

## magnolia & heartache

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# magnolia & heartache

by [magicjohnson](#)

## Summary

“When did you start feeling like this?” she asks.

“It started in Detroit in December, last year.”

“Do anything out of the ordinary then?”

“No, I do not—” he comes to a complete stop, and Ash walks ahead of him for a few steps before turning.

“What? What is it?”

The picture swirls in front of him like vibrant water colours splashing on a canvas. Cliff beckons him over to where he and Victor are perched on their bikes, and Victor holds his phone out to him. The headline is clear: *Is Rose Landry dating MLH star Shane Hollander?*

A pit forms in Ilya’s stomach, cramping uncomfortably as if carved with a rusted knife, and distantly he recalls feeling the same way back in December.

There is no fucking way that’s been the problem.

•—

or, hot off the press from my tl after episode 4: ‘ilya is the first alpha to go through rejection sickness’

## Notes

\*walks in nervously\* hello... never thought i would be here.

this is my first time writing this kinda stuff so please be kind... would appreciate thoughts and feedback. some housekeeping announcements:

-this is mostly compliant with the book in terms of team and character names, as well as some minor plot details the show left out. but there is a mix of TV stuff as well

-i know nothing about hockey, as a matter of principle, and depended on my knowledge of fútbol to fill in the gaps for any on ice action. god bless

thank you to my dear pati who acted as an omegaverse consultant. would not have gotten through this otherwise. and [here is the link to the tweet](#) that provided inspiration.



# Chapter 1: chapter 1

*New Jersey - December 2016*

Ilya glides across the ice slowly, almost dreading a face off for the first time in his life. There's just over 2 minutes left in the final period, the game is tied 2-2, and he can feel the weight of his teammates and fans' expectations on his shoulders—he has to seal this off here.

He skates over to the red ring, gritting his teeth as he bends over through his stretched thin muscles' protest. The referee takes his sweet time getting over to them, fiddling with the puck in his hand, and Ilya curses in Russian to avoid a reprimand.

*Hurry the fuck up.*

“Nervous, Rozanov?” his opponent jeers, mouthguard sticking out between his teeth. Ilya takes a moment to look at him, scanning him from the shield in his helmet to the cut of the blades at his feet.

Frazer, he thinks his name is; New Jersey's top scorer for the season so far with a massive chip on his shoulder after a devastating Game 7 loss in the first round last year. And it was all his fault.

He's alright for an okay team, but not anywhere near the level that should have him feeling brave enough to chirp at Ilya.

“It's you who should be nervous,” he reminds him, breathing heavily through his nose as a searing wave of pain rolls down his back. “In a few seconds you will lose your team game after a face off, *again*. Maybe no playoffs this year!”

“You wanna fucking go?” Frazer snarls, bearing his teeth and rising to stand. It would have been intimidating, at most a little, if the mouthguard he had slid back over his teeth wasn't bright blue. The bitter smell of tobacco surrounds them and Ilya resists rolling his eyes. *Are they so shit that they can't afford decent scent blockers?* He almost says out loud, but the referee clearing his throat from above reigns him in.

“Gentleman,” he says a little too patiently, “are you quite ready for puck drop?”

“It is him who we are waiting for,” Ilya says, shrugging his arm up at his opponent, instantly regretting the movement. Frazer grumbles under his breath and stoops down with his stick.

The referee holds the puck between them, and Ilya focuses on his breathing. In the passing milliseconds he forgets the curl of his toes in his skates, the unfamiliar ache in his back, his burning shoulder, and the cool sweat on his neck.

His mind clears, the moment slows, and as the puck drops he feels his hockey stick extend like one of his own limbs—like it always does—and he's off in a flash.

As he races off to New Jersey's net, puck gliding in front of him, he can't hold back his smile. *Better luck next time*, he says to himself, pulling back his arms to score.

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Ilya sits down with a heave, the weariness in his bones not enough to stamp out his satisfaction. The Bears won the game thanks to his solo goal in the end, his teammates and coach are celebrating in the changeroom around him, and they're off back home for their next 5 games—which means no more back and forth between uncomfortable planes and hotels for a few days. As the adrenaline wears off and he starts to feel the soreness in his muscles, he's never been more thankful to be heading back to Boston.

He leans back in his stall, eyes closed with a sigh on his lips. He's been a lot more tired than usual lately, despite no change in routine or overexertion on the ice. In fact, the team's been playing so well together lately that he's been able to take a backseat on offense, trying out some tactics and playmaking instead of leading like he usually does.

Things couldn't be going better for him at the moment, but every game ends pretty much the same: he goes straight home, falls asleep immediately, and wakes up feeling like a zamboni drove all over him.

Twice.

*There is one thing that is different*, his alpha tells him, fingers twitching to his pocket where his phone lies. He tightens his grip into a fist as soon as the thought crosses his mind, determined to prevent himself from doing something stupid. No. It had been well over a month since they'd seen each other, radio silence since he scrambled out of his place. Ilya wasn't stupid; he knew when to take a hint.

"Hey Rozanov," he hears, followed by a slap to the shoulder. His eyes shoot open and he covers a groan with a cough. Cliff Marlow beams down at him, hand still holding Ilya's shoulder in a friendly grip, and he tries not to wince. "You coming out tonight? We got the morning off and an afternoon flight tomorrow," Cliff says suggestively, eyebrows waggling. "We can really celebrate."

Ilya holds back a grimace. The idea of bodies pushing up against him, hands touching and prodding at his aching body did not entice him whatsoever, far less the pungent smells of arousal and desire from unfamiliar omegas and alphas alike that would mingle up with his. He's got some medical grade blockers that would probably keep things at bay if needed, but if Ilya was going to have a night out, it would be unrestrained and free. He hardly felt that at the moment, and probably wouldn't for some time.

Normally that would be worrisome—Ilya was never one to turn down a good time—but the cry of protest in his muscles under Cliff's grip was so loud that he couldn't ignore it.

"Maybe next time, when we are at home," he forces out, lips stretching into a painful smile.

Cliff reels back in confusion. "Seriously dude? You feelin' okay?"

“Yes,” Ilya says a little too quickly, trying to reassure himself more than his teammate. “I am coming down with flu, I think. It is nothing.”

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*Boston - December 2016*

Nothing has a funny way of turning into something. The soreness seeps deep into his body as the days go by, despite the longer warm ups and cool downs he builds into his workouts and game prep. He’s never felt so out of tune with his body before, and he’s getting worried.

Ilya tries his best to work through it. He’s asking his trainers and team physio for stretches and exercises to do at home, and he stops going out with his teammates on his days off, trying to rest as much as possible to keep his activity light.

Sometimes it doesn’t feel so bad. For his first few games at home, the discomfort is nothing more than a dull ache across his shoulders or a mild soreness in his lower back, easy enough to deal with through massages and ice baths. But a back to back run of games really has him feeling it, past the point of team mandated recovery protocol helping him.

Flames lick up his joints with almost every swing of his stick, he can feel every stretch and pull of muscle in his legs as he skates around the rink, and he can barely keep his head up with the stiffness in his neck. He’s not sure how he’s been managing to play full periods.

But, outside of some team staff and his coaches, no one seems to notice. He’s weathered worse storms before and came out unscathed, and this time will be no different. There isn’t room for him to be any different; he has greater things to worry about.

But in the comfort of his own home, he allows himself a crack. As he shuffles slowly to his room, ever cognisant of keeping his back straight and his steps small, nerves creep in and the bitter smell of burning rubber is as suffocating as smoke in the air. With a set of away games incoming, he can already feel the discomfort from hours on the plane settling in, his lower back spasming as if he were already airborne. The team may not have skimmed out on the jet the players travel in—there’s way too much money in the league for that—but it still doesn’t beat sleeping in the plush king sized bed that he’s now thankful he let Svetlana convince him to buy.

Ilya makes his way to his large walk-in closet and rolls his carry-on suitcase to the bed, before making his way back in to think about clothes. They’ll be heading out west for a bit before they’re off for the holidays, so he doesn’t have to pack too heavily. He lets himself get lost in his packing, stressing over a conversation he had with his brother a few hours ago.

*“How is Father?” he had asked, keeping his voice flat and getting directly to the point.*

*Andrei had called him, for the first time in some weeks, trying to make small talk like they both didn’t know what he was really calling him for. Ilya tried to steer the conversation in the direction of his father, hoping that it would distract his brother from his initial goal: money.*

*It seemed to work. “Still asking for Mama, still thinks he is a foot soldier cleaning up our country’s dirty streets,” his brother said, the sneer in his lips evident even over the phone.*

*“He forgot who I was on Tuesday.”*

*Ilya sighed. “What was the last update from his appointment on Thursday?” It was Sunday now, and he hadn’t had a chance to speak to either of them immediately after it. Maybe if this were a few years ago, Ilya’s father would have scolded him for his tardiness, insisting it showed a lack of responsibility. He’s not sure whether he’s glad or hurt that this isn’t the case now.*

*His brother was silent on the line.*

*“Andrei?”*

*“He had an appointment on Thursday?”*

*Ilya could feel the anger building inside him, chest burning and fury thick around him. “Yes on fucking Thursday, I was telling you about it three days before it happened. He needs to have regular check ins, Andrei, what the fuck are you doing over there? Do I have to fucking tell you how to do everything?”*

*“I am only joking Ilya, shit,” his brother laughed, ringing out over the line in a way that only made him feel even angrier. “Poor Ilya, so busy with his little hockey team and worrying about his sick father. The doctor said the same thing as always. About three, four, five months left.”*

*The air was hot and fast coming out of his nose. “Don’t fucking play with me on this shit, Andrei. I pay for the hospital bills, I pay for the medication, I pay you to take care of him, for fucking everything and somehow I’m checking in on him from the other side of the fucking planet more than you are. For fuck’s sake, be serious.”*

*“Calm down Ilya,” his brother warned. “I’m not some fucking omega you need to bring to heel. You have all the money in the world, you are paying for father’s treatment, whatever. Top shot alpha. I fucking get it. But at the end of the day, I am the one who goes to the appointments, I am the one who is dealing with things day to day. Not you.”*

*He’d heard the sound of laughter on the other end, loud and boisterous and certainly male, and checked his watch. It would have been around 11 at night back in Moscow, most of the city asleep and awaiting the coming of a busy workweek. Distantly, Ilya wondered how his niece was doing.*

*He almost brought up the fact that Andrei had left his father alone merely a month ago, even though the physicians had told him that he needed constant supervision, so his behaviour was more than warranted. Eventually he thought against it. There was no reason to keep him talking for any longer than he needed to.*

*“Just remember who allows you to do that in the first place. Make sure he’s taking his medication and you’re looking after him. If not you, your wife, hire a nurse, just make sure he is watched by someone.”*

*“Yes, yes,” his brother said. “Could you—”*

*“Alright, bye.” he said with finality, ignoring the phone call that came through almost immediately.*

Determined to not think any more of his brother, Ilya shifts his focus back to his packing. He’s just about finished now, missing one or two T-shirts to add that should hold him for the short trip. Opening his top drawer he pulls out a shirt, plain black and boxy, and a little unfamiliar. When was the last time he wore this?

He spends a few silent moments in puzzled thought, until he remembers—it wasn’t him that wore this last. Faint stretchmarks and freckles flutter behind his closed eyelids, his fingers gripping the shirt tightly before he even realises it. The faint smell of citrus and florals rise gently in the air as he lifts the shirt out of the drawer, and he’s unable to tell if it’s truly coming from the fabric or if he’s just remembering it from all those weeks ago.

Saliva gathers atop his tongue, and something churns in his stomach. He can also feel the beginning of a dull headache right where his neck disappears into his hair.

Ilya shoves the shirt back into his dresser and picks a team shirt instead, trying (and struggling) to ignore the tightness in his chest.

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*Boston - January 2017*

The new year comes along and brings no reprieve with it. Ilya is not any closer to understanding the heaviness in his bones he feels day after day, and if it were the only thing he had to worry about in his life he’d be close to panicking.

It *is* really weird though. He hasn’t been sick in probably four years, and hasn’t had more than a bruised rib and some knocked out teeth for even longer. His last rut, though not as satisfying as it’s been in the past for a reason he’s choosing to ignore, occurs exactly when it’s supposed to and nothing goes amiss. The team’s staff begin to worry somewhat—it’s been over a month with things worsening rather than alleviating—but he assures them that as long as he can stand up on the ice, he’s fine to play. With no official diagnosis to stop him, they begrudgingly agree.

Other things make matters even worse. As much as he tries to ignore it, the media noise about Shane and Rose Landry makes it impossible to ignore what he’s been trying to let go of for the past few weeks, breaking into sports commentary in a way like never before.

It was impossible to deny it; something had shifted leading up to the last time they saw each other. What was once quick, steamy and easy had become more tender, more intimate before he’d even realised it. His inner wolf was seeking out Shane before he could even think of him himself: skirting his fingers across his skin, placing gentle kisses wherever he could, sniffing deeply at the base of his neck for fresh florals and citrus, and remembering little things about him to make what few moments they had together special. *Fuck.*

He should have known when he bought a 12 pack of ginger ale at the supermarket.

Nausea rolls over him in waves, embarrassment rearing its hideous head not for the first time. The disappointment lies on no one but himself because he should have known better; he *knew* this would end eventually and wouldn't last forever. He wouldn't consider himself like other alphas in this aspect, perhaps due to a strong determination to be everything his father disliked when he was off the ice, his expectations on it already heavy enough. He was confident enough in himself to know when something was simply just a night's worth of pleasure, and was assured enough to not feel territorial or owed anything just from a weekend together.

But something with Shane was different. They both knew how fragile this thing between them would be when they started all those years ago, and Ilya definitely wasn't a stranger to casual or on-and-off flings. In fact, it would have been criminally easy to have stopped this years ago, to find something more stable that could exist outside of locked doors—but he hadn't, and neither had Shane. Until now.

