he hated, to doctors and therapists explaining in patronizing tones that sometimes Shane's brain worked differently, to hours he'd spent at the public library down the street from the rink between rec and travel practice trying to find an explanation that hadn't been boiled down for a child. He thought about how much he'd practiced seeming 'normal' because being the only Asian kid on an all-white team was enough; he didn't need to be Asian *and* autistic. He thought about the way he could be in rooms full of people he loved, knowing that he was safe, that he should be having fun, but feeling like he was being chased by wolves because his brain was different from average.

Depression wasn't the same, but it fit under the same umbrella. It existed in psych journals and encyclopedias alongside the entries he'd found on *Aspergers* and *Autism Spectrum Disorder*, and

Shane's young mind had soaked all of it up. He knew about depression, he knew about generalized anxiety disorder and OCD, he understood the slight difference between ADHD and ADD and how the symptoms overlapped so much that sometimes what people thought was ADD Inattentive could actually be misdiagnosed Autism. He understood the difference between schizophrenia and a personality disorder and between bipolar disorder and manic depression.

His unconscious mind, primed for pattern recognition, had known what Ilya was struggling with before his conscious mind had allowed the conclusion.

"Chemicals," Shane confirmed, running his thumb along Ilya's perfect cheek, catching the single tear that'd fallen when he'd been too focused watching Shane to hold it back. "It's not anyone's fault that you feel sad, Ilya."

"You're not mad?"

"No," Shane said, holding Ilya's gaze and hoping he could see how sincere Shane was. "Do you want my help making it better?"

Ilya's face crumpled and Shane had barely a moment to panic that he'd said the wrong thing before Ilya was tucked back against his side, face pressed to his neck and arms wrapped around Shane's torso, "please."

"Okay," Shane agreed, rubbing his hand up and down Ilya's back and wondering which of them the motion was soothing more, "we'll figure it out. Promise."

Ilya nodded, his nose dragging slightly against Shane's throat.

Shane stayed awake, long after Ilya had fallen asleep, and stared out into the night through the bedroom windows. He let his eyes trace the familiar patterns in the summer sky – Ursa Major running alongside the curved tail of Draco which was just above Hercules and Boötes – and settled into the quiet rhythm of Ilya's breathing.

He thought of Ilya, 17 years old and standing in the freezing cold behind that rink in Regina. That boy, his scripted rival, had seemed larger than life even then. Shane could remember how scared he'd been to introduce himself, he could remember practicing his words under his breath, hoping that he wouldn't sound odd and out of place. That Ilya, the one who'd seemed so mature at the time, was just

a little kid. He was a kid who'd found his mother's body five years prior, who'd never quite felt safe in his home, who'd been dropped into a new world with a new language and new rules and no one to guide him.

It felt like they'd lived lifetimes in the nine years since that moment.

They were so different now. But, at the same time, they were still those scared kids wondering if they'd ever find a place to call home or a person who wouldn't tease them for being different.

He looked at the stars for a while longer, hoping that Ilya's mother was out there somewhere, that she knew how wonderful her son had become, and then he pressed a kiss into Ilya's hair and followed him into sleep.

* * *

Ilya woke up warm.

Not the sort of warm that feels *too much*, like when you've accidentally left the fireplace running or turned the hotel thermostat up two notches too high, but the sort of warm that felt like safety.

The duvet was the same weight as the one on Shane's childhood bed in Ottawa, the same weight as the one on their bed back in New York and in the condo in Montreal, the same weight as the one Ilya had purchased for the house in Boston after asking Yuna which one to buy. The sheets were soft in the same way, too. Worn in by time and softened with the right detergent. And Shane - his nose pressed into Ilya's hair, his arms wrapped around Ilya's shoulders, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm against Ilya's cheek - was the same as well.

Well, not quite.

Because the Shane Ilya had woken up with in New York the day prior hadn't known about Irina Rozanova, he hadn't known the dark shadows that crept into Ilya's mind. The Shane he woke up to now, though, knew the truth. He knew the truth and he'd stayed, he'd asked how to help and made sure Ilya knew it wasn't his fault.

Chemicals, he'd said.

Ilya didn't quite understand, but he knew that Shane would explain when he asked.

His education was in Russian; everything he knew about science existed in a different language that he hadn't yet had a reason to translate.

He wondered if it was a little like the neural pathways he'd read about in some study several pages into Google after watching Shane carefully adjust his socks so the seams were even for the twentieth time sometime back in 2015 and finally searching *why does my boyfriend hate seams?* Which had led him to searching *what is sensory processing?*, while ignoring the fact that he'd called Shane his boyfriend to Google before ever even *considering* mentioning it to the man himself. That had led him to *what is overstimulation?*, at which point he'd had to turn on Safe Search before reading enough to move on to *common sensory processing disorders*.

Finally, after several visits to Dictionary.com to figure out what the hell any of the articles were saying, he'd landed on the NIH page explaining autism.

None of the articles had mentioned chemicals, but Ilya wondered if maybe there was some connection, some tie that allowed Shane to understand what Ilya was saying without him being able to find all of the words.

Ilya turned his head and pressed his lips to Shane's sternum, his nose brushing against the warm metal of the white gold chain he hadn't taken off since Ilya had given it to him. Shane stirred slightly, his grip around Ilya's shoulders tightening for a second as his nose twitched. Watching Shane wake up, all soft and sleep warm and beautiful in the early morning light, was one of Ilya's favorite things to do. He'd do anything – therapy, medication, journaling, *anything* – to be here to experience Shane waking up again and again until his heart gave out.

He wanted to be here; no matter how tired he got, no matter how often his limbs felt like they were encased in concrete as his mind spiraled out of control, he didn't want to leave.

Shane's eyes blinked open, honey brown against the rising sun, and Ilya got to watch his whole face light up as he saw Ilya already looking at him, "g'morning," Shane mumbled, ducking his chin to kiss Ilya's forehead, his lips a little clumsy with his mind still weighed down by sleep.

“Доброе утро, любовь моя.”

Shane grinned and kissed Ilya’s nose and Ilya wondered what he’d done in a past life to deserve a love like this.

He waited until they were a half mile down the forest trail for their morning walk, moving slower than normal as Anya and Sunny stopped to examine every new smell, to ask, “can you explain what you meant when you said chemicals?”

Shane paused for only a second, his brain catching up to where Ilya had started a conversation half way through, before nodding and sending Ilya a soft smile that clearly said *I’m proud of you for asking*, and then he began to explain.

He talked about theories; about how most of the studies he’d read had examined the roles of chemicals called serotonin and dopamine, about how scientists theorized that people who struggled with depression had a deficiency of those chemicals that regulate your mood or your reward system and motor control. Then he explained how some of the more recent studies he’d seen suggested that it wasn’t an issue with simple chemical deficiency, but with the actual biological makeup of a person’s brain, how some people might just have differences in the ways their brain cells connected and functioned and that viewing it in terms of biology instead of chemistry had helped professionals adapt treatment.

Everything he explained was clinical – it existed in prescribed patterns in the way Ilya remembered science classes in secondary school – and the simple facts made it seem less like Ilya was somehow dysfunctional and more like there was just something different about him that wasn’t his fault.

And the way everything was explained as they walked their dogs through the bright green trees, a slight breeze coming off the lake and the summer sun warming their shoulders, made it all feel so much less intense.

Then Shane’s brows pinched slightly and his lips pressed thin in the way they did when he was determined, and for the first time in the nine years Ilya had known him, Shane said, “I’m autistic, you know?”

“I guessed,” Ilya admitted.

Shane smiled a little, meeting Ilya's eye, "I wondered if you had."

"I read about it."

"You did?" Shane asked, his expression going soft.

"Of course," Ilya said, reaching out to run his hand over Shane's hair before squeezing the back of his neck.

"Of course," Shane echoed, looking at Ilya like he couldn't believe his luck and Ilya wondered if maybe that was part of why they worked so well; they were equally obsessed, equally *infatuated*. He couldn't imagine loving another person the way he loved Shane and he couldn't imagine being loved by another person the way Shane loved him. "It's different from depression, there's not really a *chemical* definition, but I understand what it's like when your brain is fighting back against you and I've spent a lot of years finding ways to make it better. What works for me probably won't be what works for you, but I want to help if you'll let me."

Ilya was pretty sure that Shane was the only person he'd let help in any real way, that Shane was the only person he'd be willing to explain to, in detail, what was happening in his head in order to find a path out of the crowded, shadowed maze.

"But," Shane said before Ilya could say that aloud, "I think we should consider finding you a therapist, someone you can talk to who's not me, who can look at everything from an outside perspective. I think it might be helpful and I think it might stop you from feeling like I'm trying to fix you and stop me from feeling like I'm your therapist more than I'm your husband."

Ilya hadn't even thought about that.

He'd just heard Shane's offer of help and latched on, but now that Shane had mentioned it, he could see it in startling clarity; he could see them a decade down the line, fighting and full of resentment because what'd once been a relationship based on equal footing and mutual respect had become the opposite.

"Can you help me research?" Ilya asked. "I do not know where to look or who to ask and I do not think the team psychologist is right answer."

“Course,” Shane agreed easily, “I’d bet we can even find someone who speaks Russian.”

“I love you,” Ilya said, not even sure how else to express everything he was feeling.

He’d considered that back in Russia, he’d added it to his to do list somewhere around packing up the condo and setting up a trust for his niece that his brother couldn’t touch, but he hadn’t returned to the thought. And here Shane was, understanding what Ilya might need without him even having to say it.

“I love you too,” Shane responded, easy as breathing.

* * *

After that walk through the trees, the serious conversations – the conversations about how to help without hurting and about how, maybe, they could start a foundation in Irina’s name - came in bits and pieces throughout the days, existing in the spaces between swimming in the lake and diving off the dock and getting way too competitive playing video games and Ilya teasing Shane about his inability to divide recipes in half. They were in their own world, just them and their dogs far away from where anyone could bother them, and Shane had honestly started to forget that the outside world existed until a week after they’d arrived when free agency started and the announcements of every trade J.J. had mentioned started to roll out.

Both of their phones were blowing up with messages from their team chats and the opposite team’s WAG chats and individual messages from different players and Shane was about to just turn his phone off and ignore it when it started ringing.

A fish-eyed goal camera picture from one of the games where Drapeau had been nursing a hip injury two years prior lit up his screen, *Mikhail Miitka* spread across the top, right above Mitty’s face looking into the camera like it was a Ring doorbell, his eyes crossed and a goofy little grin on his lips.

Mitty’s going to Vegas, J.J. had said.

Shane stared at the screen, his mind flashing back to that moment in the Montreal locker room before everything changed, to Mitty’s voice asking *finally gonna explain how you fumbled Rose Landry?*, to

the teasing grin on his face that'd seemed so much more sinister in the moment, with anxiety weighing down his lungs and forcing his brain to spiral.

Shane nearly let it ring, nearly sent him to voicemail, but something made him pick up, "Mitty?" he greeted.

"Hollzy," Mitty said, his accent thick on the Z. "Congrats on the Cup, and the Conn Smythe, should have been yours two years ago, everyone is blind."

"Thanks," Shane responded automatically, really starting to wonder where this was going.

They hadn't talked since that day in the locker room.

Not a single word.

But that was better than how he'd parted with many of his old teammates. Most had left him with words that haunted his dreams, Mitty had at least seemed neutral.

"I wanted to call earlier, but did not know what to say and did not want to bother you, I just," he paused, blowing out a harsh breath that echoed slightly through Shane's phone, "Shane, I am going to Vegas but your secret stays in Montreal, okay? I will not tell anyone and Laine and Dillon promised me they would not tell anyone. Pike and J.J. are safe, I think? Right? You trust them? We can trust them?"

Shane's head was spinning. Of all the former teammates he thought would call him in outright support, the guy from the middle of goddam nowhere on the Belarusian border who'd played two years in the KHL was somewhere in the bottom five. He had no clue how to respond, so he latched on to what he knew to be true, "Hayden and J.J. can absolutely be trusted. I trust them with my life."

"Good," Mitty breathed out, clearly relieved. "I would have talked to them, too, but I guessed you trusted them. Shane, we will not tell. But I do not know what will happen *in* Montreal. Everyone who openly supported you is leaving, and -"

“Woah,” Shane interrupted. He’d berate himself later for being rude, but he simply couldn’t help it. “Mitty, are you saying *you* supported me in the locker room?”

“Comeau said he wanted you dead,” Mitty said, his voice a truly confusing mix of conversational and nearly goddamn feral, “you do not deserve to be dead, Shane, you are nice person, good friend, I should have been better friend but I was not and I regret it.”

“Fucking, – Mitty!” Shane yelled, Ilya was in front of him now, clearly having heard Shane’s voice rising and looking deeply worried. “Don’t get deported for me you dick!”

“I am married to Canadian, Hollander.”

“Oh, thank fucking Christ,” Shane breathed out, “I forgot your wife was Canadian. I only ever heard you two speaking in Russian.”

“Canadians can speak Russian, too, Shane,” Mitty said.

His smile was obvious in his voice and Shane couldn’t help but laugh as he responded, “да, я это знаю.”

“Ах ты, сука!” Mitty laughed. “Ты говорите по-русски?”

“Совсем немного,” Shane said before sobering slightly, “Mikhail, thank you. It really means a lot to me, both that you defended me and that you called, I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, Shane. I will see you when New York plays Vegas, yes?”

“Yeah, of course,” Shane echoed, “we’ll go get drinks.”

“Shane Hollander does not drink.”

“Shane Hollander drinks sometimes,” Shane corrected with a laugh, “mostly when Carter Vaughan is egging him on.”

“Then we bring Carter Vaughan with,” Mitty decided, “have a good summer, Hollander, I will see you this fall.”

“See you then, Mitty.”

The line went dead and Shane looked up at Ilya who was quite obviously fighting hard to stop himself from asking what was going on, “the five people leaving Montreal are all people who openly defended me,” Shane said. “J.J. and Hayden I knew, but Laine, Dillon, and Mitty were news to me.”

“Mitty? Mikhail Miitka? Giant Russian goalie?”

“I think he’s from Belarus, actually.”

Ilya leveled him with a look that very clearly said *I do not give one single fuck about the fracturing of the former Soviet Union right now, Hollander*, “what did he want?”

“Called to congratulate me on the Cup and to tell me my secret stayed in Montreal, that Laine and Dillon agreed, and to make sure that J.J. and Hayden could be trusted.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Shane blinked a couple of times before shrugging, “I don’t know, honestly. I feel shitty that they all got pushed out because of me, but I’m also kind of happy that none of them have to deal with Montreal management anymore. We know Boston’s better, the Vegas managers seemed nice when we met them at the awards and I’ve heard good things about Ottawa’s management, J.J. in Toronto might not be an upgrade but at least Kent’s not there anymore.”

“But you are okay?”

“I’m okay,” Shane confirmed.

“Good,” Ilya nodded, “now, care to explain to me who got to kiss you?”

Shane just stared at him, trying to figure out what the *fuck* Ilya was talking about.

Ilya whipped his phone out of his pocket, unlocked it, and then turned the screen toward Shane, pointing to the most recent post on Cosmopolitan’s Instagram in almost comical accusation, “kisses.”

Shane let out a laugh that was more of a snort at the look on Ilya’s face, “Amanda, Ilya, Amanda got to kiss me. She tweeted about it a week ago.”

Ilya’s eyes lit up with unholy terror before he visibly calmed himself down, “just Amanda?”

“Just Amanda,” Shane confirmed, leaning forward to brush his lips against Ilya’s jaw, delighting in the slight rasp of day-old stubble that somehow made Ilya look both soft and mind-meltingly hot.

“Is good I did not go to this shoot,” Ilya murmured, ignoring Shane in favor of looking at the other pictures that’d been downloaded from the article and posted to Twitter by various fans. Shane should probably check his email to confirm what he was meant to post but based on the almost predatory glint in Ilya’s eyes, he was about to be a little busy. “You would not have been able to get anything done.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

Ilya finally looked away from the phone to lock his gaze with Shane’s, “you know, Hollander.”

“Mmm,” Shane hummed, letting his eyelids droop just a little as he tilted his head and pouted in mock confusion, “I don’t know, I think you might have to show me.”

He watched Ilya’s pupils dilate, watched his chest heave slightly as his breathing changed, and just grinned as, between one second and the next, he found himself pinned on the sofa beneath Ilya’s weight.

God, he hoped no one ever tried to save him, he was exactly where he wanted to be.

* * *

Shane, sleepy and sated and sprawled across Ilya's chest, happily handed his phone over to let Ilya choose which picture he should post on Instagram and Ilya decided he was the luckiest man on the face of the damn planet.

He copied over the caption Yuna had emailed and then picked up his own phone to have a sufficient crash out on his burner account as Shane tucked himself closer to his side. By the time Ilya fired off the second tweet, Shane was fully asleep and Ilya paused long enough to kiss the top of his head before returning to the task at hand.

He knew a couple of Shane's teammates – or at least their wives - had figured out *lilyhollander1221* was, in fact, Ilya Rozanov, and there was at least one other account who'd somehow made the connection (how, Ilya had no fucking clue; but he absolutely wasn't going to outright confirm it to some random girl on the internet so he'd simply decided to just continue as normal), but it still sort of felt like an unconstrained outlet. He could post about Shane without anyone breathing down his neck. He could get a little unhinged in the best of ways without worrying about the consequences.

He'd felt so much better over the past week since deciding to be honest with Shane. He was genuinely happy here, out in the freaking wilderness in a place he would've thought was boring after spending his whole life in cities. Everything felt like it'd slowed down to a pace he could follow without having to try. It was just them and their dogs, no one else for miles. And it was still summer, that single month between the end of playoffs and the beginning of preseason training where they could just exist without meal plans and workout schedules and someone else controlling pieces of their lives.

Shane had made a list of therapists for him to reach out to over the next few weeks and they'd talked more about how to help each other without being overbearing and after years of stolen moments and lingering questions, everything about their relationship felt solid. It wasn't just rings and a marriage certificate, it was something real, something that lived in the space between them that only they could see.

Ilya finished up his unhinged rant about Shane on the cover of Cosmo covered in lipstick with his pants unbuttoned, and let his mind drift to an 18-year-old Shane Hollander, almost exactly 8 years prior, opening the door to room 1410 and telling Ilya this was a bad idea before dropping to his knees. He thought about 18-year-old Shane Hollander folding his clothes as he took them off, about how his heart rate had picked up and a smile had spread across his lips before he could stop it.

There were so many moments that Ilya could pinpoint as the moment he fell irrevocably in love with Shane, but that one had always stood out.

Ilya looked down at his husband, at 26-year-old Shane Hollander who still folded his clothes if Ilya gave him a second to breathe, and leaned in to the instinct to be unbearably cheesy on an account that nearly everyone thought was run by a teenage girl and pressed post on a screenshot of *18* by One Direction.

Maybe, someday, when they went truly public and more people started to realize that *Lily* was *Ilya*, he'd be a little embarrassed about the number of pop music references he, a six foot tall Russian professional hockey player, had made. But right now, he didn't care.

He turned his phone off, tugged the throw blanket off the back of the couch, and spread it out as best he could with Shane as a dead weight on his chest.

Of all the things he was excited for in a future where the world knew the truth, the ability to finally say that the NHL had never known an Ilya Rozanov who wasn't head over heels for Shane Hollander was probably at the top of the list.

Chapter End Notes

and here lies the end of the heated rivalry/game changer timeline. onward and upward to the long game (and a little bit of the rest of 'em). love you all.

Chapter 41: end of a decade, start of an age

Chapter Notes

the last time i referenced long live only two people were there to say goodbye. this is a very, very minor redemption arc for a couple of people who didn't show.

July 2017

Two weeks into their time at the cottage, a week after trades had been announced, Shane drove the 3 hours to Montreal to spend a night at the Pike's because Jackie had been clearly freaking out about moving but hadn't wanted to admit it to anyone and Shane, of course, had noticed.

Ilya had considered tagging along. He wanted to see the Pike kids, he wanted to meet Amber and Jackie properly, he wanted to spend every single second of their summer break glued to Shane's side, but he also knew he needed a minute alone to process the past few months.

So, instead of going to Montreal, he watched from the front porch as Shane drove away and then made his way up to the little room on the second floor that was more of a library than anything else. He plucked a book from the shelf at random and then curled up on the day bed with Sunny and Anya and settled in to read *A Wrinkle in Time* as morning sun streamed through the windows and the peaceful silence settled in his chest.

* * *

Shane settled onto the couch in the Pike's living room after several hours of going through every room of their house with Jackie to either pack or make lists with a grunt. Hayden was at J.J.'s condo attempting to help him pack and he had at least a little time to rest before getting dragged out for one last night in Montreal. He wasn't at all shocked when Arthur immediately crawled on top of him. He was, however, a little bit shocked when Arthur lifted up the hem of his t-shirt and burrowed underneath, his cheek pressed against Shane's sternum and his little arms wrapped around Shane's torso.

He looked up at Jackie in confusion and no small amount of concern and just raised an eyebrow in question.

“He’s nervous about the move,” Jackie explained, sitting down next to Shane and resting her head against his shoulder with a huff. “I think it’s part of why I’m so nervous, feeding off of his mood, you know?”

“You a little stressed, buddy?” Shane said softly, tugging at the neck of his shirt to try and catch Arthur’s gaze.

Arthur looked up at him with big blue eyes, the exact same shade as Hayden’s but somehow more stunning when offset by Jackie’s dark hair, and nodded before tucking himself back against Shane’s chest. Shane let go of his collar, letting Arthur settle into the dimmed little bubble he’d created using Shane’s shirt, and then wrapped his arms around him, holding on tight and wondering, not for the first time, just how similar he and Arthur were.

He looked over at Jackie and decided maybe his thoughts were being telegraphed because the next thing out of her mouth was, “I know you already helped with the movers and finding a house but could you maybe help me find a child psychologist?”

Shane didn’t mention that he’d spent several hours over the past two weeks researching seemingly every mental health professional in the greater Boston area so he already knew where to look. Instead, he just nodded and then rested his chin on top of Arthur’s head, closing him into Shane’s hold entirely. Arthur let out a puff of breath that sounded almost like a sigh and then melted, every ounce of stress and restless energy in his little two-and-a-half-year-old body dissipating in an instant.

Jackie just stared in shock for a second before cuddling closer to Shane’s side, “you sure you don’t want to ask for a trade to Boston?”

“Boston can’t afford me,” Shane teased.

“Ah, I’d forgotten who I was talking to,” Jackie teased right back, pinching his thigh, “big, bad, 3 time Cup winner Shane Hollander.”

“Maybe I can retire on the back of three consecutive wins and live the WAG life.”

“You’d enjoy it for like four days and then you’d go out of your mind,” Jackie laughed, “you’ve got a few years left in you yet, Hollander.”

“Just a few?” Shane demanded, smiling despite himself. “I am young and spry, Pike. Don’t even joke.”

Jackie huffed out a laugh and Shane felt himself relax.

The girls were at the neighbor’s, Hayden and J.J. weren’t back yet, Amber was asleep, and it was just him and Jackie and Arthur in the quiet peace of an afternoon at home. Arthur was at least half asleep, a warm weight against his chest, and Jackie was starting to doze tucked against his side. He’d felt so calm over the past couple of weeks at the cottage with Ilya, but this felt different somehow, it felt a little nostalgic, like coming home after a roadie that’d dragged three days too long. It was familiar in a way that made Shane’s brain settle enough to actually process the insanity of the last several months of his life.

He let himself feel it all, let the emotions crash down around him, steady in the knowledge that this was a safe place to land. The cottage was safe, too, but he had the (admittedly, misguided) idea that Ilya needed the safety more than he did right now and he hadn’t wanted to pull attention. He felt Jackie sit up before one of her hands wrapped around his bicep and loosened his grip on Arthur just enough that she could wrap her arms fully around one of his.

“Alright?” she asked softly, only settling fully against him once he’d nodded.

He sat there and let each emotion hit him for long enough to take stock before letting it float away.

Betrayal hit first, then anger, and then the bitter sting of something like nostalgia, of wanting to go back to a place that was no longer his.

He’d read, once, of a concept in Welsh culture called *hiraeth*; a Celtic word of Welsh origins relating to a longing for a home that no longer exists. A word used to describe that aching homesickness, that soul-deep yearning for a place that is irretrievably gone.

Montreal still existed. This city he’d called home for seven years. But the place he truly wanted to return to was gone, or maybe it never was. Maybe the Montreal he’d built up in his head had never even existed, maybe the team he’d clung to with a white-knuckled grip was a figment of his imagination. It didn’t matter how much better New York was, it didn’t matter that he knew he was no longer welcome, a piece of him would always ache with that desire to run home.

He didn't know how to express that specific sadness to Ilya knowing that what Shane felt for Montreal was barely a blip on the radar of what Ilya felt for Russia and he'd been so focused on winning, on proving to himself that he was good, on proving to the Voyageurs that they'd made a mistake and to the Admirals that they hadn't, that he'd pushed the feeling away.

He let himself feel it now, though. He felt it, he gave it its due, and then he let it fade and by the time Amber woke up from her nap, by the time Ruby and Jade came bursting through the front door, by the time Hayden and J.J. trailed in after them ready to take Shane out on one last adventure in this city that they'd loved, he didn't feel so weighed down.

Shane really wasn't sure what the plan was. He'd told Jackie he'd come help and the next thing he'd known, Hayden and J.J. were planning their 'last hurrah.' He wasn't, however, all that surprised when he found himself standing in front of a tattoo parlor.

It was a half-drunken deal their first line had made right after they'd been knocked out of the playoffs in 2014, an agreement that, *when* they won a Cup, they'd get matching tattoos. When that time came in 2015, Shane had chickened out, worried about brand deals and his image and the sterility of needles and about 14 other things his mind hadn't been able to get over. Wilson, Comeau, and Drapeau had gone through with it. J.J. and Hayden had agreed to wait.

Then they'd won in 2016 and the deal had changed; they'd wait to get the tattoos until they'd won every Cup they could together.

And Shane had just won one without them.

It was over. The end of an era. Shane was in New York, Hayden was going to Boston, and J.J. was going to Toronto.

"Good?" Hayden asked.

"Good," Shane responded, his nose twitching slightly as he tried not to tear up. "A deal's a deal."

Hayden grinned and clapped Shane on the shoulder before jostling him through the door, like theatrics and humor would make the reminder that it was really over hurt less.

An hour later they spilled back out onto the street, Roman numerals in stark black ink etched into their sides, an extra line of text added to Shane's.

MMXV, MMXVI, MMXVII.

And, while J.J. had been finishing up and Hayden had been calling Jackie to check in, Shane had quickly scheduled an appointment for the morning so he could get one of his own before driving back to the cottage.

They went to dinner, just the three of them, and Shane could almost forget that they were honoring the end. It was fun, genuinely fun to be out with his friends in a city he loved.

And then they ended up in one of the clubs in Old Montreal they used to frequent after games. Shane hadn't been there quite as often as the other two, but it was still familiar ground. Shane wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but it certainly wasn't the sight of nearly half the Voyageurs, several of their wives and girlfriends, and at least a dozen random people from the staff; from Mark, the facilities manager who'd made sure he could get on the ice at the Bell Center one last time, to Alice from legal, probably the youngest person in the department and the *only* person in the department who'd known why Shane was leaving and hadn't made him feel like it was his fault.

"Holy shit," Shane muttered under his breath as J.J. let out a noise of surprise. Shane turned to look at him and raised an eyebrow, silently asking if he'd known about this and J.J. just shook his head. Shane turned back toward the crowd, his eyes immediately landing on Jackie's grinning face.

"Surprise?" she said, shrugging, like it was no big deal, like she hadn't organized physical, tangible proof that Shane wasn't hated by the entire organization he'd given nearly a decade of his life to, like she hadn't plucked the harshest thoughts from Shane's mind and found a way to make them go quiet.

Shane darted through the crowd and wrapped her in a hug, taking her clean off her feet with the force of it as he buried his face in her shoulder. Jackie's arms wrapped around his shoulders as she let out a delighted laugh and Shane thanked every god he'd ever even heard the name of that he'd agreed to go to the bar with Hayden that night seven years prior instead of convincing him to stay in and watch a movie.

"Thank you," he whispered as he felt Hayden's arms wrap around them both, squeezing tight, like he never planned on letting go.

“I want in,” J.J. declared and then Shane found himself in the middle of a pile. He felt a hand ruffle his hair and immediately placed it as Wilson before someone somehow got through the huddle to kiss his cheek and from the overexaggerated smack he knew it was Mitty.

It didn’t necessarily make up for the fact that they’d stayed silent while Shane was suffering those last couple of months, but it showed that they cared, that they didn’t hate him, that maybe they regretted it and missed him. Mitty had called, Dillon and Laine had clearly stood up for him in some manner even though they were young and their careers weren’t established given the fact they were both leaving. Everyone else here had kept their head down or hadn’t pushed enough for the Voyageurs to get rid of them, but they’d shown up *now*. They were here to celebrate with Shane who’d already left and with Hayden, J.J., Mitty, Laine, and Dillon who were leaving.

They were here, acting like a team in a way Shane hadn’t ever thought he’d experience. It wasn’t as good as every last one of the Admirals showing up at the Kingfisher after beating Montreal that first night of playoffs, but it was something and he found himself having *fun*. It was like everyone knew that this was their last chance, their last night together before it all changed for good. It felt oddly like that last week of high school before graduation, that week where everyone seems to forget the divisions of cliques or the lines of their friend groups and, suddenly, everyone loves everyone. That week where the marching band ends up at the lacrosse captain’s house party and the class president is sitting with a bunch of stoners at lunch.

Here, in this club in Old Montreal, they acted like kids, like 18-year-olds realizing that the world was coming at them fast and hanging onto childhood for a few precious moments. For a couple of hours, they all let themselves forget that the world was already here, that they’d already been pushed out of the relative safety of youth. They got too drunk and told stories and pretended that everything was fine, that they were still a band of brothers who couldn’t be torn apart, and Shane let the feeling wash over him just like he’d done with every other feeling earlier that day. He felt the joy, let it heal a few of the tattered pieces of his heart, and then he stored it away.

The end had come in pieces.

It’d come in the brittle silence of the locker room in January, in Farah officially waving his no trade, in Scott telling him that New York would be better, in signing on the dotted line, in that final moment on the ice with Hayden and J.J., in stepping into his house in Irvington and realizing he’d truly left, in stepping onto the ice for the first time in Admirals red, in stepping into the visitor’s locker room in the Bell Center, in hoisting the Cup with a different team, and now in this; in a raucous goodbye from a home he could never return to.

Ilya sat on the back deck, long after the sun had set, simply watching the stars twinkle into being.

He'd always known that life moved fast, that if you didn't pay attention time would slip by and people you'd thought would always be there were gone, but the past couple of months had truly moved at hyper speed. It felt good to sit in the dark, listening to the gentle lapping of the lake against the shore, and just simply exist.

He let his mind go quiet, let the chirping of crickets and the random hoot of the stupid Canadian wolf birds Shane had teased him for being scared of settle over him.

His phone buzzed a couple of times but he ignored it. Shane would call if he needed him and his texts could go unanswered for a little while longer. The quiet was nice in a way he'd never really appreciated. For so long, quiet had meant danger. It'd meant walking into his childhood home with his hackles raised, waiting to find out what had made his father so angry he'd gone silent, it'd meant walking into his apartment or house in Boston knowing he was entirely alone. Here, though, the quiet felt like peace. It felt like the knowledge that he was safe, that he was welcome, that tomorrow Shane would come home and exist in the quiet with him.

Eventually, the night chill got to him and he made his way inside, feeling oddly settled in a way that made him wonder if maybe Shane was right about yoga and meditation (not that he'd ever admit that out loud). He took the dogs out and showered and only after he'd climbed into bed, both dogs curled up next to him, did he pull out his phone.

His screen lit up with a dozen notifications, a couple of texts from Shane just checking in and saying he loved him and then several texts from Jackie with pictures of Shane with the kids, of Shane on the couch with a suspiciously Arthur-shaped lump fully under his shirt, of Shane in a *club* with Hayden and J.J. and several other former teammates smiling like he was actually having fun. He sent back several hearts and a thank you for setting it up, knowing it'd been her doing without having to be told, and then responded to Shane to tell him to have fun, to be safe, and to remind him of just how much Ilya loved him, and then he turned off his phone and drifted off into sleep.

* * *

He was very happily dozing in the hammock strung up between two trees down by the lake, Sunny and Anya sleeping in the shade beneath him attached to the long leads they were using until they could decide on an invisible fence, when the hammock shifted and he almost tipped right out. He heard a familiar voice let out an *oof* before a familiar weight settled on top of him, "hi, baby," Shane greeted, kissing his cheek.

“Hello,” Ilya responded, feeling his lips tug into a smile as he wrapped his arms around Shane and just held on, “how was Montreal?”

“Really good,” Shane said, sounding both surprised and genuinely happy. That was all Ilya could ask for, really; Shane being happy. “Got you something.”

Ilya opened one eye at that, keeping the other squinted shut against the afternoon sun, “present?”

“Sort of,” Shane answered, an amused little smile on his face.

“What is it?”

Shane started to move and then seemed to realize that two 200 pound athletes in a single hammock was a bit of a precarious situation and climbed back out with a huff. Ilya missed his weight and warmth immediately and almost tugged him back down before Shane started pulling off his shirt and Ilya was rapidly distracted by the sight of a goddamn tattoo spreading across the left side of Shane’s ribs.

The text was small enough that it was covered when he put his arm down but the simple knowledge that it was there was enough to make Ilya feel a little bit feral. He hadn’t known that about himself, that Shane with tattoos was that much of a turn on, but he was learning pretty quickly that it was, and then Shane turned slightly and showed Ilya the back of his left arm and he realized that the tattoo honoring three consecutive Cups wasn’t what his beautiful husband had wanted to show him.

Sketched in black ink, tucked in the space between Shane’s elbow and tricep, was a house key attached to a key ring with a little tag reading *1410*.

The room number on the left, the key on the right, a number and an order that no one except Ilya would understand.

A room in Toronto and the New York house key.

The place they’d started and how Shane had proposed.

“Shane,” Ilya whispered, his voice coming out choked. Shane wore his ring every day, had official documentation showing his last name was Hollander-Rozanov, had signed a marriage license with their names on it, but this was permanent in a way that somehow made it feel even more real. He could see it, could see the ink telling the abridged version of seven years of confusion and struggle and lust and hidden love, seven years of hotel rooms and weighted silence and constant denial that somehow turned into the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever known, seven years of *them*, etched into Shane’s skin.

“You like it?” Shane asked, sounding nervous.

“Love it,” Ilya corrected, all but launching himself out of the hammock to get his hands on Shane, “I love it, Shane, thank you,” he said, leaning down enough to press a soft kiss over the Saniderm before cupping Shane’s cheeks and pressing a far less soft kiss to his lips. “I love it,” he repeated, pulling back to kiss Shane’s cheek, not even sort of embarrassed that he was already panting from just the sight of the tattoo and a single kiss, “I love it, I love it, I love *you*,” he said, breathless in the space between kissing every inch of Shane’s perfect face.

“I love you,” Shane got out, his voice a little shaky as he giggled at Ilya’s antics. God, he was perfect. Perfect, perfect, perfect. Everything Ilya had ever wanted, more than Ilya had ever even dreamed. Ilya let out a sigh, feeling like he couldn’t contain his emotions, like they simply had to find some way out, and wrapped his arms around Shane’s waist, tugging him into a hug that bridged on too tight, but Shane didn’t complain, not even a little. He simply wrapped his arms around Ilya’s shoulders and held on just as tight. He pressed a soft kiss to the space where Ilya’s neck met his shoulder and then tucked his head into the same spot, snuggling closer like he couldn’t get enough. “Forever, Ilyusha.”

Chapter 42: ottawa

Chapter Notes

btw, i added a work to this series from alice's (@hollanov) perspective :)

August 2017

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” Ilya called, almost bouncing on his toes as he waited by the door.

If you asked him on any other day, he’d have said he never wanted to leave the cottage, but right now he was *buzzing* with excitement to get on the road.

They’d started their pre-season training on Shane’s plastic rink, which was *fine*, but today was the beginning of the week they were spending in Ottawa to train in an actual rink and Ilya was *dying* to get back on proper ice. But the ice wasn’t the main reason for Ilya’s excitement; they were going to the airport first to pick up Luke who’d be spending the week staying at the Hollander’s with them. They were also being joined by J.J., Hayden, and Cliff, but Ilya honestly couldn’t care less.

He’d never realized just how much he’d miss Luke until he wasn’t there. It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the Luke-sized hole in their lives; they both kept accidentally making too much food or calling out for someone who wasn’t actually there and Ilya just wanted to see the kid.

“Just give me a second!” Shane yelled back, “you know, if you helped pack your own gear we could leave faster?”

“Oh shit,” Ilya muttered, realizing that he’d headed for the door without collecting a single thing he needed for either a week of hockey practice or a week staying somewhere else. He really wasn’t sure what his plan was. Steal Shane’s clothes from high school? Hope that David’s skates from college happened to fit? “Sorry!” he shouted, jogging back into the house and trying to locate Shane using a very specific type of echolocation that was attuned to the annoyed mutterings of his husband.

He finally found him in the mudroom, meticulously packing their gear into two bags and looking a little like he wanted to test the sharpness of his blades on Ilya’s neck.

“Sorry, sweetheart, I’m sorry.”

Shane glared and Ilya decided he needed to try again, “I am very sorry, малыш.” He tried not to grin as Shane’s face softened and just kept talking, “how can I help, золотце?”

“Take our duffels to the car, please,” Shane responded, sufficiently appeased by Ilya’s apologies and pet names, “and make sure we have everything we need for the dogs and that there’s room for Luke’s stuff.”

“Yes, of course, любимый.”

“You can quit with the endearments now, Ilya.”

“Never, дорогой.”

Shane rolled his eyes but did a really poor job of looking annoyed and Ilya counted it as a win. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Shane’s forehead and then jogged out of the room to complete his assigned task. With him actually helping instead of just bouncing at the door waiting for Shane to show up, they were able to get out of the house within 10 minutes and Shane even let him pick the music for the two hour drive. Ilya was having a great day.

* * *

They pulled up to the arrivals door of the Ottawa airport and found Luke already waiting, staring off into the distance with a duffle and his gear bag at his feet.

Shane jumped out of the car the moment Ilya put it in park and Ilya watched Luke’s entire being light up as soon as he spotted Shane. He hopped over his bags and flung himself into Shane’s open arms like it’d been years since they’d seen each other instead of barely six weeks. He had his face tucked against Shane’s neck and was clutching onto the back of Shane’s shirt with a white-knuckled grip and Ilya realized that if he wanted a Luke hug, he was just going to have to join them because there was no way he was going to be able to separate them any time soon.

He climbed out of the car and simply wrapped his arms around both of them, ignoring the three phone cameras he could see pointed in their direction with an ease he never really thought he'd achieve.

"Rozy!" Luke greeted, detaching one hand from Shane's shirt just to grip onto Ilya's.

"Hello, сынок," Ilya greeted, barely even registering the endearment as he dropped a kiss into Luke's hair.

"What's that mean?" Luke asked.

"Ah," Ilya paused, blinking a couple of times as his cheeks started to heat. He was pretty sure even he wouldn't be able to deny the fact he was blushing. "Is a, uh, affectionate word."

"For what?"

Ilya looked skyward, wondering how he'd gotten himself into this situation, "sons."

"Awww," Luke cooed, patting Ilya's cheek several times like he was trying to hold himself back from pinching it. Ilya sort of wanted to smack him. He also wanted to figure out how to legally adopt a 20-year-old man even though he was only 26, so he was feeling rather conflicted, to say the least. "What's the word for stepdad?"

"I'm really only step dad?" Ilya asked, incensed. "Hunter still gets to be dad? What is Shane?"

"Dad," Luke answered, "sometimes brother, it's a confusing family unit, to be totally honest."

"It's отчим," Ilya said, sounding a little defeated, even to his own ears, "but that is like man who is married to your mother, specifically. Just call me Ilyusha if you *need* something affectionate. The rest of your annoying rookie friends can call me Ilyukha like Marlow does."

"Someone needs to explain the difference to me," Luke decided, detaching himself from Ilya enough to pick up his duffle, though he kept a hand on Shane the entire time. Shane reached around him to pick up his gear bag and then steered them toward the car where Sunny had been trying to break

through the back window since the moment she spotted Luke. “Just so I can brag about why my version is the better version.”

“And you should probably tell my mom which one to use otherwise she’s going to come up with a nickname all on her own and then you’ll be 26 and still getting called honey in public,” Shane said, throwing Luke’s gear bag into the truck while successfully stopping Sunny from launching herself out of the car at the same time. It was a pretty damn impressive showing of reaction time.

“Yuna can use Ilyushenka,” Ilya said, trying to ignore the way the name made his chest clench as he climbed into the driver’s seat. Luke got into the back and was immediately tackled by Sunny while Anya just looked at him in interest. Shane climbed into the passenger seat and took a quick photo of Luke and the dogs before reaching out for Ilya’s hand, clearly noticing the shift in his emotions. “Ilyushenka is version mothers use. Ilyusha is, ah, endearing? So is Ilyushka but I don’t like that one so much. Ilyukha is for friends.”

“I feel like I need to learn Russian in this family,” Luke said, expertly dodging Sunny’s tongue as she attempted to lick the *inside* of his mouth when he talked. “Or French, how many languages do you people even speak?”

“French and Japanese,” Shane answered as Ilya started navigating toward the exit to the main road, “and English, obviously. He speaks Russian and English.”

“I can curse in French,” Ilya added.

“I took Spanish throughout high school,” Luke offered, “I was really bad at it, though. Like I think I can say *donde esta la bibliotecha*, and that’s about it.”

“Maybe we stick to English, yes?”

“You took Spanish for four years and *all* you can say is where is the library?” Shane asked, turning around in his seat enough to look at Luke in total bewilderment.

“I can also say *me llamo es* Luke.”

“Right,” Shane said, “yeah, maybe we stick to English.”

“I took two years of college calculus so I swear I’m smart. I just hated my Spanish teacher,” Luke said, like he needed to prove himself somehow.

“I know you’re smart,” Shane said, reaching back to squeeze his knee, “you memorize playbooks way too quickly to be an idiot, bud.”

“What do we call Sunny?” Luke asked, clearly ready to move on, “and Anya?”

“Солнышко for Sunny, means sunshine or little sun,” Ilya answered, “Anya is just Anya, maybe малышка, that is like baby.”

Luke dutifully repeated each word, only totally tripping over the pronunciations, but he looked so damn proud of himself that Ilya absolutely was not going to correct him.

“Sunshine would be *soleil* in French,” Shane said and Luke repeated it back, far better than he’d echoed the Russian, and Ilya had to remind himself that French and Spanish were from the same language family so it’d be easier for Luke to copy, so he really shouldn’t make fun of him for his butchering of Ilya’s mother tongue. “You hungry? We can stop for food if you want.”

“I ate before I left,” Luke responded with a yawn. Sunny had finally settled down and was now curled up in his lap like she was still the little puppy they’d carted around on the team plane instead of a six month old dog that weighed nearly 50 pounds. Anya had made her way over too, curled up in the middle seat with her nose pressed against Luke’s thigh.

“Then let’s just head home,” Shane decided.

Ilya couldn’t help but smile.

* * *

Shane hadn't been home to his parents' house since he and Ilya had driven away back in March so he was shocked to see that several additional frames had been added to the walls and shelves.

There was a picture of Shane and Ilya from their wedding in a frame below the TV that was pretty perfectly placed to be hidden in a drawer if people came over, something that both settled Shane's nerves and, simultaneously, made him irrationally upset. There was one of Luke latched onto Shane's back as they'd crowded Eric's goal right after winning the Cup and another of Shane and Luke hugging after Luke had won the Calder. The selfie of Shane, Ilya, and Yuna that Yuna had posted for Ilya's birthday was printed out and stuck to the fridge with a magnet right above the newly released preseason schedules for both New York and Boston and a 4x6 of Luke at maybe 10, posing in front of the goal in one of his youth league jerseys.

"Where did you get this?" Ilya asked, cradling a frame he'd just picked up from the mantle like it was the most precious thing he'd ever held. Shane walked over and leaned against Ilya's side to look at a picture he'd never seen. It was of Ilya, somewhere around six years old, swimming in his pads and jersey and grinning up at the camera and a woman who looked *strikingly* like him who was kneeling on the ground beside him, a matching grin on her face and a soft look in her matching hazel eyes.

"Svetlana," Yuna answered, rubbing Ilya's back as she leaned against his other side, "this is a copy, I have the original saved for you, and a couple of others she thought you might want when you were ready."

"Thank you," Ilya whispered, looking at the photo for another second before carefully setting it back down, "you will keep them safe?"

"Of course," Yuna agreed.

Ilya sniffled slightly and then said, "you can call me Ilyushenka, if you want."

Yuna locked eyes with Shane and he could just tell that she'd somehow already learned everything there was to learn about diminutives and naming conventions so he simply nodded, confirming what Ilya was saying.

"Ilyushenka," Yuna repeated, perfectly pronounced.

Shane watched, in real time, as Ilya's heart broke before it stitched back together, and decided to follow Luke into the kitchen. This wasn't his moment. He saw Ilya all but collapse into Yuna's hug out of his peripheral and thanked his lucky stars that he had parents with love enough to share; especially considering the fact that Luke didn't seem to be doing any better than Ilya was.

"That's me," Luke whispered, sounding painfully, heart-wrenchingly confused as he pointed at a framed photo of Shane, Luke, and Sunny in the Admirals gym that Shane recognized as one Scott had taken and must've sent to Yuna.

"You're on the fridge, too," Shane said gently, wrapping his arm around Luke's shoulders.

"You said I'd get to keep this, but I guess it was still hard to believe. I've never had anyone hang pictures of me like this. Well, Drew did, but not parents, you know?"

Shane had never actually *asked* what Luke's home life was like, seeing as he was pretty sure Luke would shut down if he did, but every new thing he learned made him want to commit several violent crimes.

Shane had played with Luke for five months now, including an entire playoff run, a Stanley Cup win, and an award season where he'd won Rookie of the Year, and had yet to meet a single member of Luke's biological family. The kid lived in his house and Shane didn't even have his parents phone numbers. He was about 95% sure *he* was Luke's emergency contact based on several half statements and a text he'd gotten from their team doctor letting him know the dates of *both* Shane *and* Luke's preseason physicals.

"You're stuck with us now, Luke," Shane said, instead of speaking any of that out loud.

Luke grinned at him and Shane found himself wondering whether Ilya or Svetlana would be more likely to have the contact of someone who would just straight up murder Luke's family.

Svetlana, probably.

He'd have to ask.

After that first half hour where Ilya and Luke were hit with the realization that they'd been entirely adopted by the Hollanders, things moved much more smoothly and Ilya was reminded of how much he'd enjoyed spending time in Ottawa back in March.

It was better this time, though, because Shane wasn't injured and Ilya wasn't actively falling apart, so he actually got to enjoy every piece of it. He got to help Yuna cook without feeling like he was stepping on toes, he got to sit down and work on a puzzle with David without feeling like he was intruding, and he got to curl up next to Shane in the stupid little kid sports sheets and tease him about it without feeling like an ass because Shane was no longer seriously concussed.

"Okay, quit," Shane laughed after Ilya made his twelfth joke about how Shane hadn't even needed to be gay to drive away every girl in high school with bedding like this, "quit joking about it or I'll kick *you* out of my bed."

"Noo, Hollander," Ilya whined, wrapping his arms around Shane's torso as tight as he could, "I want to stay," he added, looking up at Shane with his best puppy dog eyes as he propped his chin on Shane's sternum.

"Okay, okay," Shane agreed immediately, running his fingers through Ilya's hair before smooshing his cheeks and shaking his head a little, "you're adorable."

"Mmm, yes," Ilya agreed, dropping a kiss onto Shane's chest. He'd long since given up arguing about Shane calling him adorable, he was well aware he wasn't going to win that fight.

"How are you doing?" Shane asked, and Ilya appreciated that he'd waited to check in even though he'd probably been itching to ask since that moment with Yuna. One of the things Ilya had requested when they talked about how to help each other without hurting was that Shane try to wait until they were alone to ask Ilya if he was alright so Ilya could be honest. He didn't want to lie and always say he was fine anymore, but he also didn't want to be put in a spot where he'd have to either lie or admit that he wasn't fine while other people were watching.

"I am good," Ilya responded after a second, resting his cheek on top of Shane's heart, the familiar rhythm of it soothing what little was left of his nervous energy, "I like being here, I like having Luke with us instead of somewhere else. I am going to miss you two when season starts, but I feel better now than I have in a long, long time so I am good."

“Good,” Shane said with a sweet little smile. “Now get some sleep, we have a long day tomorrow.”

* * *

The week they spent in Ottawa was some of the most fun Ilya had ever had playing hockey.

The rink that Shane and Boodram apparently normally got ice time at was a solid facility with good ice and enough space for all of them to spread out and work through their training programs. It was good to be back on the ice with Cliff and Ilya was even having fun with Pike, which he'd never actually admit out loud. He was a solid player, clearly used to playing with a fast center and used to compensating for having a center that could clearly outplay him.

Ilya was far less full of himself than most people probably thought, but he did know that there was a difference between playing with someone skilled and playing with someone like himself or Shane, and it was always a question of whether a line mate would be able to keep up. But Pike did more than keep up, he was always there when Ilya looked, always ready with a pass when Ilya was open, and didn't complain once as Ilya walked him through the way Boston trained and played. He adapted quickly, memorized plays nearly as fast as Shane did, and offered suggestions for when they stumbled upon gaps. It only took an hour for Ilya to realize that, not only was Pike a really good player, but he was also an *incredible* Alternate. Shane had seriously lucked out with him at his wing and at his side and Ilya was finally ready to admit, at least to himself, that Pike was a solid addition to Boston's team.

It was also incredible to watch Shane with Luke up close. He'd seen them at home, of course, but hadn't had the chance to watch them on the ice outside of games.

Sometimes, it almost seemed like they were speaking their own language. Luke could make a half-aborted grunt and Shane would somehow understand that he was asking which lane to pass through in some stupidly specific scenario. And Shane could make some random hand gesture and Luke would immediately know where he was supposed to move and how fast he was supposed to get there.

But Shane wasn't only focused on Luke; he gave his time freely to anyone who asked. He walked Tanner Dillon, one of his rookies from Montreal and Ottawa's brand new center, through plays with a sort of diligence Ilya was certain he'd never be able to focus long enough to achieve. He could mimic the style of just about anyone in the League whenever J.J. asked and Ilya could just tell it was something they'd done time and time again. And, on the third day, Ilya realized that Tanner and Luke could do the same thing.

J.J. had let out a frustrated grumble and said something about Vancouver's first line and the next thing Ilya knew, Shane, Luke, and Tanner were lined up to let J.J. run a drill, almost *perfectly* mimicking the play style of a team they played like three times a year.

People sometimes joked about what a terror it would be if Shane and Ilya were ever allowed to play on the same team, but Ilya was starting to realize the *scarier* option would be someone forming a team full of people who'd been trained by Shane Hollander.

"Is he cloning himself in a lab?" Cliff asked, his voice almost incredulous as he sidled up next to Ilya against the boards. "This is insane. Plus, doesn't New York have, like, three more rookies he's been spending time with?"

"Two, but he spends the most time with Luke."

"Laine's the same way," Pike said, leaning against the boards from the other side. "And Taylor, to a lesser extent, but that's just because he's not quite as dedicated when it comes to reviewing tape. Ottawa might actually be able to build something around Dillon, though. He's dedicated, he still followed Holly's practice schedule even after he left, and he's got that sort of attitude that makes you want to follow him, you know?"

"God, I can't wait to get that kid on our ice," Boodram said, appearing next to Pike out of goddamn nowhere. Ilya tried not to jump, he was pretty sure he hadn't succeeded. "The NHL should start sending every new center to Camp Hollander, it'd make games so much more fun."

"Hey," Ilya complained because, sure, that was his husband, but it was also his main competition and he didn't really appreciate being left out of the conversation.

"You might be good, Roz, but do you have the patience to train hyperactive 18-year-olds?"

"No," Ilya admitted, "maybe younger kids, when they are still cute. Shane can deal with teenagers."

"The girls want to learn how to play," Pike offered, clearly seeing Ilya's barely half-covered wish to hang out with cute little hockey-playing kiddos, "I don't think I can handle both of them myself and Shane'll be in New York."

“You’d let *me* help?” Ilya asked, genuinely shocked.

Pike shrugged, like he wasn’t offering the ultimate white flag in the form of letting Ilya spend time with his children without Shane there, “sure.”

“Okay,” Ilya agreed, clearing his throat and mentally switching his name to *Hayden* instead of Pike, “that would be fun, thank you.”

“They’ll like you extra if you bring Anya with,” Hayden said, “also, that way, they get to see a dog and I don’t have to buy one.”

Ilya let out a laugh and tried not to think about how strange it was to be actually *getting along* with Hayden Pike, “I will bring Anya then. Would not want to, ah, deprive them of seeing a puppy.”

Hayden smiled and then hopped over the boards just in time to intervene before J.J. made them run the drill again. It was a good thing, too, because Shane was clearly getting annoyed by how slow he was having to skate but was far too polite to tell J.J. to move on. Ilya found himself thinking that it was a shame those three had been separated. It wasn’t really a thought he’d ever imagined himself having, but it was hard not to be sad about a trio that perfectly in concert being split between teams.

It sucked, but that was the way professional hockey went.

* * *

On Friday, Boodram, or *Bood* as Ilya had been told to call him, convinced everyone to be done with training early so they could drive to Lake Ontario because he’d decided that the fact only he, Shane, and Tanner had ever been was a travesty of epic proportions. They’d also all been instructed to pack overnight bags because Bood’s parents had a house on the lake they could stay at and they were out of town for the weekend. Ilya had very narrowly avoided making fun of him and asking if they should bring beer or if they were worried about getting caught.

Ilya wasn’t all that excited, given the fact that he’d spent the past six weeks at Shane’s cottage which sat on a picture perfect lake and he was certain that nothing would be able to match up. He also really

wasn't sure what the hype about the "Great Lakes" was. Russia had some big ass lakes; Ilya was prepared to be unimpressed.

Turns out, "Great Lakes" was a pretty apt name.

They finally climbed out of the car after three hours of driving (during which Ilya had mentioned that the cottage was closer no fewer than a dozen times) and Ilya found himself standing on a beach staring out at a lake that, apparently, wasn't an actual fucking ocean.

He couldn't see the other side.

And, according to Shane's local geography lecture, this was the *smallest* of the five lakes.

"Done complaining now?" Shane asked.

Ilya let out a grumble he knew Shane would be able to translate as agreement and then turned around to help carry stuff inside.

They ended up tossing all of their stuff into a bunk room that Bood said had been built for grandkids that didn't yet exist and Ilya tried not to laugh as Luke and Tanner immediately began fighting over which of them got to share a bunk with Shane.

"I get Shane!" Hayden finally cut in. "Jesus."

"No fair!" Luke almost shouted.

"You live with him, Gillis. I think you'll survive."

Luke deflated at that reminder and decided to just sit down and let Sunny crawl into his lap instead of continuing to argue.

“Is okay, сынок,” Ilya said, ruffling Luke’s hair, “you can share with me, да?”

“Да,” Luke agreed, nodding slightly but not looking away from Sunny, “спасибо, Ilyusha.”

“How many of you people speak Russian?” Bood asked, blinking at Ilya and Luke in something like shock.

Ilya was pretty sure Bood had already clocked the whole ‘family unit’, as Luke had called them, but maybe he’d been wrong.

“Just Rozy,” Luke answered, “Shane’s learning, I know, like, four words.”

“Hold on,” Cliff cut in, “did you just get to call him Ilyusha? I’m still stuck on Ilyukha!”

Ilya knew the tilt of Luke’s grin without even having to look.

“Cause I’m special,” Luke said, his voice distinctly smug.

“Let’s go outside,” Shane suggested, clearly seeing a needless, probably entirely ridiculous, argument brewing.

Ilya ruffled Luke’s hair one last time and then followed his husband back onto the beach. He laughed as Luke came sprinting past them with a shout of *RACE YOU!* that Shane immediately responded to, stepping out of his slides and stripping off his t-shirt as he kicked into a run. He was a vision, all tanned skin and freckled shoulders and pre-season bulk muscles and he was all Ilya’s. But the sight of Shane shirtless reminded Ilya of something very important he’d forgotten to do. He turned around just as Shane and Luke hit the water with a splash and pointed at J.J., “you,” he said, “are my favorite.”

“What’d I do?” J.J. asked.

“Tattoo,” Ilya answered, “your idea, yes?”

“Partially,” J.J. shrugged, “it was the whole first line, really. The year you won the Cup. The three of us just agreed to wait until we’d won every Cup we could together.”

“Still, you made appointment?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said, like he was thanking J.J. for solving world hunger. It honestly felt like it was about the same level. A month later and Ilya still wasn’t quite used to the sight of the ink on his husband’s skin. It made him more than a little crazy and J.J. deserved his heartfelt thanks.

“Right,” J.J. said, stretching out the word and looking like he knew *exactly* why Ilya was thanking him and really wasn’t sure how he was meant to respond, “you’re welcome?”

Ilya nodded and then followed Shane and Luke into the water.

They ended up around a campfire, hours later, exhausted from a week of training and time spent under the sun, and Ilya had his first experience roasting dinner over a fire. He was pretty sure that some people thought he’d been raised in the wilderness, given the accent and possibly his general level of feral behavior on the ice, so he was used to people being shocked that he hadn’t done something like this before.

“Moscow is big city, yes?” Ilya said, like he was talking to a child as Hayden expressed his shock over Ilya having never had a hotdog that’d been cooked on a fucking stick. “Many people, many buildings, civilized?”

“Yes,” Hayden agreed, “I also grew up in a city, Rozanov, but I’ve experienced nature before.”

“You grew up in Cole Harbour,” Shane said, staring at Hayden in complete and utter confusion, “can you please tell me how a town with a population of like 12 counts as a *city*?”

“I was talking about Halifax,” Hayden argued.

Ilya had no concept of the size of Canadian towns but given the way everyone else was staring at Hayden like he'd just admitted to being the Unabomber, he had to assume that Halifax wasn't much better than Cole Harbour.

"Roz, what's the population of Moscow?" Shane asked, not looking away from an increasingly sheepish looking Hayden Pike.

"Probably, ah, 13 million?" Ilya answered, trying to remember any demographic information he'd have picked up in passing. "More if you count the areas around the city, maybe 20?"

"Hayd, what's the population of Halifax?"

"...350,000," Hayden said.

"And Cole Harbor?"

"208."

"Well, it's 207 now because you moved away," Shane deadpanned and Ilya grinned as everyone started laughing. He loved being around people who *knew* Shane was funny and simply laughed at his jokes instead of pretending to be shocked that Shane Hollander had a personality.

It was fun, being with a group of guys that weren't just his teammates, and Ilya wanted to hold onto the moment. He was more than happy that Bood had dragged them all out here. It felt like how his teammates talked about their experience in juniors and youth leagues, about the nights they spent with their teams having fun and screwing around. Ilya had never really experienced that, at least as it related to hockey. He was always forced to take it *too* seriously, forced to see every moment as life and death. He had his fun, sure, but it wasn't like this, it wasn't with people he got to share the ice *and* his life with.

He looked over at Shane, at the way his smile was lit up by the fire, and knew he was right where he was meant to be.

Chapter 43: training camp

Chapter Notes

some discussion of religious trauma and past child abuse (not explicit, but it is referenced)

September 2017

Scott genuinely couldn't tell if this was the most refreshed he'd been for a season or if he was already hopelessly exhausted.

It was a truly confusing spectrum, but he simply didn't have time to think about it any further.

He'd had a great summer with Kip, avoiding the media circus and simply taking time to *exist*. Now, though, life was coming back at them fast. Kip had started his graduate program (and his job at the Kingfisher) and Scott was sitting on the floor of Amanda's office – one of the only places in this entire facility where they could hide without being bothered - with Carter and Shane, staring at 54 individual index cards with names, stats, and notes about every single member of their training camp roster.

They'd made it through the first day of training camp, a morning entirely eaten up by off-ice and on-ice testing designed to push them to their limits, and were now into the days of camp that they, as captains, had to have some sort of control over. The facility would be overrun by the time Murdock's whistle blew and Scott was already just a little bit worn out from the impending chaos.

"It's fine," Shane said, shuffling a couple of the cards around in a way that probably only made sense to him, "there'll probably be five to six early cuts, then we're left with 48, you take out the vets we know will make the roster and you're left with thirty something players to divide between scrimmage teams to test out with our guys. We don't have to make the cuts, we just have to help run the camp so all we need to pay attention to is numbers."

Scott knew that. Of course he knew that. He'd been Captain for years, he'd attended training camps for years, but somehow, every single year, in the face of a pile of names of hopefuls, he forgot how relatively simple his job was. Shane saying it out loud, boiling it down to the bare bones of what they needed to get done, was incredibly helpful in getting Scott's mind to quiet down enough to feel refreshed rather than exhausted.

It also helped that some piece of what felt like his actual goddamn *soul* had steadied as soon as he was back in the same place as Carter and Shane. He'd missed them more than he'd ever thought possible over the summer break; even though they'd talked nearly every day and he'd seen Carter several times, it wasn't the same as being in the same room every single day, as having them in a place where he could reach out and touch to remind himself that they were there.

Shane's phone buzzed and he pulled it out immediately, his brow pinching in concern before he read whatever was on the screen and let out a huff of laughter.

"What's up?" Carter asked, setting aside the note card he'd been reading.

"Luke's just terrorizing Ilya," Shane said, a fond little smile on his face as he set the phone down, the screen still turned on so they could both read the messages.

Scott wasn't at all shocked to find a group chat between Shane, Luke, and Ilya, but he was a little confused by the name at the top of the screen. It was something written in Cyrillic followed by (sunny & anya fanclub).

"What does that say?" he asked, pointing toward the title.

"Family," Shane answered, "семья."

Scott probably should've been able to guess that, given the context. He smiled and then looked back down to read what'd made Shane laugh.

It was a series of texts from Luke explaining, in detail, how Ilya was slowing down in his "old age". He'd included statistics. And charts. Scott loved that child with every atom of his being.

"Why hasn't Roz made the argument that you're a month older than him yet?" Carter asked, looking nearly as amused as Scott felt as Ilya's messages just kept flooding in. They were a truly chaotic mix of threats, comments about how *Scott* was the old one while Ilya was still a child, and messages that Scott couldn't read seeing as he didn't know Russian. "Ope, there it is," Carter laughed as two screenshots came through of Google searches showing Shane and Ilya's birthdays.

Scott heard familiar laughter through the door and watched in amusement as Shane climbed to his feet and threw the door open right as Luke walked past, “Lucas McGregor,” Shane said, putting on his best Captain voice.

Luke went entirely still, like if he just stopped moving maybe Shane wouldn’t be able to see him, and then slowly turned around, a sheepish little smile on his face, “you need a middle name.”

“You made Sunny’s middle name Freddy so I think I’ll have someone else pick mine.”

“But I didn’t even get to pick Anya’s!”

“Because Anya has a traditional Russian middle name,” Shane argued back before blinking a couple of times, like he couldn’t believe he was having this conversation, “that’s beside the point. Stop terrorizing Ilya while he’s supposed to be running training camp. It’ll be less fun beating Boston if we know it’s because you’ve distracted their captain by calling him old.”

“He calls Scott old all the time,” Luke said, nearly whining at the prospect of having his fun taken away.

“I didn’t tell you to stop entirely,” Shane hedged, “just not during camp. Now, send him a picture of Sunny and tell him you miss him. He misses us but won’t admit it until one of us does first. And then go to the locker room and set a good example.”

“He misses *me*?”

Shane leaned out of the doorframe to check the hall before looking at Luke, a dead serious expression on his face that made even Scott sit up a little straighter, “never tell him I told you this. He nearly cried after we dropped you off at the airport in Ottawa. Text him, tell him you miss him, and call him Ilyusha and then later you can go back to calling him old.”

“Okay,” Luke agreed, his throat clicking with emotion as he swallowed.

He was just sort of staring at Shane, not taking either direction, and Scott really didn’t know what was happening until Shane breathed out a little sigh and held his arm out, “c’mere.”

Luke slammed into Shane's chest with enough force that he would've knocked them both over if Shane hadn't been packing on muscle like it was his full time job since March.

"We love you," Shane whispered into Luke's hair, just barely audible even in the quiet of Amanda's office, "so much. Okay?"

"Okay," Luke agreed, his voice entirely muffled against Shane's shoulder. "Love you too."

"I know," Shane said, the simple confidence in his response making Luke's shoulders drop another fraction, "you're paired with me today, by the way. And Cam's with Carter and Nicky's with Scott. We've got too many gaps with all the movement for things to get weird on day one because the young guys look like they don't know where to go."

Shane was right about that.

The addition of the Vegas team and the absolute insanity that'd happened trade-wise in the following weeks had basically stolen almost their entire middle ground.

They now had vets and rookies who were no longer actually rookies with Shane, Carter, Matti, Tommy, and Breezy stuck in the middle as the only people older than 22 and younger than 30 where they used to have a pretty even age spread. It was going to be a weird dynamic and one of the only ways to make it less weird was by showing the new recruits that their younger players were treated with as much respect as the older ones.

Scott was pretty sure you were supposed to feel more stable coming off of a Cup win. But, instead, it felt a little like everything was up in the air and they were simply waiting to see where the cards would land.

* * *

Ilya missed his husband like he would've missed a vital organ. He knew he wasn't acting like himself, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to pull it together every day he woke up in a house that was almost entirely empty. Anya made it a little better, but it wasn't the same as waking up to Shane, Anya, and Sunny or, on some of Ilya's favorite days, Shane, Anya, Sunny, and *Luke*.

The weight of missing his family had driven him to considering early retirement at least three times in the single week he'd been back in Boston.

Ilya knew that he'd miss hockey if he actually did give it up and he knew that things would even out as he got used to the new normal and as he worked more on his mental health. But, right then, as he sat in the locker room surrounded by far too many people, Ilya was about four seconds away from walking out of the building and never looking back.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by his former number one enemy and new maybe friend, "I miss him too," Hayden said quietly, settling on the bench next to Ilya without drawing attention. Ilya was certain it was a skill he'd picked up from years of pulling Shane out spirals without anyone noticing their captain was anything less than picture perfect 100% of the time, and that thought made something close to *appreciation for Hayden fucking Pike* settle in his chest. "Not the same way you do, but I get it, at least a little."

Ilya nodded, acknowledging Hayden's words, but he was still stuck in his own head and the texts in their family group chat that reminded him that Luke and Shane were in the same place weren't making the ache of missing them any easier, even though Luke calling him *Ilyusha* and saying he missed him like it was something simple to admit did nearly bring a smile to his face.

"Come over after practice," Hayden offered, "bring Anya. Jackie will want to see you."

Ilya wanted to just go home and sulk, but he knew Hayden's offer was the better option. He knew spending the entire afternoon and evening in his quiet house would only make his thoughts darker. So, he nodded his agreement and his thanks, and then forced himself into captain mode.

* * *

Shane felt a little like they were existing in a minor warzone.

Everyone was here, all 54 people on their training camp roster including the prior year's roster, AHL/ECHL contracted players, and recent draft picks who'd made the first cut after the prospect camp that'd happened earlier in the summer. It was bound to be chaos and the fact that training camps were also open to media and the public certainly wouldn't help keep things calm.

“Jesus,” Carter muttered as they looked around the over-crowded locker room. 31 of these guys would be cut from the final roster and, as much as Shane hated watching dreams die in real time, he sort of wanted to speed run the process until they were at a spot where everyone had their own stalls and there weren’t *fifty four fucking people* crowded into one room.

“Groups,” Scott said, “we just gotta divide them into groups.”

“This is objectively too many people,” Luke muttered as he glued himself to Shane’s back. He could feel Luke’s hand sneaking under his hoodie to grip onto the back of his t-shirt and hoped that no one would point it out. Luke, like Ilya, got clingy sometimes. He needed a physical reminder that he wasn’t alone and Shane was certain that if someone teased him for it, he’d force himself to stop, which meant Shane needed to put up with being crowded by a whole crew of rookies so Luke wouldn’t look out of place.

Shane scanned the crowd quickly, looking for Nick and Cameron, and finally found them tucked together in a single seat in front of Luke’s stall, likely having thought that hiding in the corner would be the safest option but, instead, it was looking a little more like they’d gotten themselves trapped.

“Nicky! Cam!” Shane shouted over the din. He didn’t even have to tell them to come over, they perked up like puppies at the sound of his voice and in the next second, they were darting through the crowd with unerring skill and latching onto him with poorly hidden excitement. “Hello, boys. Good summer?”

“Missed you,” Nick replied, tucking himself under Shane’s arm and wrapping his arms around his waist without disturbing Luke’s grip as Cameron pressed into his other side, wrapping both his arms around one of Shane’s. He’d seen them in passing the day prior but had barely had time to nod hello let alone actually speak to them so he really wasn’t shocked by the reaction. Shane sort of hoped Amanda and Christina were getting photographic evidence of this, otherwise he was certain no one would ever believe that he was willingly allowing himself to be hugged while in the most overstimulating environment known to man.

Christ.

The things he’d do for Luke Gillis.

Luke’s forehead pressed into the space between his shoulder blades firmly enough that Shane could tell he’d figured out what Shane was doing and was silently thanking him the best way he knew how.

“Damn you got jacked,” Cameron muttered, squeezing Shane’s bicep before pressing his head further into the space between Shane’s neck and shoulder like he’d somehow be able to hide from the chaos using Shane as a shield, and asking, “how do we make this less insane?”

Later, Shane would probably find it funny that three 20 and 21-year-old 6 foot tall men were making themselves small enough to cuddle him like the Pike kids did, but at the moment he was more focused on getting through this morning without any of them losing their minds.

“Scott,” Shane said, both an answer to Cameron’s question and a reminder to their captain that he was in charge.

“Fuck,” Scott muttered, “right, okay. Hey!”

The crowd fell silent and Shane felt a rush of pride at the way Scott commanded a room. That was his Captain. This person who everyone respected enough to follow without question, this person who’d been so incredibly brave, who’d done so much to change the narrative about inclusivity in hockey, who’d *kept* people’s respect even after shattering the mold.

“We’re splitting into three groups and moving between stations,” Scott announced, “group one is with me, two with Vaughny, and three with Hollzy. Lists are up in the hall; you’ve got 20 minutes to get to where you’re supposed to be. Vaughan and I will be on the ice, Shane will be in here, get a move on!”

“Cam, you’re with Carter,” Shane said, knocking his head against the top of Cameron’s and then squeezing the arm he had around Nick’s shoulders to make sure he had his attention, “and you’re with Scott. You’ve got my full permission to be menaces so long as you’re still being helpful, we want these guys to feel welcome, show them that the young guys can have our respect and still have a little fun. Got it?”

“Got it, Hollz,” Nick said, smacking an obnoxious kiss to Shane’s cheek before detaching himself and then immediately latching onto Scott who barely even reacted beyond slinging his own arm around Nick’s shoulders.

“Got it,” Cameron echoed, squeezing Shane’s arm once more before moving toward Carter.

Luke stayed at Shane's back, his face pressed into Shane's shoulder, even as the room started moving around them, "why are we not on the ice?"

"We're doing walk through and fitness first," Shane answered, tilting his head back just enough to rest it on top of Luke's, "then we'll cycle out, there's not enough space on the ice for everyone."

"How many of these people would we have to get rid of to afford Rozy's contract?"

"Our entire third line, including the defensemen."

"Well, that doesn't seem sustainable."

"No, probably not."

"You think he'd quit and be your fulltime WAG?" Luke asked, like he was genuinely considering the possibility.

"Probably, if you were the one to ask," Shane admitted, "which is why you're not gonna ask. Вы понимаете??"

"Да," Luke grumbled.

Shane huffed out a laugh and just watched as the room started to clear out before, finally, they were left with a group of only 18. Shane was more than happy to see that he had Matti and Eric in his group, meaning he had other vets who people would listen to.

"Right," Shane said, clearing his throat a little and digging into whatever reservoir of *commanding presence* he had in order to come across as a serious captain while the rookie who everyone knew lived in his home was attempting to burrow under Shane's skin. "I'm Shane Hollander, nice to meet you."

"I think they know who you are," Eric teased.

Shane shot him a playful glare before scanning the room and realizing that Murdock and Scott's final division of groups had left him with every person on the camp roster under 22. Well, aside from Matti and Eric who'd clearly been added to give him a couple of voices with authority and Nick and Cameron who'd been sent with Scott and Carter.

This felt purposeful, somehow.

Shane knew he was good with rookies, but he probably could've done without 14 of them who were looking at him like he was their god.

It also sucked because it was more than likely that most of these guys would be sent back to the minors, college, or juniors. *Maybe* one of them would be added to the 23-man roster.

But, on the other hand, that *one* will have spent their entire pre-season with Eric Bennett, the League's current top goalie, Matti Jalo, the League's current top defenseman, Luke Gillis, the most recent Rookie of the Year, and Shane Hollander, the most recent recipient of the Conn Smythe. They'll have had the ears of four members of the first line, one of whom had just finished their rookie year and could state, with irrefutable proof, that their captains always had their rookies' backs.

It was good planning, even if it meant Shane was going to have to shatter through the wall that people tended to put between themselves and their idols in order to get anywhere productive.

"I'm Canadian, Benny, I'm legally required to be polite."

"Apologies," Eric laughed before turning to the room, "I'm Eric Bennett, by the way. Might as well follow Hollzy's example. Then this is Matti Jalo, one of our defensemen, and the kiddo over there is Luke Gillis. We're all excited you're here, we know that *you're* excited you're here, but we've got a lot of shit to wade through before our first exhibition matches so let's pay attention to Shane. Cool?"

Eric got a scattered murmur of agreement in response which Shane decided to count as a win.

"We're starting in the weight room," Shane said, turning toward the door and forcing Luke to walk by his side instead of hiding behind his back, "allons-y."

“You’re not in Montréal, Hollander,” Matti laughed, slinging an arm around Shane’s shoulders and ruffling Luke’s hair as they maneuvered through the locker room door in a tangle of limbs. “Try another language.”

“さあ行こう,” Shane teased, “or how about *vamos*, right, Luke?”

“I think so,” Luke shrugged, “don’t ask me to conjugate.”

“Give us one more,” Eric called.

“Пойдем,” Shane said after taking a second to sort through the random combinations of phrases and sounds that were swimming through his head.

“Atta boy,” Matti laughed, squeezing Shane’s shoulder and then taking a step away as they filtered into the weight room.

Shane turned to address the group, ready to get this started so they could get through the day, when he felt Luke go entirely rigid next to him as he quite literally choked on air.

“What the fuck?” Shane muttered, turning to him in confusion and maybe a little concern.

Luke’s eyes were trained across the room, lit up with something that looked just a little like panic, though the blush blooming across his cheeks made Shane think it was a *specific* sort of panic.

Shane let his own gaze follow and found Conor McLaughlin, New York’s first round draft pick from the year after Luke, standing just inside the doorframe, doing a pretty shit job of appearing casual as he shot Luke a nervous little smile. Shane bit the inside of his cheek, trying not to react, as he looked past Conor and locked eyes with Eric who was already staring back at Shane with one eyebrow raised.

It took every ounce of Shane’s formidable willpower to stop himself from saying something. But he kept his mouth shut because, based on a decade of first-hand experience, he was pretty sure Luke

would lose it if Shane called attention to whatever was unfolding.

Plus, he had a training camp to run, whatever sexual awakening was happening could be handled later.

* * *

There were a lot of things Luke was learning the longer he lived with Shane.

The first had been that he was allowed to exist in common spaces. Then he'd learned that he could give and accept affection without being pushed away. Then he'd learned how to express familial love with words without worrying about attaching caveats. And, most pressingly at that very moment, he'd started to learn that maybe, just maybe, the way he'd felt about the guy he'd been randomly assigned to share a hotel room with for a week during the Admirals development camp the prior summer wasn't something to be ashamed of; that maybe constantly having to tell himself he was straight was a sign that there was something else to consider.

That was the thing that was taking him the longest to learn, the longest to push past. It was a realization that was so tangled up in the words of his parents and of youth pastors and church leaders, in things he'd heard his peers say, even in a liberal suburb of a liberal city. It was a realization he still wasn't quite ready to face, so when Shane simply squeezed his shoulders a little harder and then announced their first weight circuit, Luke let himself push it down, for at least a little longer.

* * *

Ilya sat in his car staring up at the Pike's brand new house and felt an odd sense of *wrongness* that he got to be here before Shane ever even saw it in person. He knew it wasn't a rational feeling to have, but feelings weren't always rational. He missed his husband, he knew his husband missed these people who were his family, and he still wondered, just a little, if he actually *belonged* in this space.

But Hayden had invited him and he'd already gone home to Newton to get Anya before driving over to Chestnut Hill so he should really just go inside and stop questioning everything.

"Well," Ilya breathed out, looking over his shoulder at Anya who was sitting very nicely in the back seat, just staring up at him with her curious little eyes, "давай."

He scooped Anya up and then climbed out of the car, locking it behind him and heading for the front door which opened before he even reached the steps to reveal two identical grinning faces, “Uncle Ilya!” one of them shouted and Ilya felt a little like he was about to pass out from sheer joy.

“Uncle Ilya?” he responded, his cheeks already starting to hurt from the force of his grin. God, why had he ever been questioning whether or not he should be here? “I am *Uncle* Ilya now?”

“You’re married to Uncle Shane, that makes you Uncle Ilya,” the one on the left, the one he was about 83% sure was Ruby, said, “duhh.”

“Duh,” Ilya echoed.

“Puppy!” the other one shouted, clearly having different priorities than her sister.

“Yes, yes,” Ilya laughed, “this is Anya, she is very excited to meet you. Let’s go inside, though, yes?”

Both girls scrambled back through the door, leaving it wide open for Ilya to follow them inside. He kicked off his shoes and lined them up, a habit he’d picked up after weeks in the same place as Shane, and smiled a little at how natural the action had become.

“Oh, hello,” Jackie said, appearing around the corner holding Amber. Ilya still couldn’t believe this was the first time they were *actually* meeting. He felt like he’d known this woman for years with how much Shane talked about her.

“Hello,” he replied, “thank you for having me, I hope is not too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Jackie said, waving him off, “I’m glad you’re here, it makes us less outnumbered, though Arthur may be pissed that it’s you and not Shane.”

“We can bond over missing Shane, then.”

Jackie smiled at him, something so warm it made Ilya feel like this was, somehow, *his* home too, and then led him further into the house. It was a beautiful place, already set up like they'd lived here forever, and Ilya kind of never wanted to leave. They found Hayden sitting on the floor of the living room across from Arthur who was sorting blocks into some order that probably only made sense to him. Hayden's hands were folded in his lap, like he'd already been scolded for messing up the system, and Ilya pretty immediately guessed exactly why Arthur preferred Shane.

"Pike," Ilya greeted.

"Rozanov," Hayden responded, patting the space on the floor next to him, "Arthur, bud, do you want to say hello to Uncle Ilya's dog?"

"Sunny?" Arthur asked, not looking up from his project.

"No, Anya."

"No Shane?"

"No, bud, not today, but we can call before bedtime."

Arthur squinted at the blue block he was holding for a solid five seconds before turning his gaze toward Hayden, "two stories," he announced, like it was a done deal and he had no plans of negotiating.

"I think Uncle Shane will read you two stories if you ask nicely."

"Yes," Arthur agreed, "dog now?"

Ilya liked this kid's priorities.

Shane Hollander, winning arguments, and dogs.

Ilya settled into the spot Hayden had indicated, doing his best to ignore the way his legs protested after two days of far too intense on and off-ice training, and thanked all the gods that he and Shane had been consistent with training both Anya and Sunny over the summer as Anya simply sat down in front of him and waited for Arthur to come to her. Sunny was a naturally calm dog, only getting really excited every once in a while even in her “teen” years, but Anya was a hyper little thing when she wanted to be, especially the more she grew and the longer she spent with Ilya. She was smart, though, and took to training easily.

Arthur set down the block he’d been holding and scooted forward before pausing, staring at Anya for several seconds in total silence, and then pressing his forehead against hers in some sort of greeting.

Anya sat still for a moment before darting her tongue out to lick Arthur’s nose which made him giggle as he leaned back and patted her on the head.

“Soft hands, buddy,” Hayden reminded him gently.

Ilya felt movement to his right and looked over to find Ruby and Jade sitting down next to him, just quietly waiting their turn to pet Anya. Ilya blinked a couple of times, trying to figure out how Hayden Pike, the man he’d recently watched run naked into Lake Ontario on a drunken dare, had raised such well-behaved children.

He reckoned Jackie probably had a lot to do with it.

* * *

Shane looked up from his phone, where he’d been staring at a picture Jackie had sent of Ilya sitting on their couch with Ruby and Jade cuddled up at his sides, watching Moana with more interest than he’d probably ever admit, when Luke sat down next to him with a huff.

“What’s up, bud?” Shane asked.

“I’m going to tell you several things but first I need you to promise not to commit any federal crimes.”

“Only federal crimes?”

“No crimes,” Luke amended, “I don’t know why I specified.”

“Can I ask someone else to commit the crimes for me?”

“No because that would be solicitation and that’s also a crime.”

Shane decided he should probably take this seriously if Luke was pulling out actual criminal law.

“No crimes,” Shane promised. “You can tell me anything, Luke. Nothing you tell me would make me kick you out, nothing you tell me would make me love you less. I promise.”

“Nothing?”

“Luke, you could murder someone in cold blood and I would help you hide the body. I’d probably ask what drove you to kill someone, but you’d still have a bed to fall asleep in and you’d still have my love, no matter what.”

“I grew up in a really religious household,” Luke started, and Shane stayed quiet, knowing that that wasn’t what Luke needed to tell him. “Like not the good kind of religion, where you have a community and a faith to fall back on, but the sort of religion that’s weaponized. I don’t know what, exactly, I believe in, but I do know that I believe in being kind and in loving your neighbor and knowing that anyone, from any walk of life, deserves love.

“My parents, though, they believed in conformity. In forcing perfection. I was a prop to them, something that need to fit their vision of a perfect, pious child. In life, in hockey. I wasn’t allowed to make mistakes. I’m an only child which I’m thankful for. It would’ve been nice having someone to lean on, but I also think it might’ve sucked. Having someone else they could compare me to, you know?

“Anyways. I did a good job, I think, living up to their standards. I was never good *enough*, but at least I wasn’t a failure. Then, last summer, I came down for prospect camp and I ended up rooming with McLaughlin. Some pictures came out from the different media outlets that were there, just us chatting, looking friendly, nothing out of the ordinary, but, for some reason, my dad *saw* something. I really don’t know what, specifically, set him off. But when I got home, he asked if I had *feelings* for him. I didn’t think I did, I was so deep in the headspace of being who they wanted me to be that I’d never have even *considered* it, but I didn’t answer fast enough and he decided that was an answer itself.

“He kicked me out of the house that night with nothing but a duffle and a black eye. I went to Drew’s, stayed there until season started and then I played my ass off through training camp and made the 23-man roster and I never looked back.

“You gave me a home, Shane. And you showed me that I deserve love and that looking at love different from how my parents wanted me to isn’t wrong. I don’t know what I am, but I don’t think having to repeat *I’m straight* like a fucking mantra is a sign that that’s the truth.”

“I love you,” Shane said immediately, needing Luke to hear it while he took a second to process everything he’d just been told. “You don’t have to figure out what you are now, or ever, really. All you have to do is try your best to be happy. I hate that I promised no crimes, by the way.”

“That’s why I made you promise before I started talking.”

“Smart,” Shane said, huffing out a soft laugh. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I wanted you to know,” Luke said with a little shrug.

Shane held up his arm and Luke immediately scrambled across the couch to cuddle up against his side.

“This is your home,” Shane said, pressing his nose into Luke’s hair and holding on tighter, “this house, specifically, but also wherever I am. I don’t care if one of us gets traded, I don’t care if you decide to retire early and fuck off to Timbuktu, you will always be able to come home to wherever I am. I promise that. And I don’t care who you have feelings for, so long as they’re good to you. I don’t care if it’s another player, clearly, I don’t care who they are. I’ll go toe to toe with Crowell for you any day of the week so love whoever you wanna love, Luke, even if you think it might be trouble.”

“I think you’ve set a bad example,” Luke teased.

“Hey, you don’t have a rival to hook up with in a CCM-sponsored hotel room. Whatever you do is already a less insane idea than any idea I ever had,” Shane said, pressing a kiss to the top of Luke’s head before settling back against the couch. He was exhausted, both from two intense days of training and from the slight emotional roller coaster he’d been on since Ilya drove back toward Boston a week prior, and he was certain Luke had to be exhausted as well. “But every bad decision I ever made led me to my husband who I love a stupid amount so I will happily support all of your decisions, good, bad, insane, or otherwise, as they come.”

“You won’t tell anyone what I told you, right?” Luke asked, his voice muffled against Shane’s chest.

“Not even Ilya,” Shane promised, “it’s up to you if you tell him, though you will need to exact a no crimes promise from him as well.”

“I know,” Luke said. “Maybe I’ll tell him someday. I don’t know. I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

“That’s okay. I don’t think any of us ever really know what we’re doing.”

Luke nodded and then reached across Shane for the remote, turning the TV onto whatever random movie channel they’d left it on the night before. It was half way through *Pitch Perfect* which, for some godforsaken reason, was a movie Luke *loved* and Shane resigned himself to having acapella mash-ups stuck in his head for the foreseeable future.

He really would do anything for this kid.

Chapter 44: stanley cup day

Chapter Notes

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

September 2017

“Can I follow you two home?” Scott asked as they filed out of the locker room at the end of the day on their final day of camp before preseason games began. They were down to a 40-man roster which made their days a little easier but Scott was still exhausted and he really just didn’t want to drive all the way into the city yet, especially when he knew Kip wouldn’t be home for hours. Also, he had something he wanted to run by Shane.

“Yeah, course,” Shane agreed easily. “Something up or you just wanna hang out?”

“Little of both,” Scott responded.

“Can we pick up dinner first?” Luke asked, holding onto the handle of Shane’s gear bag as they moved down the hall, looking just a little bit like a kid gripping onto their mother’s purse as to not get lost in a crowd.

“We have food at home,” Shane said.

“Ugh,” Luke groaned, “Ilyusha would let me get take out.”

Shane paused, causing Luke to run straight into his back, and then looked over his shoulder, “did you seriously just pull that?”

“I did, yes.”

“Every day we get closer to him calling you Lucas Ilyich.”

“Maybe I should update my player card,” Luke said, “Lucas Ilyich Hollander-Rozanov has a nice ring to it.”

“Never say that out loud again unless you want adult adoption papers awaiting your signature to appear out of thin air.”

“You think we could fit the whole last name on our jerseys or would we have to choose?” Luke asked as Shane started down the hall again, looking some strange mix of contemplative and amused. “If I had to choose I’d use Hollander, just by the way.”

“I’m honored.”

“I vote you two adopt me then we get rid of our third line, pick up Rozy’s contract, and create a Hollander-Rozanov triple threat powerplay that will make all of our opponents shit their pants.”

“That’s the League’s nightmare, in more ways than one.”

“The League needs to get its homophobic head out of its homophobic ass,” Luke grumbled, “it’s not a hat.”

Scott blinked a couple of times before cocking his head, “did you just reference Pitch Perfect?”

“We’ve watched it three times,” Shane said, shouldering the door open and tugging Luke, who still had a hand wrapped around the strap of his bag, along with him. “This week.”

“That’s a lot.”

“Yes,” Shane agreed. “Though it’s better than when Ilya made me watch Tokyo Drift 8 days in a row last month.”

“That’s not even the best Fast and Furious movie,” Luke said, his brow scrunched in confusion.

“Don’t tell him that.”

Scott really wasn't sure what went on in the Hollander-Rozanov-Gillis family, but he found himself quite happy that they'd found each other.

He wasn't at all shocked when Shane acquiesced to Luke's request for takeout before they even got to their cars. He was rather glad that Shane always folded immediately at Luke's puppy dog eyes seeing as that meant he got to eat pasta from the Italian place down the road instead of whatever chicken and rice was meal prepped in Shane and Luke's fridge.

Shane called in their order and Scott offered to pick it up while Shane and Luke drove ahead to take Sunny out. The timing worked perfectly; Scott pulled into their driveway with their dinner just as they were walking back up the road. He followed them into their house and smiled a little as he pulled dishes out of Shane's cupboards; something about knowing where everything was, about being accepted into this house like it was somewhere he could call home, always made him just a little giddy.

"Alright, what's up?" Shane asked after they'd all started eating.

"We're the only ones who haven't done our Cup days," Scott said.

Normally, players' days with the Cup happened over the summer, in the interim between the final and the first days of preseason, and everyone had followed that trend except for Shane and Scott. He was fairly certain that Shane just hadn't been sure what to do for his in a new city but Scott's issue was more that he couldn't decide between two options.

Luke had brought the Cup to the block party at Camp Anchor, a day camp for special needs children that his friend Drew works at every summer in Lido Beach. Carter had gone to the children's hospital at NYU Langone while Greg had gone to the one at Presbyterian and Cale had gone to the one at Mount Sinai. The Cup had appeared at neighborhood parties, summer hockey camps, and college visits.

Scott, though, was stuck.

There was a place called The Center over in Greenwich Village that Scott knew to be a pillar of the NYC LGBTQ+ community but there was also a place called the Ali Forney Center, it was maybe a little less well-known but it was an organization that was committed to assisting queer youth in the

city, specifically those young people who'd been kicked out of their homes, who were homeless or otherwise at risk.

Scott wanted to give back to the community somehow, in a way that felt meaningful, and he couldn't decide where to give his focus.

But then Kip had reminded him that Shane hadn't done his Cup day yet and maybe, just maybe, even if he wasn't ready to come out publicly, he might be willing to be seen as a *staunch* ally.

So, Scott started rambling.

He told Shane about both organizations, about how he hadn't been able to decide, about how he wanted to make it a decently big deal to try and call attention and help bring in donations, and then he asked, "so, would you maybe consider doing your Cup day at one and I do the other?"

Scott watched Shane meet Luke's eye, watched them have an entirely silent conversation that ended in both of them starting to tear up which was *not* what Scott had been expecting, and then Shane cleared his throat and said, "I'll do my day at the Ali Forney Center. And I think I'll come out this year, properly. Maybe on our Pride Night. We'll see."

"Shane," Luke whispered, his voice a little choked, "you sure?"

"Yeah," Shane said, nodding once, decisive. "Anything to make it safer for others."

NHL Pride Nights across the League were scheduled for February, meaning Shane had time to come up with a plan, but Scott still wasn't quite sure what'd pushed him to make that decision when he'd been against it only a few short months prior.

He had to wonder if it might have something to do with the kid staring at him like he'd hung the stars.

* * *

"I am stealing a rookie," Ilya announced as soon as the call connected.

“I think that’s called kidnapping,” Shane said, double checking that Luke had everything he needed before locking the front door behind them and heading toward the car. They had their first preseason game against Brooklyn that night and Shane would be watching from the press box, scratched along with most of the other vets to give the new people on their 40-man preseason roster a chance to play. Luke would be taking Shane’s spot at starting center so they could test out wingers and, with all three of their captains in the box, he’d also be wearing Shane’s A.

There’d been about five minutes where Shane had thought he’d convinced their equipment team to just let him wear Shane’s whole jersey but then someone had reminded him that their uniforms had to have the surname that was registered with the League which had led to Luke pouting for ten full minutes before getting distracted by Sunny.

“Is not kidnapping if he comes willingly,” Ilya said, pulling Shane back to the issue at hand. Namely, Ilya ‘stealing’ a rookie.

“You’re talking about Haas, right?” Shane asked, climbing into the back seat of the town car. Luke shot him a questioning look, trying to figure out what he was talking about, and Shane pulled the phone away from his ear to show who was calling. Luke rolled his eyes a little, a fond smile on his face as he nodded in understanding and then turned back to his own phone.

Ilya hadn’t shut up about Luca Haas for a week.

The kid had been drafted second overall by the Centaurs in 2016 - one spot ahead of Conor McLaughlin - but had ended up being traded to Boston for their backup goalie in the League-wide shuffle that’d happened over the summer. He was shy, incredibly smart, and at least half in love with Ilya, so Shane really wasn’t all that shocked to hear that Ilya had taken him under his wing.

Shane had considered billeting any of their rookies that made the final roster but had eventually decided it against it seeing as the one most likely to make the roster was Conor and moving Luke’s crush into their house while he was still skittish and shying away from childhood shadows felt like a pretty shitty thing to do.

Ilya, though, had a massive house in the Boston suburbs he’d bought after moving out of his Beacon Hill penthouse that was empty except for himself and Anya.

“Yes,” Ilya confirmed. “He will make final roster, he is very fast. Good player, you will like him.”

“Is this your way of asking me if it’s okay for you to billet?”

“Maybe.”

“Of course it is, Ilya,” Shane laughed, “I’ve got Luke, you take Luca.”

“They have matching names, very cute.”

“Very cute,” Shane agreed, “you guys make it to Quebec City alright?”

“Yes. Wish we were actually in Montreal, though, then I would not have to stay in hotel. Marly, Pike, and I are all scratched, I think management was worried about us killing someone before regular season even started.”

“Yeah, I’m really not looking forward to playing them this season. Can you keep an eye on Hayden? If he escapes the press box he’ll find someone to fight and I don’t want to have to bail both of you out of jail.”

“Yes, we will behave for one night, just for you, любимый.”

“Thank you,” Shane said, rolling his eyes at the way Ilya made that sound like it’d be the hardest thing either of them ever did. “I’m texting Cliff and telling him the same thing.”

“Ugh,” Ilya huffed, clearly realizing his loophole had been found. “Is Luke okay? WAGs are asking for updates and I am in charge of both of you.”

“Luke’s in perfect shape,” Shane assured him, getting a thumbs up from Luke as well once he figured out what was being asked. “He’s stealing my A for the night. And my position.”

“Ah, I am a proud father. Tell him good luck, I have to go for meetings but I will call later, yes?”

“Yeah, sounds good. Люблю тебя, Ilyusha.”

“Love you too, любимый. And Luke, tell him, oh, never mind, I will text him.”

“Alright,” Shane agreed, smiling to himself. He was so in love. “Bye.”

“Bye,” Ilya echoed and then the line went dead.

Luke’s phone buzzed several times in quick succession and Shane watched a grin spread across his face at whatever Ilya had sent.

* * *

Luke was buzzing as he lined up for the faceoff for their sixth and final preseason game. Shane and Scott had played a game each, but he’d gotten to play the other four as starting center. He knew it was just to test out wingers, but wearing Shane’s A on his chest and doing justice to his spot felt *good*. It felt like he was in control of what was happening on the ice which was something he’d only ever felt while lined up to Shane’s left with Carter across the ice.

Now, though, he had Conor to his right and Nick to his left and all he had to do was win this game before they got a week off. He knew he’d make the final roster. He was on the first line, he’d scored in the Stanley Cup Final and won Rookie of the Year, his only job was giving everyone else on the ice a chance to prove themselves. He just had to feed pucks and facilitate plays.

Philadelphia was using the opportunity to test their preferred final line-ups but Luke refused to let the fact that their *actual* first line would be going up against Luke (who rarely ever played center), their third line left wing, and a rookie right wing deter him.

He was consistent in each face-off, had the assist on the first goal of the game, and put up a goal himself in the second, and when the buzzer rang on a 2-1 win for the Admirals, he felt like he’d finally found his footing on his own.

Luke hadn't even realized what he'd been doing until he was sat next to Shane on the team bus, headed back toward New York, scrolling through his phone.

It was a post on the Admiral's official Twitter, two pictures side by side, captioned *genetics are crazy*. The one on the left was Shane in a white New York away jersey, the A on his chest, standing at the gates at the end of their last regular season game against Philadelphia the prior season, holding out his fist to see everyone off the ice. It was a tradition he'd kept from Montreal, even after he was no longer captain, and they'd all just fallen into it without question. The photo on the right was Luke doing the exact same thing, in the exact same jersey.

It felt good to be compared to family in a positive way, even if there was no genetic connection between himself and Shane. Amanda's caption was meant as a joke, but, to Luke, it meant so much more.