Maybe that's why he felt so embarrassed. He'd let himself slip into a level of intimacy that he hadn't given to someone in what feels like a lifetime, and seeing Shane move on as quickly as things had changed between them was only salt in the wound to that primal part of him. He thinks of all the photographs he's seen of them, Rose beaming at Shane as he dons a soft smile he's unfortunately familiar with, or their unrestrained and uninhibited happiness in public that Ilya could never allow himself to feel. His back lights up in pain.

It's just so much more pathetic than he's used to feeling. Why did it matter so much? They were never going to work out. Ilya supposes this must be more traditional of him—the alpha inside him could never resist something that he knew was a bad idea, adrenaline and desire licking up his spine and buzzing in his veins.

It was something convenient, something fleeting, and now it was over. He'd be fine. He's survived so far in his life without Shane, and has achieved so much without him. How bad could life be now?

There's a burning in his thighs that brings him out of his thoughts, legs crying out and in more pain now than they've already been subjected to in the past few weeks. As he takes a sip of water from his bottle, he convinces himself the issue is resolved. When they play Montreal in a week things will be fine, and then at the All Star Game the following week, things will be even better.

He's been pretending long enough to hate him, that the rivalry has as much animosity as the press like to play up; it'll be easy to convince himself he's not acting this time around. And if Shane completely ignores him, even better.

Forgetting for a moment the new feelings in his body, Ilya steps off the bike machine with much more energy than his legs can muster and stumbles right into the other machine next to him.

*"Ot'yebis!"* he shouts, the water bottle flying in the air as it drops from his fingers and blood rushes in his ears. His teammates look at him in confusion, and Cliff steps off the treadmill to approach him.

“Jesus Rozanov, what the fuck’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing, Marly,” he says as casually as he can, the water bottle abandoned as he blazes an emergency exit out of the gym. “Stubbed my toe.”

He just needs to get Shane out of his system. He’s rarely seen someone so often over such a long period of time—Svetlana being the only exception—and never been so... rejected or left behind. There’s a first time for everything, and he’ll just have to get over it.

And Ilya knows just the person to help. ‘*What are you doing tonight?*’ he texts Hazel, and smirks when the three typing dots appear almost immediately on his phone. He remembers the last time they spent together at his place—her warm skin against his as he pressed her into the wall, her arousal clear with caramel and vanilla falling softly around her—and convinces himself that it won’t be long before he starts to feel like himself again.

If her dark hair, brown doe eyes and smattering of freckles across her nose get him excited, it’s no one’s business but his own.

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*Winnipeg - Four days later*

The bullhorn blows out and Ilya sighs in relief, heading straight down the tunnel while his teammates cheer on the ice. They’ve scraped away a 2-0 win that they should all be proud of, but Ilya knows better; that’s probably the worst game he’s played all season.

He heads straight to their visitors' changeroom to get out of his gear, thankful that the team staff have directed the journalists to Marlow instead of him. As quickly as he can manage he takes all his gear off, which is not that fast at all, and packs his things up. By the time he’s ready to go, his teammates are trickling in.

“Off in a hurry, Rozanov?” Victor St-Simon asks as he throws off his gloves.

Cliff walks by them in nothing but his underwear, feigning nonchalance, but he can tell he’s listening in concern. He hasn’t exactly been subtle about his discomfort in their presence, but they don’t know what the exact issue is. They just know he’s been skittish and anti-social after games for a few days now, and that’s as much as he’d like to keep it.

The regular scent blockers he’s been wearing on the back of his neck have been fine for now, but he’s started to smell faint traces of rubber during practice and was starting to consider whether a topical cream was needed, just to be sure.

(With all the other scents on the roster from alphas who don’t give two shits about covering themselves up after a game, mandates be damned, it’s near impossible to make Ilya out amongst them. But as captain of this team, he wants to make sure he doesn’t lose his locker room.)

“Personal matter. But you guys were fucking *amazing* on the ice tonight, and I hope you will take many shots for me while I am gone. But not too many. Flight to Montreal is tomorrow morning.”

The boys in the changeroom laugh and cheer, and as he heads out of the change room and turns towards the training room with a slight limp, he hopes that they believe him.

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“You are busy?” he asks the physiotherapist, Ash, as she packs up the last of their gear to hit the road. She takes a look at the watch on her wrist and shrugs.

“Got about half an hour left before we roll out. Why?”

“I need your help. Will not be long. Leg was cramping during game.”

“Again?” she asks, putting down her bag and motioning to one of the massage tables. “You keeping up with the stretches I gave you?”

“Every night,” he says, hoisting himself up onto the table with a grunt.

She asks him where the cramp is and as he points to it, she gets to work. She first stretches his leg out, bending it gently at the knee repeatedly, before laying his leg back down and kneading into his thigh. He closes his eyes and lets out a shaky breath, sagging in relief.

“How’d you feel before the game? Better or worse than the game against Colorado?”

“Definitely better. I thought it was maybe getting alright until the second period. It’s when my thigh started hurting.”

Ash hums as her finger digs harshly into the muscle closest to his knee. Ilya feels himself melt into the table, and if the room starts to smell faintly like spiced whisky, none of them mention it. He coughs and rubs a hand over the scent patch on his neck, feigning a scratch as he flattens the corner that had peeled upwards.

As Ilya peeks an eye open he catches her staring at him with her lips pursed, like she’s trying to hide a laugh, and she darts her eyes away from his belatedly.

“What is funny?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

Ash is one of many physiotherapists that works with the Boston Bears, and has been with the team since Ilya was drafted. When he got to his first training camp he received a typical alpha’s welcome: slaps on the shoulders, wide smiles, and the promise to help him in whatever way he needed to destroy nearly everyone that came between them and the Stanley Cup.

As a beta, Ash’s greeting was a little different. “You sure you’re on the right team?”

“I am drafted number one,” he had said confidently, crossing his arms and putting on airs, ever the picture of a young and prideful alpha. “There is no confusion, not possible. Are *you* at right team? This is Boston Bears.”

“You look more like the poodle I got at home than a bear,” she said, and Ilya reeled back. She was already moving on before he got a word in. “You ready for some warm ups, rook? Or

you gonna keep standing there with your mouth hanging open?”

Ilya had barked out a laugh, so unused to someone meeting him at his level of cheek. He'd decided then that she would be his favourite trainer, and made sure to never tell her that.

(It doesn't matter, because she knows it anyway. She's everyone's favourite.)

“Nothing,” she says innocently, going to her team bag to get a massage gun. “How have you been feeling the last week or so?”

Ilya hums in thought. It wasn't like he was getting any better, but there were some okay days in between. “Sometimes maybe good, sometimes maybe shit.” Ash snorts as she runs the gun along the side of his thigh. “But now I am starting to be shit on the ice, and we cannot have that.”

She purses her lips. “Yeah, you weren't at your best today, I could tell.”

That was an understatement. Ilya lost nearly every face off he had, was getting spun around in the neutral zone like he learned how to skate yesterday, and was checked into the glass so much more than usual that his entire left side was covered in a smattering of bruises.

He had seen the glances that his teammates had sent his way throughout the game, trying not to seem too concerned to set their opponents off, and it had honestly made him feel like shit. More than he already did.

He was supposed to be leading them, not having them look out for him.

“Ilya,” Ash calls out to him, breaking his reverie.

“What?”

“I said, when did you start feeling like this? Did it come out of nowhere or you think something happened?”

Ash takes a step back from him, staring at him momentarily with serious concern laid bare in her face before she steps away to put the gun back in its kit. For the most part, they're finished; he's done this routine with her so many times over the last month that he can pinpoint the exact moment that temporary relief will start to settle in.

It's about now, when she sets her thumbs back into the sides of his thigh for one last massage. He ponders her question, moving backwards in time. It was bad already on their first game in the new year vs. Toronto, and was in full swing on that west coast road trip in late December. Pittsburgh, North Carolina, New Jersey; for almost every game in the last month he can remember the inexplicable soreness. It had flared up at every home game in Boston, was definitely there in—

“It started in Detroit in December, last year. I do not remember it from games in Vancouver and Edmonton before that.”

“Do anything out of the ordinary then?” she asks, slapping down on the massage table to signal that she’s done. A soft smile wraps around his lips as he mutters his gratitude softly, and she smiles back at him.

Ilya thinks back to that Detroit trip, really digging back in his memory as he and Ash make their way out of the workout room, the equipment cart dragging behind her. They had won that game, a whopping 5-1, and he doesn’t think anything was different or out of the norm with their preparation and game plan.

“No, I do not—” he comes to a complete stop, and Ash walks ahead of him for a few steps before turning.

“What? What is it?”

The picture swirls in front of him like vibrant water colours splashing on a canvas. He’s in the workout room with Cliff and Victor, finishing off an arms circuit before getting to a treadmill for his cool down.

“Roz! You gotta see this shit man, you’ll shit!” Cliff yells, beckoning him over to where he and Victor are perched on their bikes.

Victor holds his phone out to him, the page set to an article from *Le journal de Montréal*. Half the site looks dodgy with the web translator he’s using, but the headline is clear: *Is Rose Landry dating MLH star Shane Hollander?*

A pit forms in Ilya’s stomach, cramping uncomfortably as if it were carved out with a rusted knife, and distantly he recalls feeling the same way back in December.

There is no fucking way that’s been the problem.

“Nothing,” he says unconvincingly, walking past Ash and heading out towards the rear exit to get on the bus. He glances down at his phone; they’ve got 8 minutes to go. Ash is way too good at her job.

“Bullshit,” she says, catching up to him easily even with the cart. When he speeds his pace up, trying to take advantage of the height he has on her, he feels little shame. “What did you do? If you pulled something or did something wrong, I won’t care.”

“How are you so fast?” he misdirects, mildly irritated.

“I did track and field in college,” she smirks, still keeping up with him and not showing signs of slowing. “And I keep up with it now in my spare time. Don’t even try to change the subject.”

He sighs. He knows she won’t let up. And when she makes a sound of realisation, he’s dreading what she’ll say.

“You know,” she starts, and he instantly hates the unrestrained glee in her voice. “If it’s something you did *outside* the rink, I’m not gonna—”

“Believe me, Ash,” he says smugly, reaching the back lot with the bus before she does. That the reality of the problem is so one in a million, so absolutely absurd that it occurs to no one and could never be figured out, is a comfort to him now like never before.

Because when the time comes for his bluff, it’s all the more believable.

“Is not *me* who will be sore on off ice activity. That is not something I worry about.”

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*Montreal - 3 days later*

The game against Montreal is a disaster. He’s scatterbrained like never before, easily distracted by the thrum of energy on the ice and the pressure of the scents in the arena. The pain in his body has flared up to an agonising crescendo, spasms and cramps so frequent that each breath comes out with exertion.

It’s bad enough that he can tell how shit he is, but everyone else notices too. Unlike in Winnipeg his teammates don’t attempt to hide their concern, constantly asking if his head’s in the game in between whistles and at intermission. They keep saying he’s not like himself today, as if he’s been switched with someone else. He doesn’t blame them.

Their opponents notice too. The home crowd is letting him have it, more shit talk than he’s ever had to endure.

*You’re a fucking bum!*

*How can you peak in your rookie year?*

*Fuck off back to Russia!*

*Va chier!*

But the worst is yet to come.

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Ilya heaves himself over the wall to get to his team’s bench. His thighs scream out as he finally sits down, and the muscles in his back and arms feel like they’re pinned down with nails as he leans forward to rest on his stick.

He grits down hard on his mouthguard, resisting the urge to groan in pain, and shudders. They’re in the second period with a long way to go, and he doesn’t know if he can make it to the end.

For a multitude of reasons. Even with his head fixed on the rink, eyes glazing out of focus on the game when he knows he should be paying attention, he can *feel* him a few feet away, just on the other side of the wall separating the Bears from the Voyageurs.

It hasn’t even been two months since he last saw him, but he can feel the wolf inside him almost desperate to reach out like it’s been years, to look over and take him in, and it’s a hard

fought battle against his inner instincts to keep his head straight.

He closes his eyes and tightens his grip on his stick. He wiggles his leg from left to right on the blade of his skate, not even realising that he's searching the air for clementines and magnolia until he catches it—faint and barely there, but just enough for someone to pick up on it if they were *really* looking. His scent patch must be peeling.

Ilya inhales like a man starved, half delirious and wondering how everyone else is unaffected by what's essentially his olfactory ambrosia, and pretends that the loosening in his back is purely coincidental.

The urge to open his eyes and look over feels like life or death. He fights a hard battle internally, desperate to pull back his alpha's reins and convince him that there's no use, that *this* is what he needs.

Looking over at the Voyageurs' bench and not catching Shane's eye would bring a sense of finality to what they've had that he isn't yet ready to face; catching the eye of one of his teammates who has definitely noticed he's playing like shit would also add fuel to the fire. On the other hand, looking over and catching Shane's eye might be infinitely worse, for everything he might find in his gaze.

Or everything that he might not.

So he keeps his head straight on the ice, slowly lifting his lids eventually to keep track of what's happening for when he's subbed back in, and the nagging feeling piercing the side of his head goes ignored.

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The Bears lose emphatically and the home crowd lets them hear it. He doesn't even have the energy to jeer back at them, barely able to get through the dizziness and shake of his limbs to keep himself upright. He's definitely not in the mood for handshakes and promises of vengeance when Montreal is back in Boston (March 23rd with puck drop at 7pm, but who's keeping track?), and heads off towards the tunnel.

"Nice game, Rozanov," he hears that fucker Hayden Pike call after him. "Had a hard time keeping track of you on the ice today. Oh wait," he pauses with an exaggerated laugh. "You weren't fucking there!"

The bitter smell of rubber pours out of him heavily and he feels little desire for restraint, revelling in Pike's wrinkled nose when he'd previously baulk at the thought of letting someone know he's that bothered. The pleasure is momentary, though, as he notices Shane beside him.

Florals and some soft vanilla still linger softly in the air, a little more potent with people leaving the arena, and the fog in his head starts to clear. Ilya tries his best to seem indifferent, to not let it show that merely standing in front of Shane gives a reprieve he's been searching for months, and the effort is almost as hard as making it through that game.