"What's that?" Shane asked, his voice pitched lower as the bus settled into post-game quiet.

Luke tilted his phone so Shane could see and watched a soft smile tug at Shane's lips, the smile that always made Luke feel at home.

"Ah, very cute, сынок," Shane said, an almost teasing lilt to his voice as if Luke couldn't tell just how much Shane loved the comparison, as if he couldn't tell exactly how much Shane loved *him*.

"Can I come with for your Cup day?"

Shane studied him for a second, likely trying to parse out why Luke was asking now, or why he was asking permission at all, and then nodded, "of course you can," and that would've been enough for Luke to allow himself the freedom, but then Shane said, "you're always welcome wherever I'm at, Luke. You know that." And Luke didn't know what to do other than melt against Shane's side.

* * *

They had a week between their final preseason game and their first regular season game. A week where the team was locked in, trying to figure out their final roster and making sure everything was ready for when their lives kicked into high gear, but in the middle of that week, they found a minute to celebrate their final two days with the Stanley Cup.

On Thursday, Scott showed up to The Center with the Cup and every member of their Cup-winning team who'd been in town without any pressing plans. They'd made a small media circus out of it, with all of them posting on Twitter and the official account giving updates throughout the day and Shane knew that the amount of money they raised would make a real difference to the community.

Friday was just as rowdy except they didn't invade one of the Ali Forney Center's locations, they hosted a field trip for anyone who wanted to come out to Tarrytown. The Ali Forney Center wasn't just one building like The Center, it was separated out to allow the people they helped independence and privacy. There was a central office, a headquarters, but that was where a lot of their crisis management and counseling services happened and Shane didn't think that invading that space with 20 rowdy hockey players was a great plan.

So, instead, the director helped them organize an outing.

Scott and Carter met their team charter bus at headquarters and bussed everyone who'd signed up for the trip from Midtown out to Irvington on Friday morning where they met the rest of the team.

"Thank you for doing this," Luke said softly as he helped Shane unbox some of the merch their PR team had set aside for community events like this.

"Of course," Shane responded, making sure the pile of shirts he'd just pulled out were properly sorted by size. "It's a good organization."

He and Luke both knew how much more it meant, but neither of them needed to speak that aloud.

Their bus rolled in with a couple dozen teenagers and Shane watched his teammates immediately light up, watched as all of them did everything they could to make these kids feel welcomed. They toured around the facility, they spent time on the ice, they took pictures with the cup and answered every question that was asked with the utmost sincerity and Shane made a note to find a way for them to stay involved with the organization.

"I want to start a charity, or something, I don't know how to define it," Scott said, sidling up next to Shane against the boards as they watched Huff teach a teenage girl how to skate like it was the single most important thing he'd ever done. "Something about inclusivity in hockey."

“Ilya and I are starting a foundation,” Shane offered, “we’re focusing on mental health, but we’re planning to do hockey camps as our major fundraiser. Maybe we could team up? Do camps in New York for yours and in Ottawa and Boston for ours?”

“Yeah,” Scott agreed, shooting Shane a bright grin, “I like that idea.”

Chapter End Notes

Ali Forney Center:

<https://www.aliforneycenter.org/about-us>

The Center:

<https://gaycenter.org/about/>

Other Resources:

The Trevor Project: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/>

Human Rights Campaign: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/direct-online-and-phone-support-services-for-lgbtq-youth>

LGBT National Helpline (US): 888-843-4564

LGBT National Youth Talkline (US): 800-246-7743

Chapter 45: season opener

Chapter Notes

this chapter is for ao3 user vsm and for ao3 user vsm only.

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

October 2017

“I feel crazy,” Luke muttered, flopping down on the bench next to Shane.

Sunny was curled up at Shane’s feet, biding time before she got dragged away by Amanda to sit up in the press box, but Shane was sort of wondering if they could just keep her on the bench for emotional support.

It was his first home opener playing for the Admirals which really shouldn’t have felt like a big deal seeing as he’d already won a Cup with them, but his brain hadn’t quite gotten the memo.

Luke, apparently, was on somewhat of the same wave length.

“Me too,” Shane replied, leaning back in his stall. The locker room was mostly empty. They’d gotten here early because Shane was a Captain and Luke was technically listed as one of their four allotted Alternates so, even though he’d only wear the A in games where Shane or Carter didn’t, he’d insisted on tagging along instead of arriving at a rational time with the rest of their teammates.

“Why do I feel like I’ve never played a game of hockey before?” Luke asked, leaning down to pet Sunny who sort of just flopped over so Luke could reach her belly. “I played every preseason game, I should not be this nervous right now.”

“It’ll be fine as soon as we get on the ice,” Shane promised, not quite sure whether he was trying to reassure himself or Luke. Probably both.

The pregame playlist was on and the eclectic mixture of music really wasn’t helping Shane feel any more normal about ... anything going on around him. The fact that their team consisted almost entirely of 20 year olds and guys over 30 meant that season’s playlist had become a rather insane

amalgamation of what Carter lovingly called ‘divorced dad music’ and stuff that wouldn’t have been out of place at a frat party. Shane sincerely doubted anyone actually cultivating a normal playlist would have Travis Scott immediately followed by Green Day but that was apparently where they were at.

“What the fuck are we listening to?” Cameron asked as he and Nick strolled into the room. They both dropped their bags in front of their stalls and then immediately threw themselves onto the ground next to Sunny. Shane could see Amanda taking pictures out of the corner of his eye and knew that Shane and his ‘ducklings’ would be all over Twitter within minutes. It wasn’t really a burden, though. Shane loved these guys, even if they constantly invaded his house and made him buy disgusting snacks like Cheetos and Gushers. At the very least, he got rid of them when they wanted to swim. His house didn’t have a pool. Eric’s did, though, and Shane was pretty sure he was beginning to regret that.

“I don’t know,” Shane answered, suddenly very glad he’d remembered to throw a lint roller in his bag as he watched Sunny shed all over Cameron and Nick’s game day suits.

“I wasn’t expecting *you* to know,” Nick laughed, looking up at Shane with bright eyes and a teasing smile. “Mr. Only Listens to White Noise.”

“Hey,” Shane complained, not quite able to stop himself from smiling in return, “I also listen to podcasts.”

“Right,” Nick said seriously, nodding his head, “of course.”

“Brat,” Shane muttered, flicking his ear and getting a laugh out of all three of his not-quite rookies. The familiar rhythm of their conversation calmed his nerves and he felt himself becoming more and more steady as the minutes passed and by the time the locker room started to truly fill up, Shane was back on even footing. He passed Sunny’s lead over to Amanda and then finished getting ready. He made it through pregame media and skated his way through warmups and cheered after Scott’s speech and then they were back on the ice and the anthem was playing and then he was at the dot, facing off against Colorado’s center and winning the first puck drop of their regular season.

* * *

Ilya’s game days looked different now but it was a good sort of different.

Luca had made the roster and then he'd moved into Ilya's house and the kid was so shy, so enamored by Ilya's presence, that Ilya was a little worried he wouldn't be able to make an actual connection but then he'd realized that he was just dealing with a mini Shane Hollander who sometimes muttered to himself in Swiss German.

After that, it'd become *much* easier to form a bond.

Luca liked things in a particular order, he liked things to be predictable, he did *not* like when things felt out of control or when he felt like he was missing something or being left behind. He never complained, but Ilya knew how to spot it after a decade of knowing and loving Shane. He could see the way Luca's smile dimmed when he felt like he was missing the punchline of a joke, he could see the way his jaw clenched when something didn't go the way he'd been expecting, and Ilya quickly learned how to make it better.

He explained jokes under his breath and delighted in the way Luca would grin at him in response, he did what he could to make sure their schedule was spelled out and then carefully followed and felt a strong rush of pride when he could see the way Luca's shoulders dropped and his expression relaxed, he offered options instead of leaving open ended decisions and watched as Luca started to show more and more of his personality as his stressors were taken away.

Their season opener was at home against Nashville and Ilya made sure to explain his normal game day routine in the small break they had between preseason and the regular season and he paid close attention to the way Luca reacted to every step.

"I can come early with you?" Luca had asked, for a second time, after Ilya had laid out the schedule.

"Yes," Ilya had confirmed easily. He'd noticed that Luca liked to give himself time to settle in to new places, he liked being prepared, he did not like being caught off guard. Ilya sort of wondered if this was how Shane had felt with Luke; if he'd seen a mini Ilya Rozanov and decided it was his responsibility to protect him from a world that didn't quite get it. Luke wasn't the *exact* same as Ilya and Luca wasn't the *exact* same as Shane, but there were enough similarities that Ilya found it difficult not to notice.

"I would like that," Luca had decided. He was so young it made Ilya feel a little ancient. He was 18, fresh out of juniors and probably would've been playing another year of minors if the whole League hadn't been scrambled over the summer. Ilya felt an almost visceral need to protect him, to make sure that no one made him feel bad for being so young, that no one made him shut off the pieces of himself that could be seen as soft or naïve like Shane had in Montreal.

And that had been that.

Now, they were strolling into TD Garden for their first game and Ilya dropped Luca off in the locker room and then went through his routine. He felt good about this season. They'd played well through the preseason, they'd built up a promising roster with solid depth, the vibes in the locker room were good and, even though not everyone knew about him and Shane *yet*, a lot of people did and the rest would be told whenever Ilya decided to tell them or, at absolute latest, when they played New York in November.

Ilya, for the first time in his entire professional career, didn't feel alone.

* * *

It wasn't until a week and a half later, at a team gathering on their single day off after a three game roadie to Colorado, Arizona, and Vegas, that Ilya realized he wasn't the only person who saw Shane in their new rookie.

He walked back into Cliff's backyard from helping refill the coolers to find Hayden happily sitting on the edges of the gathering at Luca's side with Arthur on his lap. Hayden seemed to be listening carefully to whatever Luca was rambling about and Ilya recognized the expression immediately; it was the look he'd seen on Hayden's face every time Shane started talking about something he didn't even sort of understand but was pretending to enjoy anyways. The man was a good friend. And that fact was starting to piss Ilya off less and less as time went on.

Arthur's attention snagged on Ilya immediately and Ilya couldn't help but grin as his little face lit up with joy. He'd gotten over the fact that Ilya wasn't Shane pretty quickly and even though he still, in his precious toddler way, continued to make it clear that Shane remained his favorite, he was more than happy to tolerate Ilya's presence.

"Hello, малыш," Ilya greeted, reaching out for Arthur as he approached their little trio. Arthur squirmed out of Hayden's grip and Hayden passed him over in an easy show of trust that shocked Ilya every single time. He kept waiting for Hayden to change his mind, to start saying that there were so many better options for Shane out there and that he should leave Ilya behind, but it hadn't happened and Ilya was starting to think it never would.

Arthur happily cuddled up against Ilya's chest when he picked him up and Ilya wasn't even sort of shocked when the first words out of the kids mouth were, "Uncle Shane?"

“Ah, of course,” Ilya teased. He couldn’t even be mad about it. He and Arthur were very much aligned in their priorities. “Should we call him?”

Arthur’s big blue eyes lit up with so much joy that Ilya immediately pulled out his phone and FaceTimed Shane without taking the time to check their family Google calendar to make sure he wasn’t at practice and without paying any regard to the fact that several of his teammates, including the rookie currently living in his house, hadn’t yet been told about the fact that Ilya was married.

He really needed to get around to telling Luca, he sort of just kept forgetting.

It was that thought that had Ilya holding his phone so only Arthur’s face was visible. Shane wouldn’t be able to get annoyed with Ilya’s apparent inability to take this seriously when faced with his objectively adorable godson.

The moment Shane’s face filled the screen Arthur let out a sound of unfettered glee that caught the attention of just about every single person in the backyard.

“Uncle Shane!” he shouted, reaching one little hand out to hold onto Ilya’s phone like he could somehow snatch Shane right off the screen. Ilya understood the impulse on a soul-deep level.

Shane’s hair was damp and sticking out in all directions like he’d just gotten off the ice and the chatter in the background further confirmed that he was in the locker room, likely having just finished practice, and Ilya felt a little bad about interrupting his day but Shane was grinning so he decided he didn’t really need to feel all that bad.

“Arthur!” Shane responded, easily matching his enthusiasm. “Did you steal Uncle Ilya’s phone?”

Apparently Shane’s voice had either carried through the crowd or the Pike kids all had some sort of internal honing beacon for their favorite uncle (or, according to several individuals on the internet and sometimes Jackie Pike herself, their third parent) because Jade and Ruby all but materialized out of the shadows just as Luke’s voice asked, “who are we talking to?” from somewhere off screen.

He appeared in frame a moment later, pressing their sweaty heads together in a way that would’ve set Shane off if it’d been anyone but Luke, “oh! Arthur! Hello, good sir. How are you today?”

“Is that Shane?” Ruby asked.

“Yes,” Ilya answered, “do you want to say hello?”

Both girls nodded excitedly and Ilya decided to just plop down on the ground so they could get a better view of his phone. He settled Arthur more comfortably on his lap and smiled to himself as Jade and Ruby both cuddled up to his sides. He knew they were just getting as close as they could to see Shane but it also felt like they were there for *him*, like they trusted him enough to snuggle up.

“Hi girls,” Shane greeted while Luke made funny faces over his shoulder, getting giggles out of all three kids. “I just got done with practice but I still have a meeting to go to so I can’t talk long but I can call tonight and read stories, is that okay?”

“Yes!” Jade responded immediately before looking back at Hayden with absolutely *lethal* puppy dog eyes that Ilya would bet his entire car collection she’d learned from Shane, “he can call for bedtime, right?”

“He calls like three times a week I don’t know why you think you need to beg,” Hayden said, his smile somewhere between affectionate and amused.

Jade scrunched her nose a little and then shrugged, “true,” she said, turning back toward the screen, “you’re all gross, Holly.”

“I just got off the ice,” Shane said, grinning a little as he shook his head in amusement, “anyone else here you wanna say hi to or can I go shower?”

“Who’s there?” Ruby asked, clearly taking Shane’s question seriously.

Shane looked away from the camera to scan the room, “ah, Carter, Scott, Eric, Conor, Tommy, and Breezy.”

Ruby considered her options for a moment before deciding, “tell them all I say hi but I don’t need to talk to any of them myself.”

“I will,” Shane promised, biting his cheek to keep himself from laughing, “love you all, I’ll call later, okay?”

“Okay,” the girls agreed before scrambling back up. They both threw shouts of *love you, Uncle Shane* over their shoulders as they ran back toward whatever they’d been doing before they heard Shane’s voice.

“Okay,” Shane echoed before focusing back on Arthur, “*allo, mon etoile,*” he cooed, causing Arthur to giggle in response. “How’s your Uncle Ilya? Is he being nice?”

“I am always nice,” Ilya insisted. His heart felt like it’d gone gooey as he watched Shane interact with Arthur. He didn’t think he’d survive watching it in person. He’d barely survived it back in Tampa and it’d only be worse now that his brain knew it was safe to actually feel the emotions.

“You are not,” Shane responded, sending Ilya a fond look all his own. Ilya could hear Scott’s voice somewhere in the background, far enough away from the phone that he couldn’t quite make out the words but Ilya could guess he was telling Shane and Luke to get a move on. “Okay, I have to go. I’ll call you later, too, Ilyusha. Я тебя люблю.”

“Я тебя люблю,” Ilya echoed, “both of you.”

“Love you, Rozy,” Luke said, shooting Ilya a grin and then disappearing from view.

“Bye,” Shane added with a dorky little wave that made Ilya want to marry him again. How many times could you marry one person? Ilya was going to have to Google that. It felt like important information for him to have. The call cut out and Ilya turned back toward Hayden and Luca. Hayden was just sort of grinning like he still couldn’t quite believe that this was their reality but Luca was staring at Ilya like he’d never seen him before.

“Was that Shane Hollander?” Luca asked, blinking rapidly like that’d make the pieces click together.

“Yes,” Ilya answered, purposefully obtuse because life was simply more fun that way.

“They’re like best friends,” Connors supplied from somewhere behind Ilya. “I have no fuckin clue how Hollzy puts up with him, though.”

“Yeah,” Cliff snorted, apparently unable to help himself, “best friends.”

“Are we really doing this right now?” Hayden muttered, running a hand down his face in clear exhaustion.

Ilya looked around the backyard. Most of the team was there along with their wives, girlfriends, and various children. Some of them already knew. Shane’s entire team knew and Ilya had permission to tell his team, as well. He’d wanted to wait until Shane was with him, until they played New York in a month, but this was a golden opportunity and Ilya didn’t feel like waiting any longer. He wanted everyone to know; he wanted them to know that Shane was *his*, that he’d married the most incredible person he’d ever met, that he was happier than he’d ever been. He wanted them to know that he’d spent his summer in a cottage outside Ottawa with his favorite person and their dogs. He wanted them to know that he’d become so enmeshed in Shane’s life that they had a shared calendar, that he was in the Hollander(-Rozanov) group chat, that they had a “family” group chat with the two of them and Luke.

“Shane is my best friend, yes,” Ilya said, holding onto Arthur a little tighter like maybe he could soak up some of Shane’s comfort through his godson. “He is also my husband.”

The backyard went dead silent. Everyone who already knew was grinning at him in support and those who hadn’t either looked like they were trying to figure out if he was joking or like they’d simply lost all ability to process thoughts. Ilya really didn’t know why this was so shocking, they did a really poor job of hiding how they felt about each other and, really, who would be a better match for Ilya than the person who’d been his match his entire career?

“Husband?” Connors asked, like he just needed to make sure he’d heard Ilya correctly.

“Yes,” Ilya confirmed, “we got married in May.”

“Congrats, man,” Wyatt Hayes, their new goalie and one of Ilya’s new favorite people, said. “Is this a secret or what’s the protocol?”

This was why Ilya liked Wyatt.

He was so steady, so practical, it made even big things like (officially) coming out to his team and admitting he was married to their former biggest rival feel almost easy.

“The League does not know,” Ilya admitted, “teams know. New York has known since day before their Cup parade. Coaches know. But we do not think that, ah,” he trailed off, clearing his throat a little to give himself a second to calm down. He really didn’t think now was the time to launch into a rant about everything he hated about the Commissioner, about how he knew they wouldn’t be given anywhere near as much grace as Scott had. “We do not think the League will be so kind, so we are waiting until I have Canadian passport, just in case.”

Wyatt winced, likely seeing the bigger picture even though Ilya hadn’t listed details, “well, I’ve got your backs. I haven’t really met Hollander properly beyond that night in Vegas but he seems like a good guy. Well, outside of having to be the one to block his shots he seems like a good guy.”

“Yes, my Shane is very good,” Ilya said with a hum and a proud little grin. “He will be glad I told you, now he can stop talking about himself in WAG chat.”

“Oh my god,” Claire Feller said before letting out an almost hysterical laugh, “he’s been talking about himself in the third person for months. Fuck that must’ve been confusing.”

“For the record, I knew,” Camille St-Simon said, looking a little smug.

“*That’s* why you were all thirsting over his posts?”

“Yes ma’am,” Camille confirmed.

“That makes so much sense,” Claire laughed. “Wait, who were you guys talking about adding to the chat? One of his friends was possibly talking to Cliff?”

Cliff’s whole face went bright red and Ilya just grinned, more than happy to let the attention shift to his best friend. Honestly, the fact that Cliff had landed Rose Landry was bigger news. Well, maybe not, but Ilya was going to take the reprieve he’d been offered.

“Not just his friend,” Ilya said, gleefully ignoring the glare Cliff shot him. “His ex.”

“I hate you,” Cliff muttered but he was starting to smile so Ilya knew he wasn’t actually in trouble. Cliff had honestly been doing a shit job with his soft launch (not that Ilya could really be one to talk considering the only way you could still call what he and Shane were doing a “soft launch” was by arguing that it was a soft launch of a *relationship* and that, really, everything they were posting was completely and totally normal for two friends) (it wasn’t) (but that didn’t mean Ilya was going to stop) and everyone pretty much already knew who he was dating, they were simply waiting for confirmation before they started chirping.

“Cliff’s dating Shane’s ex?” Carmichael asked, head tilted in confusion, “the only person Hollander’s publicly dated is Rose Lan-... no.”

“Yes,” Cliff said, looking skyward. His face was so red it looked like he’d spent a full week in the Florida sun without sunscreen. “I’m dating Rose Landry.”

“He thanked Shane for being gay,” Ilya added in the spare second of silence before everyone started yelling over each other trying to get answers.

Ilya loved this team so damn much.

Chapter End Notes

sorry about the delay i briefly became very, very important at work.

Chapter 46: cross my heart

Chapter Notes

title from "seven" by taylor swift :)

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

October 2017

Luca waited until they were in the car driving home to unleash his spiral upon an already smirking Ilya Rozanov.

“*Shane Hollander?*” he choked out after several seconds of sputtering.

“Da,” Ilya responded, smug as all hell which ... fair.

Luca would personally spend his every waking moment looking that smug if he’d landed *Shane Hollander* which, now that he thought about it, sort of explained *a lot* about Ilya Rozanov as a person.

“You are married to *Shane Hollander?*”

“Hollander-Rozanov,” Ilya corrected conversationally, “if you want to be, ah, technical.”

“Who else knows?” Luca demanded, both because he wanted the gossip and because he needed to know when to shut his goddamn mouth as to not out his idols.

“All of New York, Boiziau in Toronto, Boodram and maybe Dillon in Ottawa, Shane’s parents, my friend Svetlana, and Rose Landry.”

Luca blinked a couple of times, deciding to stow away the *Rose Landry* of it all for another day (he still wasn’t over Cliff’s lore drop, forgive him for needing a moment), and then said, “that feels like a lot of people to still be calling this a secret.”

Ilya tilted his head back and forth in consideration for a moment before saying, “true, but, the League does not know and that is probably most important. We do not think we would be treated as nice as Hunter has been. I have applied for residency in Canada with Shane as my spouse, but it will take a few more months for my Permanent Residency card to come and a few years after that for me to be citizen so we are waiting until I am safe, at least until PR card is printed. It is sort of open secret, though, you are right.”

“Well, I promise not to call up the Commissioner,” Luca said after processing Ilya’s words for a moment. It sort of stung to have his rose-colored glasses yanked off, to be reminded of the fact that the minimal kindness the League had shown Scott Hunter likely wouldn’t be extended further. It hurt to remember that this sport he loved bred a culture of bigotry. But Boston wasn’t like that, and apparently New York wasn’t either. There were spots of good, there were places full of kindness and light, and Luca simply had to tell himself to remember that.

Ilya let out a bright laugh that Luca never would’ve imagined he’d hear but one he’d gotten used to over the past couple of weeks. Ilya was so fierce on the ice, such an antagonistic shit disturber in interviews, that it was a bit mind-boggling to realize that the man was brimming with joy. Though, from the way their teammates sometimes looked confused, Luca was starting to guess that this attitude was new. Or, at the very least, the extent to which he was showing this attitude was new.

“I was supposed to tell you before telling team,” Ilya admitted a little sheepishly, “but I kept forgetting. Luke is going to chirp me *so* bad.”

“Gillis?” Luca asked, pretty sure that was who Ilya was talking about but asking anyways. He’d seen people on Twitter calling him *Hollanov Son* but hearing the *reality* of the situation was throwing Luca for a bit of a loop. The fact that Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, and Luke Gillis had created their own little family unit was *baffling*.

“Yes,” Ilya confirmed, “little Gilly. He lives with Shane. I think they have adopted each other. I really would not be surprised if Yuna and David, ah that is Shane’s parents, by the way, I would not be surprised if they found a way to *actually* adopt him. He is a sweet boy, even if he keeps calling me old. I will add you to family chat. We may need to call you by your last names, though, Luke and Luca are very close.”

Luca just nodded in response because he was pretty sure if he opened his mouth, the only thing that would come out would be an incoherent shriek at the prospect of being added to a *family chat* with Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, and Luke Gillis.

What the everloving *fuck* was his life?

* * *

The fact that everyone and their mom played in or performed at Madison Square Garden made their schedule insane and sometimes that meant that they spent nearly an entire month at home only to spend later weeks on too-long road trips that made them all want to yank out their hair and maybe, possibly, murder one another.

The 2017-18 season was shaping up to be one of those years where the schedule simply ceased making sense.

They had three total away games through the entire month of October and none of those games even took them beyond the Great Lakes Region.

All of this was great.

Shane loved being at home, he loved getting to avoid the aforementioned hair-pulling, homicidal road trips.

However.

Their third and final away game of the month would be taking them to Montreal for a Saturday night primetime game wherein they would all find out if Montreal was going to suck it up and honor Shane as their former Captain in the normal first-game-back (in the regular season) tradition or if they were going to give him a massive *fuck you*.

All this to say, Shane was starting to get a little jumpy.

“You good?” Carter asked, sidling up next to him against the boards during warm up for their game against San Francisco.

“Sure,” Shane answered which was at least sort of true. They’d had an incredible start to the season. They were 9-0 and if nothing went entirely off the rails that night or against Arizona on Thursday they’d be rolling into Montreal with a perfect 11-0 record as a neon-sign reminder that they’d fumbled Shane Hollander. Also, of greater importance, Ilya would be waiting at home that night ahead of Boston’s game against New Jersey on Wednesday so they could meet with a small group of people they’d started collecting in New York to get the ball rolling on the Irina Foundation.

Boston, unlike New York, had a relatively normal schedule with days off and rationally-lengthed road trips. Also, by some act of the hockey scheduling gods, they didn’t play Montreal until fucking *January*.

Lucky Boston.

Anyways, Shane really should be doing great.

Shane was not, however, doing great.

“Right,” Carter said, stretching out the syllable unnecessarily. “Are you going to be something better than sure after next week?”

Shane thought about it for a second and then nodded, “marginally.”

“That’s all a guy can hope for,” Carter said, clapping Shane on the shoulder and then returning to his warm up. Shane knew he’d check in again later, that he’d make sure Shane was really alright before they went home for the evening. Shane knew that he’d find a seat next to Shane and Luke on their flight up to Montreal in five days and either push Shane until he let Carter in or find a way to distract him until Shane decided he was ready to open up. But, for now, he was going to let Shane slip into his game-day mindset and ignore the problem for a little while longer.

Thank fuck for Carter Vaughan.

* * *

“Ten and ohhhh!” Luke cheered as they shouldered the doors of the side entrance open to meet their town car.

Shane grinned over at him and couldn’t help but let out a fond laugh.

Luke had played a great game.

Luke had played *ten* great games.

He was on a point streak that had pundits almost giddy every time they mentioned his name and Shane truly couldn’t have been more proud.

All of them were playing great – especially their first line – but, by this point in their careers, Shane and Carter were *expected* to play great. It was far more exciting to watch talent blossom.

“You played well,” a voice said from somewhere over Shane’s shoulder and Shane watched Luke go completely and utterly *still*. Like prey sensing a predator. His limbs were locked, his face was entirely devoid of emotion. Shane wasn’t even sure he was breathing.

“Thank you, Dad,” he said, seemingly on instinct.

Something molten and ferocious rose up in Shane’s chest, like hellfire licking at his lungs, “get in the car,” Shane said, keeping his voice as even as possible.

Luke’s eyes snapped toward him, blown with panic and so achingly young, and Shane just nodded toward the waiting town car.

Luke was moving before Shane even processed it. He turned around and climbed into the back seat without question. It was something beyond fear of his father and a wish to avoid confrontation; it was a show of trust that went straight to Shane’s heart. He was trusting Shane to keep him safe, he was trusting Shane to protect him from having to speak to the man who’d tried to tear him down, who’d tried to teach him that he was unworthy of love.

Shane took a deep breath and turned around.

James Gillis looked like Luke, in some distant way. They had the same eyes, the same nose and chin. But where Luke was soft and full of light, this man was hardened and joyless.

He didn't look shocked that Luke had walked away, he almost looked like he'd expected it; like he thought his son *weak* for choosing to turn his back.

"You're not supposed to be here," Shane said. Getting this man on their security list was the first thing Shane had done the morning after Luke told him why he'd left home. He'd had to pull several strings seeing as there were no official reports showing he was a danger to Luke and Shane was unwilling to tell them every gory detail but he'd gotten it done. It only protected Luke when they were at MSG but it was something.

"I didn't go inside," he responded. His tone was flippant, like he couldn't see the error of his ways, like he was the sort of person who believed he had a right to exist in any space simply because he wanted to.

"You don't get to hurt him anymore," Shane said. It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the burning desire to punch this man in the face. He hadn't taken his anger out on Comeau or Drapeau or Theriault. He'd missed his chance to drop kick Grigori Rozanov into the ocean and he didn't necessarily fancy flying to Moscow to beat the shit out of Alexei Rozanov like he sometimes day dreamed about. But James Gillis wasn't dead or on a different continent, he wasn't standing on the ice in front of refs and thousands of fans, he was standing in a dark alley in front of a 6 foot tall, 200 pound hockey player who'd spent the past six months channeling his all-encompassing rage into packing on muscle and finally learning how to fight instead of simply dodge.

The *only* thing holding Shane back from killing him with his bare fucking hands was the fact that Luke was waiting in the car.

The legal implications of murder were of lesser importance.

Carter was still somewhere inside and would be more than happy to help Shane hide a body and if that failed, he was pretty sure Alice had paid enough attention in her criminal law courses to help him argue self-defense.

“He’s my son,” James responded.

“Not anymore,” Shane said, “you lost your right to call him that when you forced him to leave.”

James laughed.

It wasn’t a kind sound.

It was the sort of sound that grated at Shane’s ribs, the sort of sound that lived between casual slurs and locker room stalls.

“Who else would take him?”

It was such a stupid question that Shane was about half convinced someone had spiked his post-game electrolytes.

Who else would take him?

Well, Drew for starters. The person Luke had run to when his father had closed the door.

New York had taken him and loved him for the front he presented until Shane showed up and he started to let the mask fall and everyone quickly learned to love him for *him*.

Shane had taken him after mere weeks of knowing him and didn’t plan on letting him leave any time soon.

Shane’s parents had taken him the moment they met him; had fallen in love with him so immediately that Shane was certain they’d already researched the legality behind adult adoption, had fallen in love with him so fully that after three days in their house in Ottawa David had ‘joked’ about the Admirals having a first line that was 2/3 Hollander.

But Shane didn't feel the need to expend his energy to explain all that. He would save that energy for the car, he would conserve it only to be used to remind Luke that he was loved, that he was safe. So, instead of murder, instead of losing his grip on his temper and screaming himself hoarse, he simply said, "me," and then turned his own back and headed for the door.

His hand was on the handle, ready to step inside and close them into the quiet safety of tinted windows and 45 minutes of un-interrupted peace, when James decided to speak again, "people wouldn't love him so much if they knew the truth."

Shane opened the door and climbed inside.

Responding would make it worse, responding would lead to yelling which would lead to Luke's father spilling a secret he hadn't yet defined to whoever was close enough to overhear and that was when Shane finally understood what James was doing. He'd lost control and Luke was only getting better. He was proving every single day that he could do this away from his father's shadow and James was a weak, insecure man who needed to put his son down to feel good about himself. Shane sincerely doubted he'd actually out Luke, especially if he saw it as an affront to his own image, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try to use it to scare him.

"Shane," Luke whispered as soon as the door closed. His voice was tight, controlled in a way that told Shane he was seconds from breaking, and Shane felt a little like he was ready to burn the whole world down if it'd make Luke feel safe.

"Everything's fine," Shane said softly. "We have tomorrow off. We can talk about it in the morning. Tonight we go home and rest. You're safe, I promise."

* * *

Safe was such an absurd concept.

Luke had spent so long wondering what safe even meant.

He'd felt it in moments; in the nights he was allowed to sleep over at Drew's or in the hours after he played a flawless game that left no room for a lecture or disappointment. But safety had never lingered, and it'd certainly never been tied to *home*.

It was now, though.

Now, with Shane, safety was inextricably linked to home.

From the furious set of Shane's shoulders, he could guess the content of his father's parting words and the concept of those words reaching a larger audience, of the secret of his less than ideal home life and a sexuality he hadn't had the chance to define being shared with the world without his control was the single most terrifying thing Luke had ever imagined. But Shane hadn't yet erred in his promise to keep Luke safe and Luke was entirely certain he wouldn't fail now.

Luke slid across the row and buckled into the middle seat, pressing himself as close to Shane as he could.

"It's gonna be fine," Shane promised and Luke found it shockingly easy to believe him.

He could almost hear Shane's mind spinning, pulling together contingencies based on gag orders and NDAs and well placed threats from whatever un-named contacts Luke and his fellow rookies were dead fucking certain Ilya Rozanov had. But, apart from the questions of legal teams and organized crime, Luke was sure of one thing: Shane would keep him safe.

* * *

Ilya was half asleep on the couch with Anya and Sunny both curled up beside him when he heard the front door open. He'd driven himself down a day early, begging off the optional skate before the team flew out the following morning, so he could have a few extra hours with his family. He'd pulled up to their New York house part way through the second and had gotten to watch Shane and Luke both play an incredible game. He was expecting them to come stumbling into the house laughing like they usually did when spirits were high but, instead, they walked in like they'd just narrowly escaped the gallows.

"What the fuck?" he muttered, mostly to himself.

Luke was stuck to Shane's side like glue and Shane looked more murderous than Ilya had genuinely *ever* seen him and absolutely nothing about this scene was giving Ilya any reason to believe that they

were going to have a peaceful family night.

“Go sit down,” Shane said, the gentle lilt of his voice clashing violently with the look in his eye. Ilya was reeling. He had no clue what could be going on and he did *not* like not being able to immediately make it better.

“I need to eat,” Luke whispered, his voice raspy in a way that made Ilya’s chest hurt.

“I’ll grab your snack,” Shane said and Ilya watched Luke move himself somehow closer to Shane’s side like he didn’t think he’d be able to handle him disappearing from sight for even a second. “Ilya’s here,” Shane said softly, “go sit with him, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Luke went quiet for a second, his eyes darting around the room before they landed on Ilya for the first time since they’d walked inside and Ilya could tell that he was not the person Luke wanted to be with right now but that he might just be a decent enough substitute for him to agree.

“Come,” Ilya said, nodding toward the couch, “Anya is here, she has missed you.”

Luke lit up a little at that but nowhere near as much as Ilya had expected. Something was *definitely* wrong. He moved away from Shane after another beat of hesitation and slunk his way over to the couch, all but collapsing onto the cushions. Sunny moved from where she’d been curled up by Ilya’s hip to Luke’s side immediately, stretching out in front of him so Luke could wrap himself around her and bury his face in her fur.

Ilya really didn’t know how Shane had found a spontaneously trained therapy dog, but he was really appreciating that miracle in this moment.

“I like boys,” Luke mumbled, his voice muffled against Sunny’s coat. “I think, I don’t know. My dad guessed after rookie camp last year and I didn’t deny it fast enough so he kicked me out and then he showed up at the game tonight as some sort of alpha male intimidation tactic and thought it was a smart plan to square up with Shane goddamn Hollander in a dark alley. Shane didn’t kill him but I’m not entirely convinced he hasn’t sent Carter to take care of it.”

Well.

That was a lot of information.

“Thank you for telling me,” Ilya got out on instinct alone. His brain had stopped working several seconds prior. It was *far* from the most important thing at the moment, but he was a little disappointed in his gaydar. He’d really thought Luke was straight. Though, on a more serious note, that probably said nothing good about the amount of repression Luke had been suffering through.

“You’re welcome,” Luke grumbled, wrapping his arms even tighter around Sunny as Shane walked into the room. Luke sat up a little as Shane approached the couch and then immediately let his head drop into Shane’s lap once he’d settled. “Snack?”

“Yeah, bud,” Shane said, setting his own gross high-protein yogurt that was only sort of made edible by the added fruit down on the coffee table in favor of tearing off pieces of a turkey sandwich and dropping them into Luke’s mouth as if he were a particularly disgruntled baby bird. It was a scene that Ilya would’ve laughed at if he weren’t dead certain him laughing would send the pair of them into oncoming traffic at that very moment.

Ilya waited until half of Luke’s sandwich had been eaten before saying, “why did your father come *now*?”

“Because he’s an insecure old man who can’t handle when I succeed and prefers to watch me suffer.”

“Sounds familiar,” Ilya huffed, realizing, not for the first time, just how much he had in common with Luke Gillis.

“Can we watch Toy Story?” Luke asked, apparently over this conversation.

“Sure,” Shane agreed, settling his hand that wasn’t holding the sandwich on top of Luke’s head. He brushed the curls off Luke’s forehead with an aching gentleness and then reached out to Ilya for the remote. Ilya moved a little closer, dragging Anya along with him, and settled his head against Shane’s shoulder as Shane navigated over to their DVD system.

“How do you find the movie you want to watch?” Ilya asked, entirely bewildered as Shane easily navigated through the pages to an unmarked, unnamed icon that, somehow, opened to the opening menu of Toy Story. He knew Shane had one of those ridiculous multi-disc DVD players but had no earthly idea how he was able to select the right film.

“It’s organized alphabetically,” Luke answered, “there’s a binder with a printed list if you need to reference it but we know the numbers for the movies we re-watch.”

Ilya really wasn’t sure why he hadn’t guessed that. He had, after all, met Shane before.

“Hi,” Shane greeted after pressing play. He turned his head and pressed a kiss into Ilya’s hair.

“Hi,” Ilya echoed, sitting up for a second to kiss Shane hello and then leaning forward to pick up his yogurt. “You feed our сынок, I feed my котенок.”

“I am not a kitten,” Shane grumbled, his nose scrunching in a way that really wasn’t helping his case.

“Shh,” Luke cut in, “movie.”

Ilya smiled and reached across Shane to run his own hand across Luke’s head. He pushed up into the touch for a second before settling back down and Ilya told himself that was enough for now. He was clearly drained and, chances were, Shane had a plan that Ilya could help him implement in the morning.

For now, they would simply watch the movie and offer Luke these quiet reminders that he was safe, that he was loved.

Chapter End Notes

i finished my outline for this work and there are probably somewhere between 5 and 10 chapters left based on how much i write for certain scenes. i have a list of in-universe one shots and other slice of life/future things to add to the series but those won't be a part of this main work. so! if there is anything you'd like to see, let me know and if it's not on my outline i'll consider adding it to my one-shot list!!

Chapter 47: taste the blood inside my mouth

Chapter Notes

title from 'montreal' by the ghost of paul revere which is such a shane hollander leaving the voyageurs coded song i might cry about it

October 2017

Ilya woke up confused and with a crick in his neck that immediately told him he'd accidentally fallen asleep on the couch.

He blinked his eyes awake and rather quickly remembered *why*.

Anya was still snuggled up next to him which wasn't outside of the norm, but the other three figures crowded into his space marked that morning as different from the others.

Luke was curled entirely around Sunny, both arms wrapped around her neck and one leg wrapped around her hips with his other leg stretched out across the cushions and Shane was somehow curled around *both* of them. He'd moved slightly from his spot next to Ilya in favor of globbing on to Luke and Sunny like he had no plans of letting either of them go.

Ilya pulled out his phone and took a picture and immediately added it to his Instagram story with no context beyond the Westchester County location tag.

Boston played in New Jersey in two days and, after that afternoon's meeting, there'd only be a couple of weeks before they were announcing the Irina Foundation and launching their website and social media pages so Ilya *did* have a reason to be in New York even if no one actually knew about any of that.

Also, they were asleep on the couch and Ilya wasn't even in the picture. It wasn't like he was uploading a photo of Shane shirtless in bed like he'd wanted to several times over the summer.

Ilya stood up and made his way into the kitchen to start breakfast, stretching out his neck and shoulders as he moved through the familiar space. It felt good being home, here in New York. Good in a way that made a little voice in the back of his head ask just how much longer he wanted to stay in Boston, just how much longer he wanted to play hockey.

Retirement wasn't necessarily *on the horizon*. But it was closer now than it'd been the season prior. Such was the passage of time. It wasn't yet a consideration that existed in the real world, but it lived somewhere in Ilya's quiet thoughts.

He was fairly certain he'd retire before Shane and something about that felt right, somehow.

They'd taken every step of this hockey world together and maybe it'd make sense for them to retire together, too. But Shane loved hockey in a way that was nearly impossible to replicate. He would play until he was forced off the ice or, at the very least, until he had enough time to settle into the decision. Ilya, on the other hand, would play until he felt like he was done and then he'd walk off with his head held high and spend a joy-filled couple of years as Shane Hollander's WAG before Shane reached the same decision and they disappeared into the Canadian wilderness only to be seen at their summer hockey camps and a dozen of Luke's games.

Shane and Luke stumbled into the kitchen a half hour later to the smell of fresh coffee and too much food for three people and Ilya couldn't help but grin as Luke nudged his head against Ilya's shoulder as he made his way toward the fridge followed closely by Shane who leaned forward to kiss Ilya good morning.

He wanted this *always* but, for now, getting to treasure it for a few select mornings would more than do.

* * *

Shane held off on asking anything real until they'd finished breakfast and walked the dogs. He waited until Ilya was in the gym downstairs and it was only him and Luke sitting on the back porch enjoying the morning sun and mid-autumn breeze.

"What do you want to do about it?" he asked.

He had plans A-Z running on a loop through his head but he wasn't about to launch into one of them without Luke's input. It was his life, it was his right to determine how it was lived. All Shane had to do was fulfil his promise to keep him safe.

"Is it wrong to say nothing?" Luke shot back. His eyes were closed and his face was tilted toward the sun and he looked far more at peace than Shane would've in his shoes.

"There's no wrong answer," Shane said gently, "it's your life, Luke."

"You have a plan?"

"I have several."

Luke breathed out a little laugh and shook his head, "of course."

"My main concern is your power of attorney," Shane said, thinking that maybe talking about practicalities would be the safest option, as opposed to talking about something as messy as *feelings*. "You made me your emergency contact, didn't you?"

"Sorry," Luke whispered, a little sheepish.

"No, not sorry," Shane corrected, "I'd thought so because I was getting texts about your physicals as well but I just wanted to make sure."

"Yes, you're my emergency contact with the League."

"Okay, so that helps with hockey but out in the real world they'd still call your parents and I don't want someone who doesn't care about you making medical decisions."

"So how do I stop that from happening? Because I don't want that either, I want *you* to make decisions if I can't."

“Well, we either file a legal document listing me as your POA or we go about seven steps further and either me or my parents adult adopt you.”

Luke shot up in his chair, eyes wide as they locked on Shane’s, “you weren’t kidding about that?”

Shane scrambled through his memory, trying to figure out when he’d even mentioned that, and finally landed on the first day of training camp that season, “I was sort of kidding in that moment, but I *had* already researched it.”

“Could you even adopt me? You’re only six years older.”

“Both parties just have to be over 18, but it might be better if my parents adopted you and then we listed me as your POA,” Shane explained, “you’re a legal, consenting adult so it’d be difficult to challenge the adoption but in the off chance that someone tried, it’d probably be better if your listed adoptive parents were, y’know, real adults. It’d also probably be easier to explain to management and the League that they had brothers playing on the same team, that’s normal, we wouldn’t be the first pair of brothers and we certainly won’t be the last, but there’s no precedent for a father and a son, even if it is an adoptive relationship.”

Luke went quiet, settling back in his chair and Shane just let him think.

“I think I’d prefer you to be my brother, anyways,” he said after a minute. “That’s what you feel like, to me.”

“We’re brothers no matter what, bud,” Shane said softly. “You okay with this plan?”

“Yeah,” Luke nodded. His eyes were a little glassy but so were Shane’s. “What’re our next steps?”

Shane pulled out his phone and called his mom.

* * *

By the time the doorbell rang at 3, they had a fully outlined plan to make Luke a Hollander as soon as humanly possible.

The plan included several lawyers, immediately filing documents making Shane Luke's POA and Medical Proxy, and a list of people who owed them favors across the League to get Luke's parents on security lists in as many arenas as possible.

"Hello!" Amanda greeted with a bright smile, dragging Alice in behind her the moment Shane opened the door. He'd told them they could just join on Skype like everyone else so they wouldn't have to travel out to the suburbs from the city but Amanda had, instead, told him to use his overloaded bank account to order them a car.

"Hello," Shane responded, stopping her long enough to press a kiss to the side of her head in greeting, "and hello to you, too, Alice," he added, tugging her into a quick hug.

He'd only seen Alice in passing since that last night in Montreal and was very much hoping the pair would stick around after the meeting so he could make sure she was settling in well.

"Hi," Alice responded, looking more shy than Shane had ever seen her. He quickly realized that they'd only ever interacted on neutral ground or in a building that they *both* worked in. Now, she was in his home. Shane could understand how that might make a person shy.

Amanda, on the other hand, was already in his pantry finding snacks.

"Who is this?" Ilya asked, appearing over Shane's shoulder.

"Oh, yeah, I don't think I've ever explained," Shane laughed, "Ilya, this is Alice, she used to work in legal in Montreal but moved to New York this summer, she's working for the Admirals now. Alice, this is Ilya Rozanov."

Alice was looking at Ilya in abject *terror* and Shane was about to explain that he really wasn't as scary as he liked to make himself seem but Ilya started talking before Shane could even open his mouth, "Alice? *Alice* Alice?"

The terror started to fade in favor of something like amusement as Alice responded, “nice to meet you, Lily.”

Shane went still as Ilya started cackling.

“What the fuck is happening right now?” Luke asked, raising his voice to be heard over Ilya’s laughter that was verging into hyena territory.

“No clue,” Shane responded.

“Oh, we are going to be best friends,” Ilya said, breathless as he got ahold of himself. He was grinning like an absolute lunatic and Shane was, frankly, frightened.

Alice’s hand landed on his bicep, “sorry for the delay, Hollander, but congratulations on your wedding.”

“What the fuck,” Shane muttered.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think anyone else could’ve figured it out,” she explained, softening a bit, clearly realizing that Shane was starting to spiral. “I have pieces of information the public doesn’t. Like why you actually left Montreal and Hayden asking you about Lily in the hall and, also, a law school classmate who works at Windsor City Hall who knows nothing about hockey but was able to recognize your faces because I had a slight obsession and talked about you at every opportunity.”

“I figured her out this summer,” Amanda announced, walking back into the room with an entire Costco container of peanut butter pretzels. “We’ve been bonding over the perils of being women with big dumb crushes on Shane Hollander.”

“He has left many women disappointed,” Ilya said, smiling like that was something to be proud of.

“I hate you,” Shane grumbled, poking him in the side so he’d jump. The man was stupidly ticklish and absolutely refused to admit it.

“You don’t,” Ilya responded, slinging an arm around Shane’s shoulders and steering them into the dining room so they could join their virtual meeting.

* * *

The meeting was deeply boring and Ilya just wanted it to end so he could talk to Alice but he knew the information was important so he was doing his best to pay attention.

They had their little crew in the dining room sitting in front of Shane’s laptop on Skype with David and Yuna, Farah, some attorney named Robert who Yuna had done work with in the past, and Harris, the Centaurs’ social media intern who Shane had developed some sort of strange friendship with over the past few months. He held the same position in Ottawa that Amanda did in New York and Shane had brought him in to help Amanda with their media presence for the foundation so it wouldn’t all fall on her shoulders.

The same went for Robert.

Alice could *probably* handle all of their legal stuff on her own, especially with the added assistance of Yuna and Farah who were great with contracts given what they did for work, but she was busy and Shane didn’t want to overwhelm her.

Ilya maybe should’ve realized that the Alice Shane had mentioned in passing had some connection to the random twitter user who’d clocked their shit immediately but it wasn’t until she was in front of him, looking at him like she was afraid he might kill her, that he finally figured it out.

Ilya was a little bit lost in the meandering conversation, not because he couldn’t understand what they were saying, but more because his mind was half distracted and everyone was talking in circles instead of following some sort of rational order.

The only things he really caught were the fact that they’d launch the website the day before the Bears v. Admirals game the first week of November, that he and Shane would hold a press conference the morning following that game to officially announce the Foundation, and that they’d start their camps next summer in Ottawa with the goal of expanding them to New York and Boston the following summer, possibly in some sort of partnership with whatever charity Scott was planning to start.

Finally, after an entire hour, the call wrapped up and Shane and Luke disappeared with the laptop to talk to David and Yuna about ... something. Ilya had no clue what those two were up to but figured they'd tell him soon enough. Either way, they'd disappeared, leaving Ilya alone at the dining room table with Alice and Amanda.

Amanda was just eating her pretzels and grinning like this was the greatest thing that'd ever happened to her while Alice stared at him, clearly waiting to see which one of them would break first.

"How long have you known?" he asked after a solid thirty seconds of total silence.

"Detroit, game three," she answered. "I spotted the ring after the last game of the Boston series and then my friend texted me that she'd seen you at work in Windsor and then during the game the next day Shane kissed his ring after scoring and you were in the stands."

"You have had account for long time," Ilya said, raising an eyebrow as he crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat, "you have *hollanov* as username, you got there first."

Alice just shrugged, looking distinctly amused, "everyone was shipping him with Hayden and I thought it'd be funny to swing in the total opposite direction, turns out I was right."

"You are very smart," Ilya decided, "much smarter than *idiots* who think my Shane would fuck *Hayden Pike*."

"Thank you," she said primly. "Now, what's your plan for announcing it? You two haven't exactly been subtle online."

"They're soft launching," Amanda explained, "sort of. I don't really know what's happening. Everything they've posted so far can be explained away as them being friends but, at this point, it's sort of the NHL's worst kept secret. All of the Boston and New York guys know, a couple guys on other teams, too."

"We are not really, ah," Ilya trailed off, trying to find the right words to explain the arguably risky game they were playing, "we aren't hiding it, very much. If people ask and we trust them, we tell the truth. We are kind of, ah, what is the phrase ... hiding in plain sight? Yes?"

Alice and Amanda both nodded.

“Yes,” Ilya repeated, nodding to himself, “hiding in plain sight, if people know, they know. I think that if everyone just acts like it is normal, it will be harder for League to do anything when truth comes out. Our teams have been very supportive, I think they would fight for us if the Commissioner tried to bench us or something and we have lawyers if we need to sue. We just do not want it to become this big deal. We are in love, we are married, I want everyone to know because I am proud but I don’t want to have to, ah, explain, you know? He is my husband, I want to just say ‘this is my husband, he is amazing,’ I do not want to have to, what the fuck is the word, justice?”

“Justify,” Alice offered.

“Da, yes, justify. I do not want to justify it.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Amanda grumbled. She was easily in the top five *Shane Hollander Defenders* and Ilya was well aware that she got ticked off when people wanted Shane to explain himself. She was already getting pissy with people digging into Scott’s life and she was nowhere *near* as close with Scott as she was with Shane. He really hoped that, once Shane publicly came out, Christina was the one who controlled the reporters asking him questions. She was fierce and would protect Shane but would remain professional while doing so. Amanda, on the other hand, might murder someone with her bare hands. And, as much as Ilya would support her murdering someone in Shane’s defense, he knew Shane would hate the added attention that homicide might bring.

“No, we shouldn’t,” Ilya agreed. “Alice, are you liking New York?”

It was a clumsy segue but Ilya needed the conversation to shift before either of them got truly fired up.

“I love it,” Alice said, easily accepting the redirect.

Ilya finally fully relaxed back into his chair and smiled as the pair started rambling about everything they got up to in their free time.

* * *

“Come on,” Ilya said, waving Luca toward his car that was waiting outside New Jersey’s arena, “let’s go.”

“Where?” Luca asked, looking at Ilya like he was at least a little concerned he was about to be murdered.

“New York.”

“We have curfew!”

“Oh my god, Haasy,” Ilya grumbled wiping a hand down his face in a slightly hysterical mixture of frustration and amusement. Maybe he shouldn’t be introducing this kid to Shane. “Get in the car, I already talked to coach.”

“Are you lying?”

“Why would I lie about that?”

“I don’t know,” Luca muttered, finally tossing his gear bag into the back and climbing in.

“You are something else, Luca,” Ilya laughed, slamming the trunk shut behind him and then climbing into the driver’s seat. “Ah fuck,” he grumbled as soon as the door shut, “I forgot Pike, one second.”

Luca just nodded even though Ilya could *feel* the judgment coming off of him. Luca was clearly convinced Ilya had lost his mind.

He really might not be that far off base.

“PIKE!” Ilya shouted into the empty parking garage, like that’d somehow summon the man from the shadows. “Fucking fuck,” he muttered under his breath, resigning himself to actually climbing out of the car and going in search of his husband’s errant friend. “Pike!” he shouted again after he’d finally made his way back to the arena and opened door closest to the visitor locker room.

“Rozanov!” Hayden shouted back from somewhere down the hall, “were you about to leave without me?”

“No,” Ilya lied, “let’s go.”

“Coming,” Hayden said, holding his hands up in mock surrender as he rounded the corner, “did you remember Luca at least.”

“Yes,” Ilya answered, ignoring the fact that that answer was also an admission that he had, in fact, forgotten Hayden. “He is waiting in car, come on, come on.”

“You saw Shane *this morning*, I haven’t seen him in a month. Calm down.”

“I hate you.”

“You don’t but I’ll let you keep believing that if it helps.”

Ilya just flipped him off and then shoved him out the door.

It took them an extra three minutes (Ilya counted) to get their gear bags settled in the trunk so they could all actually get into the car and then they were finally headed away from Newark and toward Irvington. Thankfully he’d driven himself to New York so he could just drive the three of them back to Boston in the morning instead of having to trek all the way back out to New Jersey in order to travel back with the team. Also, it gave him control over their current journey. He was pretty sure if he had to sit in the back seat as a passenger to a driver he’d be losing his goddamn mind. He just wanted to get back to Shane, he was feeling a little crazy, sue him.

Luca and Hayden also quickly realized that Ilya was far too in his head to actually hold a conversation so they left him to his own thoughts and chatted amongst themselves as he navigated his car out of Newark and onto the highway toward the other bank of the Hudson.

He only sped a little (fine, a lot, don’t tell Shane) and got them to Irvington in exactly 48 minutes instead of the estimated 57 and then he was scrambling out of the car, leaving Hayden and Luca in the

dust in favor of getting inside the house as quickly as he could.

“Woah,” Luke said, jumping out of Ilya’s way as he crashed through the door between the garage and the house. “Where’s the fire?”

“What?” Ilya asked, before deciding to just wave him off. “SHANE! I’m home!”

“Hi,” Shane greeted, turning the corner from the kitchen with an amused little smile on his face. “Good game, we watched the whole thing.”

“Do not care,” Ilya said, darting forward the last couple of feet and picking Shane up in an, admittedly, over dramatic hug. “Missed you.”

“You saw me this morning, Ilya,” Shane laughed, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s shoulders.

“Still missed you,” Ilya grumbled, choosing not to be embarrassed by just how much he loved his husband, especially considering the fact that Shane’s arms were wrapped around him like a vice and he was well aware that his love was returned in full force.

“I really don’t get how this is the guy the whole fuckin League is afraid of,” Hayden laughed, “he’s a big teddy bear.”

“Leave me alone, Pike.”

“No,” Hayden said, flicking Ilya’s ear and then just turning it into a group hug when he realized Ilya had no plans of letting go.

“I’m Luke,” Luke said from somewhere behind them, “you must be Luca. This is normal, by the way.”

“This is *not*,” Luca argued. “This is very not normal.”

Luke paused, clearly at a loss and clearly unable to argue that statement, “you have a point. You get used to it, though.”

“Sure,” Luca said, disbelief obvious in his tone.

* * *

“It’s gonna be fine,” Luke said under his breath for at least the twelfth time since they’d left Shane and Ilya’s Montreal condo where he, Carter, and Luke had been hiding out for the entire morning.

Shane had pretty quickly gotten sick of Scott’s particular brand of support (which involved a lot of soft smiles and genuinely considerate questions asking after Shane’s well-being that were about 75% too kind for Shane to process at that given moment) so their little trio had split off in favor of sitting in silence, pressed far too close together on the interior decorator-selected couch, and studying game tape with a bit too much intensity.

Shane was fairly certain that Luke wasn’t even attempting to tell Shane it was going to be fine but, rather, was attempting to convince himself.

They’d played four games against Montreal since Shane was pushed out the door but they’d been during playoffs, which always felt somehow separate from the norm, and they’d happened so soon after the trade that the hurt hadn’t quite had a chance to settle.

Also, those games hadn’t been captained by Dallas Kent.

From everything Shane had heard from J.J. out of Toronto, their management was a major issue, but nowhere *near* as big an issue as Kent himself. Troy Barrett, Kent’s supposed best friend, had folded almost immediately when J.J. had pushed at his walls and now everyone was stuck in some sort of liminal space where Barrett had stopped being an asshole but hadn’t quite figured out how to act normally so, instead, he was just playing games in complete and total silence.

It was, quite honestly, disconcerting.

Though, thankfully, he *was* talking to J.J. meaning Shane had heard everything Barrett had to say about just *how* shitty of a person Dallas Kent could truly be and he was not *at all* looking forward to facing him on the ice, especially with the added knowledge that Toronto's coach had been keeping him on a leash. Even if it was the most minimal of leashes, it was still more than the Montreal staff would ever do. Of that, Shane was absolutely certain.

"Today is going to be a bad day," Shane decided, knowing his voice sounded empty.

His voice may have been empty, but he certainly was not.

The anger toward his former team that he'd kept under lock and key during the playoffs was bubbling to the surface with every step they took toward the Bell Center doors, fighting for space with the anger he felt toward Luke's father and Shane just knew he was one homophobic quip away from losing his fucking mind.

He gave it about three and a half minutes before he wound up in the third fight of his career.

"Who are we allowed to fight?" Carter asked, his voice pitched low as he pulled open the door to the player entrance.

A few cameras were crowded around the hall to capture them walking in so Shane waited to answer until they'd cleared media, "literally anybody except Wilson and Taylor."

"That's a lot of options," Luke said, blinking a couple of times before a smile spread across his face. It was a smile that probably should've concerned Shane seeing as he generally preached that fighting wasn't the best way to deal with emotions, but Luke had had a tough week and Shane wasn't about to kill his joy.

Let the kid fight, it's what the people want to see.

"Can I fight Theriault?" Carter asked, a look on his face that told Shane he might actually not be kidding.

“I’m pretty sure that’d get you suspended, so I’m gonna say no. However,” Shane added after a second, “if you happen to get thrown over the boards in front of their bench and your stick happens to take a wild swing, no one would be able to fault you for that.”

Luke and Carter both started laughing and Shane couldn’t help but grin.

* * *

Scott had thought they were going to treat this like they’d treated their playoff games against Montreal.

Scott was wrong.

They’d gone through warm-ups like normal, even though, now, looking back, Scott could recognize an undercurrent of bitter anger in their first line. They’d been normal in the locker room.

Everything was fine.

And then Shane settled in for the first puck drop against Dallas Kent and shit started to go sideways.

Kent said something that had Shane visibly seething which meant that Carter and Luke were fired up and then the puck dropped and Shane won it clean, snapping off a pass toward Luke before taking off up the ice but he’d barely made it a step past the line before Kent was barreling into him at full speed.

The bench was buzzing, waiting to see what Shane would do, and Scott had genuinely started to get concerned that he was going to do something that’d get him ejected but, instead, he somehow kept hold of his footing long enough to drag himself and Kent out of the neutral zone, opening up a lane for Luke to drop a pass back to Carter.

Kent was stuck to Shane like glue, abandoning his playbook entirely in favor of attempting to rile up the opposing center and Scott just watched as Luke, Shane, and Carter stuck to their play with almost malicious compliance.

It only took them 28 seconds for Luke to bury a shot in the back of the net off an assist from Carter and Scott thought maybe, just maybe they were going to play this like they had the prior season.

Maybe they'd channel their anger into mentally destroying Montreal rather than physically fighting but then Kent was up in Shane's face, running his stupid fucking mouth and Shane let it go *just* long enough to be considered instigating before he started chirping back. He couldn't've said seven words before Kent's gloves hit the ice.

Shane ducked the first punch no problem and came up screaming.

His fist connected with Kent's jaw with an audible crack, sending him reeling back into the boards and Scott just watched, his own jaw dropped in shock, as Shane grabbed onto the front of Kent's jersey and landed a second punch against his jaw that had Kent's head snapping back before landing a third perfectly in the space between his shoulder pads and the hip of his pants.

Kent, the idiot, started fighting back.

The second his fist connected with Shane's face, Shane stopped swinging.

Scott couldn't see all that clearly across the ice, but it was being broadcast in HD up on the jumbotron and the image sent a shiver down Scott's spine.

Shane was still holding onto the front of Kent's jersey, putting himself in the perfect position to either feel a punch coming and dodge or shove him away if possible but he'd stopped fighting and was, instead, just grinning.

His lip was split, there was blood pooling against his teeth, and there was a red mark starting to form along his jaw that'd absolutely turn into a nasty bruise and the fucker was *smiling*.

"What the fuck," Huff whispered, his eyes locked on the screen at Scott's right.

It took Scott a second to understand what the hell Shane was doing, but then the officials swarmed in and everything clicked.

Montreal's refs were absolutely partial to their home team, but they'd always been *specifically* partial to Shane Hollander.

Shane had held off long enough before chirping back to make it clear Kent had instigated, he'd held himself back from throwing the first punch so it'd be clear Kent had started the fight, and he'd stopped fighting as soon as Kent got a single punch in return.

They were both issued five minute majors for fighting but Kent was issued an instigator penalty.

Five minutes for fighting, two for instigating, and an additional ten minute misconduct for a total of 17 minutes in the box.

Shane just kept grinning as Luke and Carter both grabbed him by the helmet and jostled him around for a second as one of the officials skated him off the ice while Kent complained the entire time he was skated to Montreal's box.

Gagnon was sent off to serve the two minute penalty and Montreal sent in Olsson as a sub for Kent leaving them at four skaters per side.

But, with the slight stoppage giving Carter and Luke enough time to catch their breath after that first play, Scott knew Murdock would stretch their shift leaving New York with Carter, Luke, Breezy, and Matti on the ice up against Olsson, Wilson, Comeau, and Berkes.

New York had two of the League's top scorers, the current highest scoring defenseman, and the reigning top defenseman while Montreal had Hollander's second fiddle, a bigot, some kid who'd just been pulled up from the farm league, and Wilson.

The game had barely even started.

* * *

I know your secret.

God, Shane should've assumed, but hearing the words from Kent's mouth in the seconds before the puck hit the ice had flipped some sort of switch.

He'd known, walking in, that this game was going to get violent in a way unlike the four they'd played at the end of the prior season but he hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

He'd expected Montreal to get increasingly riled up as New York ran up the scoreboard, he'd expected to get in a bit of a scrum sometime during the first and maybe a shoving match in the second, he hadn't expected he'd get angry enough to actually *fight* until at least the beginning of the third.

But Kent had been running his mouth and Shane knew there was nothing standing between him and outing Shane and he'd decided, in the moment, that the best possible defense was to remind Kent that the fact that Shane was gay *certainly* didn't mean he was weak.

Luke had scored and Kent had crowded him, spewing slurs and threatening to tell the press and all it'd taken to make him snap was Shane asking if this was Kent's way of asking for a chance.

Shane had known the Montreal refs liked him.

He'd been a perfectly respectable captain, rarely getting penalties of his own and doing his absolute best to keep his team in line.

He'd developed incredible working relationships with their home refs during his years with the Voyageurs and he knew that if he held his ground, if it was clear that Kent started it and Shane had only been reacting, that if he got in a solid enough hit to burn off the top layer of his anger before forcing himself to step back, the refs would issue penalties in his favor as much as they were able.

So now, he was sitting in the box, a vicious smile stuck on his face with blood dripping down his throat, watching Luke and Carter push the limits of their shift and attempting to calm himself down.

He told himself he was allowed to be angry but that it didn't mean he needed to *play* angry.

He needed to stay in control, he needed to play hard and remind this city of what they'd lost and he needed to remind himself that, while he couldn't control how the world treated him, he *could* control how he reacted to it.

By the time his minutes ticked down, Shane had a much better handle on his emotions.

His anger that normally lived in a leaden ball in his chest had been let loose, surging through his veins, but he had it under control.

He was going to let himself feel it, but he refused to let it overwhelm him.

He refused to hold on so tight the only option was to snap.

There was a middle ground, and he was certain he'd finally found it.

It was almost funny, then, that the first stoppage in play happened with five seconds left on his timer, leaving Shane securely locked in the box as the arena lights dimmed and the jumbotron switched from a live feed of the ice to a picture of Shane at the draft.

Shane picked up one of the water bottles their equipment managers kept stocked in the bin and did his best to rinse the blood from his mouth, knowing the cameras would cut to him to pick up his reaction and he really didn't think that smiling like a feral wolf walking away from a fresh kill while Montreal did the bare minimum to honor what he'd done for their franchise was the best look.

He watched the screen, the taste of copper on his tongue and tears burning at the backs of his eyes, as the reel started to play.

There was his first career goal, him winning the Calder, his first game as captain, a series of increasingly impressive plays all culminating in two consecutive Cups and a short clip of him in jeans and his jersey, his arm in a sling as he stared up at rafters with Hayden and J.J. at his sides.

Seven years of his life, condensed into 90 seconds of airtime.

Shane tore his gaze away from the screen and looked up at those banners and wondered, a little hysterically, just how difficult it would be to steal them.

He wasn't going to do it, but the thought did make him smile.

The video ended, the lights turned on, his clock ticked down, and Shane skated back onto the ice to the deafening cheers of a crowd that he'd thought would always be his.

Murdock sent on his line with a subtle nod in Shane's direction, a quiet declaration of support from a coach who'd done more for him in five months than Theriault had done for him in seven years, and Shane skated toward the dot, taking a second to lift his stick toward the stands in a silent salute before crouching down opposite Olsson.

This is still my barn, he thought as he settled into his stance, easily positioning himself based on the edges of the logo he'd worn for seven seasons, the logo painted onto the tarp below the sheet of ice he'd called home.

The puck dropped and Shane won it clean.

Chapter 48: the irina foundation

October 2017

The Admirals were 13-0, it was Halloween, and they were at home in New York City.

There was less of a chance of Shane getting out of going out that night than there'd been the night after they won the Cup.

He'd also been forced into a costume.

He still wasn't quite sure how it'd happened but at some point in the past week Scott had started talking and would not shut up until Shane folded and now, without actually remembering agreeing to it, Shane was sitting in a booth at the Kingfisher wearing aviators indoors at night along with a Top Gun flight suit, matching with Scott who'd gone so far as to grow a mustache for the occasion.

It was his first Halloween as a married man and he was, arguably, wearing a couples costume with Scott goddamn Hunter.

Kip was working but he'd stopped by their booth to say hello and now there was a photo on the internet for everyone to see of Kip wearing jeans and a leather bomber, claiming he was dressed up as Charlie Blackwood, with his arms wrapped around Scott and Shane dressed as Goose and Maverick.

Kip had not listened when Shane had told him that Charlie Blackwood was Maverick's girlfriend and that this was only going to confuse Twitter *more*.

He'd just said something about a throuple and Princess Diana and then wandered away, leaving a deeply confused Shane and an obnoxiously lovestruck Scott in his wake.

"This is not going to help the dating rumors," Huff (who was dressed as Musketeer #2, not to be confused with Bennett as Musketeer #1 and Wagner as Musketeer #3) said, using his half-empty beer bottle to gesture between Shane and Scott.

Scott, who'd started with his arm slung casually around Shane's shoulders, but who'd rather quickly moved into full on cuddling as the alcohol set in, just grinned.

"Sometimes I feel like Scott *started* the dating rumors," Shane muttered, picking up his own beer and draining the rest before picking up Scott's and draining that too. It was only after he realized he'd just drank out of Scott's bottle without his brain screaming about germs that he realized he should maybe slow down, especially considering the several tequila shots Nick, Cameron, Luke, and Conor (who were dressed as Ricky Bobby, Cal Naughton Jr., Dumb, and Dumber respectively) had roped him into earlier in the night.

He normally wouldn't drink this much, especially during the season, but it'd been a stressful week and they were heading down to Florida for a four day roadie in the morning meaning he'd be able to sleep off his hangover on the plane so now seemed as good a time as any to have more than a single drink.

"No," Scott said, shaking his head which only had the effect of him burrowing further into Shane's space. "Twitter started the rumors, I just do a good job of feeding them because I always look like I'm in love with you. Which I am. Just a little bit."

"Right," Shane muttered, looking at Greg like he'd somehow be able to help but Greg was just taking pictures of them with a smile on his face that made Shane scowl.

"Hollzy!" a heavily accented voice called and, for the barest second, Shane thought that Ilya had somehow materialized out of thin air but the voice was a half octave too deep meaning...

"Mitty!" Shane shouted back, his scowl quickly turning into a grin as he turned toward the entrance where Mittka and Laine were stepping into the bar followed by Janmark, who'd been traded to Vegas from the Admirals, and a couple of their other new teammates.

Shane had texted Mitty the location in the off chance he actually wanted to follow through on his offer to go out for drinks the next time they played each other but he *really* hadn't expected him to show up to, of all places, a gay bar on Halloween.

"Hollzy!" Christian Laine echoed, escaping the small pile-up that'd been caused when Nick, Cameron, and Breezy converged on Janmark and darting through the crowd like he was dodging defenders, nearly tackling Shane in a hug as he reached their booth.

“Hey, Laine,” Shane laughed, wrapping his former rookie up in a tight hug before shoving Scott over so he could join them on the bench. Scott went easily, somehow keeping an arm around Shane throughout the entire shuffle. He was possibly more drunk than Shane had assumed. This was a new level of clingy, even for Scott. He was bridging into Ilya territory which was, to put it lightly, deeply concerning.

Greg moved over to make space for Miitka who reached across the table to ruffle Shane’s hair in greeting before taking the open seat. They were quickly joined by the two other Vegas Knights who’d tagged along after they’d stopped by the bar to order drinks from Kyle, Kip’s co-worker who Eric had spent about seven minutes too long staring at since they’d rolled in after the game.

That was another thing that Shane maybe needed to pay attention to.

He needed Ilya to move to New York full time.

Not only because Shane wanted to spend every waking second at Ilya’s side, but also because Ilya was far better at perceiving and then accurately categorizing people’s emotions and without Ilya there to translate, Shane was left feeling a little adrift.

Shane was incredibly perceptive, he’d trained himself to pay attention to expressions and tone, but it was difficult for him, it took actual work. Ilya, on the other hand, could understand instinctively.

It was an incredible skill that Shane would very much like to borrow a little of in that very moment.

Mitty and Laine’s teammates introduced themselves and then settled into the booth, acting entirely casual about their locale and talking with Scott like absolutely nothing had changed and Shane realized that maybe New York and Boston weren’t the outliers. Maybe it was Montreal and Toronto. Maybe there were more teams throughout the League - or, at the very least, players spread throughout the League - with open minds.

Maybe, if Shane chose to come out on his own terms before Dallas Kent decided to do it for him, he’d be met with something like acceptance.

“Почему ты выглядишь так, будто встречаешься со Hunter?” Mitty asked, pulling Shane’s attention back to the present.

It took him several seconds to realize that he was being spoken to in Russian and several additional seconds to parse out what the hell Mitty was saying. He caught the words for *why*, *you*, *look*, and *dating* which was finally enough for his brain to scramble together a sentence.

As such, his laughter was incredibly delayed.

“Я не встречаюсь с Hunter,” Shane responded, his wording stilted and his accent absolutely abysmal with his mind exhausted from the game and his tongue weighed down by alcohol.

Mitty grinned and shook his head. Shane had no clue whether he was amused by Shane’s butchering of his language or by Shane’s answer, both options were pretty safe bets.

“Я знаю,” Mitty laughed, “is why I ask *why*.”

Shane’s mind scrambled again at the switch back to English and his response very nearly came out in French which was possibly a symptom of the fact that nine times out of ten if he was wasted, he was wasted with J.J., “fuck if I know, man, he’s the one who convinced me to match.”

“Ah,” Mitty said, nodding like that explained everything and then he turned toward Scott, “Hunter, why do you look like you are dating Hollander?”

Scott let out a little hum at the question before scrunching his nose and cocking his head in confusion, except he tilted his head toward Shane and then just left his head resting against Shane’s which really, truly did not help the image.

“Goose and Maverick weren’t a couple,” he argued.

“Depends on who you ask,” Laine said from Shane’s other side.

“It also depends on who you ask in terms of whether or not these two are a couple,” Greg added, grinning the way he always did when chaos was unfolding.

“You,” Shane said, taking off his sunglasses and pointing them at Greg in accusation, “are not helping.”

* * *

November 2017

Ilya was deeply unhappy about the time of day.

It was only 8 am and he’d already been shoved into a suit and then bundled into Shane’s car to drive over to hotel they’d booked closer to the city that had a large enough room for them to rent out for a press conference. Also, Boston had lost the night before in overtime and while losing to Shane generally hurt less than losing to anyone else, the fact that New York was somehow *still* undefeated was making all of them a little bit unsufferable to play against. At the very least, their game had been the closest a team had come to beating New York since the start of the season.

He wanted to go back to bed but Boston was flying out at three to head to Toronto so they had to get this presser done in the morning to give Ilya enough time to get on the plane.

His mood was not helped by the fact that they were about to go announce a charity in his mother’s name and she wasn’t here to see it.

“Hey,” Shane said gently, reaching across the center console of his Jeep and resting his hand on Ilya’s knee. Ilya liked being in this Jeep. It reminded him of their road trip from Ottawa to New York, of pulling off the interstate so he wouldn’t crash the car when Shane casually suggested they get married. It felt safe and warm and if you told the Ilya of a single year ago that he’d ever feel that way about a fucking *Jeep* he would’ve laughed in your face. “I can do the talking, if you want.”

Ilya nodded immediately, clearing his throat before answering, “yes, please.”

“If you want to say anything, cut in, but if you want to stay quiet, I’ll just read off the note cards, sound good?”

“Perfect,” Ilya agreed, the anxious knot in his chest unravelling, just a little. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me for making your life easier,” Shane said, his voice soft and earnest, “that’s my job, Ilya.”

It took a lot, in that moment, for Ilya to hold back his tears.

It was a bad day. One of those days where he just wanted to stay in bed, under their perfectly weighted duvet and ignore the world as it passed him by. He wanted to stay pressed into Shane’s space in hopes that the warmth of his skin against Ilya’s would thaw the ice around his lungs.

But it was also a day where he had places to be, responsibilities to fulfil, and a life to live.

It was the sort of day he was used to pushing through on his own but, instead, he had Shane’s hand on his knee and his gentle support that never failed to make Ilya feel seen.

Ilya let the silence settle as the Manhattan skyline started to appear on the horizon.

They’d launched their website the day prior with only a copy of their press availability notice. The website would be updated to show the proper layout the minute they sat down in the conference room.

They’d used the proceeds from Shane finally actually selling the three condos they weren’t using in the sex/murder building combined with the profit Ilya had made off of selling a couple of his cars that he never actually drove to get the foundation off the ground and they were planning to use most of what they made from brand deals over that season to bulk up the account but soon it would function on its own. They’d have money flowing in from kids signing up for camps and from the fundraising tab on the website and the benefit dinners Yuna was already organizing.

Everything was planned down to the letter.

Now, all they had to do was announce it.

* * *

The room was packed and Shane was only slightly regretting his offer to do all of the talking.

He absolutely was not going to revoke it, though.

Ilya was having an off day, justifiably so, and Shane was going to do everything in his power to make it better.

“Twitter thinks you’re holding the presser to announce your relationship,” Amanda said conversationally, sidling up next to Shane outside the door. Ilya had wandered down the hall and Shane was giving him a minute to gather his thoughts before he went over and, with as much love as possible, dragged him into the chaos.

“Twitter also thinks I’m in a throuple with Scott and Kip,” Shane shot back, “and Hayden and Jackie. Apparently, I get around.”

“I found a new one yesterday,” Amanda laughed, navigating over to her liked tweets, thankfully on her personal, private account and then tilting the screen so Shane could see a series of four photos of himself and J.J. that, admittedly, looked distinctly *couply*. “They’re calling you ShayJ. I really don’t know why it took this long to surface but I think it might have something to do with the way he hugged you when y’all played Toronto or maybe it was the whole new crowd of people who finally realized you’re stupid hot after they saw you fight Kent getting involved and adding to the crazy, who knows.”

“やあ,” Yuna greeted, pulling Shane’s attention and making his head spin a bit. He’d spent half the morning stumbling through speaking in Russian because it was easier for Ilya’s mind to process on days where the shadows nipped at his heels with a little more force and it’d been a long ass time since someone had spoken to him casually in Japanese. Clearly, Yuna was trying to hold a conversation without anyone being able to understand. “彼は大丈夫ですか?”

Is he alright?

What a loaded question that was.

Shane didn’t have the time or the mental capacity to explain just how complicated a real answer might be so he simply landed on, “彼は疲れていて、少し悲しいけれど、大丈夫だよ。”

He's tired and a little sad, but he's okay.

It felt like a bit of an injustice to the depths of Ilya's emotions but they weren't Shane's emotions to speak about, all Yuna wanted to know was if Ilya, in that moment, was doing alright. She wanted to know if there was anything she could do to fix it and Shane needed to deter her from asking Ilya any sort of specifics because that certainly wouldn't make anything better.

Yuna nodded, looking like she didn't quite buy it, but then she switched back to English and moved onto the next thing and Shane was deeply grateful for both. His Japanese was rusty, at best, and realizing just how rusty it'd gotten when he already felt wrongfooted wasn't making him feel all that great about himself and right now was not the time to get in his own head. He needed to be present, he needed to make the day easier for Ilya, and he needed to simply get through the next hour without losing focus.

"Okay," Yuna said, "we should get started soon, I want to take you boys to lunch before he has to get on his flight."

Shane nodded and went to collect Ilya who was standing near a window, staring out at the skyline with a distant look in his eyes. He looked beautiful in that simple way he always did, like he simply belonged in the world in a way Shane always wished he could emulate. They'd kept the presser pretty informal, at least more informal than any press they'd done together before, so Ilya was in a pinstripe suit and a white button down with the top few buttons undone. He looked more comfortable this way, a little softer, a little more himself, than he ever looked with his shirt buttoned to the top and a tie knotted around his neck.

Shane had let Ilya pick out his clothes and was sort of regretting it.

He looked nice, sure, but he wished he looked a little more professional, a little more like Ilya.

But Ilya had been so happy when Shane had given him free range of the closet and Shane wasn't about to do anything to take a smile off his face so he'd put on the black slacks and the dark brown leather jacket without complaint.

"Ilyusha," Shane said softly, letting his hand settle at the small of Ilya's back, "ready to get started?"

Ilya took a quiet breath and then turned toward Shane with those big blue eyes that Shane sort of wanted to fall into and never surface and nodded.

Shane kept his hand on Ilya's back as they followed Amanda down the side of the room, only letting go as they made their way up onto the little platform the hotel had set up.

Even this was more informal than their pressers would normally be. Instead of a table set up with network mics, there were simply two chairs and two handheld microphones.

"Ilya and I have been competing against each other for seven seasons now," Shane started once they'd both settled into their seats. The room was packed with journalists waiting to see what Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov might have to announce *together* and Shane wanted to get to the point quickly, he wanted to focus to be on the foundation and their mission rather than any sort of speculation. "A lot has been said about our rivalry, a lot has been written about what makes us different as players and as people, and I think, in the middle of all of that, my respect for Ilya has been largely brushed over. I've known Ilya since we were 17, we grew up together as competitors and, later, as friends and I am immensely proud of the person and leader he's become. When I moved to New York last year, we started talking about the opportunities that the new proximity gave us and one of the things we kept circling back to was our joint wish to create a charity and, pretty quickly, that conversation turned into the opportunity to start a charity together. We're here today to announce the Irina Foundation, a foundation that will raise money and awareness for organizations that provide support, counselling, and assistance for people who are suffering from depression and other mental illnesses that can lead to suicide. It's a cause that's incredibly important to both of us, and I'm very proud to be working with Ilya to create something that can hopefully help a lot of people."

He watched as the gathered press jotted down notes and double-checked their phones to be sure everything was properly recorded and waited a second for them to settle back down before he started talking about camps. He zoned out a bit, waiting for Amanda to draw his attention as she'd very quickly learned to do when Shane was a little too in his head during press, so he startled slightly when Ilya unexpectedly cleared his throat and adjusted in his seat.

"Ah, this was not in the notes," Ilya started and Shane did his best to not look too shocked. "I want to say that the Irina Foundation is named for my mother. She battled depression without help for many years. She had no support, no medical treatment. When she..."

Ilya trailed off and Shane didn't think, he simply reached across the small space between their chairs and let his hand settle on Ilya's wrist where it was resting on the arm of his chair. Ilya shot him a quick, grateful smile and then continued speaking.

“My mother died when I was twelve years old. She lost her battle. This foundation is for her. It is to help people like her, so they do not have to fight alone.”

Shane tightened his grip on Ilya’s arm and wanted, more than anything, to properly hold his hand or drop a kiss into his hair. His chest felt tight and his eyes were starting to burn and before he could throw caution to the wind and out them or break down crying, he forced himself to fill the silence by explaining the hockey camps they’d be hosting in Ottawa and how they had hopes of expanding them to Boston and New York in the coming years. He named some of the organizations they’d already selected to focus on when they made their first donations and announced Yuna as the director and treasurer. He ended by talking about their website and then opened the floor to questions.

Once it was over, they posed for pictures and thanked everyone for coming and then all but sprinted out of the building.

Only once they were back in the relative safety of the Jeep did Shane allow himself to reach out and properly comfort Ilya. He leaned across the center console and wrapped his arms around his shoulders and just held on while Ilya melted. He could hear Ilya’s breath hitching and could feel a slight warmth where Ilya’s cheek was pressed against his neck indicating that Ilya was starting to cry and Shane simply held on a little tighter.

“I’m so proud of you,” Shane whispered, “*she* would be proud of you. You’re incredible, Ilyusha.”

“Thank you,” Ilya choked out, tucking himself somehow further into Shane’s space.

Shane held on a little longer and then disentangled himself and started the car, driving out of the parking garage and toward the entrance of the hotel to pick up Yuna so they could go to lunch.

Ilya wiped his cheeks and ran his fingers through his hair, clearly trying to put himself together before asking, “where are we going to eat?”

Shane accepted the redirect with a soft smile.

* * *

Shane's phone buzzed with a text from Ilya letting him know that Boston had landed safely in Toronto just as Shane was sitting down on the couch next to Luke. They'd ordered pizza and were settling in for a proper movie night given the fact that they had the morning off ahead of their afternoon practice before their game against Edmonton in two days when their quiet evening was interrupted by the security system letting out a ping to alert them to the fact that someone had just driven through the gate.

"Are we expecting anyone?" Luke asked, looking toward the front door with his brows pinched in confusion.

"No," Shane answered, double checking that Ilya's text actually said he'd arrived in Toronto and not that he'd decided to ditch his team and come back home.

It wasn't rare for someone to show up unannounced, though, so Shane wasn't all that concerned.

Luke just shrugged and turned back toward the binder that listed all of their DVDs to pick their first movie.

Shane waited until the bell rang about 90 seconds later to go check the door, expecting to find Carter or maybe Scott if he was bored enough and Kip was working. Instead, he found Eric Bennett holding a duffle bag, his eyes slightly red, and a sheepish smile on his face.

"Can I stay here?" he asked, his voice coming out scratchy.

Shane nodded immediately and stepped back so Eric could make his way inside.

"Course," Shane said, maybe a little too enthusiastically. He had no clue what was going on and none of the texts Holly had sent in the group chat over the past couple of days suggested anything was amiss so Shane was at a total loss. "Pick a room, we ordered pizza, hope you're up for a movie night."

"Alright," Eric said. He sounded off, not quite like himself, and Shane had no clue how to fix it. He had no idea why Eric had shown up *here* when he, arguably, had much closer friends on the team. Shane's house wasn't even the closest to his. He'd bypassed Scott *and* Wagner to get here. But, clearly, he trusted Shane enough to show up vulnerable and Shane wasn't going to break that trust.

Chapter 49: our house

November 2017

“What the fuck is going on?” Luke whispered, his voice barely breaking through the almost awkward silence that’d fallen over their house since Eric had made his way upstairs to put his bag down.

“Fuck if I know,” Shane muttered back, shoving Sunny away from the pizza box before she could steal a slice. “Pick something happy, though, I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” Luke hissed, eyes wide. He looked, quite honestly, *terrified* of Shane leaving him alone with their wayward and potentially heartbroken goalie but Shane just waved him off and made his way into the kitchen, pulling out his phone as he went.

He clicked the contact and the line only rang twice before Holly Bennett picked up, “Shane?”

“Hey,” Shane greeted, wishing, not for the first time, that he had better people skills. “Benny’s here.”

She breathed out an audible sigh of relief before saying, “good, I’m glad. Is he okay?”

“Are *you* okay?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, her voice flat in a way that told Shane she was answering on instinct. She sounded drained, exhausted, maybe. “I’m not shocked he’s at yours, though.”

“I am,” Shane said, wincing a little at his apparent lack of a filter. It was getting late and he was dead tired so sue him for getting a little direct.

Holly laughed and Shane smiled, just a little.

“You wouldn’t be if you knew everything,” she said after a second. “He’ll tell you, when he’s ready.”

Shane nodded, thinking back to Halloween at the Kingfisher and wondering if maybe he'd clocked that situation correctly, "text me if you need anything, Holly. Anything at all."

"I will," she promised and Shane hoped she was telling the truth. He might be a hockey player first, but he was also a very proud Boston WAG and Ilya had pretty much imprinted on the New York WAGs like a baby duck so Shane felt a distinct pull toward the partners of his teammates. He liked Holly, even if she was more Ilya's friend than she was Shane's, and he wanted to help out, if he could.

Shane nearly said some piece of that out loud, nearly forced his tired mind to scramble together a sentence to tell Holly just how serious he was about wanting to help, but he could hear Eric moving down the hall toward the stairs and decided it was time to hang up, "I'll take care of him, promise."

"I know you will," she said softly. Shane could hear a slight sniffle and wished there was more he could do to help. Hopefully, though, one of the women she was closer with than she was to her husband's teammate would be there for her soon. "Thank you."

"Course," Shane replied, "goodnight."

"Goodnight," she echoed and then the line went dead.

Shane forced himself to take a deep breath, a silent mantra of *you know how to act like a person and you are a good friend, you can take care of Bennett* running through his mind on a loop, and then tucked his phone into the pocket of his joggers and made his way back into the living room.

"Hi," Eric said, stepping into the room looking a little like he'd learned how to walk that morning and Shane found himself deeply grateful for the fact that he wasn't the only person in this room who's apparently forgotten how to be a human.

"Hello," Luke said; he had Sunny sitting almost entirely in his lap, essentially acting as a shield between himself and the awkwardness. "How do you feel about *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*?"

"I'm 38," Eric deadpanned.

"Only for another month," Luke shot back, like that was the issue.

“I’m also not a virgin.”

Luke raised his hands in surrender, “never said you were.”

* * *

Eric really couldn’t tell you why he’d chosen Shane’s house.

Well.

Maybe he could.

He hadn’t even necessarily *had* to leave his own house but the silence had long since become suffocating and the brief breaks that roadies offered weren’t cutting through the tension as effectively as they had in any year prior, especially considering the near month-long homestand they’d been on.

It wasn’t that his marriage was bad and it wasn’t that he didn’t love Holly because he did, he loved her *dearly*, it was simply becoming increasingly clear that they weren’t meant to be married and he had no clue what to do about it.

Watching Shane get booted from Montreal only to be brave enough to come out to the Admirals mere weeks later had lit a bit of a fire under Eric’s ass and then watching Scott kiss Kip after winning the Cup had only made that fire grow until he’d admitted to Holly, in the quiet hours of midnight in the safety of the home they’d built together, that he might just be bisexual.

She’d been wonderful about it, supportive in the same way she always was, and it’d made Eric feel so stupidly safe that it almost hurt *more* to realize that they still weren’t working out.

On paper, everything was perfect. But, in practice, they’d been falling apart for quite some time.

Holly was his best friend, that was for damn certain, he just wasn’t so sure she should be his wife.

They hadn't even fought. He hadn't packed a bag and stormed out; she hadn't packed the bag for him and kicked him out. He'd simply gotten home, realized the silence was making him feel crazy, and had decided he needed to leave.

He'd driven toward Cale's house first, thinking that maybe a movie night with his goddaughter might make things better but the closer he got, the more the idea of watching Wagner's perfect family being perfect made him want to scream.

Then, he'd started driving toward Scott's, but the further he got from home and the closer he got to the city the less he wanted to be around Scott and Kip. They were just so perfect, so *together*, and Eric really didn't want to hear them telling him that things would work out, that he just had to be true to himself and everything would be fine.

It was that thought that made him remember Shane just barely holding himself back from telling Scott to fuck off on more than one occasion and the decision had, all of the sudden, seemed easy.

He'd driven right past all of the Manhattan exits in favor of driving the full hour to Irvington from Great Neck.

Perfect families and perfect couples were not going to make him feel better.

Shane and Luke, though?

They might just make him smile.

He knew the logic was flawed, he knew that Shane and Rozanov were happily married, but Rozanov wasn't in New York and they weren't out to the world in the same way Scott and Kip were. Shane (to Eric) seemed to be more likely than Scott to understand the chaos that was happening in Eric's mind. He was also far less likely to sugar coat anything and Luke had even less of a filter than Shane did, as exemplified by the kid looking at Eric's blood-shot eyes and probably tear-streaked cheeks and immediately making a 40-Year-Old Virgin joke.

"Jesus Christ," Shane muttered, grabbing a slice of pizza and flopping onto the couch.

Eric really wasn't sure if he was more surprised by Shane Hollander eating pizza or Shane Hollander eating on the couch instead of at the dining room table with a placemat and a cloth napkin.

"Eat, Benny," Shane added, nodding toward the box that was clearly the pizza Shane had selected, a polar opposite of the absolute monstrosity of a meat-lovers that Luke was chowing down on while not-so-subtly slipping pieces of bacon to Sunny. "If you're not up for pizza or if you don't want to break your diet there's several Tupperwares of meal prep in the fridge you're welcome to heat up."

"I think I can eat pizza for a night," Eric decided, picking up a slice of Shane's (blessedly, vegetarian-friendly) pizza and joining them on the couch.

"We wake up at 7 on non-game days to run with Sunny and do yoga before going to practice if you want to join," Shane continued, apparently content to just pretend they'd all planned on Eric showing up. "Then if you're staying, which you're welcome to, by the way, we usually cook dinner together. There's a whole recipe book and guests get to pick what we make so that's your job at breakfast tomorrow, we'll do a grocery order over lunch. The kids usually join for dinner if that's alright by you, but they're not really guests at this point so dinner's still your choice."

"All of them?" Eric asked, blinking a little and trying to remember when Shane had effectively adopted *all* of their rookies rather than just Luke. Sometimes, it was really difficult to remember that Shane had only lived in New York since March.

"They kind of travel as a pack," Shane said, pushing Sunny's face away from his slice and back toward Luke.

"Fair," Eric decided, biting into his pizza and watching as Luke pressed play on *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* because the kid truly never backed down from committing to the bit.

"And if you want to talk," Shane said, avoiding Eric's eye entirely in favor of staring at the coffee table like it'd free him from human interaction, "I'm here. And if you don't want to talk, I'm still here. You can stay as long as you need, Benny. No questions asked."

"Thanks," Eric responded, his voice barely above a whisper as the weight of Shane's easy welcome settled in his chest.

Shane finally tore his eyes away from the table to flash Eric a quick smile, it was tight around the edges, awkward in a way Shane rarely was anymore, and the sight of it made Eric feel oddly safe.

“I don’t like yoga as much as Shane does,” Luke announced, shifting on the couch just enough to shield his pizza from Sunny, who’d apparently decided she was over waiting for Luke to slip her pieces of bacon and was, instead, going to get them for herself. “So, it’d be nice if you stayed awhile, give me a break from having to attempt to keep up.”

God, these two were the perfect pair.

Just awkward and earnest and so ridiculously kind it made Eric’s head spin.

It was half hidden in a fake complaint about Shane, but Luke had not only remembered that Eric enjoyed yoga, he’d also managed to frame Eric invading their home in a positive light, in a light that made it seem like Eric simply fit.

Eric continued eating his pizza and attempted not to cry.

* * *

Something was up and Scott was committed to getting to the bottom of it.

It’d started with Eric trailing Shane and Luke into practice the day before their game against Edmonton like they’d all arrived in the same car. Then, at lunch, they’d all heated up meals in matching containers and sat down at the same table, heads bent together over Shane’s phone while they talked about something that sounded suspiciously like a joint grocery list. And then, after practice, Scott had watched Luke wait for Shane and Eric *both* to get done with the trainers instead of only waiting for Shane which was especially odd because the PT on Eric’s hip and knee took significantly longer than the maintenance PT for Shane’s shoulder.

“You guys coming to dinner?” Shane asked as Nick and Cameron walked past, Conor lagging behind them, slightly distracted with staring at Luke in a way that Scott was actively choosing not to comment on.

“If that’s alright,” Nick answered.

“You know it is,” Shane said, ruffling his hair gently and then letting his hand settle on Nick’s shoulder, steering the group toward the door.

Luke must’ve noticed Scott staring because the next thing he knew, the kid was right in front of him asking, “you want to join, Scotty?”

Scott blinked, startled a little by Luke’s sudden appearance, but he started nodding before his brain could catch up, “yeah, that’d be nice.”

“You can drive with us,” Shane offered, shouldering the door open and smiling a little as the rookies crowded through. “You hired a car this morning, right?”

“Yeah,” Scott said, not at all shocked that Shane had noticed. “Thanks.”

Shane rolled his eyes and just swung his arm in a clear *get a move on* gesture.

Scott followed Luke, Eric, and Shane toward Shane’s Jeep and watched as Conor internally debated with himself for a total of five seconds before tossing his bag into the trunk after Luke’s and then crowding into the back seat alongside Luke and Eric. Nick and Cameron climbed into whatever ridiculous car Nick had bought with the signing bonus on his brand new, post-ELC contract. Eric didn’t seem all that phased by getting jammed into the back alongside their rookies so Scott decided not to feel all that bad about enjoying the leg room in the passenger seat.

“Hey, Hollzy?” Luke asked as Shane maneuvered out of the parking lot, something about Luke using *Hollzy* when he almost exclusively used *Holly* set off about four alarm bells in Scott’s brain but he couldn’t quite identify what the bells were trying to tell him.

“Yeah?”

“Puck drop’s at 1 tomorrow, right?”

“Yes?”

“Yale plays at Sacred Heart at 7, do you think we could go?”

“How far a drive is that?”

“Hour and a half from MSG,” Luke answered immediately, “only 50 minutes from home, though. So we could go home after the game and eat and change and still make it on time.”

“Yeah, that’d be fun,” Shane said. “Do we need to figure out tickets now or just when we get there?”

“It’s not a big game so we’ll be fine just figuring it out when we get there but, even in the off chance it’s somehow sold out, I feel like they’ll probably find a way to make room for the reigning Stanley Cup champions. Also, it’s only two and a half hours further to Newton,” Luke added, “should I ask Rozy and Luca if they want to come?”

Scott watched Conor’s face twist in confusion in the rearview and realized they’d somehow forgotten to tell the rookie that the husband they all teased Shane about was, in fact, Ilya Rozanov.

“They’re playing Toronto at home tomorrow night.”

“Aren’t they playing Toronto *tonight*?”

“Back to back games,” Shane explained, “weird scheduling thing, happens sometimes. But Ilya will be here next week after Boston’s California roadie because we have a joint shoot with GQ. I think he has a shoot for something out in LA too, I have no clue. I’ve entirely forgotten. Speaking of, though, has mom sent you anything? She said something about Red Bull asking about you?”

“Yes but would it be totally insane to wait to sign on with a brand until they can sign Luke Hollander?”

Scott whipped around in his seat, entirely incapable of hiding his reaction to *that* piece of information, “until they can sign *who*?”

Luke's eyes went wide and Shane let out an almost unconscious laugh, though the sound seemed to go a long way in calming Luke down, "ah," Luke started, a shy little smile tugging at his lips, "David and Yuna are maybe in the process of adopting me?"

Eric was staring at Luke like he'd figured something out but had no plans of sharing with the class but Conor looked just as confused as Scott felt so, at the very least, he wasn't alone.