Their eyes meet briefly and, for a moment, Ilya finally feels nothing. The soreness, the twitching, the excruciating fire that was burning bone deep—all of it quells the moment Shane Hollander's eyes meet his for the first time in 2017.

Then Shane's eyes dart away as quickly as they'd met his, sour citrus and worry spiking in the cool air, and it might as well have been a slice across the heart with how badly it had felt.

Ilya spits on the ice, making sure it lands right before Pike's skates in an attempt to shake it off. A thousand words may have been exchanged between Ilya and Shane in a matter of seconds, but he'd been none the wiser.

"Which one are you again?" he asks, holding Pike's eyes for just long enough before finally skating off the ice.

"That fucker knows *exactly* who I am! I'm literally still in my jersey!" he hears him tell Shane, and it's almost enough to make up for the humiliating loss.

Almost.

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"This is getting concerning," Ash tells Ilya after the game, a frown heavy on her lips. "I might have to bring this up with the team doctors."

His rejection is immediate. "No." A doctor might actually give a name to what he suspects his problem is, an official diagnosis, and that is absolutely out of the question. For their safety, yes, but for Ilya's slowly crumbling resolve against what he's been feeling for Shane.

"Ilya," she says gently, approaching him slowly like he's a spooked horse. "I've tried everything I can, and so have the other trainers. We've been able to carry on without most of the team and staff noticing, but slips in performance will make your current... state stand out. We can do as much as we can amongst the Bears, but a journo gets one sniff of this and it'll be all the press will talk about. It'll force you on the bench or into a doctor's office."

She's right, of course. Ilya knows this. But it doesn't make accepting the situation any easier; in fact, it provides all the more drive to push against things even harder, stuffing everything down into nothingness to overcome yet another hurdle through sheer willpower. It wouldn't be the first time he's had to do so, and it wouldn't be the last.

"There will be a break for the All Star game soon, I will take—"

"Break?" she interrupts with a laugh. "You think, out of all the All Star weekends you've been in, that you're gonna get a break for *this* one?"

He holds back a grumble but rubber is clear around them, exposing him nonetheless, and she fixes him with a look. She's right, *again*.

"This one should be exciting, boys!" Ash drawls, voicing dropping a few octaves to imitate a commentator and the hockey choice topic of discussion for the last week. "Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov to share the ice for the first time together with the East versus West format

back. Who's gonna take centre on the line? Will their rivalry be too much for them to play together, or are we about to see one of the best All Star games in decades?"

It would be pretty funny if his stomach weren't churning. Anticipation, excitement, dread; with all the emotions that this coming weekend brought up, he could never tell which one was dominant. Would he even be able to make it to the game in his current state, or would he have to drop out at the last minute? *Yet another one of Ilya Rozanov's failures*, he thought to himself in a voice that sounded very much like his father.

Say he does make it—would he even be able to be in such close proximity to Shane and keep himself together, or would things get worse? The acidic sharpness of what little of his scent broke through his scent blocker today had haunted him ever since, fully convincing Ilya that Shane had no desire to see or speak to him. What else would it mean?

But, selfishly, he allows himself to think of how good things could be. What if he would *finally* start to feel like himself again, regardless of them having to lie to everyone and themselves that nothing was amiss? He can't forget that brief moment on the bench where the faintest trace of Shane's scent had relieved all the tension in his back, or the flash of eye contact that made all his pain dissipate. Even if he wouldn't speak to Shane, maybe just being around him could help him feel like his old self again.

*No*, he thinks to himself, *you will not be so fortunate*. When the weekend comes to an end and everyone leaves Tampa, he'd begin to wither away again, without a doubt. The Bears have a pretty good chance to make a deep playoff run for the Cup this year, and he needs to be on top of his game. If he gets a peek out of the hole he's plummeted into, only to fall back even deeper, he's not sure he'd ever be able to get out of it.

"The whole weekend is not intense. There will be a few days' break before and after, with no games scheduled that I will use to rest. I *will* make sure to be fine after that, and the team will be fine. We will win our division and go back to being normal before anyone notices."

"*Ilya*," she says, her voice almost a hiss as she comes to a stop in front of him. Distantly they both hear footsteps approaching their workout room, and as a Voyageurs staff member walks by, Ash starts talking about their fitness routine for when they'll be back in Boston to disguise the fact that she was about to bite his head off.

When the coast is clear, she exhales.

"This isn't just about the team and some standings," Ash says calmly, seriously. It's the sort of tone she uses when the team is going through a rough set of games, they're not living up to the Boston standard, and are in need of some serious motivation. No positive words to make them feel better, no uplifting encouragement; she's never afraid to cut right to the point, holding nothing back in her critiques to cut deep into their alpha pride and really push them that extra mile on conditioning and training to be their very best.

It's no wonder she's one of the few training staff that's stayed with the team all throughout their success.

“You are wearing your body thin by pushing it like this, playing full games when you *need* help. The Boston Bears have been around for a long time, with a long and decorated history. Unless the entire organisation gets hit with a RICO charge or the league dissolves, they’ll be around much longer. How long will *you* be able to last if you keep putting yourself through this? How much longer does Ilya Rozanov get to be the best damn player on the ice in any matchup if he can barely hold his stick up for a period?”

A beat passes. Ilya doesn't know who Rico is, but he gets the point. “You should be a motivational speaker,” he says with a rueful smile. She huffs out a laugh and rolls her eyes.

“But you are right. I have thought of this, but,” he sighs defeatedly and shrugs his shoulders. There’s not much more he can say without revealing too much of himself, muscle and flesh and sinew laid bare for her scrutiny. In a way, it already has been—she just doesn’t know *why*.

Ash hums and tilts her head in thought. Her words are soft in the room around them when she finally speaks, like she can finally understand how grave this is. “But you *do* know what’s causing the problem, don’t you? You might have got away, but I could tell from our conversation last week.” Ilya only nods in response.

“And it’s not fitness related, is it? I’m sure I don’t have to remind you, but if it’s not related to your physical health, I don’t want or need to know.”

He shuts his eyes and leans back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. The nod of his head is barely there, easy to miss, but part of Ash’s job is to notice even the smallest changes of movement he makes.

“Okay. Okay. Look Ilya, I can’t keep everyone away forever. I’m not *that* good.” He snorts and smiles somewhat, genuine this time. “You’re gonna have to deal with this thing at the source of the problem, and *fast*, or else the team will get doctors involved in a way that might let *everyone* know whatever it is you’re dealing with.” She pauses to look outside the room, making sure they’re alone, before dropping her voice even lower than it already is. “It might not just be physical doctors, maybe mental too.”

Oh, if only it were that fucking simple. Ilya wonders if it’s because of her designation that the thought hasn’t occurred to her yet, or if she’s simply just minding her business about it. Over the years he’s come to know her as one of the smartest people he’s met in the organisation, and part of that comes with having a certain level of professional ‘ignorance’ that many find difficult to manage.

The only downside is that, sometimes, it’s hard to get a read on what she’s really thinking or what she really means. But it doesn’t matter; some things are better left at rest.

God, he was so fucking sick of feeling like this.

The pressure of everything sits heavy on his chest like a weight. His father’s declining health is an ever present burden, leaving him constantly warring with worry and concern on the other side of the planet while still not being able to forgive him for who he is. His struggles with his brother and the worsening of their relationship only add to it, guilt tripping and

animosity thrown between each other to fill up the space where comfort and assurance have never sat.

He tries *so hard* to be *perfect*, to live up to the expectations that everyone has of him, and it is never enough. Ilya is left behind by everyone he knows, *constantly*.

And then came Shane. It should scare Ilya, he thinks, how easily he began to drop even the smallest bit of his guard around him, how achingly close to intimate things had gotten in the past year. It shouldn't have surprised him that when he put no more than a toe across that forbidden line, that it was too much and he had failed again. Too much and not enough for yet another person's expectations.

*What is so wrong with me?* He wonders, rubbing a hand over his face and ignoring the cry in his muscles. His lower back twitches and he releases a soft groan in discomfort.

"We haven't tried painkillers," Ash says, reminding him of her presence. His heart seizes in his chest and he lets out a shaky breath, eyes popping open immediately. He shakes his head rapidly, realising too late that he's shown too much of himself in front of her, but unable to stop it regardless. *Weak*, he hears his father echo in his ears. *Always so fucking weak*.

"No," he stresses, voice severe and eyes darting between her concerned face and the empty hallway outside. "No pills. I do not want to do pills. Ever. Not unless it is necessary."

Ash puts her hands out in front of her in an effort to calm him down. Inwardly he feels bad about his tone but can't bring himself to acknowledge it.

"Okay, no problem. We can try some more creams for the spasms and pain. I'm not sure I can get a stronger prescription without being noticed, but I'll try my best. Just take a minute, Ilya. Breathe."

He does just that and calms down somewhat, exhaustion settling into his bones as the mild panic dissipates. He can feel what seems like everything in his body at the moment—his shoulders are ablaze, his back aches from a repeating spasm near his hip, his legs are sore from thigh to calf, and even his fingers feel stiff from the tight grip he used on his hockey stick all game long. The agony reaches what feels like a cellular level, so deep inside him that it feels inescapable. With the haunting memories of his family looming over him, not even mental reprieve can reach him.

At the pinnacle of his pain, something inside him cracks. Like he can feel himself splintering in two, veins rewiring and something taking over, numbing his thoughts and the overwhelming dread for the incoming days to near nothing. An icy chill drips down his spine and his breath catches in his throat.

And then, it stops. Ilya blinks rapidly, trying to sort through what just happened. The pain had stretched on for what felt like minutes, maybe even hours, but by looking at Ash it seems like it's only been a few seconds. He almost has trouble remembering what they were talking about, or what he was even stressing over.

*What is happening to me?*

He feels something stir inside of him, and suddenly it clicks into place. He'd heard of it a few times back home, mentioned in old folktales meant to scare young children—alphas who experience something so isolating, so distressing and destabilising that their wolf had no other choice but to fight for command, taking control of mind and thought to lead a human through fight or flight just to stay alive.

If he weren't so dissociated at this point, he might have felt indignant about losing his mind to animalistic instincts, like he's some idiot knothead. But all he can think of, or what his alpha seems to think of, is shutting down this conversation with Ash and moving on to a solution.

"I will make you a deal," he hears himself say evenly, like the words are coming out of someone else's mouth. "Give me until after the All Star weekend. I will handle this on my own for now, and if it is still a problem, we will go to the doctors. Deal?"

Ash's eyebrows raise in surprise. "Are you sure, Ilya?"

"Yes," he says shortly, considering the deal sorted and making his way out. He hears a squawk of confusion tumble out of Ash's lips but his body doesn't stop to turn at her. "I will see you in two weeks, Ash."

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"Fuck this shit," he says to his roommate Ryan Carmichael, on a war path to his suitcase with his clothes. "I need to get laid. Find a fucking club, call Marly and Victor, and let's go out."

"Hell yeah, man," Ryan smiles, fingers already gliding over his phone.

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Ilya takes two double shots of the most expensive vodka at the bar as soon as he arrives, and heads towards the dance floor. Lust is heady in the air and he almost feels at ease as he scans the crowd for someone to dance with. He takes his time roaming from person to person, body to body, his wolf desperate to find a match quickly.

When he sees her, the hairs on his arms raise. His knees bend, almost ready to make a break for it.

Rose Landry stands out in the dance crowd, impossible to miss even amongst the moving bodies surrounding her. She's swaying her hips to the music with a smile lighting up her face, but even more impossible to ignore are the arms around her waist, the sliver of stomach and chest that peek out under the shirt her crawling hand lifts.

*Shane Hollander is here.*

"Fuck this shit," he mutters, immediately moving to the opposite end of the floor and letting his alpha take control. He zeroes in on an omega—long blonde hair, fitted black dress and crystalline blue eyes—and slides up beside her. With one look from over her shoulder, she's more than happy to press her body up against his.

The music is loud to a near frustrating degree but Ilya can't find it in himself to care, the pounding so strong in his ears that he's finally distracted from the aching in his body. When the girl throws her arms up in the air and rolls her ass against him, it's almost instinctual to jut out his hips to meet hers. He feels her shiver against him, and his skin begins to warm as he feels the vodka settle within him.

Ilya trails his nose down the line of her neck to the soft scent gland and inhales. Fresh sea water, jasmine and pepper flood his senses and he reels his head backwards. It's okay, not the worst person he's ever smelled, but it doesn't feel *right*. He growls in frustration and she mistakes it for arousal, laughing and turning to meet him. With all the scents swirling in the air he's not sure if she can tell, but he's almost certain he just smelled a spike of charcoal and ash from his own neck.

Luckily for him, she doesn't. She just smiles up at him and leans forward, and it's all too easy to let his instincts lead him to meet her halfway. Their tongues meet in an open mouthed kiss and he can instantly feel her purr against his chest.

Ilya grinds their bodies closer together, fingers clamped at the small of her back as he chases the rush of arousal. When the song fades into another they separate and she winks at him, pressing up against the shell of his ear.

"I love this song."

"Show me." The words come out gravelly from his lips. He noses at her neck, avoiding the side with her scent gland this time, and trails kisses down her throat. He's only halfway to hard but he's certain he can work himself up, and she *definitely* seems eager.

The omega twirls her hips in small circles against his crotch, leaning her head back on his shoulder. His hands roam gently down her body, gripping at her chest and sliding down to her waist.

He should be feeling something.

Ilya watches her writhe against his body in a way that has sent blood rushing to his dick countless times before, and can barely feel himself chubbing up in his pants.

He should be feeling *something*.

His hand on her chest rises to her chin, guiding her lips into a smouldering kiss that has her sighing against him. He licks inside her mouth, slides his hand down to palm her ass, and grinds up against her. In return her hand trails a hot path underneath his shirt, fingers skirting over his nipples, and his breath involuntarily catches in his throat.

Despite that, nothing.

They break away for air and he flashes a bright smile at her, hoping to elicit some reaction in her that will get his alpha roaring. But when she twirls back against him, nothing. Again.

And then, he feels it. The hair on the back of his neck curls, not just from sweat and the hot air around them, but pressure. Pressure from a set of eyes heavy on him. Ilya turns.

He smells him before he sees him. Sour and tangy citrus with ripe, bitter blackcurrant; worry, distress, and anxiety all around him. He's almost baffled, the thought crossing his mind that he shouldn't really be able to smell him, knowing that he'd never leave the house without a scent blocker on.

It would only be perceptible if the patch were peeling and he'd be unable to fix it, like, say, during a game of hockey with thick, padded gloves on.

It can't be any stronger than it was earlier today, and in the middle of a packed Montreal nightclub it should be even harder to find. Nevertheless, his alpha had been seeking it like a bee on the hunt for honey and found it, yet again, like second nature. Instinctual.

Ilya tenses briefly as his eye catches Shane's, waiting to see what he'll do. But Shane does nothing, eyes only widening as he remains rooted to the spot. It sends mild irritation spiking within him, and he holds back a growl. Of all the places in Montreal, he *had* to be at the same club his teammates had chosen? Ilya had purposefully moved to the very opposite end of the club that Rose and Shane had been at when he'd noticed them, which leads him to believe that his presence, now, is no accident. How long had Shane been staring until Ilya caught him? And where did he even find the gall to keep watching?

Well. If Shane wanted a show, he was going to get one.

Ilya lowers his head, swirling his tongue around his partner's ear and nibbling at her lobe. She gasps and clutches at his hips, and he soothes her ear with a gentle kiss before whispering, "Should we take this somewhere else?"

Through the entire exchange, his eyes remain fixed on Shane. Who remains frozen where he stands, despite the bodies thrashing about him, with cheeks rosy and his lips parted. Something warm pools in his stomach. Ilya feels *something*.

"Sorry," she says, actually sounding apologetic in a way that breaks his trance. "Can't do that tonight, babe. My boyfriend's here and he likes to watch me get on with other alphas, turns him on since he's a beta. I'm leaving with him."

"What the fuck?" he says, looking around.

"Don't worry," she purrs, "you're not in any trouble, and you could probably take him anyway. He likes it. Thanks for the fun." She plants a soft kiss on his cheek and disappears into the crowd.

When Ilya turns back Shane is gone, leaving him with nothing but a hard to ignore erection and a rising fury. Interestingly, he's more upset that Shane is gone than the fact that he was watching in the first place.

With a growl he turns to leave the dance floor, stomping over to the exit and pulling Victor aside. "I'm fucking leaving."

“With her? Nice one, man!”

He doesn't have the composure to correct him on his way out.

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Ilya fists his cock in his hands almost instantly in the shower. Despite his initial irritation, it was hard to ignore the swirling heat that Shane's gaze had sent straight to his lower belly. Something about him standing there, flushed prettily under a purple glow of lights, had renewed something in him.

It was all too easy to let his mind wander, to consider what could have been if the world were different, or they were different people. Ilya could have saved himself the trouble of dancing with what's-her-name, leaving her to run back to her boyfriend as he made his way closer to Shane, all the way until their bodies touched.

He'd probably be a little awkward, swaying back and forth with his arms stiff at his sides, the concept of a fun night out probably unheard of to him, so Ilya would have to take the lead.

As he imagines skirting his fingers across Shane's waistband, the pace of his hand quickens around his cock and his thumb presses forcefully onto his tip. He lets out a heavy moan that's swallowed and soaked up by the sounds of the shower's rushing water, and he hopes his roommate hasn't come back yet.

In his vision his hands creep upwards, catching all the nervous flutters of Shane's stomach and chest. His broad palm reaches for a pec, and Shane would gasp as Ilya rolls a nipple in between his thumb and index finger.

“Relax, sweetheart,” he might say when he feels Shane push back against his crotch, the sweet smell of his need thick around them. “I will give you what you want soon.”

“Well hurry up, asshole,” Shane would grumble, throwing his head back and baring his neck for Ilya. Gentle kisses would trail down his throat as Ilya made his way to his final destination, tongue swirling over his scent gland before a deep inhale. Creamy vanilla intertwines with fresh clementines and magnolia, a mouthwatering mix that makes him feel lightheaded.

“Fuck, Shane,” he'd pant, hand slipping downward to cup the front of the omega's jeans. “Do you know what you smell like?”

“Ilya,” imaginary Shane would whimper, pliant and needy under Ilya's hands. “*Please.*”

Stars explode behind Ilya's closed eyelids as a hot coil unfurls in his stomach, and he comes with a shout. He's forced to lean against the shower wall to avoid slipping, his legs suddenly wobbly as his body heaves with each breath.

He's not sure how long he stays there, watching his come swirl down the drain until every drop is gone. Eventually he steps out, his skin furiously red and raw from the hot water, and

dresses quickly. Finally clothed and spent, he plops down onto his bed, sour mood returning and charcoal sharp in his nose.

Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, Carmichael isn't back yet and Ilya is left alone with his thoughts. It's impossible now to ignore the impact that Shane's departure has had on him, as the hollow ache where his heart beats is the only pain he registers in his body.

All of his previous lies bring no comfort to him anymore. What he felt with Shane was far more than a healthy serving of adrenaline from doing something he knew he shouldn't. It was much worse than a little jealousy from having to share Shane with someone else, when he knows he's shared others with even more people in the past and didn't bat an eye.

A very small part of him, long ignored today since he succumbed to his wolfish instincts, knows exactly what it is. It tries its hardest to be heard now, ringing bells, sounding alarms and curling its lips to form the words he's absolutely dreading to hear. But his wolf roars over it, determined not to listen quite yet, and Ilya considers the matter dealt with for now.

## Chapter 2: chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

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

*Tampa Bay - late January 2017*

As Ilya finishes off his beer he presses heavily into his packet of nicotine gum, immediately popping the piece into his mouth and chewing furiously. It's the Friday before the fun begins this weekend, and most of the players have spent the day mingling at the bar and around the resort with their league or national teammates. Ilya, so far, has spent the morning and early afternoon alone.

Dread won over anticipation and excitement in the end, wearing itself down into his teeth and joints. He wasn't sure if Shane would make an appearance here today or if he'd have to wait until the Skills event, and he felt much like a time bomb ticking down to their first meeting.

If this were any other year he probably could have gone the weekend without seeing him. He's almost positive that they'd be on separate teams, maybe would be lucky enough to be in different skills competitions. But in a cruel twist of fate, of course, a meeting was unavoidable.

He's grateful, at the moment, to be alone. His misery slowly grows pungent in the air around him, and the bartender kindly stays at the opposite end of the bar to leave him to his thoughts. Technically, they only have to wear scent blockers for league mandated events and travel, but since this was their own personal free time in a hotel, he didn't care much to keep strict adherence. He'd only applied a cream on the back of his neck and wrists this morning, and though it seemed like it had nearly worn off, he couldn't care at all. For the most part it appeared that others felt the same in his rule following, but there was also the distinct, fresh smell in the air of popular aerosol and cream blockers, meaning that some were also limiting their odour somewhat.

He'd known, however, from the moment that his plane landed, that if he was going to be looking for something specific, it would be hard to parse out through everything.

Ilya feels that shift inside him again as his nerves start to build up, breath steady as his wolf tries to formulate a plan. He has to consider that Shane would keep things curt and cordial, or make good on the league's belief that he truly doesn't like him and all the years mean nothing. As much as it pains his human side in the moment, he also has to consider that their last encounter could be brought up in some kind of way, and that Shane might divulge his reactions to that night in Montreal.

His alpha tries to convince himself that regardless of what Shane does or doesn't say, things are going to be fine. Ilya himself isn't so sure of that. But whatever the case may be, he doesn't have much time to deliberate.

"Shane, my man!"

Ilya turns, and so does everyone else in the room. Shane walks in with a crisp white linen button up, the top *two* buttons undone and sleeves rolled up at the elbows. Pale blue pants hug his waist tightly, thanks to a belt that looks like a basket weaver made it, and it does wonders to outline the curve of his ass.

Idly, he wonders how long Shane spent ironing his outfit without a crease to be seen, the picture so clear in front of him. Something fond simmers in his chest, and he can smell his affection replacing charcoal.

Ilya can't stop staring.

Shane walks around, shaking hands and clapping people on the back with a bright smile. He leans back a bit as a laugh takes over his body while he chats to a player from Vancouver, looking light in a way that he hasn't in some time. Like he doesn't have a care in the world, and hasn't spent the last 2 months in abject misery like he has. He's never looked better.

Shane continues making his rounds. He may miss the look that Schmeichel gives him as he turns to leave, eyes trailing down from one set of cheeks to another, but Ilya does, and exerts all the effort he'd normally put into a growl into working his jaw to chew his gum. His back begins to burn, and it takes a considerable amount of effort to not stink up the entire room with rubber and reveal himself.

Instead, he turns and waves for another beer, doing his best to calm himself down as the bartender tries to hide a wrinkle in his nose. He thanks him softly, aiming at looking apologetic, and tries to repeat some breathing exercises that Ash had got him to start doing. He wonders when she became his part time therapist.

*(You're gonna pop a damn lung one of these days with all that huffing and puffing!* She had told him once. He promptly told her that he didn't believe in her 'American therapy' but had used them more times than he could count over the years. Another thing he'd never tell her.)

The sunshine this weekend brought was supposed to stamp out his doom and gloom—they were steps away from a beach in the middle of *January*, for crying out loud—but it was hard to let the warmth in. It was never something that came easy to Ilya, and this certainly wouldn't be the easiest time to start trying.

Someone takes the seat next to him. The scent is fresh, neutral, like the cold air on a winter's day with fresh snow falling; the most popular of all scent neutralisers.

He doesn't have to look to know that it's Shane.

"What can I get you to drink?" the bartender asks.

"Whatever my, uh, *teammate* here is having," Shane says flatly, casually.

Ilya nods and waves at the bartender as he walks away.

"So are they out of ginger ale, *Captain*?" he teases. Like there was any other option for an All Star captain for Ilya's weekend of misery.

“I’m feeling a little wild,” Shane says with a curl of his lip. Ilya mentally counts downwards from 13 in an effort to draw his attention away from the softness of his mouth and the heat flickering on the back of his neck.

“So this should be fun, huh?” Shane starts again. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team.”

“Have you?” Ilya asks, fondness barely restrained. He mentally curses and tries to compose himself.

They make small talk about the weather, how nice it is to be in Florida for a whole weekend and miss some harsh weather in their home towns, before the bartender brings Shane’s beer. Ilya watches Shane’s throat bob as he takes sip after sip, fixated on the small exhale of refreshment as he sets the drink down, and turns to him.

The light in the room catches a freckle near his lips, and his dick twitches. The wolf inside him takes that as a sign to cut right to the chase.

“Did you, uh, bring anyone with you?”

Shane rambles on for a moment, explaining in extreme detail why his parents aren’t there with him, but Ilya can’t focus. It’s the longest that he and Shane have spoken since he left his house in Boston, and his lips are moistened from the beer in a way that sends hummingbird wings beating furiously in his chest.

Shane finishes speaking and all Ilya can do is hold their gazes together, refusing to look away. It’s a wonder he can keep his scent as neutral as it is right now, a surprisingly muted amount of whisky and cinnamon in the air. Thank you science.

“Did you—um—bring anybody?”

Shane’s gaze is nervous, almost like it was at the start all those years ago, and Ilya has to hold back a grin. It kind of feels like they’re doing that dance again, trying to figure each other out.

He shakes his head slowly, watching how Shane’s gaze follows every movement of his head. “Nope,” he says, popping the ‘P’ before bringing his beer to his lips slowly, gulping each sip down with purpose and trying not to swallow his gum. Shane’s eyes linger momentarily before he turns his head with a nod, and Ilya takes the chance to stare at him again.

It’s only been five days; it might as well have been five years. Ilya drinks in Shane’s appearance like it’s the last chance he’ll have, committing each freckle and the curl of his eyelashes to memory. He’s staring at the plush curve of his cupid’s bow when Shane turns to look back at him, and he makes sure to keep staring for two more seconds before lifting his eyes up to meet Shane’s. The intensity there must mirror the same in Ilya’s, as he slowly trails his eyes down to stare at Ilya’s mouth.

The tension in the air is stifling and he’s forced to look away. He’s not sure he’s ever been this shameless in his life, and *that’s* saying something.

“Nice shirt,” Shane says through a clear of his throat.

Ilya snorts. “Thanks. I like to, uh, you know, get into the spirit. Florida. Tropics. Sunshine.”

Shane licks his lips. “Well, you’re pulling it off,” he says with a gentle tone, eyes impossibly warm when they meet Ilya’s.

God, he was so screwed.

“Fuckin’ beauties!” Carter Vaughn yells, wrapping both of them in his arms and immediately shifting the mood. The Modelo bottle in his arm sloshes somewhat near Shane’s sleeve, and Ilya notices the nervous look Shane gives it.

“Yeah, it should be a fun time,” Shane says with an awkward laugh.

*He’s flustered*, Ilya thinks, endeared. The faintest signs of a blush start forming on his cheeks, and he can’t bring himself to look away.

“Careful with this guy though,” Carter says, slapping Ilya on the shoulder. “You can never trust him.”

Ilya wiggles his eyebrows at Shane. If only he knew.

“One black coffee for him, please,” he calls to the bartender, finally looking away from Shane and waving to Carter. He doesn’t even know what he’s wearing.

“Awww, I’m just fucking with you Rozy,” Carter says with a slight drunken drawl. It can’t be 1pm yet. “S gonna be fine! Let’s go East boys!”

Carter whoops and gives their shoulders one last slap before walking away towards the pool area. Shane laughs softly and shakes his head.

“I feel like we’re gonna get a lot of that this weekend,” Shane says, but Ilya is so caught up in just *staring* at Shane, sitting next to him and not visibly distressed, that he registers it a few seconds later.