Scott wanted to ask why but he, more than just about anyone, understood the absolute minefield that questions like that lived in and Conor apparently had some level of knowledge of the situation that Scott didn't possess because he kept his mouth shut, too.

"I don't think that's crazy," Shane said, acting like absolutely nothing was amiss. "It's up to you, though. Just communicate, okay?"

"Okay," Luke agreed, slinking back in his seat a bit, clearly uncomfortable with the attention he'd drawn from Scott, Eric, and Conor.

Scott forced himself to turn back around.

Something was going on with Eric and now something was going on with Luke and every instinct was telling him to fix it, to get involved and push until someone told him how to help, but there was a little voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Kip telling him to back off, reminding him that they'd come to him if they needed him and that it wasn't his responsibility to fix everything that was wrong in the world.

"Ignoring the adoption thing for a minute," Conor piped up, "someone care to explain the *Rozanov* thing?"

"Oh, yeah," Luke said with a bright grin, "he's married to Shane."

"Shane Hollander?" Conor asked.

"Yes," Shane answered.

“How’d I miss *that*?”

“No clue,” Eric laughed, “none of us are exactly quiet about it.”

“That’s insane,” Conor muttered, shaking his head a little like he was trying to physically rattle that bit of information into some place in his brain that could make it make sense. “The whole rivalry was bullshit, wasn’t it?”

“That might just be the fastest anyone’s come to that realization,” Shane laughed. He had a smile on his face that seemed to be entirely reserved for Ilya Rozanov. The photos that’d been posted the day prior of Shane and Ilya announcing the Irina Foundation had pretty perfectly captured the look that was currently on Shane’s face and Scott was left wondering how the hell people were still buying the ‘best friends’ shtick. Honestly, though, he doubted many people were. The League, though, was continuing to turn a blind eye which was really all that mattered. Scott had seen very little anger online as the rivalry turned into a public friendship and he’d seen even less anger as it became increasingly clear that something *more* than friendship was afoot. It seemed like most people were just sort of fine with it.

It was almost like a frog being set to boil; the public had simply sat in lukewarm water, watching Shane and Ilya become friendlier and friendlier until the pot started to boil and the true nature of their relationship became increasingly obvious and by the time they decided to turn the world’s least subtle soft launch into a hard launch everyone would be trapped in the pot with no time left to complain.

* * *

It took about 45 minutes after the rookies left for Scott to decide to get up and leave, too, and Eric only felt a little bit bad about rather obviously ignoring every attempt his friend had made to figure out what was wrong. He didn’t know how to talk about it, especially with someone like Scott who would want to help, even though his help sometimes felt a little like being smothered. He just wanted a minute to process and Shane and Luke were giving him the space he needed.

“I think I’m getting divorced,” he announced an hour later. They were watching reruns of Parks and Rec that Eric had long since stopped paying attention to.

Shane blinked and Eric could almost *see* the 17 different possible responses filtering through his brain before he decided on, “how do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know,” Eric said after a minute. “She’s my best friend, but I don’t think we’re happy anymore.”

“Well,” Shane said, clearing his throat a little, “if you want help with anything, just let me know, alright? Like finding a lawyer or moving or finding a punching bag to beat the shit out of, I’m happy to help.”

“I might take you up on all of those offers,” Eric responded with a quiet laugh. This was the kind of help he needed, the earnest (if slightly awkward) way that Shane showed up for his friends. Later, when things made a little more sense, he’d need the sort of help that Scott and Cale and Greg offered, the all-encompassing love of guys he’d known forever. But, right then, this was all he could handle. “Also, I’m bi.”

“Fuckin’ knew it,” Shane muttered before catching himself and forcing on a smile that was trying a little too hard to stay even, “thank you for telling us.”

Eric was far too worn out to hold back his laughter. He had no clue what he’d done to draw Shane’s suspicion but watching his mask of polite support shatter, if only for a second, was far more amusing than it should’ve been.

“Me too,” Luke said and Eric snapped his mouth shut so quickly it hurt. “I think that’s what I am.”

“I’m gay as fuck,” Shane said casually, turning back toward the TV.

“And yet, somehow, Rozy still gets jealous over Rose Landry.”

“It’s getting to a point,” Eric started, deciding to just pretend this conversation between three professional hockey players was anywhere near the spectrum of normal, “where it’ll be easier to ask who on our team is straight rather than the other way around.”

Shane kept staring at the TV and his laugh at Eric’s quip was distant at best but Eric only had a moment to wonder what was wrong before Shane was saying, “Kent knows about me. Montreal told him.”

“That’s why you fought?” Luke asked, his voice soft.

“Yeah.”

“Does Ilya know?”

“No, but he’s probably guessed.”

“Do you think he’ll -” Eric started before trailing off, the question burning at his lungs and the mere concept spiking his heartrate. He couldn’t even imagine what Shane was feeling.

“I don’t know,” Shane answered, not even needing to hear the rest of Eric’s words to know what he was asking. “I don’t think so, especially because I hit him. He seems like enough of a homophobic asshole that he won’t want to openly admit he got his ass kicked by a gay guy in the process of outing me but it’s still a risk. I need to talk to Ilya, but I think I might just come out publicly, get ahead of it, you know?”

He said it so casually that it would’ve been easy to pretend that he was actually alright but Eric was more observant than most, he could see the tension in Shane’s jaw and the scrunch of his brow, the same face he made when he was attempting to get a read on Eric during a shoot out drill, the one that said he was considering 18 options and about 30 extra contingencies. He was stressed out of his mind but was clearly trying to hide it and Eric didn’t have to think long to realize that it was for Luke’s benefit.

“You could come out on pride night?” Luke suggested. “I looked at Amanda’s calendar and we’re doing it during our game against Ottawa in February. You know Bood and Dillon would be good about it. I mean, it’s about 500 times better than coming out and immediately having to deal with Montreal.”

“We also don’t play Boston again after that,” Shane said and Eric really shouldn’t have been shocked to realize that he’d memorized the dates of each of their games against the Bears. “Hopefully that’d keep some of the attention off Ilya. If we played them the next day or something he’d be subjected to at least twice as many questions about me than he will playing Vancouver or whatever.”

“There’s no way he lets you do it alone,” Luke said, thankfully speaking Eric’s thoughts aloud before he had to find a way to parse them.

“He will because he doesn’t have a PR card yet. After that card shows up, though, it’s anyone’s game. Odds are he’ll get so excited he’ll end up just posting a picture of it online without telling me or our agent beforehand.”

“Probably,” Luke laughed, “and once he does that, we should plan a wedding reception. Invite our teams and everyone. You should get to celebrate in public instead of just alone in a hotel room in Detroit.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, a wistful sort of smile on his face, “that’d be nice.”

* * *

They beat Edmonton, somehow preserving their win streak through yet another game, and Shane decided to just celebrate instead of thinking about how that streak was going to have to end sometime. Going this long undefeated was absolutely unheard of and whatever blessings they’d garnered from the hockey gods could only go so far. He and Eric got tapped for media seeing as Shane had scored once and assisted Scott’s goal and Eric had held them to their 8th shutout of the season but as soon as they were done, they piled into a town car headed to Irvington.

The turnaround at home was quick and after a post-game meal, showers, and a change of clothes, they were packed into Shane’s Jeep headed toward Huff’s house to collect Conor who (in a move that shocked literally no one) had decided to tag along.

Luke was just about vibrating with excitement in his seat and Shane couldn’t help but smile.

It’d been a heavy couple of days with Eric confiding in them and Shane admitting what Kent knew and Luke half-way admitting to more than just Shane, Ilya, and Shane’s parents that he hadn’t had a great home life so this, this easy joy, was exactly what they needed.

Shane let Luke and Conor control the aux meaning he had to listen to a lot of music that he would never, in this life or the next, choose for himself but they were smiling and Eric was openly laughing at Shane’s disgruntled expression, looking lighter than he had in days, so Shane decided he was happy to put up with it.

Yale won and Shane had to bite his tongue not to laugh at the *incredibly* poorly concealed look of jealousy on Conor's face when Luke sprinted out of the stands to greet Drew but then they got to kidnap Drew from the hotel the team was staying at and take him out for a (very) late dinner and all three of them pretty quickly started getting along. And then, with Drew dropped back off with his team and a much quieter car ride back to New York and Conor safely deposited at Huff's house, they pulled into the garage and made their way inside and Shane realized just how grateful he was for how much his life had changed.

He sincerely doubted that a teammate looking for a place to land would've chosen Shane's home back in Montreal but here, in New York, in a place that let him be soft, that let him act more like himself and less like the hardened hockey phenom the world expected, his house had become somewhere safe.

It'd become a place where Luke felt at home, where the team gathered on days off, where the rookies piled in for dinner, where Eric knew he'd be welcomed without question.

Shane had never imagined sharing his space like this, he'd never really imagined sharing a home with anyone other than Ilya, but this was what his home had become and he was all the better for it.

Chapter 50: time makes you bolder

November 2017

“Hello?” Ilya greeted, a little bit concerned to be getting a call from Luke out of the blue.

“Hi,” Luke responded, “I need to tell you something.”

Well, that was deeply concerning.

He didn’t sound injured or frantic meaning Shane probably wasn’t injured, either, but he also didn’t sound all that happy. He sounded nervous and Ilya’s first thought was that he’d somehow been arrested and had decided, for some reason, to call Ilya instead of Shane.

“What is it?” Ilya said, instead of just point blank asking which jail he’d managed to land himself in.

Jail seemed like the most rational conclusion seeing as Ilya was actively driving toward New York and, if Luke just wanted to talk, he could’ve waited an hour until Ilya was there in person. The other option was pregame nerves seeing as New York’s ridiculous win streak had been broken with two losses against Chicago and Columbus the week prior but they were playing Ottawa that night so Ilya really didn’t think it was that. It wouldn’t be difficult for them to beat the Centaurs, even with the slight improvement the team had seen with a new coach and Boodram finally having a center who could keep up with him in Tanner Dillon. They were still missing a solid right wing and they could do with a bit more strength on defense and their goalie was (put as kindly as possible) absolute shit.

“Yuna and David are adopting me,” Luke spit out.

Okay, so not jail or nerves.

That was good, Ilya didn’t really feel like explaining to Shane why he’d posted bail without consulting him and he wasn’t exactly sure how to kindly talk Luke through pregame nerves beyond reminding him that Ottawa fucking *sucked* which probably wouldn’t have been all that helpful if the kid was trapped in some sort of anxiety spiral.

“Is that what you and Shane were working on the other month?”

“Yes,” Luke said, “we didn’t, like, *mean* to keep it from you, it was just an insane idea and I had no clue if it was actually going to work and everything with my dad was stressful and, I don’t know, I just didn’t want to talk about it out loud and have the universe somehow take it away but Yuna just called and everything’s squared away and the papers are all filled out, just waiting for my signature so I feel like I can talk about it without it being taken away, you know?”

Ilya paused for a beat, his brain struggling for the barest moment to catch up with Luke’s rambling, “you are happy about this?”

“So happy,” Luke breathed out.

“Good,” Ilya said, nodding decisively even though Luke couldn’t see him, “then I am happy for you.”

“I’m gonna change my name,” he added, “they offered.”

Ilya couldn’t help but smile at the almost shy note in Luke’s voice, the disbelief in his tone, the pure, childlike joy of getting to be a Hollander.

Ilya could understand.

His jersey still said Rozanov and they’d agreed to hyphenate but sometimes, when the night got a little too quiet and he let his mind wander, he thought of himself as a Hollander alone.

He thought about that moment, a few years down the line, when they could start talking about retirement and children and how, maybe, he might just ask if those children could be Hollanders.

He wasn’t sure, yet.

Rozanov had been his name his entire life, it was the name he’d built a brand around, it was the name he’d shared with his mother, but she was the smallest blip of light in the dark cloud of the Rozanov name.

He, like Luke, wanted to be a Hollander, wanted a name that wasn't his father's.

"Luke Hollander," Ilya said with a smile, carefully ignoring the tightness in his throat and the warmth building behind his eyes, "I like it, very much."

"Thank you," Luke said. Ilya could hear him clearing his throat before there was a slight sniffle, "when will you be here?"

"An hour," Ilya answered, "has Shane left yet?"

"He and Benny left a while ago. They had a whole list of people they apparently *needed* to talk to today and I decided to not get involved, I don't need to be in the city until like 3, though, so I'll be home when you get here. Are you coming to the game or watching from home?"

Ilya really didn't know who Eric and Shane could possibly need to talk to at 9 in the morning on a game day but the fact that Clinically Superstitious Thing One and Thing Two were diverting from routine meant it was probably important.

"I'll be there," Ilya said. He hadn't been entirely sure, but he and Shane were doing a photoshoot the following morning so he had a reason to be in town and he hadn't gotten to see Shane play (outside of playing against him) since Game Six of the finals and, possibly more importantly, he'd largely stopped caring about what people think. He was tempted to put on a Hollander jersey with no bet as cover and sit in the WAG box but that might be a bit much so, instead, he'd put on one of Shane's Admirals hoodies and sit in Shane's seats and see if Kip wants to join him.

* * *

"Well, that's done," Eric sighed, climbing into Shane's Jeep that'd been idling in front of Eric and Holly's house on Long Island. Eric had decided that he needed to talk to Holly before he drove himself up a wall thinking about it and Shane had apparently been elected as emotional support.

"You alright?" Shane asked, trying his absolute hardest to act natural. Somewhere, the child psychologist who'd all but given up on explaining the concept of emotional intelligence to an 8-year-old Shane Hollander was laughing.

“Yeah,” Eric said, nodding his head like confirming both verbally and visually would make Shane believe him. It wasn’t really working.

“Good,” Shane said.

This was only stop one.

Shane was going to die before lunch.

* * *

Ilya Rozanov was real fucking lucky that he’d locked Shane down before anyone else had even realized the man was gay.

Eric’s growing need to sob over the end of his marriage to a wonderful woman who’d been his best friend since they were idiot teenagers pretending they understood the world was being ever so slightly tempered by trying to hold himself back from pinching Shane’s cheeks and kissing his nose because he was so goddamn cute.

He wasn’t Eric’s type and Eric wasn’t *actually* attracted to him but he did, in fact, have eyes and in that moment, looking at Shane attempting to act like a human while fighting through his own discomfort regarding emotion to be there for Eric while he went on a game day divorce-based odyssey, Eric found it pretty easy to understand the appeal.

“You’re a good friend,” Eric said, deciding to ignore the way his voice came out in some strange mix of breathy and choked. He really didn’t want to cry, both because he hated crying and because he didn’t want to subject Shane to the horror of attempting to comfort him.

“So are you,” Shane said, his voice much steadier. “Who’s next on the list?”

Eric blew out a breath and started giving directions to Cale’s.

* * *

By the time they got to Scott's, Shane was so wrung out that he really didn't even want to *attempt* to imagine how Eric was feeling.

Eric had talked to Holly alone but Shane had gone into Cale's with him and then they'd sat in the parking lot at North Hamstead Beach and stared at the Sound while Eric called Greg Huff (which had been a tactical decision based on the fact that Eric felt he should talk to Holly first before telling anyone (other than Shane and Luke, apparently) anything and hadn't wanted to drive all the way back into Westchester County to talk to Greg), his parents, and his older siblings and now they were standing at Scott's door, entirely unannounced, and Shane was just about done with the day.

They still had to play a game that night.

Scott opened the door only a few seconds after Eric knocked and just stared at the pair of them before turning his attention to Eric, pointing at Shane, and asking, "why does he look like he's seen war?"

Eric let out a huff of laughter, "he kind of has."

"What'd you do to him?"

"Nothing," Shane answered, "I'm fine, Benny just wants to talk to you."

"And you're here for, what? Emotional support?" Scott teased, pinching Shane's cheek as they walked through the door.

"Yes," Shane deadpanned, dodging Scott's hand before he could tug him into a hug. He'd hug Scott later. Right now, he was drained.

Scott's eyes softened a little with understanding and he easily let Shane pass him by without any further physical contact.

Scott was a good friend.

“I’m getting a divorce,” Eric said, apparently also done with the day. He’d approached the five other conversations Shane had paid witness to with *far* more tact.

Scott stopped in his tracks and looked to Shane first like he’d be able to offer a better explanation and Shane just shrugged before vaulting over the back of Scott’s couch and slumping into the cushions.

“Also, I’m bi,” Eric added.

“Well done, Benny,” Shane said, running a hand down his face and thinking that in some distant hour, when he was no longer gripping onto his sanity with both hands, he’d find this pretty damn hilarious.

“Well, this is already better than when Shane and I came out to each other,” Scott laughed. Shane watched him tug Eric into a tight hug that Eric slumped into immediately. “The first thing Shane said when he realized I was telling him I was gay was that he owed Ilya money.”

“I wasn’t exactly firing at full speed then,” Shane argued, trying not to wince at just how out of it he’d been during those final weeks in Montreal, “I’d be better now if you want to try again.”

“Hey Shane, I’m gay.”

“Me too,” Shane said, managing to shoot Scott a little smile when he heard Eric start laughing, the sound muffled slightly from where he was still burrowed into Scott’s shoulder. “Hey, want to become best friends and act so weird about each other that our whole team and most of the public except for like twelve Hollanov and Shayden diehards think we’re dating?”

“Sounds like fun to me,” Scott said, grinning back at Shane as Eric’s laughter got a little louder. “Maybe we can be *so* weird about each other that even after I kiss my boyfriend on national TV, most of those people will *remain* convinced that we’re dating!”

“Thank you,” Eric breathed out, pulling away from Scott with the first real smile that Shane had seen on his face since they left the house that morning.

“Is this why you’ve been staying at Shane’s?”

“Yeah, I knew I could’ve come here but, well...”

“You didn’t want to be stuck in a condo with me and Kip acting like a couple of lovesick teenagers?”

“Pretty much,” Eric laughed, settling onto the couch next to Shane. “Hollzy and Luke were what I needed in the moment, I think I’m stable enough for your particular brand of support now, though.”

“Good,” Scott said. He looked relieved and Shane had to wonder if he’d been able to tell something was off, if he’d been driving himself insane for the past week trying to figure out what the problem might be.

Scott was always there, always ready to help, and Shane was starting to feel like they’d somehow iced him out.

It wasn’t a good feeling.

Shane loved Scott dearly, he was one of Shane’s favorite people, one of his best friends, and he hated to think that, in giving Eric space and in generally starting to fall back on his old habit of attempting to handle everything on his own, he might’ve made Scott feel like he wasn’t needed, like he wasn’t loved.

“Hey Scotty?” Shane said.

“Yeah?”

“What do you think about me coming out on our Pride Night?”

Scott blinked a couple of times, looking almost shocked that Shane was asking his opinion and Shane internally committed himself to letting Scott in more, to making it a habit instead of simply a thing he’d done while he was falling apart. Eric was eying Shane like he could tell exactly what he was doing and Shane opted to ignore him, not wanting to make it obvious to Scott.

“I think it’d be really powerful,” Scott said after a second, “we’re playing Ottawa that night, right?”

“Yeah.”

Scott nodded, his eyes going distant in the way they did when he was considering every possible outcome, “they’d be good about it. Supportive. They really like you in Ottawa, even though you played for Montreal and now us, and I’ve heard good things about their management and their new coach and Bood’s a good guy who can keep his team under control. They’re probably the best team we could face after you coming out other than Boston. You mentioned it this summer, when we were talking about our Cup days, but I’d kind of thought you’d forgotten or changed your mind.”

“Kent knows,” Shane admitted for the second time that week. He watched Scott’s blood boil in real time and found himself rather glad they weren’t close enough to Montreal for Scott to go murder Kent and make it back in time for puck drop. He didn’t necessarily want to figure out whether or not a judge would set bail for homicide. “I don’t think he’ll out me, but I’d rather do it myself, you know?”

“Then I vote yes,” Scott said.

“Me too,” Eric added. “Then, if we win the Cup, I’ll come out next year because clearly the key to us winning is someone dramatically announcing their sexuality.”

Shane started laughing and couldn’t stop.

He was emotionally spent and feeling more than a little hysterical but then Scott and Eric were laughing too and all of it, the too big emotions and the cloying fear of being something *other* in a sport that loved conformity, started to chip away in the face of unfiltered joy.

* * *

Shane grinned as he caught sight of Ilya sitting next to Kip in Scott’s seats. Scott’s tickets were a row closer to the ice than Shane’s and the pair had apparently elected to force Kip’s friends Maria and Kyle into sitting in Shane’s ever so slightly worse seats.

Shane paused his warmup to nudge Scott's shoulder and nod in their direction and then he had the pleasure of watching Scott's whole face light up as Kip waved and then stood and turned around, pointing to Scott's name and number printed across the back of his jersey.

"Awww," Shane teased, pulling off his glove to pinch Scott's cheek, shaking his head a little bit to make him laugh, "Scotty's blushing!"

"Quit," Scott muttered, batting Shane's hand away only to poke at Shane's own cheeks that were assuredly turning pink as he realized that Ilya was wearing one of his Admirals hoodies that had 24 embroidered into the shoulder.

"Quit," Shane echoed, batting away Scott's hand in turn.

"God," Scott whispered, his voice a little awed as he turned his attention back toward Kip and Ilya, "we're pretty lucky, huh?"

"The luckiest."

* * *

Ilya loved watching Shane nearly as much as he loved playing against him. There was just something about hearing the crowd chant his name and getting to think *that's my husband*.

He'd had a good morning with Luke and the dogs, they'd even had enough time to go out for lunch before Huff came by to pick Luke up. He'd taken Ilya to a little bistro right along the Hudson that he and Shane liked. Apparently, when it was warmer, the restaurant had outdoor seating and they could bring Sunny. It was nice, getting to spend time with him one on one. It was amazing having Luca around, his presence made the Boston house feel more like home than it ever had, but it didn't stop him from missing Luke and Shane.

He hadn't gotten to see Shane yet but getting to watch him play, getting to watch Shane kiss his glove and then press it to his ring after scoring *in person* after weeks of only seeing it on the screen went a long way in filling the husband-shaped hole in his chest.

Shane and Scott were on fire, looking more like they had at the end of the prior season than they had over the past few games, they ended up on the power play part way through the third after Ottawa's Chouinard got called for boarding (and very nearly got his teeth knocked in before Carter and Shane realized Luke was fine) and connected for a goal and an assist each before the timer ticked down.

"Oh thank God," Kip huffed as Shane and Scott crashed into each other against the boards after Shane's goal.

Ilya let out a questioning hum, a little distracted by the close up of his husband's flushed, grinning face on the jumbotron.

"They're finally done being weird," Kip explained. "I have no clue what's been going on but something's been off the past couple of weeks."

Ilya knew what was going on.

He hadn't exactly been *told* what was going on because Shane respected people's privacy but it hadn't been all that hard to conclude that Eric had all but moved into their house and Holly had largely stopped responding to the WAG chat. As far as Ilya could tell, the Bennetts had split up and Eric, for some reason that Ilya could guess but wasn't going to openly speculate on, had elected to go to Shane's rather than Scott's and that, plus whatever secret keeping Shane (who can't lie to save his life, no matter how good he is at stubbornly withholding information) had been cornered into had probably led to him just avoiding Scott so he wouldn't slip up.

"They are always weird," Ilya landed on after a solid few seconds of attempting to come up with a response that wouldn't evoke 12 more questions.

"True," Kip laughed.

Seven minutes later, the buzzer sounded on another Admirals win. They were now 19 and 2 which was an *absurd* start to the season. They were at the top of their Division and the Eastern Conference with no sign of slowing down and Ilya almost hoped they'd win the Cup again, hoped that Shane could pull off back-to-back wins with a team that actually appreciated him so the accomplishment would no longer be sullied by Montreal.

Almost being the operative word seeing as Ilya didn't actually *want* New York to win.

No, absolutely not.

Because New York winning inherently meant Boston losing and Ilya, as much as he loved his husband, would *much* prefer winning himself over watching Shane win.

He'd just also much prefer watching his husband win over watching literally anybody else.

Ilya trailed behind Kip as they maneuvered through the arena and met up with the other WAGs to head toward the family room. The girls folded them into the pack seamlessly and Ilya thanked his lucky stars once again for the absolute goldmine he and Shane had struck with their teammates and their partners.

He half listened to the conversations happening around him as they waited for the players to trail in, far more focused on the prospect of seeing Shane than on actually paying attention to anything else.

Shane must've been requested for media, which really wasn't a shock given both his performance during the game and the fact that he might just be the most perfectly media trained individual Ilya had ever met, because it took 38 minutes (Ilya counted) for him to finally appear.

Ilya felt like his whole soul lit up as Shane stepped into the room, dressed in his suit with his hair still damp from his shower, already grinning at Ilya like Christmas had come early.

"Hollander!" Ilya crowed, entirely unable to keep the grin off his face.

"Rozanov!" Shane laughed, walking right past the few people still waiting around and yanking Ilya into a crushing hug.

He felt Shane deflate against him, burrowing his face into Ilya's neck, and wondered just how stressful the past couple of weeks and his morning adventure with Eric had been.

"Ты окей?" Ilya whispered, placing one of his hands on the back of Shane's head and holding him a little tighter.

“I’m okay,” Shane answered, “just tired. I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” Ilya said. He knew, of course, that Shane missed him when they were apart, Shane told him all the time. Ever since February, since they decided to stop lying to themselves, and especially since Shane moved to New York and started forcing himself to stop caring about outside noise, he’d never really shied away from telling Ilya what he felt. Their text thread was full of *miss yous* and *love yous* and *wish you were heres*, but hearing it out loud, while Shane was wrapped in his arms, when he was saying it as a way of reminding Ilya just how much he loved him, was so much better.

“Hey,” Kip greeted, squeezing Shane’s arm where it was wrapped around Ilya’s waist. Both the gesture and the fact that Shane didn’t flinch away made Ilya smile. Shane had friends here, real friends. Friends beyond J.J., Hayden, and Jackie. Ilya had always had that, he’d always been close with his teammates and their families. He loved going out in Boston, he loved meeting people and hearing their stories and making new friends. Shane was different and, sometimes, he let his dislike of socializing go too far, sometimes he let it isolate him instead of finding people who were kind enough to meet him where he was at. But it wasn’t like that in New York, he wasn’t isolated anymore. He’d found incredible people who loved him for him, who he trusted enough to follow outside the bounds of his comfort zone. “We’re gonna go get drinks, you coming or heading home?”

“Home?” Shane asked, looking up at Ilya in question.

“Home,” Ilya agreed, running his thumb across the fabric of Shane’s dress shirt, just over his hip. He could tell Shane was completely and utterly beat and they could always join a few people for drinks the following night before Ilya drove back to Boston Tuesday morning to go to practice only to turn around on Wednesday morning and fly to New Jersey. It was a mess of travel, but every moment spent in his car or stuck on a plane was worth it for even a single minute at Shane’s side.

“Your Jeep’s still at mine,” Scott said, stepping up beside Kip and throwing an easy arm around his shoulders as he dropped a soft kiss into his hair.

“Can I get it tomorrow?” Shane asked, sending his best puppy dog eyes Scott’s way, as if they were even necessary and as if Scott could ever say no. Scott seemed to be just about as defenseless against Shane’s big brown eyes as Ilya was.

“Of course,” Scott agreed immediately but that apparently wasn’t enough to make Shane turn off the eyes. “Stop that. Seriously. Shane.”

Shane was full on pouting now and Ilya truly had no clue what his angle was. He'd already gotten what he wanted.

"Do you want me to drive it to your shoot?" Scott asked and Shane started grinning.

"No," Shane laughed, "I just wanted to see what you'd offer to make me stop."

"You're the worst."

"You love me," Shane said easily, patting Scott's cheek before turning toward the door, dragging a more than willing Ilya along behind him. "Night!"

"Where are Luke and Eric?" Ilya asked as they stepped into the hall.

"Luke'll go out with the team and end up passed out on Nick and Cameron's couch and Eric's staying at Cale's for the night, something about a movie night with his goddaughter. I don't know, I stopped processing new information somewhere around noon."

All Ilya was hearing was that they had the house to themselves.

Shane was asleep in the back of the car within minutes of them pulling away from the arena and Ilya felt like the freaking Grinch with the way his heart grew at the sight of Shane's precious, sleepy face.

They pulled into their driveway a little less than an hour later and Ilya shook Shane awake and delighted in the fact that he was sleepy enough to let Ilya carry his bag inside.

"Hey," Ilya whispered, gently running the backs of his fingers across Shane's cheek as he leaned against the counter, eating the same yogurt and fruit he always ate after games, "the magazine Yuna booked for me?"

“Hm,” Shane hummed, somehow communicating both that he remembered what Ilya was talking about and that he was listening without saying any actual words. It made Ilya smile.

“They sent me pictures. Want to see?”

Shane’s sleepy eyes blinked fully open as he set aside his snack and held his hand out for Ilya’s phone.

Ilya hadn’t sent him any of the early proofs, wanting to wait to see Shane’s reaction in person. He opened up the email from the editors and passed his phone over and just watched in delight as Shane’s jaw dropped.

“Holy fuck,” Shane whispered, scrolling to the next picture of Ilya one pair of tiny underwear away from fully naked on a California beach. “Ilya, oh my –” he cut himself off, squinting for a second before zooming in and Ilya smiled wider as he watched the realization set in. Shane didn’t say anything out loud. Instead, he set Ilya’s phone aside and then pushed up the hem of his hoodie and t-shirt. “Ilya,” he whispered, running reverent fingers along the four numbers Ilya had gotten inked along his ribs, just below his left pec.

“We match, yes?” Ilya said, letting his hand settle over the spot where the same four numbers were etched on Shane’s arm. “Maybe we should change phone passwords now, though. Is not very secure to have password tattooed.”

“I already changed mine,” Shane responded, “it’s your birthday.”

“Aww,” Ilya cooed, moving both hands up to cup Shane’s cheeks and smooshing them together, earning himself an eyeroll *and* a scrunched up nose. “You have a crush on me.”

“We’re married, Ilya.”

“So embarrassing,” Ilya continued, pretending he hadn’t heard Shane speak. “Shane Hollander has big, embarrassing crush on me.”

“What’re you gonna change *your* password to?” Shane asked, raising an eyebrow, the effect of which was rather muted by the fact that Ilya was still smushing his cheeks.

“Ah,” Ilya sighed, rather theatrically admitting defeat, “see, I have a big crush on you, котик. I already changed mine, too. It’s our anniversary.”

“You big softie,” Shane whispered, looking at Ilya with stars in his eyes. “When are these pictures getting posted?” he asked, nodding toward Ilya’s phone as much as he could with Ilya’s hands firmly planted on his face.

“Tommorow,” Ilya said. “I think. I read email but already forgot.”

“Can I just call the Commissioner and tell him to fuck off and then tell everyone you’re married?”

Ilya blinked a couple of times, wondering if his husband had been replaced by one of those lizard people that Hammersmith wouldn’t stop talking about, “if you want?”

“I do after knowing that the whole world is going to get to see you looking like *that*,” Shane said, turning his head and pressing a kiss against Ilya’s palm. “You’re so beautiful, Ilya. I just want everyone to know you’re mine, to know how proud I am to be yours.”

Ilya melted as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to Shane’s forehead, lingering there for seconds longer than necessary, “soon,” he whispered, “after I have my PR card, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane agreed, settling his hands on Ilya’s waist, “I want to come out on our Pride Night. It’ll be before your card arrives, probably. But if I come out first, I’ll draw the League’s attention for a minute and then there’ll be less eyes on you until your card should shows up.”

“You want to come out?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Ilya agreed, pressing another kiss to Shane’s forehead and then pulling him into a hug. “You are so brave, Shane.”

“I’m not,” Shane huffed, “I’m terrified, actually. Kent knows. Montreal told him. I want to come out myself before he decides to do it for me. I think I have a buffer because he won’t say anything so soon after I punched him and we kicked the shit out of his team but he’ll get cocky again eventually.”

“Okay, so, maybe I just accidentally kill him when we play in January.”

“Maybe not *kill* him. I don’t want that on your conscious.”

“That is all you are worried about?”

Shane paused for a second, considering, “I mean, I don’t love the moral implications of murder but, yeah, that’s most of what I’m worried about. You can fight him though. Please, feel free.”

“Oh, good, I am glad I have permission,” Ilya teased. The low level anger at Montreal and, specifically, Dallas Kent that was seemingly *always* burning in his chest was rather quickly reaching nuclear fallout levels but he kept it inside. Shane didn’t deserve his anger. He didn’t deserve to even watch it second hand, especially in the safety of their home on one of the few nights they’d been able to steal together since the season started. His anger could wait until they played the Voyageurs in a month and a half.

* * *

“I do not understand why we have to be here this early,” Ilya grumbled as he and Shane climbed into the back of the town car GQ had sent. Apparently, they’d barely even blinked when Yuna had told them that Shane and Ilya could be picked up at the same address.

They were doing a joint photoshoot and sitting down for an interview on their ‘friendship’ and Ilya was sort of wondering how many people would see straight through that bullshit.

The closet wasn’t even glass anymore; it was one of those paper privacy screens that falls over when the AC kicks on.

Ilya knew there were already several more shoots and interviews planned for when they *actually* came out and he honestly couldn't wait to just scream the truth in everyone's faces instead of simply allowing them to believe what they wanted to believe.

The building GQ had rented out for the shoot wasn't too far from their house and Ilya filled the time by quietly muttering about early mornings and unfair scheduling while Shane pretended to be annoyed.

Ilya always had fun with photoshoots. He genuinely liked being in front of the camera, even if it could get a little tedious. But he was pretty sure he'd hate every single shoot he had to do on his own from then on out.

He'd forgotten how much fun it was to shoot with Shane.

They hadn't gotten to do this since the CCM campaign before their rookie year and it was, unsurprisingly, even more fun now that Ilya knew for absolute certain that he could openly flirt and have his feelings reciprocated. The interviewer asked questions throughout the day which meant they got to keep moving instead of having to sit down and awkwardly answer questions like they were at a briefing and Ilya delighted in watching Shane's personality come out more and more as the day went on. The questions were easy and Ilya knew it'd be a fluff piece with most of the focus on the photos rather than their words but he was more than alright with that.

They looked good together.

Really good.

Even though Ilya was having a real problem getting it together enough to pose for the photographer, they still looked good. He felt a little bad about the fact that they kept having to pause, get serious, and try again but he was here, with Shane. With his husband who *loved* him, who wanted the whole world to know as soon as it was safe for Ilya. He was so goddamn happy he felt like he was choking on it.

Shane seemed to be having a similar struggle which only served to make Ilya smile *more*. It was worse than their nervous teenage giggling on that rink in Toronto.

“I love you,” Ilya whispered as they waited for one of the assistants to move the softbox to adjust the lighting.

Shane grinned at him. His full, beautiful smile. The one that made his freckles bunch together as his nose and the corners of his eyes scrunched up and Ilya found himself suddenly breathless. “I love you too,” he whispered back.

Chapter 51: leave the christmas lights up 'til january

Chapter Notes

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

December 2017

Ilya walked into the locker room on the first of December to a chorus of cheering and truly obnoxious whistles.

Photos from his shoot with Cultured Magazine had been posted the night prior and the chaos had only been compounded by the first behind the scenes pictures of the GQ shoot he and Shane had done being uploaded that morning.

“BTS with hockey’s favorite friends,” Hayden read out before turning his phone toward Ilya with an eyebrow raised, “*friends* my ass. Think I should tell the internet that Shane has never *once* looked at me like that?”

Ilya leaned closer to see what Hayden was referencing and found a picture of Ilya sitting in Shane’s lap while Shane was smiling up at him the way he always did. Ilya recognized the moment immediately and felt a smile break out across his face; someone had caught pictures of the seconds right after Ilya had pulled Shane’s attention to tell him he loved him while the crew was adjusting the lighting.

“Jealous, Pike?” Ilya teased.

“Yes,” Hayden deadpanned, “so jealous. I am a jilted lover. You’ve stolen my husband from right under my nose, how will I ever recover?”

“There was no competition,” Cliff laughed, holding up one of the pictures from Ilya’s solo shoot like a trophy, “he’s so much hotter than you, Pikey.”

“I’m taken, Marly,” Ilya said.

“I’m well aware,” Cliff responded, “your husband’s my girlfriend’s best friend. You talk about him here, she talks about him at home. I can’t escape Shane Hollander.”

“Good way to live, yes?”

* * *

18 days later, the chirping about the photoshoots had died down but his team was about to get new material: Shane was in Boston.

Ilya was about to vibrate out of his skin.

He hadn't seen Shane in a month and now Shane was *here*. In Boston. At TD Garden. Wearing a Bears t-shirt and one of Ilya's leather jackets, holding Arthur Pike and standing next to Rose Landry while grinning at the camera that'd been trained on their box.

Whoever had put together the Admirals schedule that season had clearly been holding onto some sort of vendetta and this was the first time that Shane had more than a day off at a time while not stranded in some random city. The week prior, the Admirals had ended up spending two full days in Pittsburgh because, apparently, management had decided that just keeping them on the road, a 6 hour drive from home, would be easier than traveling back to New York only to turn around 30 hours later to go to DC.

The schedule from hell had *finally* relented long enough for Shane to make it to one of Ilya's games; the first game of Ilya's that Shane had ever gotten to watch in person. They were playing Columbus which was bound to be a good game, they were pretty evenly matched record and pointwise over the season and both teams had solid players who tended to put on a bit of a show.

Boston had fought their way to several close wins over the past couple of weeks but Ilya didn't want Shane to watch a close win, he wanted Shane to watch Boston *dominate*. He wanted Shane to feel the same pride that Ilya had every time he'd had the opportunity to attend as Shane's partner. He wanted Shane to understand what Ilya meant when he said that the pride felt different than seeing it on a screen or from across the ice. He wanted this to be another thing they got to share.

Ilya blew an obnoxious kiss up toward the suite level and got to watch on the big screen as Shane's smile turn a little more real as he shook his head fondly at Ilya's antics.

“I tried to get him in a Pike jersey and he flat out refused,” Hayden complained, sliding to a stop at Ilya’s side.

“Don’t even joke,” Ilya grumbled, though the effect of any threat he might make was wholly ruined by the way he couldn’t stop smiling at the sight of Shane.

* * *

“I feel like a traitor,” Rose said as the camera finally panned away.

“Why’s that?” Shane asked, settling into one of the seats at the front of the box with Arthur in his lap. He’d all but adhered himself to Shane from the moment Shane showed up at the Pike’s house that morning when Ilya and Luca left for the arena and Shane was more than alright with that. He’d steal Arthur and bring him back to New York if he thought there was a chance in hell he’d get away with it.

“I’m wearing a Boston jersey!” she, quite dramatically, cried. “I should only ever be seen in New York red!”

“You were wearing Montreal blue like 9 months ago.”

“We don’t talk about that.”

“Have you ever even worn my New York jersey?”

“No! Because someone hasn’t gotten me one!”

“God I’m the worst,” Shane sighed. “How dare I? I’m the worst gay boyfriend ever.”

“You are,” Rose agreed, only holding onto her serious expression for a second longer before she was grinning over at him, “I think to make up for it you need to get me a Winter Classic jersey. And a Pride jersey. I’ll be at both of those games.”

“Really?” Shane asked.

“Of course,” she said, looking at him like he was insane for even suggesting otherwise. “A bunch of the girls are travelling down because Boston plays Brooklyn on the 2nd so we can do New Years Eve in New York and then watch you play on the 1st. And they’re away during your Pride night so at least Jackie and I are coming down, maybe a few others.”

“When was this decided?”

“Winter Classic? Last week when someone finally looked at a schedule. Pride? As soon as you told me your plan.”

“You guys don’t have to come watch,” Shane said, feeling oddly shy about just how much he’d somehow endeared himself to the Boston WAGs over the past couple of months. “We’re playing outside, it’s gonna be freezing.”

“We want to!” Rose insisted. “We’ll wear parkas and buy handwarmers. We’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Shane said, knowing there was no use arguing. “I do really want you at Pride Night, though. Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” she promised.

* * *

Boston won 7-2 with Ilya scoring twice. Both times, he kissed his glove and pressed it to his ring in what’d very quickly become *their thing* except, this time, he got to look up at the box Shane was sitting in as he did it.

Ilya wanted to flee the locker room and chase down his husband but, instead, he ended up being requested for media alongside Hayden the second they were out of the showers.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep up the bit of them hating each other, especially considering the sheer number of nights Ilya and Luca had spent just hanging out at the Pikes' house. But he and Hayden both, apparently, derived some sort of sick thrill from antagonizing one another, especially when given the opportunity to do so in front of the cameras.

"Pike missed easy goal in the second," Ilya said in response to some benign question about how Ilya thought his team had performed. Simply saying that his team was the best and they'd sent Columbus home crying was boring. Antagonizing Hayden into fighting him on live television, on the other hand, never quite lost its charm.

"Oh, like you didn't whiff that pass on the power play early in the third," Hayden shot back and Ilya just grinned. He liked Hayden. As soon as he'd accepted the fact that Ilya was there to stay, as soon as he'd seen it for himself that Ilya was deeply in love with Shane and would do anything to protect him, he'd climbed right on board the Hollanov train. It probably helped that he'd had a fair warning that Shane was pining after Ilya during those months between the cursed tuna melt and All Star weekend and that he'd gotten to see just how much Shane's mood improved as soon as they'd sorted themselves out.

And now, the effect of having Hayden's support was that Ilya had found a person (outside of Shane, Svetlana, and Cliff) who never shied away from him at his worst.

He could see straight through the front Ilya put on and always gave as good as he got. He laughed when Ilya was an asshole instead of getting offended, he insulted Ilya right back without ever pushing too far and, if he did push too far, he noticed immediately and walked himself back without having to be asked.

He could walk into the locker room, see Ilya stuck in his head when his thoughts got too loud, and find a way to drag him back out before Ilya even realized what he was doing.

"I noticed there was a special guest," the TSN reporter said and Ilya was ever so slightly irate to realize the reporter's focus was on Hayden. "How'd it feel to have Hollander in the crowd instead of on the ice with you?"

"Weird," Hayden laughed. "I miss playing with him but it's great to still have his support. He's well liked in the room here, though, so I wasn't the only one excited to see him."

"I have known him the longest," Ilya found himself saying without even thinking about it. He saw Hayden bite his cheek, clearly trying not to laugh at Ilya's rather blatant jealousy, and wondered if

there was any conceivable way to make that statement any less insane. Ilya stared at the ceiling for a second, ignoring Hayden's amusement and the way every member of the media pool was looking at him like they were waiting for a headline, and then landed on, "Hollander trained Pike well, it has been good to have him on my wing and was fun to show off with Shane in the crowd."

Complimenting Hayden Pike.

What a great way to make himself seem rational.

Thankfully, for all parties involved, media wrapped up rather soon after and Ilya got to escape back into the locker room with a delighted, cackling Hayden.

"You looooveee me," Hayden cooed, pinching Ilya's cheek and not even having the decency to look scared when Ilya quite literally growled at him.

"You are lucky I love your children," Ilya grumbled, shoving Hayden away and heading toward his locker to change into his suit, "otherwise you would be dead."

* * *

Shane was under a dogpile of Pike kids when Ilya and Hayden finally found their way to the family room after the game.

He was sitting in one of the slightly oversized chairs in the corner of the room with Amber entirely passed out on his chest, Arthur still sitting in his lap, and Ruby and Jade somehow jammed into the minimal space between the arms of the chair and Shane's sides. He was holding three separate conversations with the three awake children, he was exhausted from the ridiculous schedule they'd been suffering under, and he was so genuinely happy he was afraid his heart might just spontaneously burst.

"Your husband complimented me," Hayden announced, a megawatt smile on his face that turned into something almost disgustingly sweet when he caught sight of Shane and the kids. "Jack, please tell me you got a picture of this."

“Of course I did,” Jackie scoffed from where she was sitting in the chair next to Shane.

“Good, good,” Hayden nodded, pulling out his phone and looking around the room until he found Grace Carmichael hanging out by the door waiting for Ryan to get done with the trainer, “we need a family picture, though, Grace, do us a favor?”

“I can take it,” Ilya said, shooting Hayden a confused look.

“You’re in it,” Hayden said, his tone of voice suggesting that he thought Ilya was actually fucking *stupid* for thinking otherwise.

“Oh,” Ilya whispered, turning toward Shane with big blue eyes that were nearly overwhelmed with emotion, “okay.”

“C’mon,” Shane said.

Ilya grinned and tossed his bag aside before darting the last few steps across the room and settling onto the arm of Shane’s chair, resting one of his arms on the back so he could lean down and drop a kiss into Shane’s hair, “we need a picture with Luca, too,” he said, “so we can frame it next to the one with Luke from Detroit last year, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane agreed easily. Luca had finally stopped calling Shane by either his full government name or Mr. Hollander so they were probably finally at a place where he could pose for a picture with Shane without actively losing his mind.

He really wasn’t sure what it was about him, specifically, that made Luca’s brain go haywire when he’d openly admitted to being more of a fan of Ilya than he was of Shane and he was perfectly alright living in Ilya’s house but Shane wasn’t planning to question it, he didn’t want to make the poor kid more nervous than he already was.

Shane pulled his attention away from Ilya when Hayden dramatically flopped onto the ground at his feet, pulling peals of laughter out of the twins and Arthur. Amber, somehow, stayed asleep through the entire ordeal. Jackie’s smile was fond and a little indulgent as she got up and settled on the other arm of Shane’s chair and softly directed her kids to smile at the camera.

“One kid per parent,” Hayden announced once Grace had handed his phone back. “Who is whose?”

From experience brought by several years of joining the Pikes on various outings, Shane knew he was talking about the system they’d developed so they didn’t accidentally leave a kid behind at the water park or the aquarium or the zoo. Shane and Hayden had forgotten Ruby *once* at the playground and had remembered before they even reached the car but that had been enough for them to decide a system was necessary. At first, they’d take a twin each. Then, after Arthur was born, it was the twins with Hayden and Arthur with Shane, or, if all three of them were there, Ruby with Jackie, Jade with Hayden, and Arthur with Shane. It was just an unspoken rule.

Arthur, however, apparently felt the need to speak it, “Shane,” he said, scrambling up, somehow avoiding kneeing his baby sister in the head, and wrapping his arms around Shane’s neck, looking down at Hayden like he was daring him to argue.

“Wow,” Hayden said, drawing out the syllable as he turned around with a face full of mock surprise, “who would have guessed?”

“Ruby you’re with me, Jade you’re with dad,” Jackie said, even though they didn’t actually need to be told, “and I guess that leaves Amber with Ilya. Hope you like babies, Rozanov.”

“You know I like babies,” Ilya said, slightly petulant as he carefully extracted Amber from Shane’s arms.

Shane had thought he was desensitized to the sight of Ilya with a baby after the several dozen pictures Jackie had sent him over the past couple of months.

He was wrong.

It was so much worse in person.

Ilya immediately clocked the blush Shane knew was spreading across his cheeks and winked.

* * *

After a 3-1 win against Toronto at home, the Admirals were finally released for their three day Christmas break.

Shane and Luke sped through media, showers, and whatever random post-game rituals they'd collected over the years and then they were jogging through the halls to meet David and Yuna by the player entrance. Their flight had landed in the afternoon meaning Shane and Luke had already left the house by the time they arrived and Shane was beyond excited to see them.

"My boys!" Yuna cheered as soon as they were in view and Shane couldn't help but grin.

He might be 26 years old, fully independent, and married, but seeing his parents waiting for him after he finished a game still made him feel like a little kid in the best of ways.

"Hold on," Luke said, catching sight of David's jersey, "is that mine?"

"Yeah," David said casually, turning around so Luke could see the full *Gillis 15* on his jersey. "It'll be out of style soon but I still think it's worth it."

Luke's whole face lit up with the force of his grin and Shane felt something settle in his chest as Luke immediately wrapped David in a hug, no fear and no question of whether the affection would be welcomed.

"Good game, bud," David said, holding on tight until Luke pulled away on his own.

"Thanks," Luke replied, his voice a little choked.

"Let's get home," Shane said ruffling Luke's hair and nudging him toward the door. "I'm starving."

* * *

Shane woke up the next morning to someone climbing under the covers next to him.

“Hello,” Ilya whispered, pressing a kiss to Shane’s cheek as he cuddled up, close enough that they were sharing one pillow.

“What the fuck time is it?” Shane muttered, not even bothering to open his eyes as he rolled over and tucked himself against Ilya’s chest.