“It should give us a chance to get to know each other,” Ilya says, unable to hold back the suggestive tone. “Who knows what we might have in common,” he says with a drop in his voice, smiling most wickedly at Shane. He flushes, licks his lips again and looks down at this beer before taking a sip. Something inside Ilya *roars*.

“You’re looking very pretty today,” he flirts, very shameless now with the help of his beers. “Very different.”

Pictures flash in his mind of Shane and Rose Landry outside a shopping centre, bags in their hands, and it gives him pause. He finally notices the expensive looking watch on his wrist, and something inside him bristles. Did *she* buy him that?

“Someone take you shopping?”

Shane's fingers fidget nervously at his lips before he turns to Ilya. "If I, um... If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone or make fun of me?"

His grip on his beer bottle tightens, only slightly, and he shrugs in what he hopes looks like nonchalance.

"Well, it depends."

"Seriously," Shane says in that soft, earnest way that had drawn Ilya in from that brisk day in Regina.

He smiles gently at him, almost positive that he's revealing everything on his face. But he can't bring himself to care, and neither can his alpha, even as his feet run cold at what he thinks Shane is about to say.

*I'm seeing someone new.*

*Rose and I are engaged.*

*I don't need you anymore.*

"Yeah, sure."

Shane takes a deep breath, and the words rush out of his mouth. "I hired a stylist."

A beat passes. Relief floods through Ilya and he can't hold back the grin stretching his lips before he's laughing. There he was, absolutely dreading what he thought was Shane's official rejection, when all he did was get professional help with his clothing.

It was impossible not to love him. Ilya has to cover his mouth to quiet down.

"Fuck you," Shane laughs in a sorely familiar way.

"No, sorry," Ilya lies, laughing still. "Wow. Of course you did."

"I shouldn't have told you."

"No, I love it!" Ilya insists. "What, you got tired of looking like shit?" He takes another sip of his beer to do something with his hands, preventing himself from reaching out.

"No," Shane stresses, rolling his eyes. "I just got tired of wearing athletic stuff."

Ilya hums.

"And some of the guys in the league are so fashionable."

"Yeah," Ilya agrees sarcastically. "*So fashionable.*"

"Not you," Shane retorts immediately, holding his gaze. "Some of the guys."

"Other players?"

“In the league,” Shane chuckles, light. Ilya feels giddy. “Not you.”

He nods, letting Shane have this, and takes a deep inhale. Frost and snow. Part of him wilts.

Ilya looks around for a moment, ensuring that no one is nearby.

“Soooo,” he says without a modicum of nonchalance, wanting to be certain. “This has nothing to do with Rose Landry?” He makes sure to hold Shane’s gaze with his own.

“No,” Shane answers, and Ilya holds his breath. “Well, I mean, she always dressed—um—very well and so do her friends, but I just wanted to stop dressing like I was always going to the gym. I never really cared about clothes.”

Ilya nods and takes a sip of his beer. He can feel the warm buzz in his skin now, almost done with his third bottle.

He pushes again. “So, uh, you and her are not...”

“We’re not.” Shane affirms, shaking his head. Ilya feels something unravel inside him, like a spool that’s finally burst after being too tightly bound around something.

His alpha grins a wolfish smile inside him, and takes a step back. The job’s half finished.

“She’s great,” Shane continues, “but we’re just not... compatible.”

Ilya holds his gaze where it lays on Shane’s lips, so caught up in his earlier words that he doesn’t remember to ask what compatible means. After a few seconds, when he reminds himself that they’re in public, he raises his eyes up to Shane’s, who’s too caught up in also eyeing Ilya’s lips to notice his staring. How have they not been caught?

Shane sits up straight, like he’s just remembered where they are, too. “I should circulate I guess,” he says, looking around with an awkward smile. Ilya’s favourite.

“Yeah,” Ilya agrees, voice low and deep in the way he knows Shane likes. “You have new clothes to show off.”

Their eye contact is heated as Ilya takes a long sip from his beer bottle. As he sets it down he licks his lips, and Shane takes that as his cue to leave. Ilya keeps his face neutral as Shane walks away, and as soon as he’s out of sight he puts a palm over his mouth to hide a massive grin.

Eventually, he gets up to leave to find his own teammates. As he takes long strides through the resort with his head held high, he doesn’t even notice that the tension between his shoulder blades is gone, that the stiffness in his arms is replaced with gooey molasses, and the slight wobble in his knee is more excitement than pain.

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The early afternoon before the skills competition could not have been more perfect. Sunbeams shone down on the pool area, unobstructed by clouds, and a gentle breeze wafted

in the air, floating the joy and happiness of all the families spending time together everywhere.

Shane stretches out his legs on his lounge chair, a pleased sigh floating past his lips. Though it wouldn't really matter until tomorrow, he was voted team captain of the All Star game this year by MLH fans, and had felt a little embarrassed. Usually the honour would fall to veteran players much older than he was, and he was only *just* starting to feel worthy of holding the title with the Voyageurs. He was only a few months shy of 26.

But, he thinks to himself with a smile, it does feel pretty good to be voted captain over Ilya.

He glances over to him in the pool, surrounded by the children of his other Eastern teammates. Ilya had spent the last hour 'losing' all the races they've had and accused the children of cheating, which Shane could describe as nothing short of adorable. The mere sight of him, cheeks pulled taught as he smiled and laughed with them, made something hot and gooey simmer low in his belly.

On a day like today, he's never been more thankful for the medical grade scent blockers that he has access to as a professional athlete. He thought that yesterday was bad. The heat in Ilya's gaze had scorched every inch of skin it trailed over, and it was embarrassing how quickly Shane had felt slick pool between his legs after a few of those crooked Rozanov smiles.

But this? This is *much* worse. It's one thing to flirt shamelessly in public like never before, even if they were somewhat secluded. Seeing the innocent side of Ilya that he only caught glimpses of when alone, playful without any brooding or posturing, out in public for the sole purpose of making some kids happy? This is a completely different thing. A whole different beast to control.

It cuts past Shane himself and does something to the omega deep inside him, warms his skin and makes his head swim in dizziness. Before he knows it he's purring softly, coughing over it as Carter Vaughn's girlfriend and sister walk by and settle down near him. He's not one to usually indulge in typical omega behaviour—positive to not give the league, media, or anybody motive to question or doubt his ability on the ice—but with the happiness of everyone honeying the warm air, he allows himself the moment.

Most of all, though, he's thankful that Ilya is even talking to him. After the way he ran out of his place in Boston like a frightened cat and that embarrassing night in Montreal, he's surprised that he still wants to be around him. Shane certainly wouldn't. He's not sure if he deserves it, honestly, but he won't look a gift horse in the mouth. If he got the chance to get him alone again this weekend, he'd have to set things right.

A loud splash and peals of laughter break him away from his thoughts.

"Last race!" Ilya yells, a grin still stitched on his face. "Winner takes all. None of the other races count."

"Hey, no fair!" one of the kids yells.

“Come onnnn,” Ilya pleads, swimming over and pouting. “If I lose... I will buy every single one of you candy or chocolate from the machine. How does that sound?”

The children whoop and cheer in excitement, and immediately form a line at the end of the pool.

“Hey, Hollander!” Ilya calls out to him. Shane nods behind his sunglasses, immensely glad that he remembered to pack them. He’s almost certain he’d reveal too much without them.

“Make sure none of these cheaters *cheat*, okay?”

Shane laughs. “Okay.”

“You guys know who that is?” Ilya asks the kids as he sinks back into the water.

“Yeah, Shane Hollander!”

“Really?” Ilya asks, shocked. “You know this guy? I only met him last week, I thought he snuck past security.”

“He’s the best player in the whole league!”

“Okay, you’re out of the race, out of the pool!” Ilya says in mock offence. He boos loudly and gently splashes water towards the little girl, and her laughter rings out above all the others’ as Ilya stands up and looks around.

“Who is your dad? I will find him and get him for you!”

He keeps looking around as the kids continue to laugh, and then he sinks back down. “It’s okay, I forgive you. You can stay.”

Shane can’t help but join in their laughter, chest fluttering at the sight. It makes him wonder if Ilya wants kids, or has ever thought of having them. Just from today he can tell that he’s so good, to the point that Shane’s sure he’d be an amazing dad. It almost seems like he’s made for it.

His mind strays away from the race, imagining the pattering of tiny feet, blonde curls peeking around a corner and freckled round cheeks. He thinks of warm afternoons with a mop of black hair nestled against his chest, hazel eyes peering up at him, and an aching familiar crooked smile.

He inhales sharply, his face feeling like it’s on fire, and he sincerely hopes that no one has noticed. This was *hardly* the time to be thinking about kids. Drawing his attention back to the race, Ilya takes an early lead ahead of all the children before they start to ‘pull ahead.’ All of a sudden, Shane can hear him shouting.

“There’s a shark in the water!” he yells with false worry, floundering his arms and legs and pretending to drown. He’s slowly creeping up to them, his cries for help smothered by water, and as the kids reach the end of the pool before him, their laughter falls like windchimes in the air.

Shane has to bite back the massive grin on his face.

“Okay,” Ilya says as he makes his way to the edge of the pool. “You guys won fair and square.”

As he hoists himself up against the pool wall, saliva gathers on Shane’s tongue in anticipation. Everything happens in slow motion: Ilya’s large chest is the first thing to heave above the line of the pool, followed by the rippling lines of his abs. Water clings to the tufts of hair circling his nipples and trailing down towards his waist, gathering below his shorts in a place *oh so* familiar to Shane. Long limbs stretch as Ilya stands tall on solid ground, swim shorts clinging to thick hard thighs and his crotch. The dripping water glistens on his skin, outlining every smooth cord of muscle on his body.

*All hail sunglasses. All hail scent blockers*, he thinks as he tries to ignore the stickiness in between his legs, shifting uncomfortably. Shane almost doesn’t know where to focus his attention, with so much *Ilya* for him to soak in after so long, but luckily for him he doesn’t have to think about it long. Cool water splashes on his skin and startles him out of his ogling, and he belatedly realises that Ilya is shaking his wet hair all over him. How charming.

(Unfortunately for Shane, he truly *does* find it charming.)

He looms over Shane, shrouded in sunlight, and he couldn’t smother the hot thrill that shoots up his spine even if he wanted to.

“I forgot my wallet.”

Shane forgets that he’s supposed to say something, lost in the sparkle in Ilya’s eyes, long since misplaced for months.

“You’re dripping water on my shirt,” he says stupidly, breath taken away.

“I am sorry,” Ilya lies, not even trying to sound sincere. Shane sucks in his bottom lip.

“Hey, Carter Vaughn, my teammate!” Ilya calls as he turns, leaving Shane with one last smile. “I need ten bucks! Hollander is a cheapskate. ‘Best player’ in the league and cannot spare a few dollars, what’s this?”

Shane can’t resist the twitch in his lips.

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*Tampa Bay - 2 days later*

Player activity is busy after the All Star game ends Sunday evening. There are many different options for late night celebrations before they all return to their own teams—a local player from Tampa Bay has a group at what he claims is the best Mexican restaurant around, a group of guys are winding down at the resort bar, and Ilya is sure there are smaller parties in different hotel rooms. But he’s alone once more, sitting at the edge of his hotel bed, mind spinning from the game ever since the final bullhorn blared out.

Ilya doesn't think he's ever played that well before, that Cup win be damned. The performance of his life and it was at a fucking All Star game, all because he got to share a line with Shane Hollander. If his father even remembered that he played hockey, he'd never hear the end of it.

He moved out on the right wing just to make things work, joking around in practice and with the coaches like he was mildly insulted by the shift away from centre. But he'd consider playing there for the rest of his life if he could, if it meant every game of hockey would feel even half as good as this one had. His mind and body were fluid like never before, arms flexing and legs agile in a way he hadn't felt in months. He felt fucking *amazing*.

At one point, Ilya wove past Sanders, a young and promising rookie from San Jose, and lifted off towards the opposite goal. He glanced over at Shane beside him, grinning and matching his pace with ease, and kept himself onside as he sliced the puck across to his left, not even bothering to see if it was intercepted or not. He *knew* Shane caught it.

They were passing the puck back and forth between each other, their other line mate forgotten as they wove through the defensive line. In the last second before they reached the goal, Ilya passed the puck back to Shane for a sitter. He scored.

Even if it was just for an All Star game, his cheer erupted from his throat just as it would for a playoff last minute equaliser. He looked over to Shane and found his elevation matched—beaming smile, nose scrunched up and cheeks flushed—and Ilya was helpless against the wolf inside him and the instincts he'd been fighting for weeks. He skated over to him, pulled Shane into his arms and smacked a wet kiss onto the side of his helmet. The crowd around them roared.

“What the fuck?” Shane laughs, playfully shoving against him. He knew he'd be worried, but after goofing around with everyone this weekend and having some briefly viral moments on social media, Ilya knew he was safe. They'd consider it typical Rozanov behaviour, overly familiar with everyone, and he couldn't give up that chance. Who knew if he'd ever be able to hold Shane in his arms in public like that again?

“Nice goal,” Ilya said with a heavy breath.

“Nice assist,” Shane shot back, biting his lip shyly and skating off to their other teammates. Even in the cool air of the ice rink, Ilya could feel the heat prickling at the back of his neck.

That moment had felt defining, realigning. Something had shifted into place within him, alpha and human stitched right back up into a fully functioning unit, urges and impulses moving together as one. Shane was single, talking to him again, and, seemingly, still open to carrying out this thing between them. That hockey game had been just as intimate as anything they'd ever done in a bedroom together.

Most of all, though, Ilya feels *healed*. It's been a few hours since the game finished, and the only discomfort in his limbs is what he remembers to be regular post game soreness, not the agony that had become his day to day normal. He works through Ash's very detailed post-game stretching routine, and can't hold back the groans of pleasure as he feels his muscles stretch and unclench.

As he wraps up, he suddenly remembers something. Grabbing his phone and chewing at his necklace, he navigates to his favourite Russian-English translation and dictionary app. He types in the letters: c-o-m-p-a-t-i-b-l-e.

The Russian translation and definitions appear.

СОВМЕСТИМЫЙ. *Sovmestimyy*.

1. (consistency) *consistent or congruous with something. Example: Such policies are **not** compatible with democratic government.*
2. (technology) *capable of being used with another device or system without modification. Example: Most models of coffee makers are compatible with only certain brands of coffee pods.*
3. (relationships) *able to exist, live, or work successfully with someone else; being suitable or right for each other. Example: It was when we started living together that we found out we weren't compatible with each other.*

Shane's words echo in his ears, nearly deafening. *She's great, but we're just not compatible.*

Ilya snorts, his chest subconsciously puffing out. He thinks he and Shane are *quite* compatible.

Quickly gathering his shirt, hotel keys and wallet with his phone, Ilya scrambles to the door, an alpha on a mission.

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"Found you," he sings as he crouches down, plopping down next to Shane in the sand. The beach is surprisingly empty where they are as the Floridian sun begins to creep below the horizon. It washes everything in a beautiful rusty glow, Shane's eyes and freckles most of all. When he glances over to Ilya, pools of maple syrup glazing him over, his stomach flips unfairly.

"Oh, you were looking for me?"

"Of course not," Ilya lies immediately. Shane smiles, like he knows it's a lie too.

Ilya digs his hands into the sand behind him, inhaling the fresh ocean air. Softly lapping Atlantic waves are the only sound between them and he sighs in content, taking a rare moment to appreciate the warm outdoors for what it was, no longer hiding inside as he always did.

It felt nice, letting the sun hit him for once. To not baulk as its rays wrapped him in their warmth.

"I searched up that word, compatible," he says after a while.

Shane turns to him, tilting his head. "Oh?"

"Yes, I thought I knew what it meant, but I just wanted to be sure."

“Uh huh.”

“So you and Rose Landry...”

Shane huffs with a smile. “Yeah, uh, not compatible. At least, not in that way, anyway.”

Ilya nods slowly and keeps his head straight, uncharacteristically shy. He looks down at his hand behind him, one of Shane’s planted nearby. He chances a glance over his shoulder to confirm they’re alone before inching his fingers slowly towards Shane’s.

“When do you fly out?” Shane asks him.

“Early,” Ilya sighs, like it pains him.

“Same. Columbus.”

“Toronto,” Ilya provides. His hand slides further in the sand.

Shane’s head drops in recognition and a smile skirts across his lips. He swallows thickly, taking in a deep breath, and pushes his hands outwards until their thumbs meet. Shane rubs his thumbs up against Ilya’s and his eyes flutter shut in relief, warmth flooding his bloodstreams. The wolf inside sighs, sated for now but with hunger steadily growing.

*Oh, how I missed you.*

“What room are you in?” Shane asks in a low voice. Ilya’s eyes blink open and Shane stares back at him, lids hanging low. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think he could make out vanilla and clementines mixing with ocean salt in the air.

## Chapter End Notes

now kids, you may be wondering: did magicjohnson briefly switch to shane's point of view simply to show omega shane daydreaming about having kids with ilya in the future?

you would be very correct.

## Chapter 3: chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

translation for any russian terms potentially or potentially not used here are in the end notes. 😊

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

Shane enters the hotel room in complete silence, sitting down on the edge of the bed with stone hard seriousness etched across his face. He clasps his hands together, back ramrod straight, and Ilya feels his blood run cold. Whispers of his previous fears start to rustle in his mind, and he swallows a gulp.

“This looks serious.”

“It’s not—I mean—sort of, it—could you, just, sit down for a second?”

Fucking hell, it *is* bad. Ilya feeds off the flatness in his voice, years of experience in knowing Shane telling him that he’s masking his nervousness. Okay, cool. No problem. He may have gotten caught up in the sunshine of the weekend, but this is a much needed reminder of how fragile things are, how quickly they can dissipate. Ilya obliges, sitting down on the hotel room dresser with crossed legs, and gives Shane the floor to speak. He tries to ignore the tightening in his back.

“It’s not just me, right?”

“Not just you, what?”

“You feel it too, don’t you?”

He refuses to be the one to admit anything first, refuses to feel the wind on his face as he eventually plummets back into the dark pit he got himself in. He wants—no, *needs* Shane to say his piece first. “Feel what?”

“Last time we were together, it was... different.”

“What was different? That you ran away?” It’s difficult to keep looking at him as the words tumble past his lips, a touch too revealing, and he turns his head to the lamp on the bedside table.

Shane huffs. “Look, I—I’m sorry I freaked out, okay?”

“Freaked out over nothing,” he plays it down, even though they both know it’s a lie. The shade of beige on the wall behind the lamp does wonders for the room.

“It wasn’t nothing, don’t act like that man, this is hard enough without you being an asshole.”

Ilya rolls his head over to Shane, his alpha making sure he looks the picture of boredom. Inside, he’s petrified. “What do you want, Hollander?”

Shane leans back, closing his eyes and releasing a sigh like it weighs a tonne. Like he’s about to release a bomb in the room. Ilya’s defenses shoot up, wolfishly rearing for a fight. He *knows* he shouldn’t be freezing up like this, but in the soft warm lighting of this hotel room, vulnerability washes over him in gentle waves that he refuses to let Shane see. He doesn’t say anything for a moment, but the discomfort is thick in the air.

Ilya decides to push him. “We get together, we fuck, it’s simple.”

“Simple?” Shane asks in disbelief.

“It’s simple for me.”

“Bullshit!” Shane calls his bluff. Silence falls between them for a moment, Ilya refusing to start the conversation again.

Shane takes the hint. “I think I’m gay.”

The words startle him, and he laughs without thinking. There he goes again, getting him worried and worked up over nothing.

“Hmm. Oh yeah? What—what makes you think that?”

“*Fuck* you,” Shane says with surprising vehemence. “You’re not gay.”

“No, not completely—”

“Yeah, well, I think I am. *Completely.*” The weight of the words lay heavy in between them, not lost to Ilya, but he still can’t make sense of where this conversation is going.

“Okay, so you’re gay. So what?”

“Well, it’s kind of a big deal! To me, at least!” Shane admits, disbelieving laughter breaking through his monotony. “*So sorry* if I’m being boring again.”

Ilya groans, not happy at all with the way things are heading. He moves to sit on the bed, not missing the way Shane looks at him in worry, eyes round and shiny. He follows his alpha’s lead, aiming to find the direct source of the problem, getting to a solution, and hopefully taking the hesitancy and pain away from the look in Shane’s eye.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Who else am I gonna tell?” he says quietly, and it pulls Ilya’s head out of his ass for a moment. He’s gotten so used to being alone over the years that the desire to talk through things with others has eventually faded away. He nods in understanding.

“It’s not just... being gay,” Shane continues awkwardly. “It’s... you. It’s this. Being gay is one thing, but fucking your arch-rival is another thing.”

Ilya shrugs, feeling ever the hypocrite for the slight hurt he feels when Shane puts it so simply. “That’s why it is a secret.”

“I *know* that, but last time... And for the record, again, I *am* sorry about last time, okay? I’m sorry I freaked out.” The honesty in his voice soothes the tender and bruised soreness inside Ilya somewhat, but his eyes remain fixed on the lamp next to the bed. The lampshade is a little dented from this side of the room.

“But before that... It was nice.”

Relief strikes deep in his back, like a mist over his skin, but he won’t allow himself to show it. Not yet. Not when the rug can still be pulled out from underneath him.

“It was.”

“And it felt like we were something.”

When Ilya speaks, each word is like a sear on his tongue. He wishes, as ever, that they didn’t ring true. “We can’t be something, Hollander.”

A beat passes before Shane responds, his voice soft. “Would you want to be, if we could?”

“We can’t.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“What does it fucking matter?” he asks defensively, metaphorical hackles raising and soot burning in his nostrils. Why is he deciding to torture him with this? What good was there in imagining things that could never shine in the light of day?

Shane huffs. “I don’t think I can keep pretending I don’t like you anymore.”

“You don’t like me,” Ilya insists, his faults and weaknesses rearing their ugly heads much too easily. *Lazy. Stupid. A constant disappointment.*

“Yeah, I do,” Shane starts, his voice trembling. “I think I like you maybe a little too much.”

Tight fingers squeeze violently at his heart in his chest, and he clenches his eyes shut. “*Don’t. Don’t fucking do this Hollander, I’m not...*”

*Brave enough. Strong enough. Well enough.*

“I wouldn’t be able to go home again,” he says firmly, finding it easier to talk about this, for once, than himself. “Ever. Do you get that?”

Shane nods, his expression earnest, like he truly understands. Ilya doesn’t think he could even grasp half of it. “Because of your family?”

Fucking hell. His nice, soft, boring Canadian upbringing was usually charming, but now it grinds his teeth.

“Because *Russia!*” he tells him, trying to convey the seriousness without spelling it out. “I would not be able to get back to *Russia*.”

“What would happen to you?”

“I don’t want to find out.”

“But, would your parents...”

He sighs. They’ve been at this for so long, and Shane talks almost openly to a fault about his family that Ilya might as well indulge him a little bit, even if he feels like a pressure valve ready to burst with steam.

“My father is police. My brother is police.”

“And your mother?”

The lump he swallows in his throat is thick. He can almost smell it in the air, sweet milk mixing with caramel, honey and vanilla. Her face is harder to remember on some days, even with all the pictures he has, and the sound of her laughter only comforts him in his dreams.

“Dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

Ilya sniffs and shakes his head, determined to keep the steam in and move things along. The conversation was heavy enough as it was, and it didn’t need to get worse. “I was young. My father is very old fashioned. And sick.”

“Sick like crazy?”

He almost laughs. “That too, a little, but no. Sick more like...”

“Oh, like cancer?”

“Dementia.” The word falls out of his mouth with the weight of an anvil. He trails his eyes up from his feet to his knees and across the room, even though he can feel the burn of Shane’s eyes on the side of his head. He sniffs again, the smell in the room now strong as the sniffles clear his nostrils, and his hands fist in his pants as the smouldering scent of charcoal and rubber swirls in the air. His back aches.

“I’m so sorry, Ilya,” Shane says gently. “That’s awful.”

The simple acknowledgement cracks a hairline fracture into his resolve, and Ilya turns completely away from Shane, not wanting to be caught. His lips are twitching in an effort not to wobble, he’s unable to stop sniffing, and a tear trails hot down his cheek. His father isn’t

worth even half the trouble he causes, and here is Ilya despite that, broken and mourning regardless. It really isn't fair.

Shane calls out to him softly, and the soft tenderness is too much for Ilya. The dam breaks and the valve bursts, water and steam rushing everywhere.

"Sorry," he says wetly, his voice cracking.

"Hey," Shane whispers, voice delicate as he lifts himself onto Ilya's lap. He holds his face gently, like Ilya is something to handle with care, and more tears flow freely.

His thumbs dance gently across his cheek, and it helps to quell the anguish hot in the room around them. Shane tilts Ilya's head up towards him, forcing him to look as he reaches to the back of his neck.

"Shane," Ilya breathes out, eyes unblinking as he tracks his movement.

Shane peels the small patch off the back of his neck and kneads his fingers into the small, fleshy scent glands he so cautiously protects. His scent slowly pours out into the room, wafting to start and crashing over him rapidly soon enough.

The floral sweetness of magnolia reaches him first, dousing him in a soothing mist that eases the tension in his back; the fresh citrus of clementines calms his erratically beating heart, slowing his pulse; and the creamy vanilla wraps around him, almost like a warm embrace, comforting like nothing else on earth and making him feel safe. Wanted. Protected.

It's been *years* since he felt that way.

"Shane," he whispers again with wide eyes, breathing in deeply and slowly to soak it all in. This was intimacy he'd never shared with *anyone* before, and it strikes him deeply to know how much it means for Shane; to reveal himself like this in a hotel with almost nothing other than alphas, their *colleagues* to boot, when he puts so much effort into not showing himself otherwise. He could feel the care and affection in the air, impossible to ignore or misinterpret after years of guessing.

It almost—it almost felt familiar, like something Ilya's been too scared to put a word to.

Shane rubs his thumb across his cheek once more before leaning down, pressing their lips together in a warm kiss. It was slow and sweet, lips sliding against each other in a way he's been longing for since December, and it ends far too soon. Shane leans back, only for a second, before Ilya leans forward and captures his lips with his again, mouth hot and searing as he sweeps his tongue against Shane's.

He tries to pour everything into it and hopes he understands—how thankful he is for what Shane's done for him, how much it means that he's here with him right now, and the strength of his feelings that he doesn't have the courage to say out loud. As Shane matches his intensity, catching Ilya's bottom lip in a soft bite, he considers the message received. He hopes that it's reciprocated.

When they finally part, Ilya presses his forehead against Shane's chest, who still cradles his head gently, and when Shane presses a gentle kiss to his temple, he crumples into the side of his neck. He swipes at the scent glands right at the bridge of his nose, submerging himself in the comfort and warmth that Shane has so willingly given him. His tears stain the omega's shirt.

"It's okay," Shane hushes him, tightening his grip around Ilya and clutching him firmly against his chest. Ilya nuzzles even further against him, a sob wracking through his body. "You're alright, you're okay."

For a long time they sit there, Shane rocking them back and forth, until Ilya's tears run dry and his sniffles cease. Ilya breathes in deeply once more, the pure sweetness of just *Shane* quieting his mind in a much, *much* needed way. Shane's taken to carding his fingers lightly through Ilya's hair, nails lightly scratching against his scalp, and it soothes him down to his very bones.

It becomes easy, then, wrapped up in him, to truly believe everything he'd said. To let biology take over, to let this omega—*his* omega, even if they weren't mated, because there would probably never be another—take care of him, and make him feel right.