“Almost seven,” Ilya answered.

Shane paused, doing the math in his head and quickly coming to the realization that Ilya had left Boston sometime before 4 o’clock in the morning. Meaning he’d gotten up early enough to pack the car and corral a hyperactive dog and a rookie who had expressed his hatred of waking up before the sun on more than one occasion out of the house before driving three hours in (nearly) the middle of the night. Eric had to drive seven hours to Hamilton, Ontario that morning and Shane knew for a fact he hadn’t even woken up before six.

“You’re insane,” Shane said, his voice almost disgustingly fond, even to his own ears.

“I missed you,” Ilya responded, like that alone explained his insanity.

Though, honestly, it did.

Shane would do far more insane things than waking up at 4 in the morning in the name of getting to see Ilya and he knew Ilya felt the exact same.

“Go to sleep,” Shane whispered, tilting his head up just enough to signal he wanted a kiss.

Ilya immediately complied, pressing his lips to Shane’s for the sort of gentle kiss they’d taken *years* to allow themselves before tugging Shane back into his arms with a soft hum.

* * *

Ilya woke up for the second time that morning to Sunny abandoning her spot at the foot of the bed in favor of strongarming her way into the space between Ilya and Shane.

He cracked one eye open and took in the sight of a very determined golden retriever who did not care one iota about anyone's personal space. He only had to wonder for half a second where the other dog (who cared even less about personal space) was before Anya was jumping up on the foot of the bed and climbing right on top of Ilya, Sunny and Shane be damned.

"Ouch," Shane grumbled. He wriggled out of Ilya's arms which Ilya did not appreciate one bit, even if it'd been done in an attempt to let Sunny lay down so she'd stop trying to crush his internal organs.

"Shane," Ilya whined, fully willing to admit he was whining so long as no one ever told anyone about it.

"Big baby," Shane teased, but he adjusted himself enough to reach across the dogs and land his hand in Ilya's hair, "I can't believe you left Boston so early."

"Wanted to see you," Ilya said, pressing his head up against Shane's hand until Shane took the cue and started scratching gently at Ilya's scalp.

They stayed in bed far later than Ilya thought Shane would allow but he decided not to question it. Instead, he simply soaked up the easy comfort of existing in Shane's space, of getting to feel Shane's fingers in his hair and getting to hear Shane's voice, rough from sleep, ramble on about defensive systems and Christmas decorations.

By the time they emerged from the cocoon of their duvet, the house smelled like pancakes and fresh bacon and Yuna and David were already at the dining room table with Luke and Luca.

Ilya was *very* glad that Luca had agreed to come to New York - after telling Ilya seven separate times that he didn't want to intrude and only actually agreeing to it when Shane had called him and explicitly invited him - because their break was far too short for him to fly back to Switzerland to be with his family and the idea of him sitting alone in Boston made Ilya want to cry.

"Ah they're alive!" Luke cheered, throwing both his arms up in celebration. "Good morning!"

"Good morning," Shane echoed, ruffling Luke's hair as he settled into the seat next to him. "Did you land on a plan for today?"

“Can we go skating?”

“You get three days off hockey after three months of suffering a slow and painful death via our schedule and you want to spend one of those days of freedom skating?”

“Oh, like you don’t.”

“I’m not going to Tarrytown,” Shane said.

“No, me neither,” Luke said with a shudder, “Scott said he and Kip are going to Central Park?”

“You want to crash Scott and Kip’s date?”

“No, I want to go to Rockefeller Center.”

“I’m having trouble following your train of thought,” Luca said, giving Luke a look that said he saw him more as an anthropological study than a human being at that very moment.

“I want to pretend to be a tourist and I want to skate outside but I don’t want to hang out with Scott and Kip who’ve never met PDA they don’t like thus, Rockefeller Center.”

“Huh,” Luca hummed, tilting his head a little, “I guess that does make sense.”

Luke grinned in triumph before shoving a too-large bite of pancake in his mouth.

* * *

It was cold.

Freezing.

Frigid, some might say.

But Luke and Luca were racing each other as much as they could through the crowd of people and David was showing off his old college hockey skills to make Yuna laugh and Shane was skating next to him, stride for stride, so all Ilya felt was warmth.

His fingers were frozen, his lips were probably turning blue, but he was dead certain that the overwhelming, nearly sickening love that was spilling through his veins would've kept him warm even if he were hypothermic.

For a long time, Ilya had told himself that he didn't much care for Western Christmas. It was commercialized and loud and just a bit too much. The colors were too bright and the songs were annoying and everything about it made his teeth ache but now, as they made their way off the tourist-filled rink in Midtown surrounded by an excessively large tree and enough strings of lights to reach the moon and back several times over, he started to understand the appeal.

They left Rockefeller Center and walked deeper into midtown and had lunch at a place closer to MSG, somewhere that Shane, Scott, and Carter frequented where every employee knew Shane and Luke's names and not because they were star players of the team from down the street. Ilya had never really imagined a place like that existing in the middle of the chaos of New York City, but he wasn't all that shocked that those guys, of anyone, had found it.

They took a car back out to the suburbs after and Ilya found himself far too amused at the sight of Luke and Luca crowded into the third row for a full hour of stop and start traffic.

Their afternoon was spent adding to the few decorations that Shane, Luke, and Eric had found time to put up and Ilya only complained twice about the fact that Shane had a fake tree rather than a real one.

He would've complained more, but he didn't necessarily feel the need to listen to Shane's 30 minute rant on fire safety for a second time.

After dinner, they all ended up on the couch in the living room and Ilya felt like he was in the middle of a dream as Shane snuggled up next to him to watch Christmas movies surrounded by *their* family. Ilya couldn't remember ever feeling this at peace during a holiday. His mother had always done everything she could to make him feel loved, to protect him from whatever shitshow his father had chosen to put on that year, but nothing about that had ever been *peaceful*. He wished she were here now, more viscerally than he had in quite some time.

He missed her every day but this was something different.

He wanted her here so she could experience the peace, too. He wanted to show her that there was something better, that the frozen darkness they'd lived in wasn't all there was. He wanted to prove to her that there was warmth in the world, that there were people who'd love her without hurting her, who would feed her a dinner she hadn't had to cook and make sure she had a blanket she liked when she sat down to rest.

He wished she could've had this, and he hoped she could see that he'd found it.

* * *

On Christmas morning, Ilya got to watch Luke open a box from David and Yuna that contained a framed copy of the Final Decree of Adoption from the Family Court of Westchester County.

It was disorienting to look at a truly benign piece of paper and understand just how much it was worth.

Silent tears were running down Luke's face and Ilya knew that he hadn't let himself honestly believe, until that very second, that this was actually happening.

He'd signed the papers, he'd known they'd been notarized and submitted, he'd known that the Decree had been made, but, now, he was holding physical proof.

He was holding a piece of paper that said *on the consideration thereof, the Court finds that the adoption should be granted*, a statement only outweighed by the sentence that directly followed it: *It is ordered that the name of the adopted adult should be changed to Lucas McGregor Hollander*.

Shane slid off the couch and onto the floor next to Luke, tugging him into an embrace Ilya knew intimately, the one that felt like you were being anchored back down, the one that felt like you were so safe, so loved, that nothing could ever hurt you.

“We already filed everything with the Vital Records Department and the League,” Yuna explained softly, “they said you can change your jersey whenever, you just have to let the equipment staff know.”

Luke let out a wet laugh and tugged his phone out of his pocket, opening his email and firing off a message in record time.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, a bright grin spreading across his face as he looked up at Shane, “we’re brothers.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, Christmas lights catching on the tears building in his eyes, “brothers.”

* * *

Getting in the car to drive back to Boston on the 27th felt like ripping out one of his lungs and leaving it behind.

He knew he’d be back here soon, but that wasn’t enough to convince his brain that the world wasn’t ending.

Sometimes, the comedown after seeing Shane felt all-encompassing. It felt like it’d drag him under to a place from which he’d never be able to surface.

And it was that, that realization that his brain was entirely incapable of letting him hold onto the happiness instead of diving headfirst back into the dark, that made him realize it was time to finding help seriously.

Searching for Russian-speaking therapists and leaving tabs open wasn’t cutting it anymore, he had to actually reach out. He had to take that step and accept that he couldn’t just battle through this on his own or rely on stolen days at Shane’s side. He owed it to his husband, who loved him and wanted him

to be happy, to his mother, who hadn't had access to the help she needed, and, most especially, to *himself* to do the scary thing and admit that he wasn't okay.

* * *

January 2018

Ilya was a little (a lot) pissed that they had mandatory practice on New Years Eve and that he'd had no real excuse to avoid the team plane to New York the following morning.

Nearly every single WAG had travelled down the day prior and had spent a wonderful (and incredibly well-documented, if the metric fuck ton of Tweets that'd been posted were anything to go by) night that'd started with dinner with Shane and had ended with at least two of them somehow crossing state lines into New Jersey long after Shane had left the city and gone to bed.

Ilya wanted to be in New York City with his husband.

Hell, he would've been fine being lost in Siberia with his husband if it'd meant he'd gotten a new year's kiss.

He was still in a shit mood by the time they got off the bus at their hotel in Brooklyn and the fact that he was having real trouble getting himself back to equilibrium made him all the more grateful that he'd forced himself to send intake forms off to three different therapists the minute he'd woken up that morning.

He wasn't big on New Years resolutions, but this year he'd set one and he was going to stick to it. He wanted to feel better. He wanted someone to tell him how to get himself out of his own head.

By the time he'd dropped his stuff off in his hotel room that he wasn't planning to use and made his way back down to the lobby to meet Cliff and Hayden, he felt a little steadier.

That year's Winter Classic was being played between Buffalo and New York at Citi Field which was 30 minutes from the team hotel which gave Ilya 30 minutes to make his way from sort of steady to functional adult and adoring husband.

“Can’t see why no one else wanted to join,” Hayden muttered, barely even half serious as the wind bit into their faces the moment they stepped outside. The spare few seconds it took for them to get from the door to the car were enough to make Ilya question the sanity of himself, every fan who’d be in attendance at this event, and the League as a whole.

“It’ll be fun,” Cliff said, his attempt at excitement sort of dulled by the fact that his teeth were chattering.

Ilya just kept his mouth shut because if he opened it the only thing that would come out was an admission that he was freezing which he had told Cliff, on several dozen occasions, was something that Russians did not do.

* * *

“Would you look at that,” Scott said as they made their way into the locker room, clapping Luke on the shoulder.

“What?” Luke asked, looking over at Shane for an answer.

Shane just grinned and nodded toward Luke’s locker.

Luke’s locker where his navy blue Winter Classic jersey had *L. HOLLANDER* stitched across the back.

“Holy shit,” Luke whispered, his eyes locked on the stark white letters against the dark blue fabric. Shane watched him approach his stall and run his fingers across each letter, tracing the shape.

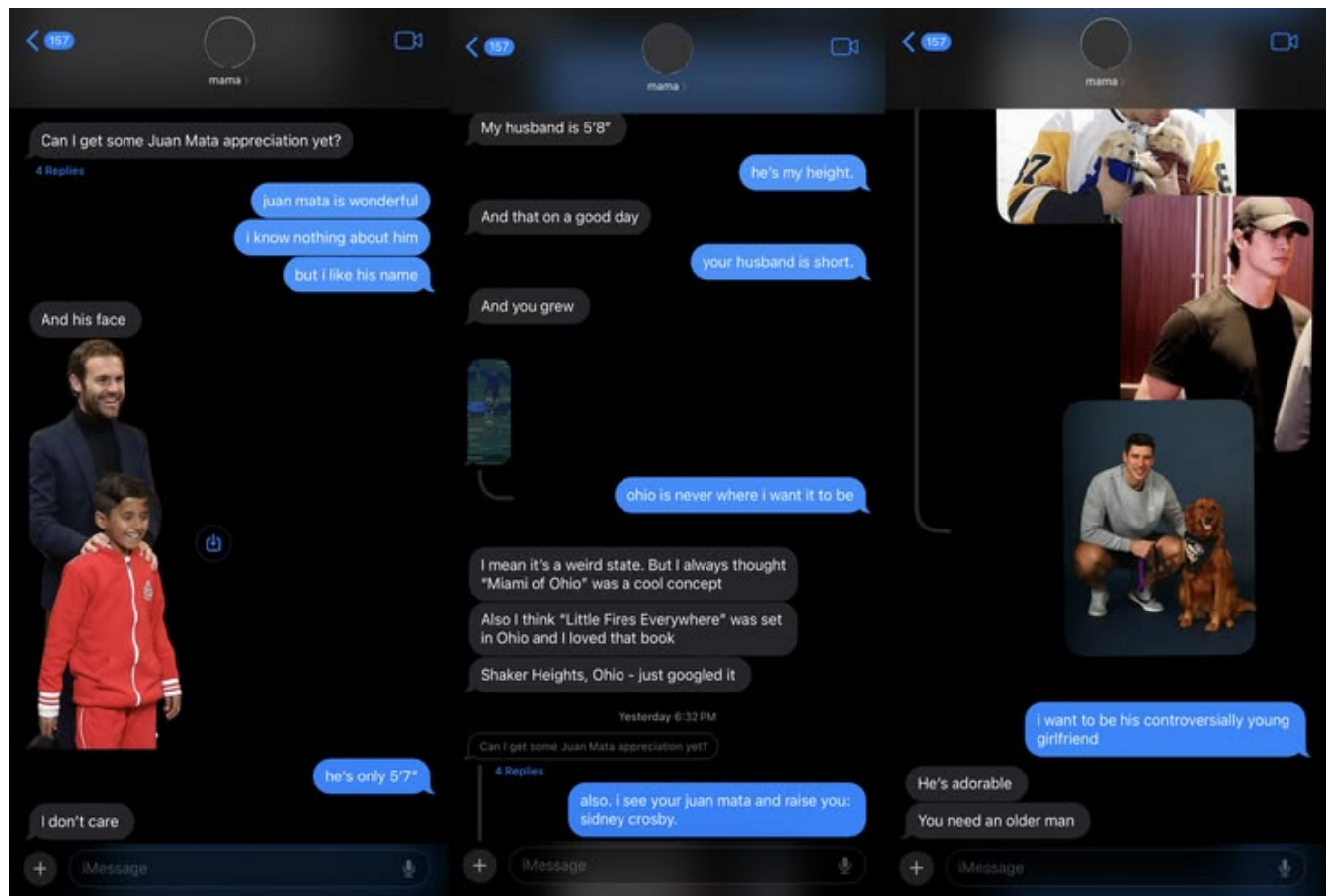
Last year, he’d watched the Winter Classic from Hayden’s couch, silently trying to figure out how he could possibly make things work with Rose while forcing every thought about Ilya out of his head. He’d felt alone, isolated in a place he was hanging onto by the skin of his teeth.

This year, he was watching his newly minted little brother admire *their* name on his jersey while his husband tried to keep himself from freezing to death in the stands.

There were still things to be sorted out, there was still fear about public reception and the response of the League when Shane came out in six weeks. There was still the lingering question of Ilya's mental health and questions of how they could make the distance easier. But Shane no longer felt like he needed to control every little piece of it, he no longer felt like he needed to have every last thing figured out in order to enjoy the moments he was given.

He was finally happy.

Chapter End Notes



Chapter 52: i need sunshine

January 2018

A week after the Winter Classic, they finally got a real break.

The NHL had implemented mandatory 5-day 'bye weeks' for every team to make up for the fact that players weren't allowed to compete in the 2018 Winter Olympics. The weeks were staggered so they'd still have games to broadcast (and ad money to collect) but it just so happened that Boston and New York were given the same break.

So, the moment their plane touched down in Boston after a road game against Pittsburgh, Ilya and Luca were trading their game bags for carryons, picking up Anya from doggie daycare, driving from Bedford to Logan, and boarding planes to Ottawa and Zurich, respectively.

Anya just *barely* fit in the size and weight limit to fly in the cabin and as Ilya watched other dogs being carefully boarded in stowage in kennels, he wondered just how insane it would be to get Anya certified as an ESA so he'd be able to keep eyes on her at all times during commercial flights. The option had been suggested to him by more than one person (specifically, his therapist and Harris Drover via Shane) and he knew that having her properly trained and licensed would probably be smart (and helpful), but he initially rejected it because he didn't like the idea of traditional dog training. Now, though, he was starting to reconsider.

They'd only get five days at the cottage with Shane and Sunny, only five days of total peace and quiet, but it was five days Ilya could check off the calendar as having spent in Canada and five days of waking up knowing that Shane was within reach.

Their schedules for January and early February had them overlapping several times - with this break, the upcoming All Star Weekend, and the final Boston-New York regular season game – but after that, they'd be in the slog of playoffs and there'd be no time to simply *exist*.

Shane was already at the airport when Ilya's flight touched down, having flown directly to Ottawa from Vegas, and with one text, he was leaving the rental car lot and pulling around to arrivals.

Ilya made quick work of stowing his suitcase in the trunk and getting Anya settled in the back seat beside Sunny before climbing into the passenger seat and smacking a kiss to Shane's cheek in greeting.

He wanted to give him a proper kiss, but they were sitting in a non-tinted car in broad daylight at the Ottawa airport where they were *significantly* more likely to be recognized than in anywhere in America.

“How was the flight?” Shane asked as he merged out of airport traffic and onto the main road.

“I found a therapist,” Ilya answered.

Shane squinted out the window like the street signs might help him decipher the logic behind Ilya’s non-sequitur, “I’m really proud of you,” he landed on after a second of buffering and Ilya found himself beaming at the honesty in Shane’s tone. He wasn’t just saying it to say it, he was *genuinely* proud of Ilya for taking that step. “Do you like them?”

“She speaks Russian,” Ilya said, “I think I like her, but have only been once so far so we will see but I think it will be good.”

“Good,” Shane echoed, letting his eyes stray from the road for a moment to meet Ilya’s. He had a soft smile on his face as he reached out and let his right hand settle on Ilya’s knee, his ring glinting in the winter sun. “Therapy sucks sometimes so it’s good to have a therapist you trust.”

“I just,” Ilya started before trailing off, letting his own hand settle on top of Shane’s, his thumb running over the white gold of Shane’s ring, the metal ever so slightly warm to the touch. “My moods are very, what is the saying? All or nothing?” Shane nodded in understanding and Ilya let himself continue, “I am either all happy or all sad and I don’t think that is, ah, healthy. I want to be stable, I don’t want to have to rely on other people to be happy, I want to do it myself.”

“I think you can do that,” Shane said, running his own thumb over Ilya’s knee through the fabric of his joggers, “you’re smart, you like a challenge, I think with the right tools you can do anything. Therapy will give you the tools.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed, his heart lighting up at Shane calling him smart. He knew he was smart. He’d always been smart. He’d always done well in school, even when his time started getting eaten up by hockey. He loved to read, he loved to learn, but sometimes people thought he was an idiot because he stumbled over his words or struggled to speak a full thought as if he weren’t existing in his second language. Shane had never once made him feel stupid, though. Even when they were at their worst, even when they were at each other’s throats, he never acted like he thought Ilya was dumb. He knew

Shane knew he was intelligent, but that didn't mean it wasn't nice to hear. "Now, can you please tell me what the fuck happened against Vegas?"

Shane groaned, his head thumping back against his headrest, but he kept his hand on Ilya's knee as he painstakingly explained every mistake New York had made that'd led them to losing 4-1 the night before.

* * *

Shane watched as the tension Ilya seemed to always carry in his shoulders bled out the further they got from Ottawa and the closer they got to the cottage. He'd known, of course, that Ilya struggled with his mental health. It was a conversation they'd had before and it was a concern that always existed in the back of his mind, but it was difficult to tell how Ilya was doing overall when he always seemed so at peace when he was with Shane. There were moments, of course, where it was clear that Ilya's head was a little cloudy, where it seemed like he was struggling to force himself out of bed or having to put in too much effort to put a smile on his face.

Knowing that Ilya had finally decided to seek out a therapist, though, both concerned and comforted Shane.

It was concerning that Ilya was struggling enough to admit he needed outside help but it was a comfort to know that he was seeking it.

The drive passed quickly, with only a few short stops to let the dogs out and grab groceries, and soon enough they were parked outside the cottage just as the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon, the fresh snow lit up in shades of pink and gold.

Ilya let out a content little sigh next to him and Shane felt his heart melt in his chest.

Still, nearly a full year after that All Star Weekend they'd walked out of changed, seeing Ilya this soft, this at peace, shocked Shane to his core.

He loved this version of Ilya.

He loved *every* version of Ilya, but this one may just be his favorite.

He wasn't putting on an act or attempting to keep ahold of a mask, he was simply existing, letting himself feel without being afraid of looking weak.

He was gorgeous like this, golden curls glinting pink as the sunset reflected off the snow, a soft smile on his perfect lips and no pain in his ocean blue eyes.

He was a work of art, a perfect portrait Shane wanted to spend his life gazing upon.

And later, after Ilya had fallen asleep, beautiful and sated, cuddled up in their bed with Anya curled against his back and Sunny sprawled out at their feet, Shane would use the way his heart felt buoyant, the way Ilya's mere presence made the world less harsh, to bolster himself through writing the first draft of his coming out.

* * *

A week later, as Ilya slept peacefully in Shane's hotel bed the night before they faced each other as captains of their All Stars teams yet again, Shane wrote his second draft.

* * *

February 2018

Two weeks later, safe in the suburban quiet of *their* house in Boston after the Bears eked out a 3-2 win over the Admirals in overtime, Shane listened to Ilya's soft, steady breathing and wrote his final draft.

* * *

Luke had played 20 games as *L. HOLLANDER*. Game where announcers and the internet alike had been delighted by the number of times Hollander and Hollander had connected for goals and assists. His social media handles had been updated, he'd used the mandatory bye week in January to update his driver's license, and his new passport had been delivered the day before their last roadie. The name had been stitched onto a navy blue Winter Classic jersey and into red and white home and away jerseys, and now it was on the back of another blue one.

Most teams used Pride tape and wore Pride jerseys for warmups and then switched to their normal tape and jerseys, but New York was apparently taking a different route.

Their alternates had been updated to include a rainbow field behind Lady Liberty's bust and the same flag displayed on shoulder patches, their number plates, and the letters on Shane, Scott, and Carter's chests and no traditional jerseys were waiting in their lockers for them to change into.

Luke had already seen the logo; it was on the sweatshirts they'd been issued for the locker room and post-game press, it was on the t-shirts and hoodies being sold in the fan shop, it'd been posted to the team social media pages and added to the website, it was on banners outside the stadium and posters across the walls, but seeing it on their game jerseys made it real. This wasn't just a capitalist grab like so many Pride events seemed to be, it wasn't a half-assed attempt at inclusivity; it was a physical reminder that their team had broken the mold.

"Hey," Shane said.

Luke looked over his shoulder to find him leaning against the doorframe, studying the jerseys with bright eyes.

"You're really doing this?" Luke asked.

"Yeah," Shane answered. "I'm posting right before warmups and won't be available for media until postgame," meaning he'd have the entire game to ignore the public response.

"I'm really proud of you."

"Thanks," Shane whispered, his eyes finally locking on Luke's. He looked a little overwhelmed, a little bogged down by emotion, but there was no fear in his gaze. "Fun fact," he added, clearing his throat, "it's been exactly a year since Marlow knocked me out cold."

"I think the universe might be on your side," Amanda said, appearing over Shane's shoulder with a little grin. "Shanevoodoo."

“That’s not a thing.”

“I’d argue otherwise.”

Shane cracked a smile and Luke couldn’t help but smile, too.

“Alright, you two stay out of my way,” she said, squeezing Shane’s arm as she passed him to walk into the room. “I need pictures of the jerseys and you two have things to do.”

“Hold on a second,” Shane laughed, “I need a picture of my jersey first.”

Amanda paused, “that’s a good first slide,” she decided, “I like it better than the youth hockey picture your mom suggested.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, shooting her a soft smile, “thanks.”

Luke watched as Amanda made sure that Shane’s picture was centered and in focus and then they got out of her way so she could get the pre-game content she needed.

“Where’s Sunny?” Luke asked.

“With Carter in the training room,” Shane said, steering Luke down the hall toward the room in question.

“I liked your suit today,” Luke said, a little at a loss conversation wise. He didn’t quite know where Shane’s head was at, didn’t know if he wanted to talk about something real or be distracted by random shit.

“Rose picked it,” Shane answered, his voice a little distant. “Go play with Sunny, I’m gonna call Ilya.”

Luke just nodded and watched Shane wander down the hall, hoping that Ilya could do a better job of settling Shane's nerves.

He wasn't sure how else to tell Shane he was proud, how else to remind him that he loved him, that he was so deeply thankful for all Shane had done.

Shane knew, Luke knew that he knew, but no amount of love and pride could change the fact that Shane was scared.

And, somehow, knowing that Shane was scared was comforting.

It was a reminder that all of them were human, that no matter how much Shane was worshipped, no matter how good he knew he was, there was still something that haunted him in the dark.

Knowing that Shane still got scared, that he still got anxious and shy, and then getting to watch him fight through it, getting to watch him choose to be brave, made it easier for Luke to imagine a day where he'd be able to face his own fears, where he'd be able to choose joy in the same way Shane had.

He wasn't there yet, but he knew the day was coming, he could see it much more clearly than he ever had before.

* * *

The Bears were playing in Vancouver, scheduled for a 7:15 PST puck drop. Exactly three hours behind the New York v. Ottawa game.

Ilya was sitting in his hotel room, waiting for the clock to tick down to a time where it'd be rational for him to collect Cliff and leave for the arena. He was nervous for Shane, afraid of the public reaction and afraid that Shane was going to regret it and somehow resent him if the response was overwhelmingly negative. He knew it was a mostly irrational fear; Shane coming out to Montreal had gone about as bad as it could've and he still didn't regret it, Ilya sincerely doubted that a negative reaction from strangers on the internet would do more damage than the reaction he'd gotten from his team. He knew the Admirals would have his back and he knew most if not all of the guys on the Centaurs would be kind as well, but it didn't change the fact that Ilya wasn't *there*. That he *couldn't* be there.

The immigration attorney they'd spoken to had said it generally took 10-13 months for the spousal sponsorship applications to be processed and up to 8 weeks after the application was approved for the PR card to arrive and Ilya was counting down the days.

It'd been 10 months since the application was submitted and Ilya's patience was wearing thin.

He was pulled from his thoughts by his phone ringing, a picture of Shane sprawled out in the snow outside the cottage with Sunny pinning him down filling the screen.

"Hi," Ilya greeted, smiling despite the nerves, despite the fact that this process was constantly testing his patience.

"Hi," Shane breathed out. "Just wanted to hear your voice."

Ilya's smile grew, "oh, you like my voice, Hollander?"

"I do," Shane said and Ilya could almost hear his smile, "it's my favorite voice, actually."

"God you are embarrassing."

"Quit," Shane laughed, "how's Vancouver?"

"Cold," Ilya said, "bleak, somehow both snowy and rainy, I do not know how it does it."

"It's sunny here but still cold as fuck. Amanda made me go outside so she could take a picture of my suit. We were only out there for like 90 seconds but my fingers nearly turned blue."

"Is a good suit, she was right to take more pictures."

“I’m scared,” Shane said, apparently done with beating around the bush, “really fucking scared, Ilya.”

“Yes, but you are brave.”

“I don’t feel very brave.”

“You are brave, Shane. You have always been brave,” Ilya said, his voice softer than he’d ever thought it could be. Shane brought it out in him, though. Shane made him want to be soft. Shane made him feel brave enough to let go of always trying to be strong. “You did not just *become* brave, you have been brave the whole time I have known you.”

“No,” Shane said, the single syllable sounding choked. “I’m not brave, I’ve never been brave, Ilya. I’m scared all the time, I’m shy and nervous and I worry too much about what people think of me and I hide my feelings and I -”

“No,” Ilya cut him off, not willing to listen to Shane speak ill of himself for a second longer, “no, Shane. You are wrong.”

“Ilya -”

“No,” Ilya cut him off again, “you were brave the very first second we met. You are the one who found me, you are the one who said hello and when I was too distracted looking at your pretty freckles, you kept talking, you did not let me being quiet and harsh stop you from being kind. You always choose to be kind when any other thing would be the easy option. You are always kind, always brave. You came out to Montreal even when you knew it could go bad and you did it again in New York *knowing* that it might go bad. You still did it. You forced me to talk about feelings in Florida and you asked me to marry you. We would not be here if you were not brave, Shane. We might be somewhere, but not here. You are brave and it is okay to be scared but you are still brave.”

He heard Shane sniffle and wished more than anything that he could be there, that he could just teleport through the phone and wrap his husband up in a hug and protect him from the world that scared him so much, the world he still chose to face every single morning.

“Thank you,” Shane whispered. He took a deep breath, the sound of it rattling slightly through the speakers. “I need to go do PT but thank you for answering, and for telling me all of that, it helped. A lot.”

“I will always answer,” Ilya promised, “I do not care if I am playing a game. Call the bench phone and I will pick it up. Call one of the officials you have somehow made friends with and I will steal their phone. Call one of the WAGs and have them throw phone over the glass, I will catch it and answer you while scoring goal. I will always answer.”

Shane was laughing, the sound of it music to Ilya’s ears, “okay,” he said, “I’ll always pick up your calls, too. And, Ilya?”

“Yes?”

“I know sometimes your brain tells you things that aren’t true,” Shane started and Ilya had no clue where he was going, “and I know sometimes it tells you that I might not choose you, that I might get tired of you and leave, but I need you to know that everything I do is for you, that this, me coming out, is as much for you as it is for me and even if it goes poorly I won’t regret it. I will never regret anything that makes it easier for me to be with you.”

Ilya sat, stunned into silence, for several seconds before he cleared his throat and nodded until he realized Shane couldn’t see him, “I will never regret you, Shane. Nothing about you.”

“I love you,” Shane said, his voice that perfect mixture of sweet and certain.

“I love you,” Ilya echoed, “go to PT, your shoulder looked stiff last game.”

“Breezy might’ve overcommitted on a checking drill Tuesday afternoon,” Shane laughed, “I’m fine, though. Promise. Kid just drank one too many Red Bulls.”

“Of course he did,” Ilya said with an amused smile, “you should maybe not call him kid when you are only two years older.”

“Fair,” Shane said, his breath of laughter coming out as an almost snort that was a bit too endearing. “Bye, Ilyusha. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I love you, моя любовь.”

“I love you, mon amour.”

The call clicked out and Ilya caught sight of his grinning face in his now dark screen as he pulled the phone away from his ear. Shane used pet names so rarely, usually only when he was sleepy or had been trying for far too long to get Ilya’s attention. He called Ilya *Ilyusha* almost daily, but the endearments felt different. They felt like winning, like every time Shane called him *baby* or *mon amour* was a trophy he had the honor of collecting.

Ilya put his phone back into his pocket, picked up his bag, and went to find Cliff.

* * *

It’d been thirteen and a half months since Rose had sat across from Shane in that restaurant in Old Montreal and gently suggested that he might be gay.

It’d been thirteen months since he’d broken down crying in the entry way of his apartment after telling his team.

It’d been a year since he was knocked out cold by Cliff Marlow and rather unceremoniously traded to New York in the final hours before the trade deadline.

In that time, Rose had gotten to watch her friend grow into the person he was always meant to be, the person who’d been folded down and hidden away in a heartbreaking attempt to fit in.

Now, she was sitting in a box in Madison Square Garden with several of the Boston WAGs with Amber Pike sitting on her lap, waiting for Shane to change his own life once more.

“Hey,” a voice greeted and Rose looked over her shoulder to find a man in an Admirals polo, wearing an ear piece that made them look even more official, “is Jackie Pike here?”

“Yeah?” Jackie said, getting up from where she’d been sitting in one of the seats near the glass.

“I’m Mike, a couple of the guys had an idea to surprise Shane once they realized you had the kids here.”

“What’s that?” Jackie asked, already smiling a little like she knew what was about to be asked.

“Would the girls want to read the lineup?”

“I think so,” Jackie said, fully grinning now as she turned back to the twins, “Jade, Ruby, do you two want to go down to the locker room to surprise Uncle Shane?”

“Yes,” Jade agreed immediately, shooting to her feet and dragging her sister up with her. “Can Arthur come?”

“I think we can make room for your brother,” Mike said, smiling down at Jade like they were in on some little conspiracy together. It was a simple thing, nothing really on the whole scheme of it, but the fact that this random employee was interacting so naturally with Jackie and Hayden’s kids told Rose all she needed to know about the organization Shane had joined.

“Do we need to go down now?” Jackie asked, collecting Arthur from Camille St-Simon.

“Yeah, they’re skating out for warmups in about a minute,” Mike said, checking his watch, “Shane’s post should be up right about now.”

And that, more even than the kindness he’d shown toward the kids, made Rose realize just how incredible the Admirals organization truly was. This random guy from the event staff who had no skin in the game, who’d probably only ever met Shane in passing, knew exactly when he was going to post and was doing everything in his power to support him.

Jackie nodded, her lips pressing together with nerves for the barest second before she schooled her features and corralled her kids out of the suite, “Rose,” she called at the last second, “want to come down?”

Rose smiled and followed them out the door, Amber still secure in her arms.

* * *

Jackie Pike had met Hayden and Shane at the exact same time.

She'd been out with her friends celebrating her 20th birthday and they'd ended up in the same bar as the Voyageurs who were out celebrating a win.

Most of the guys had been rowdy, crowded on the dancefloor and clearly trying to pick up, but Shane and Hayden had been at a booth in the corner of the room, heads bent together and speaking back and forth frantically like they were on some sort of deadline to solve all the world's problems.

She'd known who they were, because of course she did.

Shane Hollander, who's face had been everywhere that year, Montreal's new rookie who was meant to save the franchise like the second coming of Christ, and his best friend and left wing Hayden Pike.

She'd gone up to them to say hello, not quite sure why but knowing that she'd regret it if she didn't take the chance to introduce herself, and one look at Hayden's earnest, big blue eyes had had her hooked.

Everything had changed that night and within weeks she had an incredible new boyfriend and his best friend who'd follow him to the ends of the Earth.

So much had happened in the years since, but the most important change was that she never again had to do anything alone.

Hayden was there every step of the way but it was never only him. After she'd bombed a history midterm her last year of school, it'd been Shane who picked her up from campus and took her out for dinner. At her graduation three months later, they'd both been there, still bruised from the end of a failed playoff run but grinning and cheering like the diploma she was lifting over her head was the goddamn Stanley Cup. Shane was Hayden's best man in their wedding and Arthur's godfather, he'd been the first person outside of their immediate families to meet all four of their kids, and somewhere along the way he'd become her best friend, too.

While they sat in the locker room, waiting for the Admirals to come back in after warmups, Jackie sat down in Shane's stall, pulled out her phone, and read his statement:

Growing up, I always wanted to fit in. I wanted to be 'normal'. I looked and loved different than my peers. I grew up in a predominately white, predominately straight sport where racial and homophobic slurs are brushed off as 'locker room culture.' I never felt safe, I never felt like I belonged. But no matter how much I wished to change to fit the mold, it simply never happened. I couldn't change my DNA and I couldn't change who I loved.

I was gay when I was drafted, I was gay when I won Rookie of the Year and Olympic Silver and the Conn Smythe and every time I broke a record or was selected as an All Star, I was gay when I won three Stanley Cups. Being gay has never made me a lesser person or a lesser player.

I hope there comes a time when it doesn't matter who people love or how they look in order for them to feel like they fit in this sport, but, for now, I hope that others like me, others who don't quite fit, are able to find support in each other and in others who are sick of the status quo.

Tonight is Pride Night here in New York, and the Admirals will be taking the ice with two openly gay players, two players who never quite fit but who never stopped trying to find a place to belong. I found my place with this team and I am profoundly grateful.

#YouCanPlay

"Oh, what is this?" Shane's voice called from the door and Jackie looked up, her vision blurred by tears, to find Shane jogging into the room, his face split into a giant grin as he tossed his stick and helmet aside and scooped the girls up, one in each arm.

"Surprise!" Ruby shouted directly into Shane's ear as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I'm very surprised," Shane laughed, his gaze darting around the room before they landed on Jackie. She could see the tears gathering in the corners of his eyes as he mouthed, "*thank you.*"

"Oh my God!" Luke shouted, clearly exaggerating his reaction for the girls' benefit, his eyes going comedically wide, "is that Jade and Ruby!"

"Uncle Luke!" Jade greeted, a big toothy smile on her face and Jackie watched Luke just melt as he pried Jade out of Shane's grip, giving him a free arm to scoop up Arthur who'd escaped Jackie's hold the second he saw his Shane.

"Hey girly," Luke said, holding on tight as Jade wrapped her arms and legs around him.

“Oh I see we have some special guests,” Coach Murdock said, clapping Shane on the back as he turned all of his focus toward the girls, “are you two gonna read our lines?”

“Yes,” Ruby answered, suddenly very serious at the prospect of having a task.

“You know, we only do this for really special games,” Murdock said, “do you think this is a special enough game?”

“Fuck y-,” Carter started before his eyes went wide and guilty, “I mean, yes, sir.”

“Good save, Vaughan,” Murdock deadpanned, rolling his eyes, and clearly trying not to smile as the girls started giggling. “You heard the man, this is a very special game. Can you two come with me?”

Ruby wriggled out of Shane’s grip immediately but Jade hung onto Luke for a moment longer before letting him put her down and Jackie watched her little girls who were growing up far too quickly hold hands as they followed Coach Murdock up to the front of the room.

Shane greeted Rose, who was standing near the door with Amanda and Sunny, with a quick kiss on the cheek and then crossed the room and attempted to squeeze onto the bench in front of his stall alongside Jackie before he let out a grumble and just yanked her up before sitting down, adjusting his grip on Arthur, and pulling her back into his lap, both of them giggling like children. In that moment, with Shane’s laughter echoing in her ear and her own laughter spilling through her chest, she felt 20 again. She felt like they briefly became those kids they’d been, unaware of how much their worlds would change over the course of a few short years.

“Thank you,” Shane said again, squeezing her a little tighter.

“Of course,” Jackie whispered back, choking a little on the tightness in her throat. “I’m really fucking proud of you.”

“Swear jar.”

She smacked his arm and sniffled, ignoring his laughter as Coach Murdock called for attention.

“We’ve got guests!” he called once everyone had shut up, “girls, can you introduce yourselves?”

“I’m Jade Pike and this is my sister Ruby,” Jade said, “our sister Amber is with Rosie and our brother Arthur is with mom and Uncle Shane.”

“And what are you doing today?” Murdock prompted.

“Reading lines!” Ruby said, grinning up at him.

“Yes, ma’am,” Murdock said, kneeling down next to her and holding up his clipboard, “do you know all these guys?”

“Duh,” Jade said, rolling her eyes, “they’re Holly’s teammates.”

“Yeah we are!” Nick Cameron yelled, his cry met with a cacophony of cheers and banging sticks.

Jade grinned, clearly pleased to have evoked such a reaction.

It took several seconds to get everyone under control again so the girls could start reading and Jackie realized just how much they paid attention when they watched Shane’s games because they didn’t stumble over a single name.

“Okay, first line is all we’ve got left,” Murdock said, “who’s right wing?”

“Carter Vaughan,” Ruby said.

“And left wing?”

“Luke Hollander!” Jade cheered.

“Let’s do this last one together, okay?” Murdock said, “ready? Okay. At starting center we have, in three, two, one, -”

“SHANE HOLLANDER!” the girls shouted, their little voices overlapping and almost immediately drowned out by the surge of noise in the locker room. Jade handed Murdock his clipboard back and took off across the room with Ruby only a step behind. Jackie unfolded herself from Shane’s grip just in time to avoid being tackled.

Shane easily adjusted his grip on Arthur so he was held snug to his side as the girls clambered up, Jade clinging onto the side not occupied by Arthur while Ruby just climbed over all of them and clung onto Shane’s back like a koala.

“Here,” Rose laughed, passing Amber over to Jade so they could get a picture of Shane and all four kids.

“I love you,” Jackie said, cupping Shane’s cheeks once they’d gotten their photos and started corralling the kids out of the room so the guys could get ready for the game, “I’m proud of you and I am so fucking thankful that you and Hayden were in that bar.”

“Me too,” Shane said, knocking his forehead against Jackie’s like he and Hayden had always done before games, “love you, Jack.”

“Give ‘em hell, Holly,” Jackie said, smushing Shane’s cheeks a bit as she smacked a kiss into his hair.

* * *

Hayden was standing in an abandoned office in Vancouver with Cliff Marlow and Ilya Rozanov, something he hadn’t been able to imagine himself doing voluntarily, watching New York skate out for warmups on a live feed.

Shane was locked in, Hayden could feel it through the screen.

He wondered if his friend had even noticed how many people were cheering for him, if he could see how many signs had been altered at the last possible minute with whatever markers the fans had been

able to find, if he could see how many pride flags that'd had only Scott Hunter's name scrawled across them now had a slightly shaky Shane Hollander tacked on.

His post had been live for five minutes and the fans had already adjusted.

Camille St-Simon had texted to let them know that Rose, Jackie, and the kids had been brought down to the locker room so the girls could read the lines and Hayden was trying to pretend that it didn't break his heart that he couldn't be there, too.

But he kept quiet about it because he knew that no matter how much he wanted to be by Shane's side, Ilya wanted to be there more.

Ilya had his eyes trained on the screen, tracking Shane across the ice like a hawk.

It wasn't until they left the ice and their phones started lighting up with texts from Rose with pictures and videos from the locker room that Ilya finally turned away from the TV.

"He's good," Hayden said, grinning at a zoomed in, slightly blurry picture Luke had sent of Jackie and Arthur sitting on Shane's lap, all of them mid-laugh. Shane's face had none of the tension Hayden might've suspected. He looked entirely at peace.

"Yes," Ilya agreed and Hayden chose not to comment on the way his eyes were watering.

"It'll be you soon," Cliff said, still looking down at his phone instead of meeting Ilya's eye which tended to be the safest option when Ilya was showing emotion around someone who wasn't Shane Hollander.

"Yes," Ilya agreed, again. "Soon."

They sat in silence, just staring at their own phones, until the broadcast lit up again.

MSG was dark and the crowd was rowdy as music started spilling through the speakers before the ice lit up and the Admirals started skating out of the tunnel one by one.

Shane and Scott were always the last two on the ice but tonight that order felt even more purposeful, somehow.

When Shane's name was called, the volume skyrocketed. Fans were banging on the glass so hard there was genuine concern of it breaking and when Shane raised his stick in a salute, Hayden stopped trying to hold back his tears.

He never imagined, when he met that 19 year old rookie, that he'd see him become this incredible person.

He'd always known that Shane would be good at hockey, he'd always known Shane was kind, that he was a good friend, but he'd never imagined a world where Shane let everyone see *him*.

But here he was, stick raised to the crowd, shoulders back and a smile on his face, as he stood in the middle of a celebration of one of two secrets he'd kept behind an iron cage around his heart.

Hayden had never been more proud.

* * *

They beat Ottawa.

It wasn't really a shock, but it felt good to have the win, either way.

Scott felt like he was flying as they crowded back into the locker room and rushed through showers before they got broken off for media. Luke and Carter got sent up to talk to broadcast while Shane and Scott got shoved into the scrum and Scott had to wonder what Christina had threatened these reporters with because their questions were *shockingly* tame.

Scott knew that more would come, that Shane would start getting more invasive questions like Scott had been getting through the early months of this season after the shock of his coming out had worn off, but he was choosing not to think about that, not when Shane was smiling and not when the adrenaline high hadn't ebbed and it felt like they could take over the goddamn world.

They had an almost concerningly even mix of questions about the game and their sexuality so Scott wasn't all that surprised when one slightly less tame question broke through, "Shane," one reporter in the back of the room called, "care to comment on the speculation about you and Boston Captain Ilya Rozanov?"

Shane, to his credit, didn't even flinch as he stared down the reporter with the same expression he wore in a faceoff, "I respect Rozanov as a player and as a friend."

Scott could see the man gearing up for a follow-up to that nothing answer but Shane had already turned his attention to the next reporter and Scott felt a rush of pride. Saying no comment would've been worse than saying nothing and saying anything more or saying he didn't want speculation on his personal life would've had the same effect as just coming out and saying they were together. It was the best possible answer for where they were at.

"Let's get out of here," Shane sighed once they'd finally broken free of the press.

"Kingfisher?" Scott asked, slinging an arm around Shane's shoulders.

"Yeah," Shane agreed, leaning into him a little as they walked.

* * *

The Kingfisher was packed.

Rowdier than it'd been any other time they'd been there, including the night after winning the Cup, and Scott was overjoyed.

Shane was with Rose (Jackie having gone back out to Irvington with the kids) holding court in the corner of the room with a combined group of Boston and New York WAGs. The rookies had bullied Kyle (who'd needed very little convincing) into turn up the music and were dancing with whatever random patrons were brave enough to get in their orbit. Their team was scattered around, talking to each other and random fans who'd followed them over, all of them entirely comfortable in a gay bar in a way Scott had never imagined any hockey player could be, and Scott was sitting at the bar next to Eric with Kip standing between his legs, leaning back against his chest.

“How is this our life?” Eric asked, watching their rookies make absolute fools of themselves on their impromptu dance floor.

“We spent a long time quietly fighting for it,” Scott answered, feeling oddly introspective for 11:30 on a Saturday night.

“You think there’s more of us?”

Scott thought about it for a second before nodding, “yeah.”

“Good.”

Scott’s gaze slid back over to Shane and he couldn’t help but think of him as a rookie, scared out of his mind in a bar in Vegas watching the other players like they were sharks circling for the kill and somehow it wasn’t hard to believe they were the same person. He’d seen Shane at every stage the same way Shane had seen him. They’d seen each other at their lowest, snapping back and using strength to hide the fact that they were cowering in fear and they’d seen each other find freedom. Shane had watched him skate to the boards and bring Kip onto the ice and Scott had watched Shane approach Ilya in a bar in Tampa to fight for their happiness and now he’d gotten to watch Shane skate onto the ice, out to the world and months away from finally getting to spill that last guarded secret.

And now they’d get to watch more people join them, they’d get to see hockey become something they’d only ever dreamed.

Chapter 53: we've both been very brave

April 2018

Boston played (and won) their final regular season game against Florida on Sunday April 8th. Ilya had been at the arena all day sitting through meetings regarding their upcoming series against Detroit before getting into his actual gameday routine and by the time he made it home, he only had enough energy to take Anya out, shower, and crash.

On Monday morning, he forced himself out of bed, took Anya for a run, and grabbed the mail from the postbox at the end of his driveway before heading inside to shower and make breakfast.

Luca was at the counter, mechanically eating an omelet that looked like it'd been made out of an irrational number of eggs, and staring into space, clearly still at least half asleep.

"Morning," Ilya greeted, sorting through the mail as a matter of habit, not really expecting anything other than local grocery ads, but thoroughly checking anyways, in the off chance that today would be the day.

He tossed a notice from their internet company detailing what they could add to their service aside and stopped in his tracks.

Instead of another piece of trash, the next envelope in the pile was addressed to *Ilya Hollander-Rozanov* from IRCC.

Ilya tore it open as quickly as he could without damaging anything inside and found the thing he'd been waiting nearly an entire year for:

Government of Canada – Permanent Resident Card.

Ilya stared at it, a wild thought slamming to the forefront of his mind, and decided that being impulsive hadn't quite backfired for him yet.

He set the card on the counter and took a picture, running through calculations as he took the time to edit his ID number out of the photo. They had four days until Round One of the playoffs started, four days for everyone to lose their minds before the media had something more important to focus on.

And, with the way the bracket was built, Boston wouldn't face New York until the Conference Finals. They had nearly an entire month for the media cycle to die out before he and Shane were set to play each other. An entire month for everyone to see that they were still playing the same level of hockey, to get used to the idea of *them* before they were on the ice again.

It was impulsive, sure, but it was also calculated.

They'd already done a slightly painful sit down interview (at Farah's insistence) talking about their relationship that could be released by their agency at any point. They both had statements prepared for 14 different contingencies.

Ilya tweeting a picture of his PR card sitting on his counter simply captioned *got some interesting mail today @shanehollander* was only impulsive in the sense that he decided to tell no one before hitting post.

His phone started ringing thirty seconds later and Ilya just grinned.

"What did you do?" Luca asked, narrowing his eyes at Ilya whose smile probably looked a touch insane.