When everything settles and they have to go their separate ways, reality would take hold again, and Ilya would have to face the world. But here, in the safety of his room with the shroud that Shane created for him, he allows himself to believe all is fine.

When Ilya stills and drops his hands to Shane's waist, the omega leans back slightly to look at him. "Feeling better?" he asks softly, a thumb resting on his cheek bone.

"Much better, because of you. Thank you, Shane," he says reverently, really wanting to show how much it means to him. Shane smiles sweetly at him, his nose scrunching up, and Ilya could *feel* the blood warm in his veins. He couldn't believe he had Shane here with him, that he got so lucky that he chose him.

He dives back in to rub his nose against his scent gland greedily, humming in pleasure. He can smell himself in the room, too, rich whisky and cinnamon, and as their scents mix together Ilya feels drowsy, almost drunk off it. Shane laughs and shifts in his lap, rubbing his back.

"I've been worried about you, you know," he mumbles into his hairline.

Ilya sits up and looks at him, resisting the urge to sink into the browns of his eyes. "Why?"

"I could just tell something was off," Shane says, hand reaching up to the delicate skin under Ilya's eyes. "You looked terrible in all your press interviews. Dark circles under your eyes like you weren't sleeping," a thumb raises up to his eyebrow, "and that crease in your eyebrow when you're hiding something that hurts. Not to mention you've been playing like shit."

Ilya leans down into Shane's chest, arms circling tightly around his waist.

“Since when?”

Shane hums. “Since the end of last year, I think.”

Ilya burrows further into Shane’s chest, if that’s even possible. How was it that the teammates he spent nearly every day with, for *years*, had only begun to notice something was wrong with him last week, but Shane had caught on instantly, even with their distance?

It’s a little embarrassing, Ilya thinks, to admit it. But surely after crying over his dead mother and dying father like a baby, this confession couldn’t be worse. He’s given so much to Shane already; what difference does this make?

“You will not believe me,” he starts.

Shane pulls his head back gently, tilting it upwards to meet his gaze. “Please?” he pouts, widening his eyes in a way that he *knows* Ilya can’t say no to, and he accepts defeat.

“You are right, it started last December, at the end of a road trip. We were in Detroit, and after we finished our workout before the game, my teammate showed me an article. It said, ‘*Are Shane Hollander and Rose Landry dating?*’”

Shane’s eyebrows raise in shock.

The words are difficult to string together in English, and for once he’s happy for the language barrier that forces him to keep things brief, neat and simple. “And then, ever since, I start to feel like shit. Cramping. Soreness. Like I am riding a zamboni but under it, instead of on top. I tried with my, uh, what is the word—team trainer...”

“Physiotherapist?” Shane provides, voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes, that. She tried to help me but nothing was working, only for a little bit.” He pauses there, deciding not to go into extreme detail about how bad things were truly getting, and all the drama with his brother. He’d spent enough time talking about his family tonight.

The heaviness in Shane’s eyes is almost too much for him to bear, but Ilya has grown tired of looking away from Shane, even as the sweetness in the air runs sour.

“Until Montreal. When I saw you after the game. And it was okay, a little bit, when I saw you. And I think your scent blocker was peeling, because I could smell you a little bit. It made everything go away.”

“Ilya,” Shane gasps softly, body unmoving in his lap. “You—that all happened because of *me?*” His voice is laden with grief and panic, acrid blackcurrant pungent now, and Ilya hushes him immediately, his alpha berating himself for making the omega worry.

“Shhh,” he whispers, pushing his hair back off his forehead and rubbing at his freckles. “It is okay. I am fine now. Bears will be fine and we will embarrass you in Boston in March.”

“It’s *not* fine, Ilya,” he insists, worry thick in his tone. His eyes shift frantically between Ilya, the wall behind him, the bedside table and the pillows on his bed, and Ilya can’t help the

slowly creeping smile on his lips.

Shane places his hands on Ilya's shoulders. "I am *so* sorry, I shouldn't have panicked, it was so stupid. Fuck, I feel so bad, you must have felt terrible—"

"Do not worry, Shane," he pleaded, knowing that was impossible; all Shane *ever* did was worry.

"How can I not? I watched you lose a fucking face off to *Peter Bergvall*, and you missed a wide open slap shot on a power play! Against *Buffalo*! You could stick an eighty year old in their goal and it'd be better than that knothed they call a goalie, they're so shit—"

Ilya cuts off his rambling with a kiss, his heart warm and alpha deeply pleased to see Shane fretting over him. He bites down into the plush of his bottom lip before soothing it with a swipe of his tongue, sucking on it gently, and pulling away.

"It is okay, Hollander, seriously," he asserts in a voice that leaves no room for negotiation. Shane swallows with a nod, relenting instantly.

Shane's lips snap shut. "Okay."

Ilya's eyebrow quirks up, expecting to get more of a fight. He gives Shane a long stare, the soft lighting in the room twinkling in his eyes, before trailing his gaze downward to his mouth. The bottom lip puffs out from the kissing and biting, and the curve of his cupid's bow glistens with the sheen of their mixed spit.

A beat passes, tension building in the room. And then, Ilya smells it. The syrupy scent of maple, balmy in his nostrils, starting a warm simmer low in his belly. It mingles with vanilla into saccharine sweetness, the telltale sign of Shane's arousal, and Ilya's lips curl into a wicked grin.

"But, if you want," he begins to offer, tone suggestive and hands dropping to the plush curve of Shane's ass. He brings his lips within a hair's breadth from Shane's throat. "You can always make it up to me."

Shane leans back into the palms of Ilya's hands, letting out breathy sighs as Ilya kisses him.

"Wait," he says, pulling back. Thick dark lashes hang low over his eyes to caress his freckles, and Ilya's hips cant upwards. He doesn't think Shane's ever looked so beautiful.

"Your symptoms sound kinda familiar, you know," Shane says with a lilt in his voice, his lip curling to dimple his cheek.

"Really?" his voice grumbles low in his chest, arousal now unrestrained. They may have an early flight tomorrow morning, but Ilya wants to savour every moment he has here with Shane. The quiet and tender ones, the sweaty and heart-racing ones, and everything in between.

In their little sanctuary, time feels slow. On their side. Ilya follows his lead.

“You were hurt after I left that day in Boston, and then you found out I got a girlfriend almost a week later,” he starts, rolling his hips downwards. Ilya’s eyes flutter shut as Shane continuously rubs against him, and he forces his eyes open to keep watch.

“And—*ah*—I’m not one to brag, but I’m a pretty famous hockey player. I—*ungh*—know how all the news and pictures got everywhere. You must have seen it.”

Ilya has enough of his wits together to withhold that he’d been stalking Shane and Rose for each of the five weeks they were dating, his Instagram algorithm now providing him with unprompted Rose Landry updates, but his silence is enough of an answer for Shane. He grins wickedly.

“The soreness, the tiredness, the way it got into your game and your physio couldn’t help you,” he continues, and Ilya raises his hips upwards to meet Shane on a roll. A low moan erupts from Ilya’s throat, and Shane’s hips stutter.

“It—*ha*—almost sounds like omega rejection sickness. Except, you know, you’re an alpha. Unless there’s something you want to tell me...”

“You have taken my knot too many times to know that is not true,” Ilya growls, flipping them over onto the bed. Shane huffs a laugh and his legs part readily, syrupy arousal so thick it coats on Ilya’s tongue. He nuzzles into Shane’s neck once more and inhales deeply, careful not to touch their crotches together.

Yet.

“This is not what I had in mind for you to make me feel better, Hollander,” he grunts with a tut, open-mouthed kisses moving down his neck. He reaches the neckline of Shane’s shirt, pops it open and tugs it off, ignoring the soft cries of protest as a button flies across the room.

“That was expensive,” Shane mumbles.

“I will buy you ten more,” Ilya says easily around one of Shane’s nipples, teasing it with his tongue before taking it fully into his mouth and sucking hard. Shane whimpers, and Ilya’s dick twitches to attention in his pants.

“You do not even need me, *you* could buy yourself ten more shirts, Mr. Pretty Famous Hockey Player,” he reminds him, releasing the nipple with a pop and glancing up at Shane. In the dim light of the room his cheeks are still flushed visibly pink, his lips hang parted, and his hair hangs loose over his forehead in the *boringly Canadian way* that Ilya loves.

He freezes for a moment, the realisation uncomfortably clear to him that he almost lost this, how easily it nearly slipped away. How easily it *still* could slip away from him. Smoke tinges the air slightly, unbeknownst to him in his brooding, but Shane notices and reaches a hand up to Ilya. He places it gently on his chin, calling out gently to him, and guides him down to his lips.

The kiss is lazy and familiar, a language without words that they’ve become fluent in over the years.

*I'm not going anywhere.*

*When will I have you for as long as I want?*

*You have me now. And whenever you want.*

Ilya feels Shane smile against his lips as they separate, and he taps a finger against Ilya's chest.

"You missed me *so much* that it made you sick."

Shane can't even pretend to tease or taunt him, giddiness laid bare in his words and in the air, and it's hard not to match his smile with one of his own.

"You might actually be the first alpha ever to get rejection sickness, I've never even heard of that. Do you like me that much, Ilya Rozanov?"

*Oh Shane*, he thought, *if only you knew*. If only Shane understood how deeply besotted Ilya was with him, how he *longed* to come home to him after every one of his games, how he craved to hold him in his arms every morning when it seemed the rest of the world hadn't woken up yet.

'Missing' was only scratching the surface. But if they were going to go digging, they'd be there for quite a while.

"You are still not making it up to me, Shane," Ilya reminds him, his hand inching down towards Shane's waist.

"So tell me what you want," he snaps, the bite in his voice sounding more like a plea to Ilya.

Ilya hums, yanking Shane's shorts down and eyeing the tent in his crotch. There's a very, *very* large damp spot in the middle, and the smell of citrus puffs up to greet him. He darts an eye up towards Shane as he slowly tugs his briefs off, and catches him biting his lip.

Shane's cock springs free, red and angry and dribbling over itself. Shane sucks in a sharp inhale as the cool air hits him, and Ilya only gives the base of his cock a gentle sweep with his thumb before pulling the briefs off completely.

With Shane fully naked now, he can see the slick pooling between his legs and slowly dripping onto his sheets. *It is a pity I cannot take the sheets with me*, he thinks sadly. Shane groans at the tease but keeps his hands fisted in the sheets, waiting for instructions with an angry pout set in his lips. Part of Ilya swoons.

"I think I would like to see you come on my fingers, begging for my knot."

Shane's stomach clenches and his dick wobbles against his stomach.

"And I think you will like it too. The lube is in the side drawer."

Shane scrambles and leans over on his side to reach the table, and Ilya can't resist reaching out and palming the globe of his ass with a squeeze. Shane's skin is pliant and squishy beneath his fingers, and he can feel his dick leaking uncomfortably in his pants.

Ilya bends down to plant soft kisses on Shane's stomach, the room hot around them. He can hear Shane holding back whimpers above him, ever cognisant of the company around them through the heat of his pleasure. Ilya won't take it *too* far, of course, but he won't deny that the hairs on the back of his neck are standing up as he considers testing Shane's limits.

Shane brushes the bottle of lube at Ilya's hands gripped tightly at his waist, but he looks up and shakes his head before mouthing away at his thighs.

"Not yet, Shane. I would like to take my time."

The omega whines above him, music to his ears, but remains still and ever obedient. Ilya has to grind down on the mattress to relieve some of the pressure building in his pants. He takes his time worshipping Shane's skin, giving each freckle on his thigh their deserved attention. Shane's heavy breathing above him does nothing but spur him on in his endeavours.

Eventually, when the red flush of anticipation has spread onto Shane's thighs, he decides to be nice. Turning his attention to Shane's neglected hole, Ilya licks his lips at the damp pool now below him.

"Oh," he coos maliciously, kissing the crease where his thigh dips into his ass. "Did you miss me? Do you like me that much, Shane Hollander?"

"Oh, fuck you," Shane says through gritted teeth, slightly lifting himself off the bed. "Get on with it."

"You are so sassy now," Ilya notes, pressing a soft kiss to the fluttering knot between his thighs, knowing very well that Shane has *always* been sassy behind closed doors. He cries out softly in relief, hips bucking up into Ilya's lips, and it takes a considerable amount of strength on Ilya's part to lean back and reach for the lube bottle.

"Ilya, *please*," Shane begs, leaning back against the pillows and reaching a hand up to his chest. When Shane rocks his body up into his squeezing palm his dick bobs against his stomach, and he cries out a soft moan. Blood rushes in Ilya's ears, and he can practically feel his pupils dilate. "Need you."

"Shit, fuck, okay, okay," Ilya stammers, fumbling with the cap and squeezing the bottle over his fingers. Judging by the slick in Shane's crotch he doubts he really needs it, but he's determined to make this feel as good as possible for Shane. *His omega*.

Shane sighs in pleasure as the first finger slides in easily, eyes flickering shut. Ilya works him up into a rhythm easily, and soon enough Shane is rocking up to meet his fingers with light moans cascading around them.

"Did you miss this?" Ilya asks boldly, curling a finger and prodding against his walls. After so many years he knows exactly where to find Shane's breaking point, and Shane knows that

too, but it's much more fun breaking him down to a begging, weeping mess.

"Fuck you," Shane gasps, followed by a desperate whine that makes the threat feel anything but that.

"I will admit, I was very jealous. Obviously," Ilya provides, trying to make things even. He slides another finger in and twists it, aiming to work Shane loose and is rewarded with a gush of slick. Ilya has to restrain himself from bending over and licking.

"I did not like seeing you with someone else. At all."

"But you—*hah*—were at that club downtown with a girl," Shane says, reaching a hand down towards his dick. Ilya tuts and laces their fingers together, leaning on his elbow. Shane whines in frustration, and Ilya attempts to soothe him by gently kissing his knee.

"Only fingers, I told you."

"*More*," Shane pleads, lashes wet.

Ilya's dick stirs and his alpha is pulled into action, pumping his fingers faster despite his initial desire for a slow release. Shane shows his thanks by writhing off the bed with a delicious low groan.

"She was only distraction," Ilya mumbles against his leg, lost in the way Shane's eyebrows knit together and his nose scrunches up. He's starting to get close.

"What?"

"I was using her to forget about you. And she was weird, only wanted her boyfriend to watch us kissing," he says quickly, pulling his fingers all the way out and diving back in with three. Shane moans his name loudly in the room and Ilya silences him with a kiss.

"Shhh," he whispers against his lips, revelling in the hot puffs of breath against his skin floating from Shane's lips. "Whole floor does not need to know how hard you will come for me, yes? Sweet, pretty omega. Just me. Or else I will get jealous again."

Shane laughs as he rocks his body against Ilya, moaning softly against his mouth as he stretches his fingers and pushes against his prostate.

"Fuck," he gasps, gripping onto Ilya's shoulders. "Fuck, Ilya, I—I'm so close."

"You can do it, Shane," he murmurs, pulling away only just enough to watch him unfurl. His eyes are glassy with bliss, his skin glows with a rosy flush, and his lips are so pink that Ilya has to hold himself back from chewing hard against them. He shoves his free hand forcefully down his pants to grip the base of his neglected and aching cock.

He changes his mind. *This* is Shane at his most beautiful.

"I need more," he babbles, lip quivering and eyes meeting his. "Touch me, *please*."

It's not so easy this time, not giving into Shane when he looks at him like this, but Ilya shoves his alpha into a steel cage and forces his head to shake.

"No, Shane," he denies him, and the omega cries out in frustration below him. Ilya isn't fooled, though; the gush around his fingers now tells him everything he needs to know. "You are doing a favour for *me*, remember? After you run away and make me shit at hockey," he says with an exaggerated pout.

Shane's lip quivers. "I really *am* sorry, Ilya."

"I know, *lyubimyj*, I know," he says with a kiss at Shane's temple. "Show me how sorry you are. I know you can do it."

The sounds in the room are criminally lewd; the squelching of Ilya's fingers pumping in and out of Shane, the creaking in the bed below them, and Shane's wanton moans. Ilya's dizzy and intoxicated with it.

He pumps his fingers one, two, three more times until Shane's face pulls tight, eyes squeezing shut and stomach seizing as his orgasm takes hold.

"*Ah fuck*," he whimpers, warm slick pouring out onto Ilya's fingers. Shane continues to rock his hips up against them, squirming and mewling over the sheets, and Ilya knows enough is enough when his body sags against the mattress.

Their heavy panting is the only sound in the room to keep them company now. Ilya takes the moment to lick himself clean, groaning around his fingers at the taste of Shane on his tongue like a man dying of thirst. When he's finished he turns his attention back to Shane, lying still with a heaving chest, looking sated and spent. His eyes crack open slowly, lazily, and he smiles softly at Ilya, like he's never been happier to lay in his bed. Ilya lets himself believe that it's true.

"*C'meeere*," he mumbles, a little sleepily, reaching up for Ilya. He bows down to join their lips together, languid, sloppy and warm. Ilya thinks it's the best kiss he's ever had.

Shane pulls back and leans into the bed, hands rubbing against Ilya's chest.

"I think you should take this off."

"Oh, do you?" Ilya asks, hands already reaching for the hem of his tank and lifting it over his shoulders.

"Mhm," Shane nods, sucking in a corner of his lip as he ogles Ilya's chest. His arms trace over his moles and chest hair, eventually following the downward trail of hair until it disappears into his waistband. He slaps at it gently.

"These too, please."

"How polite, Mr. Canadian," Ilya teases, sitting at the edge of the bed to remove his pants and underwear.

Completely nude he turns onto his side to face Shane, whose eyes drop immediately to the hard line of his dick leaning on his stomach. His tongue peeks out to swipe at his bottom lip, and Ilya feels like a cut of steak.

“Are you hungry?” he jokes, palming the back of Shane’s head. He scoffs and hums, tilting his head in thought.

Shane fixes Ilya with a long look that goes straight to the head of his dick before lowering himself to his lap, never once breaking eye contact. He takes the head of his cock into his mouth, hollowing his cheeks and curling his tongue around the foreskin. Ilya leans back with a heavy sigh.

“*Fuck.*”

Shane hums again around him, sending precome down his throat, and he pulls back momentarily. “I did miss you, Ilya.”

Shane takes him back into his mouth, gently tugging at the foreskin to swirl his tongue around the tip. Ilya’s moans ring loudly in the room, one hand gently cradling the back of Shane’s head and the other fisting his sheets. Against the delicious heat of Shane’s mouth Ilya is weak, reduced to a melting puddle against the mattress. He’s doing everything he likes to a searing degree, making good on his promise to apologise—his tongue traces the vein on the underside of Ilya’s dick, he swallows deeply when the tip reaches the back of his throat, and he nuzzles deeply into the brush of hair at the base of his cock, inhaling deeply.

It turns Ilya into a mess, eyes shut and muttering an incoherent jumble of Russian compliments and English words of encouragement.

“*Fuck* Shane, that tongue of yours,” he groans, breathing out through his mouth and fucking earnestly into Shane’s.

When he feels the bed rock beneath him he opens his eyes slowly, heart racing at the sight before him. Shane lies between his knees, a knee propped up to keep him steady as he works his mouth at Ilya’s cock, all while he fists the sheets beneath him in a tight grip to thrust against the bed.

Ilya growls, his alpha breaking free from its restraints and making his displeasure *very* well known for leaving their omega so dissatisfied.

“Shane,” he calls out to him, lifting him off his cock. His lips pop away with a thick line of spit glistening in the air, and Shane’s brows furrow in confusion.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, *lyubimyj*, just—come here.”

Ilya sits up, reaching over to the nightstand to grab a condom and trying to goad Shane into his lap. As he rolls the condom onto him Shane heeds his call and crawls between his legs,

but as Ilya makes to flip them over, Shane pushes his shoulders back firmly against the backboard.

“No,” he says firmly, getting the bottle of lube.

“No?” Ilya repeats, mouth watering as he watches Shane squirt the lube all over his dick.

“No,” Shane affirms, rising to position himself above Ilya and holding his gaze. “I owe you still, don’t I?”

“Shane,” he sighs, stilling him with a touch at the hip. He leans up to kiss him softly, drawing circles into his skin.

“You are still on your suppressants, yes?” he mutters against his lips.

“And birth control, yes, yes,” Shane responds quickly, grabbing Ilya’s dick and lining it up with his hole. Ilya starts to think this sense of urgency has little to do with Shane feeling remorseful.

They stare at each other for a moment, and suddenly Ilya cannot hold back the swell of emotion rising in his chest from pouring out of his eyes; he’s sure he looks obvious, like a lovesick fool. But Shane only smiles shyly at him before sinking down.

They moan in unison as their hips meet, and it isn’t long until Ilya is rocking his hips upward to meet Shane on his downward roll.

“Shit,” he grunts, licking his palm and reaching down to finally relieve Shane with a stroke to his cock. He lurches forward and presses their foreheads together, steadying himself before rocking once more. “You always take me so well, Shane. Like you were made for it.”

Shane sighs hot in his ear and his stomach tightens.

“Missed this,” Shane purrs, spurting precome over Ilya’s fingers. “Your dick. Your knot deep inside me.”

“Tell me how badly you want it,” Ilya pleads shamelessly. “Tell me how much you want this knot.”

“*Alpha*,” Shane moans, crushing his lips against Ilya’s and pulling a whine from his chest with the merciless pace he sets. Their lips press together in more of an open-mouthed pant rather than actual kissing, the tips of their tongues brushing together, but Ilya can’t bring himself to care with sparks licking up his spine.

The glide of Shane’s hole around him is fluid thanks to all the lube and slick, and each brush against Shane’s walls and caress of his ridges sets a hot coil forming in Ilya’s stomach and warm pleasure melting in his veins. He breathes heavily through his nose, careful to keep his knot and orgasm at bay.

Ilya is a gentleman, so Shane always comes first.

“I’m close again,” Shane whimpers, eyes wet and forehead warm against his.

Their hips collide in a sloppy rhythm now, each of them desperately chasing friction and release, and Ilya decides to take matters into his own hands. On his next upward roll towards Shane he flips them over, successfully catching him off guard. Shane pouts from below him but still hugs his knees to his chest, raising his hips in time for Ilya to slide a pillow beneath him. His lips twist in pleasure when Ilya slides back in and starts snapping their hips together in a relentless fervour, and incoherent sobs trickle slowly from his lips. The only things he can make out are ‘knot,’ ‘please,’ and ‘need.’

“Look at you,” Ilya murmurs in awe, “my sweet omega, begging for my knot. Will you do one more favour for me, Shane?”

“Huh?” he says in a daze, coming back to himself and eyes slowly drifting over to Ilya.

“Come for me, *lyubimyj*,” he requests, tightening his grip on Shane’s cock below him. His back arches off the bed with a high-pitched whine before he bites down on his lip, as if he remembers himself. Goosebumps pebble across his arms, and Ilya can feel his knot start to swell.

“Come for me,” he repeats, taking one last thrust to push himself deep into Shane, making sure he feels every inch of him. “I want to hear you.”

He grinds his hips down onto Shane in a few shallow circles until Ilya feels it—Shane’s body tensing below him, the hot spurt against his stomach, and the rumble purring low in his chest.

“*Fuck, Ilya*,” he sobs, his orgasm shivering through him from head to toe. Ilya keeps his pace, feeling the snag of his knot starting to catch against the rim of Shane’s hole as it swells further, and the soft whimpers below him do nothing but spur him on.

“Don’t stop,” Shane encourages, legs wrapping around Ilya’s waist. “Want your knot to fill me up, stretch me nice.”

“When do you not?” Ilya laughs, pumping his hips until the hot coil behind his navel unravels and his knot locks into place.

The pleasure unfurls in his gut, white hot and searing through all the cells in his body to make him anew. He comes with a shout, leaning his head against Shane’s shoulder and panting against his scent gland as he shoots load after load into the condom. A feral, primal part of him mourns the contraceptive, the possessive beast wanting to mark and stain every inch of Shane. There would be time for that another day, he’s sure of it.

When the haze clears, Shane is twirling fingers in his hair again and drawing patterns on his back. He tries to shift his leg into a comfortable position and his knot shifts inside Shane, who hisses in discomfort.

Ilya presses a gentle kiss to Shane’s neck. “I am sorry, I should have picked a better position. We will be here for a long time now.”

“Part of me thinks you’re not really sorry about that,” Shane says with a laugh.

Ilya sighs happily into Shane’s neck. “No, not really.”

He carefully lifts himself up somewhat, grabbing his shirt to wipe at Shane’s tip and stomach before lying back down on his shoulder and breathing deeply. Their mingled scents together feels twice as potent to him as any cigarette has ever been. His heart rate slows, his mind clears, and his limbs are loose beneath him; he’s never felt more relaxed in his life.

Their time joined together is spent in comfortable silence, Ilya greedily wanting to commit everything to memory: the curve of Shane below him, the hot flush of his skin pressed against his, and the swirling patterns he draws into his back that feel suspiciously like the number 81.

Eventually the knot swells down to a point where they can move, but Ilya remains slumped over Shane.

“Hey,” Shane calls out gently to him, tapping his thumb against his temple. Ilya lifts his head with a grunt, gently sliding himself out of Shane and lying down next to him. Ilya keeps them close together, carefully minding whatever wet spots on the sheets there are so Shane doesn’t roll on them, and reaches for the dip in his hip.

“Where’d you go?” Shane asks softly, thumb reaching out for his chin.

Ilya studies him. His hair clings to his forehead and sticks up every which way from grinding into the pillow, there’s a sheen of sweat glistening on his cheeks, and sleepiness hangs heavily in his voice. For the second time tonight, Ilya changes his mind; *this* is Shane at his most beautiful.

(He’s sure he’ll change his mind again in 20 minutes).

“Nowhere,” he replies, reaching forward for a chaste kiss. “Just thinking about if you have said sorry enough yet. I do not think so.”

“Oh fuck off, you asshole, my dick is gonna fall off,” Shane laughs with a shove to his shoulder and turning on his side. Ilya joins him in his laughter and pulls his back against his chest, a possessive hand splayed across Shane’s stomach and a soft kiss dropped on his shoulder.

Very soon, they’ll have to get up. Shane will probably need a shower before he leaves, and Ilya is very thankful in the moment that he decided to travel with his own scent blockers and neutralisers, rather than relying on whatever the MLH provided throughout the weekend.

Of course, he wants Shane to feel comfortable and safe as he leaves. But his alpha, winning over a rare battle of possessiveness, has *no* desire for anyone else to get the faintest whiff of Shane as is he now, satisfied to high heavens because of Ilya and Ilya alone.

So, yes. The time would come, eventually, for the outside world to creep into the little refuge of his hotel room, and remind them of who they are and what roles they have to play. But for

now, wrapped up in each other, Ilya is more than happy to savour the moment for what it is, and keep himself comforted with a simple reminder:

*This is only just the beginning.*

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*Toronto - February 2017*

Ilya walks into the weight room, his shoulders light and a spring in his step. Ash is already waiting for him, unpacking her gear and laying out a yoga mat.

“Look who’s back,” she says with a grin, rolling up her sleeves and crossing her arms. “You were looking good out there last weekend, poodle puff. How are we feeling today?”

Ilya’s grin splits his face in half. “Never been better.”

## Chapter End Notes

so... thank you for reading, do let me know your thoughts 🙄 i am a greedy little monke obsessed with comments. if you even care

if anyone is curious, i based some of the scents here on some actual perfumes: shane's scent is clementine dream by 7 virtues (love this one) and ilya's mom's is bianco latte by giardini di toscana (my moms favourite 😊)

according to the multiple russian translation sites and forum pages i visited, lyubimyj is a term of endearment for men that translates to darling, sweetheart or love, and literally means favourite. if anyone knows otherwise and thinks its misused here, do lmk 🙏

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!