"Twitter," Ilya said before picking up his phone, sliding his thumb across the screen, and saying, "Shane."

"Ilya," Shane said, matching his tone.

"How is your morning?"

"Oh, you know, took Sunny for a run, made breakfast, did some yoga, realized I married a crazy person, the usual. How about you?"

"Ah, I have not made breakfast yet," Ilya sighed.

“Can you please email Farah and tell her that our interview can be posted? I emailed her but she’ll want to hear from both of us.”

“All business with you, Hollander.”

“Ilya, please.”

Ilya grumbled, still smiling to himself because Shane clearly wasn’t mad, he was just a very much exasperated and at least a little bit amused.

“Done,” Ilya said after sending the requested email. “What statements do we post?”

“Keep it short,” Shane said, “the interview has everything we want to say, so just post something small. Good timing on this, though. It’ll hopefully get eaten up by the playoffs before there’s much of a chance for us to get crucified.”

“People are very excited,” Luca said, scrolling through his phone with a little grin on his face. “Like, *very* excited. This person wishes it were biologically possible for you to have children so you could have, and I’m quoting here, Hockey Jesus.”

“I’ve tried, is not possible,” Ilya said, shooting Luca an overexaggerated frown while he, quite dramatically, gagged.

“Right,” Shane sighed, “well, let’s never say that in public.”

“Yes, Shane.”

“I’m really happy for you,” Shane said, his voice slipping into something warm, “you’ve been waiting a long time for that card to show up and I’m glad it’s finally there. Now, can I say like three serious things before we focus on the happy?”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed easily, knowing that Shane wanted to just be happy but that his brain wouldn’t let him until their life had at least a vague order to it.

“Do not answer any calls from the League,” he started with and Ilya had to wonder what Shane had been dealing with over the past month and a half. He hadn’t faced any real backlash, but he’d said that the response from their bosses was lackluster at best. It was likely that they’d face a bit of a stonier reception now, though, seeing as the ‘issue’ as Crowell had apparently put it in an email to Scott that’d pretty quickly been downloaded and saved to a shared folder, was no longer contained in New York. And, worse, it now involved a relationship between two players.

Shane, Ilya, Yuna, Farah, and at least four different lawyers had read the league handbook and their contracts front to back and there was nothing prohibiting them from being married and there was nothing that’d allow the League to interfere in the marriages of their players but this was an unprecedented situation so there was no saying how the League would react.

“I won’t,” Ilya promised.

“Good, neither will I,” Shane said, “everything gets fielded through Farah. Second, please don’t be vulgar on Twitter. At least for today.”

“Promise,” Ilya said. He wouldn’t have done it anyways, but knowing that Shane was stressed about it was a surefire way to ensure he’d behave.

“I know I didn’t even have to ask but it was on my mind,” Shane said, sounding a little apologetic, “and third, please eat breakfast because the day is about to get crazy and I don’t want you forgetting to eat.”

Ilya’s smile returned to his face in full force, “I will, любимый. Now happy?”

“Yes,” Shane agreed, letting out a little laugh, “fuck, Ilya, this is insane. Is this actually happening? We actually made it here?”

“We did.”

* * *

February 2018

Five days after Shane came out, he was sitting in the living room of their Montreal condo that'd been invaded by Farah, his mother, Alice, Amanda, and Christina waiting for Ilya to show up.

The Bears had two random days in Canada between playing Edmonton and Toronto and Shane had traveled up a day early before the Admirals played the Voyageurs.

He really didn't want to think about playing Montreal right now but he also didn't want to think about how he and Ilya were basically being made to justify their relationship in front of a camera so it'd be ready to be released the moment they came out, so, you know, he was a little over all of it.

The response to his own coming out from fans had been largely positive and after letting Luke go on a blocking spree on his Twitter, he'd seen almost zero negative content.

The response from the League had been less than ideal.

Shane had been rather unceremoniously told to keep his "activism" to a minimum while Scott had been sent an email saying that the League was thankful that "the problem was contained in New York."

They'd broken a sales record on Pride jerseys the same night someone had lit an actual effigy of Shane and posted it online.

Shane had gotten emails from LGBTQ+ organizations across America and Canada alike expressing their congratulations and support while the Admirals front office was introducing a heightened security plan for both game days and practices following several credible threats to Shane's life and an uptick in threats made against Scott's.

He wasn't looking forward to the circus that'd pop up when news broke of his relationship with Ilya but, at the same time, he couldn't wait a second longer for the world to know that Ilya was his.

"Hollander!" Ilya greeted, a massive smile on his face as he dropped his bag by the door and nearly skipped across the room.

Shane pushed every negative thought from his mind as he folded himself into Ilya's arms, "hi, baby."

Ilya's grip tightened so much Shane was pretty sure his face was turning red.

"How are you?" Ilya asked, rocking them back and forth a little, like he couldn't quite stop moving but didn't want to let go.

"Better now," Shane answered honestly.

"Alright boys," Farah called, "let's get this done so you can enjoy the rest of your day."

"Yes, ma'am," Shane said, reaching down to take Ilya's hand to pull him across the room.

They settled on a pair of bar stools that'd been pulled into the 'good lighting' and turned their attention toward Alice who'd *very* happily jumped at the chance to be the one conducting this interview. They'd considered finding an actual reporter and wrapping them up in enough NDAs and gag orders to sink the Titanic but this option had felt much safer and much more authentic.

Also, Ilya was delighted by the idea of the "original Hollanov shipper" being involved.

"Okay, let's start easy," she said after getting the okay from Amanda and Christina who were acting as their sound and camera crew. "Introduce yourselves."

"I'm Shane Hollander and that's Ilya Rozanov," Shane said.

"No," Ilya said shaking his head, "is Hollander-Rozanov, Shane. Get it right."

"Right," Shane said, huffing out a little laugh as he relaxed into his seat. "We did decide to hyphenate."

"When did you decide to hyphenate?" Alice asked.

“When we signed our marriage license,” Shane said, grinning a little more.

“We have been married since May 2017,” Ilya added, “if that was going to be your next question.”

“It was,” Alice said, nodding and trying a little too hard not to laugh, “now, on the timeline thread, how long have you been together?”

“Officially February of last year,” Shane answered, “but we’d been seeing each other on and off for several years.”

“So, you got together officially in February and got married in May?”

It was a line of questioning they’d talked about, that they’d decided was necessary, otherwise it’d look like Shane had cheated on Ilya with Rose or on Rose with Ilya. Also, it gave them a chance to explain the turnaround in a way that made them seem at least 40% less insane.

“Yes,” Ilya said, “sounds crazy, I know, but there is a reason. We were scared of feelings for a long time, there were no out players in the NHL, there was no path for us to follow. Also, was scary for me because of laws in Russia. I could not publicly be with Shane and go home. I had to choose and even when I chose it was still not safe because I was still Russian citizen. If we wanted to be together and be safe, I needed a different passport. I could have applied for green card in America, but it was not the best solution. This was the best solution, it was also the option that let me call Shane Hollander my husband so it was my favorite.”

“I’d do anything to keep him safe,” Shane added, wanting to be sure that it was clear this wasn’t a marriage of convenience (because there was actually very little that was convenient about it), that anyone watching could tell just how gone Shane was for Ilya. “We talked a lot about it and decided this was the best option for us, yes, but it was also what we *wanted* to do. We had spent so long afraid and hiding that when we were finally mentally in a place to be together, we wanted to be as together as possible, we wanted to be married.”

Alice was looking at them like they were a pair of particularly cute kittens and Shane tried not to squirm under her attention.

“So, I’ve gotta ask,” she said after a second, “did being together ever effect your game?”

“No,” they answered emphatically, nearly in unison.

“Well,” Shane amended, “maybe positively, there’s genuinely no one I’d rather beat than Ilya. The rivalry wasn’t totally manufactured, just the part where we didn’t like each other.”

“Oh, please,” Ilya sighed, “you say ‘maybe’ like you don’t have statistics memorized.”

“Alright, fine, if you want statistics,” Shane said, holding up his hands in surrender, “we both, on average across eight seasons, put up an additional two points above average and an additional goal over expected in games against each other. We also have an additional ten shots on goal, plus or minus two, decreased defensive zone giveaways, and an additional three to five minutes of ice time. We have an almost equal percentage of faceoff wins, I’ve won roughly 51% of our total faceoffs, though Ilya’s won 54% of our faceoffs in his defensive zone and I’ve only won 52% in mine. We each won a World Juniors Gold. He was first overall but I won Rookie of the Year. He won the Cup first but I’ve won more. We were made Captain in the same year, we’re always neck and neck in the scoring race. One of us sets a record only to be beat by the other a week later.”

“We were each meant to be the best,” Ilya cut in, “but we never have been, we’ve always been together at the top and if it were anyone but Shane, I would hate sharing. But I am happy to share with him and not just because he is my husband, it is because he makes me better. He makes me a better person and a better player. He makes me push myself to be faster, smarter, more accurate. He makes me want to quit smoking and start eating healthy.”

“Hayden always jokes that it makes sense I fell in love with Ilya because it was the closest I could get to marrying hockey,” Shane said, flashing Ilya a grin that made him roll his eyes.

“Yes, well, I saw freckles and pretty brown eyes and realized I was doomed but, sure, reduce me to hockey.”

“Oh shut up,” Shane laughed, shoving Ilya away by the shoulder, “you’re more than hockey, Ilyusha.”

“Did you know Shane learned Russian for me?” Ilya asked, tangling his fingers with Shane’s before he could pull his hand away.

* * *

April 2018

Shane sat in his living room, watching the final edit of that interview that'd just been posted to their agency's YouTube, and knew that no one would be able to deny the fact that they were hopelessly in love.

They might still say that it was wrong, that they should be blackballed or punished, but they wouldn't be able to say that Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov weren't head over heels, embarrassingly in love.

He could remember that day so clearly, could remember how clinging onto the peace he'd felt curled up against Ilya's chest on the couch in that apartment after everyone else had left had been the only thing that'd carried him through their game against Montreal the following day.

Now he just needed to get through playoffs.

They weren't slated to face Boston until the Conference Finals and Shane wanted to play Ilya, he wanted everyone to see exactly what he'd been talking about in that interview, he wanted them to remember just how incredible the hockey was when he and Ilya were on the ice. He wanted to prove that they could be married and still play great hockey because he knew that the fact they'd been doing exactly that for a year wouldn't register, people would want to see it *now*. They would want to see it for themselves.

* * *

May 2018

Shane was dead on his feet by the time his birthday rolled around.

They'd had a decent playoff schedule travel wise, playing Brooklyn in the first round and Pittsburgh in the second. But the series with Brooklyn had gone to Game Six and the one with Pittsburgh had gone all the way to Game Seven.

The hockey was exhausting, the travel (even if it wasn't all that far) was exhausting, the interview questions were exhausting, the constant media cycle was exhausting.

He'd been dodging calls from the Commissioner's office like it was his life's calling, letting everything go through Farah with the knowledge that the League wouldn't request a mandatory meeting in the middle of playoffs if it weren't *absolutely* necessary. However, it was getting to the point that Shane was pretty sure that if he or Ilya won the Cup, Crowell would let them have about 30 seconds to enjoy it before dragging them off the ice like a misbehaving child.

Boston had played Detroit in the first round and Tampa Bay in the second and Shane did not envy their constant flights to Florida and back, but now they were in the Conference Finals, playing each other for the first time since the beginning of February, for the first time since Shane came out and Ilya told the world they were married.

"I feel like I've never slept before," Luke said, slumping into the seat next to Shane in the film room.

Shane let out a grunt that might've been an agreement, "we need to do a grocery order."

"If I have to eat one more chicken breast I might become a serial killer."

"That feels a bit extreme."

"I'm losing it, Shane. This is so much worse than last year."

Shane found that he rather agreed.

The year prior, they'd beaten Montreal in four and Boston in six, they'd had small moments of reprieve while the other series played out before starting in on the next round.

Shane had also been fresh off IR and that extra bit of energy had only been boosted by the seemingly endless well of fury that'd been burning in his chest.

They were playing well and their fatigue hadn't quite started to show on the ice but, outside of games, they were all starting to fall apart. Just a bit.

Carter was down a tooth after getting his shit rocked by Pittsburgh's Alternate Captain, Scott was pretending his nose wasn't broken, Luke had a bruise from getting boarded that went from just below his ribs to the middle of his thigh, Eric's shoulder was protesting its very existence and Shane's shoulder had apparently decided to go on strike in solidarity, Breezy was playing with not one, but *two* broken fingers, Matti had quite likely cracked a rib but was doing a mighty good job of avoiding x-rays and trainers alike, Nick was sporting a black eye that made it look like he'd gotten jumped in an alley, and Greg had played through at least three games with a stomach flu his kid had brought home from daycare.

And now they were staring down the barrel at a series against the Bears, all of whom seemed to be miraculously unharmed, with the added pressure of the whole *Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are Married* situation.

All Shane wanted was to go home and go to bed but, instead, he was trapped in a windowless room in Tarrytown watching game tape.

Happy 27th birthday to him.

* * *

"I think my thumb is broken," Hayden said, dropping into the seat next to Ilya on the team plane and holding up his hand that was a shade of purple no hand should ever be. "How the fuck is my *thumb* broken?"

"You punch like a child," Ilya said, leaning forward a bit and squinting like that'd somehow give him x-ray vision. "You put your thumb under your fingers like an idiot."

"You'd think I'd've learned how to throw a punch by now."

"Yes," Ilya agreed, rolling his eyes hard enough that it hurt, "you would think."

Hayden muttered something under his breath before letting his head thunk back against the seat and turning to look at Ilya, “you ready for this circus?”

“No,” Ilya admitted.

It wasn't that he *regretted* telling everyone about him and Shane when he had, but he was starting to wonder what planet he'd been on when he'd thought that everyone would get over it and focus on the playoffs.

It was all he and Shane were asked about and as much as Ilya loved using every question as an opportunity to gush about his husband, he'd also really appreciate if someone, anyone, would comment on the ridiculous hockey his team had been playing.

Ilya felt a little like they'd all been possessed.

They'd gone into playoffs ranked second in their division and 4th in the Conference but they were playing like they'd been undefeated since January and had no plans of ever losing.

They'd beat Detroit in five and Tampa in six while New York, who were first in their division *and* in the Conference, had taken six to beat Brooklyn and had gone all seven against Pittsburgh. To anyone with an untrained eye, they looked like the same team as always, simply facing worthy opponents, but Ilya had spent a stupid number of hours watching tape and knew for a fact that at least five of them were injured enough to slow the team down.

Ilya was expecting this next round to be a fierce competition, but it wasn't a sure win for New York like it would've been if they were still playing like they'd played in October and November.

He wanted to talk about hockey, he wanted someone to recognize how much work his team was putting in, but all anyone could talk about was Hollander and Rozanov and it was only going to get worse now that they were playing each other.

“It's Shane's birthday today,” Hayden said, correctly assuming that Ilya did not want to talk about the ensuing calamity. “Have you gotten to talk to him?”

“For like five minutes this morning before he had to leave,” Ilya grumbled, “I think Murdock is holding them hostage.”

“Yeah he didn’t pick up when I called with the kids, Jackie’ll try again tonight.”

Ilya just nodded, not really sure what else to say.

* * *

Shane wandered downstairs the morning after his birthday, the morning of their first game against Boston, to find Luke asleep at the kitchen counter with a half-finished protein shake collecting condensation about three inches away from his face.

“Hi,” Eric greeted, staring at their fridge full of meal prep containers in disdain, “I’m sick of this shit.”

“We’ve gotta get it together,” Shane decided. “Seriously, we’re losing it.”

“And how would you suggest we do that?”

Shane was at a loss.

His first thought was performance enhancing drugs but he wasn’t the Russian Olympic Committee and, also, he wasn’t insane so he tossed that idea aside.

“How is this year different from last year?” he eventually asked, realizing that his lagging mind wasn’t going to come up with anything productive on its own.

“Last year we weren’t falling apart at the seams.”

“Something helpful, Benny.”

Eric shot him a look that very clearly said Shane wasn't exactly being helpful either before he said, "I don't know, maybe we're spending less time together outside of games?"

"We live together."

"Not us," Eric said, finally pulling out one of the containers and turning toward the microwave with a grimace, "the whole team. This place was basically a frat house last year, I think it boosted morale."

Shane considered that for a second and eventually nodded, he hadn't really noticed that they hadn't spent as much time together outside of games recently because he had two teammates down the hall, but Eric was right.

"Maybe we could all invade Carter's today?" Shane suggested, "it's the closest to MSG then we could walk over together for team meal?"

"Call him."

Shane nodded again and pulled out his phone.

Two hours later their entire team was packed into Carter's one bedroom Midtown apartment looking a little like they'd recently survived a natural disaster.

"Okay," Shane said once the silence had gotten a little too uncomfortable, "we're losing steam and this series is bound to be a slog so we've gotta figure out how to get through it."

"You and Scott should be taken off media," Carter said, his response coming quick enough that Shane could tell he'd been thinking about it for a while but hadn't been sure how to bring it up, "it's getting ridiculous and no part of it is productive and I can tell it's getting to you and it's only gonna get worse now that we're playing Boston."

"He's not wrong," Scott said, meeting Shane's eye, "I'm fucking sick of it."

“I need to be on media at least once or it’s gonna look like I’m running,” Shane said, wishing he could just agree but knowing it’d only make it worse.

“Valid,” Scott conceded, “maybe just tonight? Then be done. We can let other people handle it for a bit, save our mental energy for the actual games.”

“Alright,” Shane said, feeling a little like he could finally breathe again after a minute too long underwater. He was sick of reporters only asking about his personal life. He loved Ilya, he loved finally having the chance to talk about Ilya, but he would really love if someone would remember that he was more than just his relationship with Ilya.

“We need to pull fewer penalties,” Matti said, blessedly switching the topic away from press, “our kill units are exhausted.”

“Right,” Scott said, easily switching into Captain mode, “let’s figure out how to do that.”

* * *

Whether it was the time they’d spent together or the fact that people had had an opportunity to bring up concerns without coaches present, the team that skated onto the ice for warmups was *much* closer to the team they’d been in October than the team they’d been since April.

Their drills were sharper and the energy level was higher and Shane could already tell that even if they ended up losing this series, they’d be proud of the games they’d played.

“Shane!” Hayden shouted, skating closer to the red line.

“Hey, Hayd,” Shane greeted, gliding away from where he’d been standing with Luke and Carter waiting for their turn on the next drill.

“Happy birthday, didn’t get a chance to talk to you yesterday.”

“Thanks,” Shane said with a grin, “I meant to call you back last night but accidentally fell asleep on FaceTime in the middle of reading Arthur a story.”

Hayden let out a loud laugh that made Shane instinctively laugh in return.

“Hollander,” Ilya said, slowing to a stop at Hayden’s side, “ready to lose?”

“Not happening, Roz,” Shane said, “you get my text?”

“Yes, our PR team agrees, thank fuck. I am very sick of media.”

“Holly!” Luke shouted, “c’mon.”

“Coming!” Shane called over his shoulder. He paused a moment to turn back toward Hayden and Ilya, “good luck, guys.”

“Do not need luck,” Ilya said, flashing Shane his signature cocky smile, holding his eye for a second longer before skating away.

“Good luck,” Hayden said before turning to follow Ilya.

Shane shook his head in amusement and went to join Carter and Luke.

* * *

New York won 4-2 and not one goddamn reporter even mentioned the score.

Shane was on the verge of screaming in frustration when Christina finally cut in and dragged him back to the locker room and Shane hoped that wherever Ilya was, Boston’s PR director was doing the same thing.

“Fucking vultures,” Christina grumbled the moment they were out of ear shot, “what do they not understand about *do not ask about his personal life and please, just one of you, please I’m begging, ask about hockey?*”

“You’re doing what you can,” Shane sighed, “and I’m really grateful for that but I am, however, incredibly close to committing a crime.”

“Me too. Crimes galore.”

Shane cracked a half smile at that.

* * *

Boston won Game Two and, while the fact that Ilya and Shane were avoiding media did make their days a little less exhausting, it didn’t stop the deluge of emails and phone calls and Ilya was on the verge of quitting hockey in favor of becoming a hermit in a forest somewhere.

But then New York won Game Three and Boston won Game Four and, *finally*, pundits started to shut up about the possibility of them throwing games for each other.

And as much as that brought Ilya joy, he was still in a mood. The day between Games Four and Five was Shane and Ilya’s first anniversary and he was spending it on the team plane back to New York instead of with his husband.

In hindsight, getting married during playoffs may not have been their best idea.

Still, Ilya did what he could to celebrate. He sent flowers to their house in New York and posted cheesy pictures of Shane on Instagram and sent him about 100 texts extolling his many virtues and smiled so hard his cheeks hurt as Shane explained that he’d bought Ilya personalized stationery he had no real occasion to use because, *yes, Ilya, the first anniversary being the Paper Anniversary is a real thing.*

When they got to New York, all Ilya wanted to do was sneak off and go home with Shane, but with the added scrutiny he didn't dare. He was just holding onto the fact that after this, one of them would be done with playoffs and would be able to join the other for the final series.

* * *

Boston won Game Five 2-1 in overtime and Shane resigned himself to another seven game series.

They kicked it into high gear and won Game Six 3-1 and then they were back in New York for game seven.

18 minutes into the third, they were tied 2-2 and it seemed like every player on the ice had somehow found a second wind.

Shifts shortened, plays got sharper, checks got harder, and every little remaining bit of energy went into staying upright long enough to finish the game.

Shane pushed through the door and all but collapsed onto the bench as their second line jumped the boards and watched helplessly as Luca Hass took off up the ice like a man possessed, knocking off a pass to Connors as he looped around Leberg. Connors passed back immediately, leaving only Adamchuk between Luca and Eric, who's attention had stuck on Connors just a second too long, and Shane realized pretty quickly that their only hope of winning was the clock running out before he reached the net.

"Fucking fuck," Luke bit out as Luca flew past Adamchuk and fired off a wrist shot that went soaring directly over Eric's blocker.

Shane slumped forward, his head thumping against the boards as the goal light flashed red in his peripheral mere seconds before the game buzzer sounded.

In about three hours he'd find it in himself to be proud of Luca but, for the time being, he was going to let himself sulk.

Boston converged on their rookie as New York made their way across the ice to give their goalie some love and Shane tried not to look like he was trying to kill them all with his mind.

When he reached Eric, he found himself being yanked into a crushing hug and decided to just hug back instead of asking questions. His friend clearly needed it.

“I guess his coming out was decidedly more dramatic,” Eric said, his voice muffled slightly by his mask.

It took Shane a second to catch up before the memory of their conversation with Scott hit him and a laugh punched out of his lungs without his input.

“True,” Shane huffed, “maybe your theory still stands.”

“Maybe,” Eric agreed, finally letting Shane go. Shane clapped him on the shoulder and then turned to skate away, Scott following close behind as they stationed themselves at the entrance to the tunnel.

Scott slung his left arm around Shane’s shoulders, keeping his right hand free to tap gloves with their team as they funneled toward the locker room.

“We did good, Rook.”

“I’m 27, Scotty.”

“Still my rookie.”

“You do realize I was never *actually* your rookie, right?”

“You were my rookie in spirit,” Scott decided, holding on a little tighter. “I’m proud of us. We played a lot of good hockey and did a lot of good off the ice. I don’t think there’s anything to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not quite ready to be introspective,” Shane grumbled, leaning a bit more of his weight against Scott’s side and smiling a little when he accommodated it easily.

“Let your boy take his turn,” Scott said, “we’ll take it again next year.”

Chapter 54: but i'll believe in anything

May 2018

Well, dodging calls had been fun while it lasted.

32 hours after their loss against Boston, Shane found himself sitting next to Scott in the lobby of the NHL offices in New York, both of them silently contemplating felony arson, when he remembered that he was, in fact, Yuna Hollander's son.

"Ha," he breathed out, pulling his phone from his pocket, double checking that New York was a single-party consent state, and then opening the voice memo app.

"What are you doing?" Scott asked, his voice barely above a whisper, quiet enough that no one but Shane would've been able to hear him over the infernal elevator music they had pumping through this pit stop on the way to Hell, also known as Roger Crowell's office.

"What do you think?" Shane whispered back, shaking his phone a little.

"I could kiss you," Scott said, a grin tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Please don't," Shane said, huffing out a quiet laugh as he hit record and slipped his phone back into his pocket.

* * *

Becoming friends with Shane Hollander was somewhere in the top five best decisions of Scott's life.

He couldn't imagine sitting through this meeting alone and he couldn't imagine a world where Shane and Ilya had been forced to face this on *their* own.

If Crowell was saying these sorts of things to *them*, two people who weren't dating each other and who'd caused very few problems for the League throughout their joint careers, he couldn't even begin to *fathom* what he'd be saying to Shane and Ilya.

By the time they walked back onto the street, it was late afternoon and Scott had heard at least three new insults about his sexuality which was genuinely impressive considering the amount of time he'd spent in locker rooms and the several years he'd spent attending a decently conservative boarding school.

"Fucking dumbass," Shane muttered, typing furiously.

"What are you doing now?" Scott asked, very much hoping that Shane had a plan because Scott was at a loss.

It wasn't like Crowell could *really* do anything to them without facing a law suit but he'd certainly made some creative threats that Scott very much did not want to see come to fruition.

"Didn't you hear the last thing he said?"

Scott thought back, scouring through his mind for specific words.

It was difficult, seeing as his brain had sort of shut itself down at some point under the deluge of bigotry, but he finally pieced together snippets of the last few words Shane and Crowell had exchanged.

Shane had stayed threateningly calm the entire time and the fact that he wasn't reacting had only seemed to make Crowell more irate. But the angrier he got, the more rational Shane became. He was almost *maliciously* respectful and it only served to make Crowell seem like he had several dozen screws loose as his threats got increasingly chaotic.

"Dumbass," Scott echoed, starting to grin just a little as he looked over Shane's shoulder, thinking he knew what Shane was doing but needing to check.

Sure enough, Shane's email was open, a perfectly respectful message already written, the full recording of the meeting linked as an attachment, and the emails of a dozen strategically selected captains – captains who'd offered them support in some way, captains who were popular enough in their markets to have the ears of their teams' owners - typed into the *To* line.

"The Governors who don't care about the blatant homophobia," Shane said, an evil little smirk tugging at his lips that made Scott realize, once again, just how well he and Ilya were matched, "will certainly care about the threat of putting the Captains who won the last four Cups on one team."

Crowell, in his idiotic ploy to 'contain the problem', had forgotten that his job depended on the favor of the Board of Governors, a Board primarily consisting of owners across the League, owners who would not appreciate having to face a team containing Shane, Scott, *and* Ilya.

"And as much as I'd like to play with Ilya," Shane added, blowing out a harsh breath as he pressed send, the evidence of the bullshit they'd just suffered and the nightmare threats that'd just been made flying away with a quiet *whoosh*, "I don't want to move again and I don't want to take him away from Boston. He *loves* Boston, Scott, and I know there's a world where he'd leave, I know there's a world where we'd get to play the last decade of our careers together, but he's happy there, now. He has the captaincy, he has friends and the support of a really good front office and I don't want to risk us all getting picked up and traded to the middle of nowhere with no guarantees that we'd have that same support."

"I don't want to leave New York," Scott agreed, knocking his shoulder against Shane's and starting down the street. The sidewalk was busy, packed in a way Manhattan always seemed to be. Within seconds, they were lost in the crowd, insignificant amongst the speed of life passing them by. It used to make Scott feel small, how easily he could fade into the background in a place like this. But as time passed, it started to feel like a comfort. Like no matter what bullshit was happening in his life, he was still just a minor blip in the world at large. It was peaceful in a strange sort of way. "We're building something good here. I want to retire here, I want you to get to retire here. I want Ilya to get to retire in Boston. I don't want it to change."

Also, of somewhat equal importance, the three of them sharing the spotlight in whatever minor market Crowell would drop them into would be impossible. Ilya was Boston's star and New York was big enough for Shane and Scott to share, for both of them to have their own sponsors and their own attention.

It'd never work with three of them, the market would be too saturated, they'd fade into obscurity long before their time, and Crowell's ploy would work; they'd be invisible, forgotten, a fireside tale warning against making waves.

Staying where they were, though?

Continuing to rake in sponsors and win Cups and break records?

That would prove that they were here to stay, that making waves was worth it and that you could break the mold and remain untouchable.

“No,” Shane agreed, “I don’t want it to change, either.”

“When are you heading to Boston?” Scott asked, skirting around a couple who’d paused to look at a map on one of their phones and pulling out his keys to unlock the player entrance off 33rd.

“As soon as I get back to my house,” Shane answered, following Scott. “What are we doing here?”

“I left my watch in my locker, the equipment team put it in Murdock’s office.”

“Ah,” Shane hummed, happily following him through the halls. He was comfortable here, settled in his skin in a way he’d never been in Montreal. They were both happy here and, if Shane’s play worked, which they always seemed to do, they wouldn’t have to leave.

Even empty, Madison Square Garden buzzed with energy.

It settled into Scott’s bones, comforted him like the weight of a well-loved blanket or the pressure of a familiar hug.

He could tell Shane felt it too, he could see it in the subtle smile on his lips and the absence of the crease in his brow.

This was their home.

This was the place that made them who they are, the ice that saw their biggest moments, their losses and triumphs.

Crowell was going to have to pry it out of their cold, dead hands.

* * *

Ilya was on the verge of mental collapse.

He'd somehow forgotten just how exhausting playoff hockey could be and he was quickly learning just how much *more* exhausting it could be while also balancing the emotional well-being of a rookie with anxiety to rival Shane Hollander at his most neurotic.

It also didn't help that Shane and Scott had spent their morning squaring off with Satan's top lieutenant and the only update he'd heard was that they 'had it handled'.

The issue, though, was that with those two, *having it handled* could mean anything from properly planned legal consequences to a carefully orchestrated mob hit.

At the very least, their solution would be incredibly well organized.

He was sprawled out like he'd given up halfway through making a snow angel on his living room floor, Anya's head resting on his bicep as she snored like a tiny freight train, when the sound of the garage door opening rumbled through the house.

Anya's head shot up immediately, her ears perking up and her nose twitching as her eyes darted around the room, attempting to figure out who'd just gotten home.

She and Ilya reached the same conclusion almost in sync and Ilya might've, in a past life, been embarrassed about the way he scrambled off the ground and chased his dog toward the door that connected the house to the garage, but at that moment the only thought spinning through his mind was *Shane, Shane, Shane*, on repeat.

“I’m home!” Shane called, the sound of the door swinging open and Sunny’s paws racing into the house hitting Ilya’s ears just as he and Anya crashed into the mud room. “Hi there.”

“Hi,” Ilya echoed, his vision blurring a little as he smiled so wide his eyes started to close.

Shane breathed out a fond laugh and dropped his bag by the door in favor of happily slotting himself into Ilya’s open arms.

Ilya thanked his lucky stars that his house was a newer build, one that required a basement in order to keep the foundation below the frost line, because that put a full story of the house between Luca’s basement cave and the master bedroom.

“Put me down,” Shane laughed as Ilya lifted him straight off his feet.

“No,” Ilya said, smiling to himself as Shane’s legs immediately wrapped around his waist as he moved back into the house and toward the stairs.

“If you break something right before the finals because you insisted on carrying me I’m going to laugh in your face.”

“No you won’t,” Ilya responded, only about 80% sure.

“You don’t know that,” Shane huffed, but he tucked his head against Ilya’s shoulder and pressed an open mouthed kiss to the side of his neck so Ilya was fairly certain he was done lodging complaints.

* * *

“Oh, thank God,” Luca said the moment Shane walked into the kitchen the following morning.

It was Saturday, Boston’s final series against Vegas started on Monday, and Shane had left a still-sleeping Ilya tucked into bed so he could read the various responses he’d received back from the Captains he’d emailed the day prior while also getting started on breakfast so Ilya wouldn’t have to expend the energy to cook for himself.

Shane raised an eyebrow at his husband's rookie and just waited for him to clarify.

"Ilya forbade me from asking him about tape before 9 am," Luca explained, "but you haven't made the same rule, also, you played with Miitka for years, do you think he's slower on his glove side or blocker side? I can't tell."

"Blocker side," Shane answered immediately, "specifically the lower corner, he's got the exact opposite soft spot from basically every goalie in the League and somehow nobody's realized that."

"Huh," Luca hummed, turning back toward his iPad and tapping the screen a couple of times. Shane wandered further into the kitchen to start the coffee maker and just waited for further commentary. "You're right."

"I tend to be."

"True. Hey, question, what were you doing yesterday? Ilya was out of his mind."

"Scott and I were taking care of something," Shane answered vaguely, "I think we got it sorted, Ilya was just nervous. Nothing to worry about."

"Right," Luca said, stretching out the syllable. Shane turned back around just as his phone lit up and Luca craned his neck to make out the name on the screen, "nothing for me to worry about, but something for Boodram to worry about?"

"Exactly," Shane said, picking up his phone and pausing a second before picking up to ask, "do you speak French?"

"Barely," Luca answered.

"Wonderful," Shane said, sliding his thumb across the screen, "âllo?"

“Âllo,” Boodram greeted, “qui écoute?”

“Boston,” Shane said, huffing out a little laugh as he answered Bood’s question of who was listening, “quelles sont tes pensées?”

Of all the captains Shane had emailed, he wanted to hear Boodram’s opinion the most.

Despite having played on national teams with several of the other captains and developing rather solid working friendships with the captains from Pittsburgh and Edmonton, specifically, Boodram was the captain he spent the most time with outside of hockey.

Over summers spent rattling around Ottawa searching for ice time and late night conversations about existing as minorities in a sport that demanded cohesion, they’d become *actual* friends and, with Scott and Ilya already in the mess with him and Hayden and Carter sucked in by circumstance, there wasn’t anyone else Shane would rather have helping him navigate the minefield of hockey politics.

J.J. was who he went to when he needed to get a read on *people*, but Bood was the person he went to when he needed a read on a *situation*.

“C’est un idiot,” Boodram deadpanned, “Hollander, Rozanov, *and* Hunter dans une équipe? Un cauchemar. Une catastrophe. J’ai transmis votre email à nos propriétaires, ils vous défendront auprès des Gouverneurs.”

The three of them being on one team being a nightmare *and* a catastrophe seemed a *little* dramatic but Shane had absolutely been banking on people wanting to stop that particular threat from happening so he chose not to comment on it. He also wasn’t all that shocked by the claim that Ottawa’s owners would back them up with the Governors. He’d only ever heard good things about the Centaurs’ ownership but it still was a comfort to hear the confirmation.

“Merci,” Shane said, decidedly ignoring Luca who was just staring at him like looking hard enough might make him magically develop the ability to understand Quebecois French despite a lifetime in Zurich. “Hey,” he said, switching back to English which made Luca groan, clearly realizing that Shane was done discussing whatever it was that required any amount of secrecy. Shane shot him a wink and headed for the fridge to start making breakfast, “are you still free to coach at our camp this summer?”

“Yeah and I’ve got two kids beside Tanner who are happy to help.”

“I’m bringing Carter, Luke, and Mac and Ilya’s bringing Hayden, Cliff, and Luca so we should be more than good on the staff front,” Shane said, happily switching over to the logistics of hockey day camp rather than the minefield of ego and bigotry that was hockey politics. “J.J.’s coming, too. I’m not sure if he’s bringing anyone.”

“We need a goalie,” Bood said. Shane could hear something rustling on his side of the phone, followed by a quiet scratching noise indicating he was making notes. “We’ve got three full sets of first line forwards, a couple extra forwards, like four defenseman, and zero goalies.”

“Benny would’ve come but he’s moving this summer and Scott’s got a local hockey school he’s putting on so we agreed to split custody of our team and after considering the circumstances, he got Eric. I could maybe bring Tommy but he usually goes back to Sweden in the summers. Hey, Luca,” Shane said, switching his phone to speaker, both so Luca could join the conversation and so Shane would have use both of his hands to make enough breakfast for two hockey players still actively in playoffs and one in the early days of attempting to recover from the season.

“Huh?” Luca hummed, finally setting aside his iPad and turning his attention toward Shane.

“Would Hayes coach a kids camp?”

“Probably,” Luca shrugged, “ask Lisa when you see her later.”

“When am I seeing her later?”

“Jackie’s hosting the WAGs,” Luca said, staring at Shane like this was information he should have.

The fact that *Luca* knew where Shane was meant to be when Shane was fully in the WAG chat was a little odd but Shane was choosing not to question it.

“Shouldn’t Shane be hosting the WAGs?” Bood asked. “He’s the one married to the Captain.”

“Shane doesn’t live here,” Luca pointed out.

“Shane also just got done with playoffs and is so tired he would probably die if he had to host anything,” Shane said, pausing for a moment before adding, “as exemplified by the fact that I just talked about myself in the third person. Okay, Bood, you’re right on the goalie. We’ll ask Hayes. If he’s busy, we’ll find someone else. Mitty would probably come if I asked and we can always check with the CWHL teams, too.”

“We should maybe check with the CWHL teams anyways, the camp’s co-ed, right?” Bood asked.

“Right,” Shane answered, “probably a good plan. I think we have too many coaches but whatever.”

“You’ll need that many coaches next summer so it’s good to have them on board now.”

Shane hummed in agreement, keeping most of his attention on cracking eggs without ending up with a bunch of tiny fragments of shells in the bowl. Bood was right that they’d need more coaches the following year. For the first summer, they were only planning on two week-long day camps in Ottawa, one for younger kids and one for older kids. But for every summer moving forward, once they had more time to actually plan, they were looking at doing two weeks of day camps and then a week of sleepaway camp at a facility Yuna had found in Ontario that had cabins, classic summer camp activities, and an indoor rink. But, in order to do a sleepaway camp, they needed fully licensed coaches and more money in their accounts to offer scholarships and to pay the staff they needed outside of their professional hockey player friends.

“Are you making breakfast?” Luca asked.

Shane stared down at the dozen eggs he was actively scrambling, the plate full of cut fruit, the 4-slot toaster that was full of bread, and the pound of breakfast sausage cooking on the next burner over and wondered if he’d somehow missed Luca suffering a head injury, “yes.”

“Cool.”

“You’re literally cooking in front of him, aren’t you?” Bood asked, his voice holding a note of amusement as it carried through the phone’s speakers.

“Yup,” Shane said, flipping over a couple of the sausages before they could burn.

“Have fun in Boston,” Bood laughed, “I’ll talk to you later, Hollzy. Haas, good luck against Vegas, we’re cheering for you.”

“Thanks,” Luca responded, a big grin on his face.

“Bye, Bood,” Shane said, reaching over to end the call, “now, Luca, ask me all of your tape questions before Ilya wakes up.”

Luca’s grin grew even wider as he scrambled to unlock his iPad again.

* * *

After weeks of waking up to only the quiet sounds of Luca moving through the house, Ilya woke up in a domestic daydream.

He could hear Shane and Luca’s voices tangling together as the sound carried up the stairs, he could hear Anya and Sunny chasing each other around the living room, he could hear music playing through the speakers down in the kitchen. And, best of all, he could smell breakfast already cooking. Fresh breakfast, not whatever they’d gotten from the team nutritionist to reheat.

“Good morning,” Shane greeted, a bright smile on his face as soon as he spotted Ilya wandering into the kitchen.

Ilya grinned back, already feeling more awake than he had in weeks. Shane’s presence wasn’t a solve all, but it was certainly a balm on Ilya’s soul.

“Good morning,” Ilya echoed, wrapping himself around Shane where he was standing at the stove. Shane leaned back against him easily and Ilya felt a little bit lightheaded with how much love he felt in that moment.

The morning went so much smoother with Shane there, with someone to take care of them and get them out the door, and by the time they made it to the practice rink, Ilya felt like he could take on the world.

* * *

“Shane!” Jade shouted, the front door flying open mere seconds after Shane pulled into the driveway.

“Hey, Bug,” Shane called, happily jumping out of his car and jogging up the front walk. Jade took a running leap off the top step and Shane caught her easily, already mourning the day that she’d be too old to get this excited over his mere existence.

The girls were only five but they already had big enough attitudes that Jackie was preemptively bemoaning their teenage years.

“I missed you,” Jade grumbled, clinging onto him like a little koala as she buried her face in his neck.

Shane held on just that much tighter as he made his way through the door, “I missed you too.”

“Shane’s here?” Ruby’s voice called from somewhere deeper in the house and Shane adjusted his grip on Jade just enough to accommodate for Ruby as the sounds of thundering footsteps echoed down the stairs.

“Hey, Bear,” he laughed, bending at the waist and scooping her up, rather thankful she hadn’t attempted to make a running leap into his arms as he was fairly certain that would’ve ended in chaos. “Do you two know where I’m supposed to be?”

“We’re making posters,” Ruby informed him, “and they have a present for you. Also, can you tell Arthur he can’t wear your jersey on Monday? He won’t listen to me.”

“I’ll try my best,” Shane promised.

“Oh, good, you’re here,” Jackie said, half jogging down the stairs with Amber in her arms. “Your child’s on the verge of the tantrum to end all tantrums.”

“If you keep calling him my child people are going to get ideas.”

“More ideas than they already have?”

“Fair,” Shane conceded, leaning down to kiss Jackie’s cheek in greeting, “I’ll go talk to him, when’s everyone getting here?”

“Soonish?” Jackie said, shrugging one shoulder.

“Sounds good,” Shane laughed, giving the twins one last squeeze before setting them back on their own feet and making his way upstairs to explain to a two year old why he couldn’t wear a New York jersey to a Boston game.

* * *

“How was today?” Ilya asked, pressing his head a little harder into Shane’s thigh as he stretched out on the couch until Shane got the idea and started playing with his hair.

“It was nice,” Shane said, his voice a little soft, a little awed, like he still couldn’t quite believe that this was their life, that he’d truly been accepted by Ilya’s team and their partners despite having been a part of the group as himself for the better part of a year. “We made posters, I talked Arthur off the ledge and convinced him that wearing a Rozanov jersey was just as good as wearing a Hollander jersey since our names are legally hyphenated anyway.”

“You convinced Pike’s son to wear *my* jersey?”

“Sure did,” Shane said, a smug little grin on his face that made Ilya want to eat him alive.

“Menace,” Ilya complimented, turning his head to kiss the inside of Shane’s wrist, careful not to dislodge the fingers gently scratching against his scalp.

“And Lisa said Wyatt would probably love to coach at our camps this summer so there’s the goalie issue solved.”

“Speaking of goalies, how are you and Luke going to survive Bennett moving out?”

“I don’t know,” Shane laughed, “I’ve gotten used to him being there, but I think it’ll be good for him to have his own space instead of living with a couple of kids. He found a great house in Murray Hill. It needs some work but it’ll be a good project for him and it’s livable in the meantime so it was a good find.”

“Of course Mr. Real Estate is focused on the house,” Ilya said, rolling his eyes and hiding his smile as Shane’s grumble of protest.

“Whatever,” Shane huffed, flicking Ilya’s ear, “everyone’s always at our house anyway, we probably wouldn’t even notice if someone else moved in without asking.”

“Doesn’t our house have locks?”

“Yes but they all know the codes.”

“Are you running a daycare in New York?”

“Pretty much,” Shane laughed, “it’s fun, though. And if I need space I always have my office or our room, no one bugs me there. I think they just like having a place to relax.”

“And you like having them there.”

“True,” Shane admitted softly, “I like that they trust me and it’s nice to feel like I’m wanted, like I belong.”

“Good,” Ilya hummed, turning over so he could press a kiss to the sliver of Shane’s stomach that was visible between the waistband of his joggers and the hem of his shirt. “I’m happy you are here.”

“Me too,” Shane said softly, “I’m really proud of you, Ilyusha, and I’m really excited to watch you play.”

* * *

For the first time since 2014, the Boston Bears were back in the Stanley Cup Finals.

Last time, Ilya had looked up into the stands during Game One to find Svetlana and he’d felt, in that moment, that he was so incredibly lucky to have a single person in the stands who loved him, who would be proud no matter the outcome.

Now, though, he had five people who were here for him and him alone.

Five people.

He’d never, in his life, had that many people at one of his games simply because they loved him, simply because they were proud and wanted to watch him succeed.

Three was his previous max and he could remember that game clear as day.

It’d been the season final for his youth league, he’d been 11, nearly 12. Only a month and a half short of the age that’d come to mark the loss of his childhood. It was the last game that his maternal grandfather had been alive to see and Ilya wished more than anything that he would’ve known, that some shift in the universe could’ve told him that this was it, that he should’ve spent a little longer memorizing the sight of his grandfather, his mother, and Svetlana on their feet, cheering at the top of their lungs as he scored the winning goal.

His grandfather had died a week and a half after his 12th birthday; his mother had died six months later.

By the time the championship the following season rolled around, the only person left in the stands who actually cared about *him* had been Svetlana.

Now there were five.

Svetlana, Yuna, and David were sitting near the glass, David and Svetlana were wearing Rozanov jerseys and Yuna - who, despite coming to despise Montreal, still couldn't quite bring herself to wear anything Boston - was wearing one of the Irina Foundation t-shirts that'd already been printed for their upcoming camps.

And up in the box that Shane and Rose had bought for the WAGs, Ilya could make out the outlines of Shane and Luke standing right at the front of the suite.

Just as Ilya started to squint, attempting to get a better view, his attention caught on the jumbotron, where the camera had panned to their box, picking up the sight of the last two Hollanders, both of them grinning and waving at the crowd, seemingly delighting in the very *Boston* mix of boos and cheers.

Luke was wearing a gray Boston hoodie he'd stolen from Ilya's closet when he'd shown up that morning claiming he'd missed Sunny (and outright rejecting any insinuation that he'd actually just wanted to watch Ilya play), and Shane was standing next to him wearing a black jacket with a bright yellow C on his chest that looked similar to the jackets the other WAGs had been wearing but ... no.

Ilya seriously doubted -

Then Luke elbowed Shane and pointed to the screen and he grinned before turning around, showing off the *ROZANOV 81* emblazoned across the back.

Shane Hollander, 3-time Stanley Cup Champion and Alternate Captain of the New York Admirals, was wearing a WAG jacket.

Ilya watched as he turned back around and blew a kiss toward the ice and felt like his desire to win had just been turbocharged.

He always wanted to win. He would happily admit that he was a competitive little fucker. But his desire to win had been rooted in something negative for so long. For most of his life, winning had meant proving someone wrong, had meant showing everyone that he was *worth something*. Now, though, looking up at his husband wearing his name and number, happily matching with the other WAGs without a care in the world over who might see, he already *knew* he was worth something.

Loving Shane had shown him just how worthwhile it was to do things for himself.

Loving Shane had shown him that doing the scary thing paid off, that he could be vulnerable and still be loved.

He didn't need to win for Shane to love him, he didn't need to win to feel safe in his home that night.

He no longer *needed* to win, he simply *wanted* to.

He wanted to lift that trophy over his head at the end of this series, he wanted Shane on the ice and in the locker room, celebrating with him.

He simply wanted to win.

* * *

June 2018

Ilya watched the clock tick down and felt a little like fireworks were going off inside his skull.

Boston had lost Game Three, their first game in Vegas for the series, and Game Five, their first game back in Boston after the two game stretch in Vegas.

Now, it was Game Six.

Shane, Svetlana, David, and Yuna were here, Luke was watching from back home in Boston where he was taking care of the dogs.

The Cup was in the building for the second game in a row and Ilya was hell bent and determined to end this here, to watch the Cup get rolled out onto the ice *tonight* where he could lift it over his head before tearing a war path through Las Vegas with his team to celebrate this win.

Winning at home was incredible, sure, but winning on the road had a certain appeal; getting to rub the win in the opposing city's face added an extra layer of fun to any celebration.

They were up 2-1 with 52 seconds left on the clock and Ilya could taste the win, he could feel the cold silver against his lips, he could hear the devastation of the home crowd getting drowned out by the cheers of Boston fans who'd followed them from Massachusetts to Nevada.

Ilya hopped the boards for the last shift change of the game with 45 seconds left and devoted every last ounce of energy to keeping the puck away from Wyatt's goal.

He had faith in his goalie, more faith in Wyatt than he'd had in literally any other goalie he'd played with, but he wasn't willing to risk it, especially at the end of what'd proved to be an *absurdly* taxing post season.

He didn't stop moving even after the buzzer sounded on their win, his edges cut into the ice as he whipped around and barreled toward Wyatt, Hayden and Cliff on his heels. Carmichael and Hammersmith had already collided with their goalie and Ilya threw himself into the pile with an incoherent shriek of victory.

"Let's fucking go!" Hayden shouted, knocking his helmet against Ilya's harder than he probably meant to in his excitement.

Ilya's cheeks were starting to hurt with the force of his smile as their team jumped the boards and joined the celebration, the adrenaline coursing through his veins making everything seem like it was happening in technicolor.

He cheered at the top of his lungs as Cliff accepted the Conn Smythe, more than happy for his friend who'd played a *ridiculously* impressive series, and then Crowell, the rat bastard who wasn't going to have a job much longer if Shane had anything to say about it, was handing him the Stanley Cup with a painfully fake smile on his face.

“Thank you,” Ilya said, flashing him a brilliant smile, “I am very excited to celebrate with my husband.”

Crowell’s smile dropped and Ilya just grinned harder as he skated away.

Shane had the prehistoric creature they called a Commissioner well in hand, Ilya wasn’t worried in the slightest.

He took his lap with the Cup, quietly dedicating it to his mama for the second time, and then he passed it over to Cliff and turned his attention toward the growing crowd of family members making their way onto the ice.

A year ago, he’d watched this moment from the shadows in Amanda’s office.

He’d watched Scott bring Kip onto the ice, he’d watched them make history, all while remaining hidden, terrified of what would happen if they were found out and heartbroken over the fact that their moment in the sun felt so far away.

He wasn’t hiding now.

Shane was on the ice, standing with the other WAGs like it was entirely commonplace and all Ilya had to do was skate over to him.

Shane was already looking when Ilya turned around, a smile on his face that told Ilya they were on the same page. His eyes were bright with unshed tears and Ilya could’ve sworn he could *feel* the pride and love radiating off his husband in that moment.

Ilya had never let himself imagine a day where he could have this, where he could have the man he loved more than life itself on the ice, celebrating his victory in plain sight.

He’d long since resigned himself to a life lived in the shadows, but here they were, standing in the sun.

“Come here,” Ilya yelled, waving Shane over.

“No, you come here,” Shane shot back, his smile some beautiful mix of teasing and fond as he took a few steps toward Ilya.

“No,” Ilya called back, shaking his head as he glided forward, happily meeting Shane in the middle, “you come here.”

“No, you come here,” Shane muttered a final time, his hands gripping onto the front of Ilya’s jersey as Ilya cupped his cheeks and dragged him into a kiss.

He hadn’t been taller than Shane since they were 17, standing in that dingy parking lot before Shane had hit his final growth spurt and they ended up just about even, but with Shane in street shoes and Ilya in skates, he felt like he was practically towering over his husband and he happily took advantage of the height difference, tilting Shane’s head back and kissing him harder than he probably should’ve with an audience, especially an audience that included the Commissioner who wanted to see them both stoned at the city gates.

Ilya let his eyes flutter shut as their surroundings faded away and all Ilya could smell, feel, hear, and taste was *Shane*.

He was drowning in it, sinking into the sensation of Shane’s lips against his, the press of Shane’s cold nose against his flushed face, the bitter taste of Shane’s tongue telling him he’d folded and had at least one beer while watching the game.

Nothing else mattered, not the Cup his team was holding, not the cameras locked in on this moment.

The only thing that mattered, the only moor left in the chaos of the world, was Shane Hollander.

“I love you,” Shane whispered, his lips brushing against Ilya’s as he pulled away just enough to get the words out.

Ilya ran his thumbs across Shane’s cheeks, over the freckles he’d fallen for a decade prior, “I love you.”

“I’m so proud of you,” Shane added, his grip on Ilya’s jersey getting somehow tighter as he pressed himself impossibly closer, “so fucking proud, Ilya.”

“Thank you,” Ilya choked out, wondering just how many more hits his heart could take before it melted.

“Go hug mom and dad,” Shane said, pressing up onto his toes to place a gentle kiss on Ilya’s cheek, “then go celebrate with your team, I’ll go with the girls and we’ll meet you in the locker room, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya agreed, kissing Shane once more before he could pull away.

Shane grinned up at him and stepped aside so Yuna and David could crowd in and Ilya lost whatever remaining handle he’d had on his emotions as they hugged him, holding on tight and celebrating his win like he was something they could be proud of, like he was someone they loved.

He’d won, in every sense of the word.

Chapter 55: step into the daylight (the epilogue)

Chapter Notes

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

June 2019

“So, we hear you’ve got an announcement?” the TSN correspondent prompted.

Shane stayed leaning against the door frame, trying to make no noise that could be picked up by the mics, as Eric Bennett stood in front of the cameras after their last practice before Game One of their final series against Minnesota.

They were all exhausted. They’d gone to Game Seven against Pittsburgh in the first round, Game Seven against Boston in the second, and Game Six against Tampa Bay in the Eastern Conference Finals. All of them were beat to shit and hanging onto their sanity by a thread which probably explained why Eric was about to do what he was about to do.

“Two, actually,” Eric said, flashing Shane a grin that he was somehow able to interpret as *it’s time to test a theory* and Shane just shot him a thumbs up.

They maybe needed to make more friends outside of hockey.

Existing inside an echo chamber of superstition and adrenaline fueled questionable decisions simply *had* to start leading them toward equally questionable outcomes at some point.

But no matter how much Shane wished that someone would step in and tell them all that this was insane, there was no way he could stop the ball from rolling *now*.

Eric unzipped his hoodie, revealing a t-shirt Ilya had given him for his birthday, and then promptly announced, “I’ll be retiring at the end of this season.”

The t-shirt, featuring a drawing of a racoon riding a bicycle with the words *BISEXUAL and STILL NOT INTO YOU*, promptly overshadowed the end of Eric’s 20-year career.

“He actually fucking did it,” Scott whispered, staring blank-faced at their wildly grinning goalie.

“At least he won’t have to deal with Crowell,” Shane muttered back, flashing Eric another thumbs up when his eyes darted over searching for a reaction.

“Thank fuck.”

It’d taken eight months for the Governors to finally hold a meeting on the matter of Roger Crowell but, in that time, an independent investigator had been able to find evidence of coercion, money laundering, and, somehow, insider trading, so by the time the meeting finally rolled around, it hadn’t taken all that long for them to decide to boot him out and then wish him well on his brief stint in whatever fancy jail they kept white collar criminals in.

Their new Commissioner wasn’t liberal, by any means, but he was a far sight better than Crowell had been.

Progress, it turns out, is a rather slow path to climb.

“I need fourteen hours of sleep,” Scott whispered, his head hitting the wall next to Shane’s with an audible thud. “I woke up this morning to your goddamn husband banging on the door and I’ve known not a minute of peace since.”

“I haven’t known peace since December of 2008 so I think you’ll live.”

“Why did you let him leave the house?”

“I didn’t *let* him do anything,” Shane huffed, turning his head slightly to catch Scott’s eye as Eric carried on with his increasingly chaotic interview in the background, “he was gone by the time I got out of bed, what was he even doing at your place?”

“Something about flower arrangements and Kip promising to help?”

“Of course,” Shane said, utterly unable to keep the fond smile off his face even if he’d tried, “I don’t know why that needs to be dealt with here and now when the whole thing’s happening in Ottawa in August but I’m not about to stop him.”

“He’s excited,” Scott said softly, smiling almost despite himself, “you’ve already been married two years and he’s this excited about a vow renewal, you’re lucky, Rook. You got a good one.”

“I’m telling him you said that.”

“Please don’t. He’ll never let me live it down.”

“We’re gonna walk in the Pride parade,” Eric announced, appearing in front of them with a grin so wide it looked a little painful.

“Are we now?” Scott said, turning around and leaning back against the wall rather than simply slumping over on it. “Why?”

“Gayest team in the League!” Eric said, waving his hands for emphasis.

Shane felt a little like he was having a stroke.

He had no clue who this man was and what he’d done with Eric Bennett but apparently they were all being dragged along for the ride.

“There’s three of us,” Shane said, not quite sure whether he was attempting to temper Eric’s insanity or feed it, “and you’re retiring.”

“Three *out*,” Eric corrected, his gaze rather unsubtly flicking toward Conor and Luke who were pressed together on the bench so closely that they were both within the boundaries of Luke’s stall as they waited for Shane to be ready to leave.

“Don’t mention them,” Shane sighed, looking skyward with a silent plea for patience, “they give me a headache.”

“You really can’t be one to talk,” Scott teased. “Mr. It Took Me Nine Years to Say My Husband’s First Name.”

“Hey,” Shane grumbled, shooting Scott a rather ineffective glare, “that’s a sensitive subject. Also, I had Ilya’s dick in my mouth literally the fourth time we ever met. Those two have spent like 90 hours a week living in each other’s pockets for the past two years and we’re still at whatever stage this is, it is in no way comparable.”

“I didn’t need to know all that,” Scott said, his nose wrinkled in feigned disgust.

“I could tell you more,” Shane offered, wondering, not for the first time, how Eric was actually 40 years old with the way he giggled every time Shane tortured Scott with details about he and Ilya’s sex life, “like how one time, after a preseason game in Boston, we -”

“No more!” Scott yelled, smacking a hand over Shane’s mouth dramatically enough that Eric full on snorted.

“Boys!” Shane called, his voice muffled by Scott’s hand but thankfully still loud enough to pull Luke and Conor out of whatever earth shattering conversation they were having that required them to sit so close together that their ears were touching, “let’s go.”

Shane was pretty sure that Conor still lived with the Huffs but the sheer amount of his clothing that’d ended up in Shane and Luke’s house was enough to make Shane wonder if he’d moved without remembering to let anyone know.

“Can we pick up food?” Luke asked, dutifully slinging his bag over his shoulder and making his way through the door, yanking Scott’s hand away from Shane’s face as he went because that was the brotherly thing to do.

“Ilya’s making dinner,” Shane reminded him, deeply grateful that Ilya actually enjoyed cooking so they could consume something other than the pre-made meal prep containers passed out by the team nutritionists.

“I love him,” Luke decided.

“Me too,” Conor echoed, clapping Eric on the shoulder as he approached, “and congrats, Benny. I’m gonna miss you.”

“Do you like my shirt?” Eric asked, gesturing to the purple racoon monstrosity that Ilya had more than likely purchased in a 2am fit of insanity in the middle of a roadie.

“It’s great, I might need to get one for myself.”

Shane blinked, Eric’s grin grew somehow wider, Scott choked, and Luke started visibly buffering.

“Gayest team in the League,” Eric said again, his voice entirely conversational, like he was simply announcing a fact of life.

“I think one bisexual racoon shirt is enough,” Shane said after taking a second to force himself to function like a human, “maybe we can find you a different animal.”

“I like sharks,” Conor offered.

“Solid choice,” Shane said, “you two ready to head out?”

“Yup,” Conor chirped, slinging an arm around Luke’s shoulders and heading down the hall. Shane watched as Luke dutifully followed, his face very carefully blank.

“I sense a headache incoming,” Scott said, patting Shane’s back as he turned to follow his brother and his brother’s freshly bisexual best friend out of the building.

“Me too,” Shane said. He paused for a moment, tugging Eric into a tight hug before actually following them out of the room, “I’m really proud of you, Eric.”

“Thanks, Shane,” Eric responded, his voice rough with emotion in a way it rarely got, “you made this so much easier,” he choked out, lifting one arm away from Shane long enough to pull Scott into their

hug, “you both did. Thank you.”

“Ah, we’ve gotta stick together,” Scott said, clearly trying to wave it off as the tender moment pressed into the soft spaces below their ribs.

Shane held on a little longer, let himself sink into the comfort of his teammates, his friends who’d changed his life in their own special, wonderful ways, “let’s hope Benny’s theory pays off, I want another Cup.”

“Me too,” Eric laughed, the sound heavy with emotion, “one for the road.”

“Exactly,” Shane said, blinking hard in an attempt to keep his tears at bay. Crying could wait until they had the Cup in their hands again, crying could wait until he’d played his last game with Eric on the ice.

“We’ll get it,” Scott said, his voice making it sound like it was a promise, “I can feel it, it’s our year.”

“Two people coming out might help our chances,” Eric mused, “even if only one of those was public.”

* * *

Eric was fucking right.

Shane felt Luke slam into him seconds after the puck slipped past the Nomad’s goalie, the goal light casting the Xcel Center in shades of red mere moments before the game buzzer sounded.

“Let’s. Fucking. GOOOO!” Luke shouted, his visor knocking against Shane’s as he pressed their helmets together, the sounds of screaming fans turning into a din in the background as the noise hit a fever pitch.

Shane *loved* winning.

He'd always loved winning, but there was something a little extra magical about victory when his little brother had been the one to feed him the game winning pass and Ilya was somewhere in the crowd wearing a WAG jacket that Shane was fairly certain he wasn't planning to ever take off.

"There's something you don't see every day, folks!" Carter said, his 'announcer voice' not quite hitting the mark as his own excitement bled through every word. He crashed into them, crushing them into a group hug that rearranged a couple of Shane's vertebrae. "The Hollanders connecting for the buzzer beater!"

Shane let out a bright laugh, "we've connected for buzzer beaters several times, Vaughny."

"But this one won us the Cup!" Luke shouted, knocking his helmet back and forth against Shane and Carter's like a pin ball for a couple of seconds, entirely unable to contain his excitement.

"Fuck yeah it did!" Shane agreed, wrapping his arms around Luke's waist and taking him clean off his feet, delighting in the peal of laughter Luke let out.

"Fuck it feels good," Carter breathed out, skating a half step back before not so gently shoving Shane and Luke down the ice toward where the rest of their team had jumped the boards to crowd Eric.

"So good," Luke sighed, "happy goddamn birthday to me, boys."

"Does anyone know where the hell you're supposed to celebrate shit in *Minneapolis*?" Breezy asked, slinging an arm around Shane's shoulders as they approached the dog pile their team had turned into around Eric's net.

"I think we're technically in St. Paul," Matti corrected, "also, no."

"It's fine!" Nick yelled, "we'll just have to keep drinking until we get back to NYC!"

"You did not just *say* NYC," Cameron groaned, ruffling Nick's hair hard enough that Nick damn near lost his balance. The post-win adrenaline high was clearly making all of them underestimate their own strength.

“Coulda called it the Big Apple,” Nick shrugged with a crooked grin.

“Thank Christ you didn’t,” Greg laughed, grabbing Nick by the shoulders and shaking him around, much to the kid’s delight.

* * *

Drinking until they got back to New York proved to be more challenging than any of them thought seeing as the team plane didn’t leave Minneapolis until 10:00 the following morning. By the time they touched down in Westchester, they’d been awake for well over 24 hours, every last member of the team was blackout drunk, and they’d spent an entire hour wholeheartedly believing they’d somehow lost Luke midair only to find him passed out cold *on the floor* of the plane bathroom.

“We rally,” Nick announced, standing at the front of the plane like a general leading his men into battle. Well, ‘standing’ was maybe a bit generous. He was more half upright, half leaning his entire body weight against one of the seats in a vague approximation of standing.

“We rally!” Cameron shouted back, leading to a criminally loud rally cry from everyone else on the plane. Shane was fairly certain his brain was going to start leaking through his ears.

Shane checked his phone, sent up a brief thanks to Steve Jobs for his iPhone automatically correcting to the time zone so he wouldn’t have to try to remember whether he was meant to add or subtract an hour, and said, “it’s two in the afternoon, where the fuck are we meant to go?”

He should not have spoken.

Thirty minutes and several handsomely tipped rideshare drivers later, 22 sleep deprived, bruised, and completely sloshed hockey players had invaded his home.

* * *

Ilya walked into the house an hour and a half after Shane had texted him they’d landed, having taken a commercial flight along with several of the other families, to find his husband’s entire team freshly

showered and asleep across every bed, couch, and chair in their home.

He made his way up to their bedroom as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake any of them up, and found Shane, Scott, Carter, Luke, Eric, *and* Conor asleep in Shane and Ilya's bed.

Shane was on his back with Carter to his left and Scott, who was fully being spooned by Eric, curled up against his right side. Luke was laying entirely on top of Shane and Carter both, his head tilted at an angle he was assuredly going to regret upon waking up.

Conor, having apparently decided there wasn't enough space to cuddle up with his teammates, was asleep across the foot of the bed holding onto Sunny like he was afraid someone was coming to take her away.

Ilya took a picture, sent it to Amanda, and then went in search of Luca who'd stayed back to watch the dogs and would, fingers crossed, be sober and awake enough to explain what the hell was going on.

He found him a couple of minutes later, hiding in Shane's office watching Netflix on the desktop with Anya curled up at his feet.

"I don't know," he said, unprompted the moment Ilya opened the door, "they just showed up. Shane made them all shower before they were allowed to touch any blankets or pillows and I'm supposed to wake them up 'when the bars open.' The issue, though, is that I don't have one single clue when that is."

"We can wake them for dinner," Ilya decided, wondering what the hell had happened in the 12 hours between the last time he'd seen them all when the bar they were at shut down at 2am and now.

"Did you have fun?" Luca asked, pausing his show and turning his attention toward Ilya.

"Yes," Ilya answered immediately, sitting on top of Shane's desk since Shane wasn't there to grumble at him for misusing furniture. "Was very fun to kiss Shane on the ice in front of a Commissioner who only kind of grimaces at gay things instead of trying to kill us with his mind."

“Progress,” Luca said, a wry sort of grin on his lips.

“When is your flight?”

“Tomorrow at noon out of JFK then I’m flying into Ottawa when I come back, you’re bringing my training stuff for me, right?”

“Is on my list,” Ilya promised, “I’ve never been to summer camp before, I’m kind of excited.”

“I went once when I was really little but it wasn’t a hockey one, I think it’ll be fun. Did everyone do the training they were supposed to do?”

Ilya opened the drawer by his right knee and pulled out Shane’s camp folder, double checking the printed spreadsheet, “yes, thank fuck.”

They had 150 campers signed up for the weeklong overnight camp, not to mention the nearly 300 kids they had signed up for day camps in Ottawa for the two weeks leading up to the overnight program.

The day camps the prior summer had gone off without a hitch but the added chaos of the overnight was truly testing everyone’s patience.

All of their coaches from NHL and CWHL teams had been required to complete additional training for the Ontario Camps Association, their legal team had spent ages figuring out the necessary forms and waivers, and they’d had to find a week the facility wasn’t being used for an already existing camp that also fit the schedules of a dozen professional hockey players.

Also, more importantly in Ilya’s mind, they’d had to make sure it wouldn’t conflict with the vow renewal/wedding reception he and Shane (and Yuna, Svetlana, Jackie, and Rose) had been planning for the past several months.

He and Shane had been married two years and they still hadn’t gotten to celebrate with their friends.

They'd wanted to do something the prior summer but life had gotten so chaotic that anything they would've pulled off would've been half-planned at best and Ilya was adamant that they deserved something better.

They deserved beautiful flowers and painstakingly organized seating arrangements and a perfectly curated playlist.

They deserved having the chance to plan far enough ahead that they got to send pretty invitations with enough time to wait for RSVPs.

They'd fought an uphill battle to get here, to be in a place where they were safe enough to celebrate their love, and Ilya wanted them to do it *properly* and Shane was more than happy to give Ilya anything he wanted. He was more than happy to let the WAGs introduce Ilya to Pinterest which had led to him being woken from a deep sleep on more than one occasion to look at different décor options and floral combinations, he was more than happy to let Rose pick out his suit so Ilya could sleep peacefully knowing that Shane wasn't in charge of his own clothing.

"Will the dogs be okay here if we both go out with them?" Luca asked, pulling Ilya out of his silent reverie. "I kinda want to see Shane drunk."

"He was drunk in Vegas last year, also at our parade."

"He was barely tipsy then," Luca said, shaking his head a little in mock disappointment, "he came in here an hour ago claiming he was going to challenge Scott to a cage match and when I asked why he said, 'for the love of the game,' I would like to experience more of *that* Shane."

"The dogs will be fine," Ilya said, blinking a little as he attempted to adjust to whatever new level of wasted his husband had apparently reached.

Shane had built a decently sized fenced-in dog run attached to the mudroom so it was rather easy for them to leave Sunny and Anya to their own devices for a couple of hours without having to have someone come let them out. He still either brought Sunny with on game days (to the point that several people had seemingly forgotten she was *Shane's* dog and not the official Admirals mascot) or hired a dog walker but if they were just going to be gone for a few hours, the little addition worked perfectly.

"Yay," Luca said, a bright grin on his face that spelled chaos.

* * *

Shane woke up to the sound of someone letting out a pained groan and found himself buried under the weight of both Luke and Scott, a situation he'd unfortunately found himself in on more than one occasion after a team night out.

"Kill me," Luke muttered, digging his head into Shane's shoulder like he'd be able to block out the light through sheer force of will.

"I don't feel like committing fratricide today, thanks," Shane huffed, squirming a bit in an attempt to remove Scott's bony elbow from his ribcage, finding himself grateful that Scott was on his right because he was fairly certain he'd decided to update his Stanley Cup tattoo while drunk in the middle of the night. His movement, though, only succeeded in rousing Scott enough that he cuddled *closer* before falling soundly asleep again.

"Don't throw biblical words at me right now," Luke said, shifting off of Shane in a display of hungover, loose limbed chaos that put his knee precariously close to Shane's groin.

"We're supposed to rally," Conor groaned said from somewhere near the foot of the bed which shocked Shane less than it probably should've, "I don't know how to rally."

"You have to keep drinking," Carter said, his voice dropping into a truly shitty British accent in some sort of reference that Shane wasn't even going to *attempt* to place.

"I vote we only go to gay bars," Eric decided, "since being gay made us win."

"I hate that your theory paid off, I really didn't think you could get *more* superstitious."

"It's been six years since the Cup was won by a straight Captain," Eric said, "that's not superstition, that's a fact."

* * *

“Drunk Shane!” Luca cheered, pointing toward Shane and Scott, two of the most socially awkward people Ilya had ever had the pleasure of meeting, as they joined their teammates on the impromptu dance floor that’d broken out in the middle of the Kingfisher, Kip happily following on their heels.

Ilya scanned the room and found Eric *indecently* making out with the bartender he’d been silently checking out for the better part of two years, Luke looking a little like he wanted to melt into the floor as he awkwardly attempted to figure out how to flirt with Conor, Matti Jalo dancing with Kip’s friend Maria in a way that could really only lead to one outcome, Cale attempting to pull Cameron and Farmer - the team’s newest rookie - off the bar, Nick and Greg dumping champagne into the Cup that’d seemingly appeared out of thin air a half hour after they’d walked through the door, and finally landed back on Shane, Scott, and Kip dancing like they were *trying* to feed the throuple rumors.

It wasn’t anywhere near as chaotic as the Bears had gotten in Vegas after their win the year prior, but it felt comfortable in a way random celebrations could never quite be.

They looked like they belonged in this bar, like it was a place they could claim.

The team blended seamlessly with the other patrons, not a one of them uncomfortable with the clientele to the point that it somehow looked entirely *natural* for the Stanely Cup to be in an East Village gay bar for the second time in three seasons.

They’d created a safe haven, a shining example of acceptance and inclusivity in a sport where a space like this was never meant to exist.

Ilya loved it, he loved getting to be a part of it as Shane’s husband instead of as one of the players, it felt more important, somehow. Like being accepted by the Admirals was a bigger sign that hockey was changing. Being accepted by Boston meant he was a good Captain who commanded respect no matter what was going on in his personal life, but he wasn’t New York’s Captain; he was simply their Alt’s husband who they’d accepted with open arms.

Boston had accepted Shane in the same way, proving all over again that this community could exist, that people like them were *allowed* in this sport.

Ilya grinned over at Luca and then hopped up from the booth to join Shane on the dance floor, deciding to take advantage of the freedom Shane was allowing himself for as long as it lasted.

* * *

“We need to pack the car,” Shane said, dropping onto the couch next to Ilya with a groan.

It was the last day of June and Ilya had never been more grateful to see the end of Pride Month.

Don’t get him wrong, he *loved* Pride. He thought it was incredibly important and he was grateful that so many companies and organizations had chosen to work with them, Scott, and Eric, jamming all of their campaigns into the final weeks of June after their seasons had ended, but he was sick and goddamn tired of being in front of the camera.

He and Shane had done a full day of interviews with several different sites talking about their relationship and what it was like to be queer in professional hockey, they’d done a Pride-themed callback to their original CCM campaign (during which Ilya had taken the liberty of happily explaining to the crew just how funny basing the commercial on their relationship was, much to Shane’s horror), Scott had enough rainbow themed Under Armour gear to outfit the entire New York National Guard for the next several years, Nike had all but tattooed a Pride Flag on Eric’s forehead, Ilya had somehow been harangued into appearing on Late Night just ahead of the summer hiatus (which had made zero sense seeing as he was the only one *not* from New York), they’d all ended up in the New York Pride Parade at Eric’s insistence, and Shane had been thoroughly slugged out by *Reebok* of all companies.

The Twitter spree following the release of that particular shoot had, unfortunately, ended in everyone finally figuring out that [@lilyhollander1221](#) was actually the Captain of the Boston Bears but that was bound to happen sooner or later so Ilya wasn’t all that effected.

Boston’s PR team, on the other hand, had been about 5 seconds away from handing in their resignation letters.

“Ugh,” Ilya huffed, letting his head fall onto Shane’s shoulder and smiling to himself as Shane’s head immediately rested against his.

“Exactly.”

“What time do we need to leave?”

“I told mom we’d be in Ottawa by dinner,” Shane said, looking down at his watch, “so an hour ago.”

Ilya’s smile grew as a quiet pressure built behind his eyes.

Shane did that all the time, simply calling Yuna and David *mom and dad* whenever either Ilya or Luke were concerned, he never said *my mom* or *my dad*, they were just everyone’s parents, no possessive determiner required.

“We should probably leave, then,” Ilya said, clearing his throat and trying not to cry. They did not have time for a minor emotional melt down if they were truly that far behind. It could wait for the car.

With a groan he’d vehemently deny if anyone ever attempted to call him old, Ilya started to get off the couch, intent on getting things properly packed so Shane wouldn’t have to track stuff down by himself or wait on an Ilya who’d gotten entirely distracted by something random but, instead of getting to do any of that, he was unceremoniously yanked back down onto the couch, “no,” Shane grumbled, wrapping himself around Ilya like a tiny, incredibly insistent octopus.

“We need to leave, котик,” Ilya reminded him, wrapping his arms around Shane and dropping a kiss into his hair.

“Just a minute?” Shane begged, looking up at Ilya with big brown eyes he’d happily go to war for if asked.

Ilya almost suppressed the urge to bite Shane as he was overcome with (what his extensive research had assured him was a very real biological phenomenon) cuteness aggression but then he remembered that they were married and he didn’t need to hold himself back.

“Ouch,” Shane grumbled, fondness bleeding through his tone as he wriggled away from where Ilya had decided to bite down on his shoulder, though his movement had the wonderful effect of bringing him somehow even *closer* so Ilya was counting it as a major win.

They didn’t make it to Ottawa until midnight.

* * *

July 2019

“I’m never having children,” J.J., who’d been (happily) traded to Ottawa just before the trade deadline that season, announced, throwing himself into a chair at the table their day camp coaches were gathering at with a level of dramatics that *far* exceeded the situation.

“I want kids,” Ilya grumbled, pouting over at Shane like he was asking to keep a puppy he’d found on the street.

“We live in different cities and travel 100 days a year,” Shane said, raising an eyebrow at his pouting husband and wondering why this conversation was happening *now* in front of a dozen different people instead of, you know, in their home while no one was watching.

“Well, not now,” Ilya conceded, “but eventually?”

“Eventually,” Shane agreed, reaching out to run the backs of his fingers across Ilya’s cheek, an action that always seemed to soothe him, an action that’d come to serve as a reminder that Shane loved him.

It was the final day of their day camps in Ottawa and their coaches were gathered around, waiting for final instructions regarding the sleepaway camp that would stretch over the final days of July and the first few days of August the following week. Where the Ottawa camps were mainly for young kids of any skill set, the sleepaway camp had somehow turned into more of a true Development Camp. All of the coaches, despite having played professional hockey for years, had completed *several* coaching modules to get the camp certified with various youth hockey organizations and they were all excited for the thing to just start so they could finally stop worrying about planning it.

“I want to move here,” Troy said, trudging into the room and immediately slumping into the seat next to J.J., “I still can’t believe you left me in Toronto without you.”

It was still, even after two full years, *shocking* to watch Troy Barrett display an emotion other than contempt or apathy.

J.J. had well and truly yanked him out of his shell.

“There’s only one year left on your contract, mon ami,” J.J. reminded him, “you could always become a Centaur then.”

“Or I could scream at management that they’re a bunch of racist, homophobic assholes, and hope that they send me packing.”

“Yes,” J.J. agreed, nodding seriously, “you could always do that.”

“That plan feels like it has a lot of room for error,” Harris said, settling into the seat to Shane’s left with much less dramatics than the man across the table.

“It worked for Hollzy,” Troy argued.

“That’s a really interesting perspective of what happened in Montreal,” Shane said, shooting Troy an almost fond half smile, “but I can promise you that, no matter how much I wanted to, I did not yell at management.”

“No, you just took one of their lawyers, half their first line, their rookies, and their backup goalie with you on the way out.”

“Fair play.”

“Alright!” Yuna called, clapping once to get their attention and doing a rather shit job of hiding just how much Troy’s analysis amused her, “parking is a little limited so figure out who you’re driving with, I’d like you all at the facility by 3:00 tomorrow so we can settle in before the campers start arriving at noon on Sunday. I know my boys all fit in one car but I am not in charge of the rest of you so figure yourselves out.”

“We’re seriously putting all four of us plus two dogs, four gear bags, and four duffels in Shane’s Jeep?” Luca asked, his tone of voice making it more than clear that he was preemptively dreading what was *sure* to be a chaotic two-hour drive.

“Wait, then who am I going with?” Conor asked, looking at Shane with something akin to fear in his eyes, like he expected Shane to tell him he was going to be hitchhiking or, worse, driving with Cliff and Hayden.

“He’s going with us, right?” Luke asked, flashing Shane big blue puppy dog eyes.

Shane wasn’t even phased by the slightly panicked codependence at this point, but everyone who didn’t play for New York was studying the pair in a clear attempt to figure out what the living fuck was happening.

“Okay, maybe my boys *don’t* all fit in one car,” Yuna said, adjusting easily to the addition of Conor to the group.

“Admirals in the Jeep, Luca and Ilya can drive with you or Hayd,” Shane decided, realizing it’d be far easier to just split by team, especially considering the fact that Carter was going to walk in from wherever he’d wandered off to and demand to be in Shane’s car sometime before this meeting ended.

“I’m with Shane, right?” Carter asked, appearing as if summoned, holding a bag of chips from the vending machine that was clear on the other side of the building.

Just as Shane opened his mouth to tell him off for disappearing, he was hit in the face by a Snickers and decided to be kind and let Carter get away with wasting everyone’s time.

“Right,” he agreed, opening the candy bar, tearing it in half, and handing a piece to Luke before he could even ask.

“What sort of hive mind are you all working with in New York?” Troy asked, studying them like they were some sort of lab experiment.

“The kind that wins us Cups,” Conor answered, happily accepting a handful of chips from Carter as he slid into the last open seat.

“Fair enough,” Troy said with a nod. “J.J. and I can probably fit two more in my car.”

“I’ll go with you guys,” Tanner Dillon said, “saves me from having to drive myself.”

“Scott and Eric fly in tomorrow, who’s dealing with them?” Carter asked.

“I will take Kip,” Ilya said, perking up from where he’d been at least half asleep with his head on the table.

“Kip wasn’t one of the offered parties.”

“Still, Kip will come with me. Someone else take the dinosaurs.”

“I’ll take Eric and Elaine,” Wyatt offered from where he was sitting next to the Markham Thunder’s starting goalie, “my trunk’s big enough for three goalie bags if we put the third row down.”

“I guess I’ll take Ilya, Kip, and the kid,” Hayden sighed, setting off a rather impassioned speech from Luca about how he was 21 whole years old now and, as such, they should stop calling him the kid.

Shane decided not to mention that he was 28 and Scott *still* called him Rook, he didn’t think the information would be all that helpful at the moment.

“Does that mean Scott’s with us?” Conor asked, leaning around Harris to meet Shane’s eye, looking a little bit ill at the prospect of being trapped with their Captain which, fair. Shane would also like to avoid spending two full hours listening to true crime podcasts and playing iSpy under threat of bag skates if at all possible.

“Cliff,” Shane said, flashing his husband’s best friend and his best friend’s boyfriend his most innocent smile, “would you mind giving Scott a ride?”

Cliff, either too trusting of Shane or too tired to notice the way the other three Admirals had gone stock still awaiting his answer, simply grinned right back and said, “I’d be happy to.”

“I hate you, Hollander,” Cliff hissed, climbing out of his car the second it was in park. Shane could still hear the voices of Scott’s favored podcasters coming through the speakers.

“I’ll live,” Shane said, ticking off the *arrived* boxes next to Cliff and Scott’s names.

He felt Luke shift behind him, a rather clear indication that he was attempting to hide the fact that he was laughing which wasn’t all that effective seeing as the sounds of him and Conor giggling were fully audible.

“Tell Baby Hollander I hate him too,” Cliff added, grabbing his bags from the backseat and starting to stomp off before realizing that he had to continue speaking to the Hollanders he apparently hated in order to get directions. “Where do I go?” he asked, his voice rather comedically dejected.

“That way,” Luke said, climbing back forward to sit next to Shane where he was perched in the open trunk of his Jeep with Sunny (and Carter) happily sprawled out at his feet waiting for everyone to arrive and pointing down the wooded path, “you’ll find J.J. and Barrett near the main building and they’ll tell you which cabin you’re in.”

Cliff rather begrudgingly thanked them and then trudged down the path.

“Scott must’ve picked a bad one,” Conor choked out, attempting to bite back his laughter at Cliff’s expense.

“I don’t think he was properly socialized as a child,” Carter said, “there’s really no other explanation.”

“Are you talking about me?” Scott asked, tossing his bags aside and sitting down next to Shane, happy as a clam and apparently oblivious to the fact that he’d put Cliff in a mood. “You think I pissed him off enough that he’ll just avoid me instead of using me to demonstrate checks?” or, well, maybe not.

“You fucking genius,” Luke breathed out, staring at Scott in complete awe.

“Okay but that doesn’t explain why you make the rest of us suffer,” Carter pointed out.

“No,” Scott agreed, “I just do that because I’m your captain and you have to listen to me.”

“Oh piss off,” Shane laughed, “go put your stuff in your cabin, you’re lucky I like you, by the way, you and Kip are in one of the staff rooms so you don’t have to bunk with the kids.”

Scott grabbed Shane’s cheeks and smacked a kiss to his forehead with an overexaggerated, “*mwah*, I love you, Rook.”

“Love you too, Scotty,” Shane said, shaking his head a little in amusement, “now get out of my sight.”

* * *

Over the next hour, the rest of their staff (and a few random assorted friends) trickled in.

It was a great mix of players from across various NHL and CWHL teams along with a couple of former players different people had known through various connections Shane had stopped attempting to track.

The camp was situated on a little lake north of Ottawa, about 45 minutes away from the cottage. It was peaceful, quiet in a way that New York could never be, no matter how far out in the suburbs you drove, and Shane felt a little like every ounce of stress he’d been carrying in his body was slipping away, little by little, with every minute he spent on the grounds.

After touring the camp and going over their schedules for the week, they’d built a bonfire down on the little beach and Shane was happily sitting in a camp chair, Ilya to his right and Luke to his left with Sunny passed out in her own chair between them, listening to the chatter of their friends as they leaned in to the easy peace of their surroundings.

Meghan, a forward from the Worcester Blades, had challenged Carter to a rock-skipping competition that was being judged based almost entirely by sound given the sun had already set, Ilya was evenly dividing his time between chirping Scott and talking to Kip, Luke and Conor were dutifully listening to Wyatt explain the significance the reference to the multiverse in Doctor Strange held in regard to the rest of the Marvel franchise, and Cliff had decided he was done being annoyed at Shane in favor of asking him not even sort of subtle questions about Rose’s jewelry preferences.

Shane dutifully answered the questions with the responses Rose had been drilling into him for the better part of a year while also side-eying the truly horrendous attempt at flirting Troy was putting on with Harris, who'd been so kind as to join them for the week to document the camp for their social media seeing as Amanda was busy 'avoiding wildlife at all costs' back in New York.

"I lost," Carter announced, meandering back into the circle of chairs and planting himself at Shane's feet, Shane moved his legs just enough for Carter to have space to settle between them, using the inside of Shane's thigh as an impromptu pillow in a display of physical comfort that you could really only achieve with people you spent every waking hour with for 10 months out of the year.

"You'll get her next time," Shane said, patting his head as if he were Sunny.

"You always believe in me," Carter said, sighing rather dramatically. "What would I do without you?"

"God only knows."

* * *

The campers started rolling in a little before noon on Sunday and Ilya happily sat between Shane and Hayden at one of the tables in the main hall, listening to them arguing about absolutely nothing of consequence over his head.

Ilya had discovered, over the past couple of years, that when those two got back together after too long apart, they started bickering like an old married couple as some sort of strange tactic to settle back into their norm. At the moment, they were arguing about how Shane tied his skates.

Hayden insisted Shane's way was insane while Shane was adamant that his way was the reason he won so often.

Ilya sincerely doubted Shane's success had anything to do with the way he tied his skates, but he wasn't about to trash one of his husband's superstitions. He'd made that mistake in the past. Never again.

Hayden, however, tended to escape Shane's superstition-related ire because he had superstitions of his *own* while Ilya was often arguing against the worth of them at all.

He let their voices wash over him as he watched the camp start to fill up through the windows.

Luke was guiding a kid and his mother down the path to show the kid to his cabin, pausing to introduce Conor to the pair as he returned from doing the same thing, Carter was in the corner organizing the final box of gear that Boodram had carried in from Yuna's car, Harris was wandering around taking pictures while Kip followed him with a folder full of media release forms making sure he was only taking pictures of the kids who'd submitted them.

Everyone else was scattered around, happily fulfilling the tasks they'd been set and making sure all of their campers were settled in.

Watching as everything came together, Ilya was struck once more with the thought of how lucky they'd gotten, of how incredible their friends and teammates were.

"This will be a fun week," he declared, interrupting whatever Shane was saying, "I'm happy, I think."

"Good," Shane said, running his hand gently down Ilya's back, "you being happy makes me happy."

Ilya turned to grin at him, somehow still in awe of just how loved he was even after all this time and found Shane already smiling at him, his eyes full of love and his smile so beautifully fond.

"Gross," Hayden grumbled, though he couldn't quite keep the fondness out of his own tone. "I'm gonna go help Cliff."

"Have fun," Shane said, not looking away from Ilya, "if you see my brother, maybe tell him to stop flirting with Conor in front of the children, especially if he's not planning to actually *do* anything about it."

"Will do," Hayden said, "and while I'm at it, I'm going to find and murder whoever it was who made him so repressed."

“Give me deniability, I promised no crimes.”

“I’ll be discreet,” Hayden promised before wandering off, whistling a little as he went.

Shane shot him a half-assed salute and then turned his attention right back to Ilya, “you’re good? Happy?”

“I’m perfect,” Ilya said, reaching out to hold Shane’s hand. “Excited for this week, I think it will be good.”

“Me too,” Shane whispered, leaning over to press a quick kiss to his lips, sweet and full of familiarity Ilya had never dared to hope for.

He loved this life they’d built, and he hoped he never lost sight of just how much they had to appreciate.

* * *

The camp went off without a hitch. Well, mostly.

They had to break up a couple of fights between kids who were rivals in their youth leagues and deal with more teenage drama than Ilya thought was strictly necessary, but no one got injured and no one begged to leave and, overall, they seemed to have a good amount of fun.

It was truly enjoyable getting to watch them learn, getting to experience just how excited they got when they performed a new skill or improved on something they already knew.

Ilya watched as the last car drove off, leaving only the staff behind for one final night on the grounds before they dispersed back to wherever they were spending the offseason.

“This is kind of like your bachelor party if you think about it,” J.J. said as he followed Ilya down the path.

“Is it?” Ilya asked, shooting J.J. a rather confused look.

They were still a month out from the wedding, Svetlana, Rose, and Jackie weren’t there, and, maybe most importantly, Ilya really didn’t picture a youth hockey camp in Ontario as the ideal site for a bachelor party.

“Well, not really, but we can still drink.”

Ilya let out a laugh at that, slinging an arm around J.J.’s shoulders as they walked, “you have good ideas, Boiziau.”

* * *

August 2019

“Shane, trust me, this is perfect,” Rose said, undoing the button Shane had *just* done up. “This shirt looks weird if you’re *too* buttoned up.”

“Alright, alright,” Shane agreed, holding his hands up in surrender.

He thought the white silk shirt and goddamn Bulgari necklace were a bit much, he thought all of this was a bit much, but, at the same time, he was *beyond* grateful to have the opportunity to celebrate his love for Ilya with this many people watching so he decided to keep his mouth shut.

It’d been two years and three months, to the day, since their courthouse wedding in Windsor.

27 months to the day since Shane’s parents, Svetlana, and the Justice of the Peace were the only people to witness their wedding, the only people who got to see just how much they loved each other, even when it was hidden and terrifying.

Today, though, over 100 people, including Shane’s extended family, Ilya’s childhood friends from Russia, both of their teams, and the other friends they’d gathered along the way, would be here to see that love in broad daylight.

What had started as wanting to host a reception with their friends had very quickly turned into planning a full vow renewal after Shane's paternal grandmother spent their most recent 3-day Christmas break sighing and pouting about never getting to see her 'sweet little Shanebug', her *only* grandchild, marry their 'sweet little Ilyushenka.'

Ilya had folded almost immediately and Shane was utterly useless against the combined pouting of his grandma and his husband so here they were, hosting a vow renewal instead of a reception.

"Ready?" Luke asked, all but skipping into the room and immediately slouching over the back of the chair Yuna was sitting in, greeting her with a kiss on the cheek. "Hi, mom."

"Hi, Luke," Yuna said, sending him a fond smile, "are they ready for us?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, standing back up and dramatically presenting his hand, "may I escort you, my lady?"

"You may, kind sir," she laughed, taking his hand and pulling herself to her feet. She paused in front of Shane and cupped his cheeks, forcing him to meet her eye, "I love you, I'm proud of you, and I'm very happy that everyone is here to celebrate you two."

"Thanks, mom," Shane said, sniffing once and steadfastly refusing to start crying before he was even at the altar. "I love you too."

"Good," Yuna said, tugging his head down so she could kiss his forehead. "See you in a minute."

Rose finished sorting out Shane's hair, bouncing slightly on her toes in excitement in a way that made it impossible for Shane not to smile, "Rosie?"

"Yeah, Shane?"

"Thank you," he whispered, hoping she understood what he meant without him having to say. He was dead certain that if he started explaining just how much she'd changed his life he'd lose whatever remaining handle he had on his emotions.

She studied him for a second, a warmth in her eyes that he felt in his bones, and then said, “you’re welcome.”

* * *

“This feels like a lot of responsibility,” Carter said, chasing after Amber as she toddled away. Again.

Ilya watched in entirely unconcealed amusement as Carter scooped her up with a frantic look on his face.

“Vaughan, you’re in charge of flower girls,” Ilya said, “is not a difficult task.”

“They’re fast, Roz!” Carter said, shooting Ilya a rather ineffective glare.

Ilya just huffed out a laugh and leaned back against the wall, waiting for Shane and Hayden to come back.

Rose was fussing over Cliff’s tie, Luke had just returned from walking Yuna to her seat after David had walked his own mother down the aisle, Luca was having a minor panic attack over having to walk down the aisle with *Scott fucking Hunter* while Scott pretended he didn’t know what Luca was panicking over which was more than a little amusing, and Svetlana was standing next to Ilya, also happily watching the chaos unfold.

“Where are your husband and his boyfriend?” Svetlana asked, looking around for any sign of Shane and Hayden.

“Talking to Arthur,” Ilya explained, feeling his smile tilt into something fond, “he got nervous. Hey, Jade!” he called, realizing that Carter had well and truly lost control of the situation as Amber was attempting to Houdini her way out of his grasp while Jade was trying to climb his leg like a tree. Ruby, the sweetheart, was peacefully sitting on the ground petting Sunny and Anya. He didn’t quite buy her innocent expression but she was behaving for the moment so he decided to let her be. “Can you find your basket for me please?”

Jade nodded and quickly stopped her attempt to scale Carter who, when they realized they had uneven numbers of people Shane and Ilya wanted in their wedding parties, had suggested that Hayden officiate while he corralled the Pike girls so Jackie could simply enjoy the wedding.

Ilya had happily agreed to that because he really wasn't quite sure who else he'd want to add to his side without having to add too many. Adding St-Simon meant adding Carmichael which meant adding Connors and so on and so forth. Cutting himself off at Svetlana, Cliff, and Luca was far easier to manage.

Having Hayden officiate had also made it a lot easier for Shane to admit he wanted Luke as his best man without feeling guilty about the fact that he'd been Hayden's and, also, feeling guilty about not including J.J. in the wedding party.

Ilya hadn't quite realized just how difficult picking a wedding party would be but he was more than thankful that particular task was over.

"We're good," Hayden said, half jogging back into the room, turning around to clap Shane on the shoulder, shooting Arthur – who was holding Shane's hand and trailing slightly behind him - a big thumbs up, clapping Ilya's shoulder, and then calmly making his way down the aisle to take his spot at the altar.

Ilya blinked, a little startled by his appearance and subsequent disappearance, but then his focus caught on Shane and he lost all other train of thought.

"Hi," Shane greeted, looking a little nervous.

"Hi," Ilya echoed, "you look beautiful, любимый."

"You too," Shane said, stepping forward and pressing a soft kiss to Ilya's cheek. "Ready?"

"Ready," Ilya echoed, grinning hard enough it started to hurt.

* * *

Shane opened the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the deck, the subtle warmth of the setting sun settling over him like a blanket as a late summer breeze rustled through the trees.

Ilya was in the hammock down by the water, Anya curled up in the last rays of sunlight as they reflected off the glassy surface of the lake.

It'd been a week since their wedding, a week since they got to say their vows for an audience, since they got to take pictures that could be framed and hung with pride instead of hidden in locked folders or tucked into drawers when visitors came. A week since they got a proper first dance and a night of pure *joy* celebrating with their friends.

A week spent hidden away at the cottage, soaking up the final moments of summer before they had to jump headfirst back into preseason training.

In the past two and a half years, Shane's life had turned entirely on its head. Everything he'd known, everything he'd planned for, had fallen apart with one decision.

One monumental decision.

It hadn't been simple, it hadn't been a ripple in a pond or a flap of a butterfly's wings. It wasn't one little decision that then subtly changed the course of his life, it'd been significant. That decision had taken years of hiding, of pain, of *abject terror* to reach. It had taken the love of a friend, of Rose holding his hand through the first admission, the love and acceptance of his parents through the first true confession, the love and care of Hayden, Jackie, and J.J. as he'd made that second confession, as he'd come to that monumental decision.

It had taken him standing in a room, surrounded by teammates he'd known for years, by the team that'd drafted him, *knowing* it could go wrong, knowing that it more than likely would. It had taken strength to fear the outcome and do it anyways.

It had taken Scott's apology and his promise that New York would be better, it had taken Murdock knowing the truth and signing him anyway, it had taken Carter's open acceptance the first day Shane walked into the building, it had taken an iron will to tell their team even when he knew how bad the response could be, it had taken their team's steadfast support and easy acceptance to prove Scott right.

It had taken the subtle strength of the rookie who'd become his little brother, the knowledge that coming out publicly would help ease the way even after Scott had done it first.

It had taken the all-encompassing love of the first and only person Shane had ever loved. It had taken the kind of love that dug its claws in and refused to let go, no matter the cost, no matter how difficult, how *terrifying* that love might be.

It had taken the kind of love that, when let free from the shadows, bloomed into something beautiful, something that fed their souls and made them better, that helped them grow.

It had taken *everything*.

It had taken everything and it'd been more than worth it.

Chapter End Notes

fin.

thank you for reading <3

subscribe to/bookmark this series if you haven't yet because i've got more to write in this universe :)

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