

No Further Questions

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76307726) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76307726>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov , Troy Barrett/Harris Drover
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Troy Barrett , Hayden Pike , Ottawa Centaurs Team Ensemble (Game Changers) , Wyatt Hayes , Zane Boodram , Luca Haas , Gilbert Comeau , Patrice Drapeau , Jean-Jacques Boiziau , Harris Drover , Media - Reporters , Minor Characters - LaPointe
Additional Tags:	Press and Tabloids , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Injury , Slurs , Internalized Homophobia , Anxiety , Anxious Shane Hollander , Autistic Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug , Shane Hollander in Love , Self-Esteem Issues , Mental Health Issues , Emotional Hurt , Angst , Queer Themes , Queer Character , Canon Queer Relationship , queer identity , Insecure Shane Hollander , Eating Disorders , Shane Hollander Has an Eating Disorder , Sensory Overload , Mental Breakdown , Neurodivergence - Don't Touch without Permission , Not Beta Read
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-24 Updated: 2026-01-08 Words: 27,045 Chapters: 3/?

No Further Questions

by [pause_to_read](#)

Summary

Shane has spent his entire career rising above it.

After one dirty hit, one slur, and one question too many, he stops.

A press conference becomes a confession—and a line is finally drawn.

Notes

Hello everyone,

Before you start I wanted to thank you for reading my story. I don't really consider myself a writer - I've always been a reader of fanfic but I've never really written much.

But I've had these ideas recently that I can't seem to stop and so I've tried writing them out on paper. I wrote this in less than 24 hours so be gentle if you can. But if you do see a mistake, please do let me know.

I don't know if any of this is good but I'm glad it's written. I hope you enjoy and let me know what you think.

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

Chapter 1: A Debt He Never Owed

Chapter Notes

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

Shane answers the first few questions the way he always does.

Short. Polished. Careful.

“Yes, it was a physical game.”

“No, I’m not commenting on officiating.”

“We’ll review the tape and move forward.”

He keeps his hands folded on the table because if he doesn’t, they’ll shake. He doesn’t say Ilya’s name. Not yet. He keeps his eyes level, his voice even. He gives them nothing they can use.

It had been a shitshow of a game tonight. They barely managed to pull out the win, all them rattled by the loss of their captain. It was their third game against Montreal for the season, and once again his husband was the target of all their anger. Shane will admit that Ilya doesn’t always make not wanting to punch him easy, and chirping is all part of the game, but this was more than that. Every game they have played against Montreal since Shane started with the Centaurs last season, his husband always comes home with a new bruise. And this time...this time they went even harder and Ilya was injured enough to be out for the rest of the game and more than likely the next few weeks. All Shane wanted to do was get out of this ridiculous post-game attire and find his husband. He wanted to go home to his dog and crawl into bed with Ilya and not talk to anyone for the next 48 hours. But seeing as his husband was currently in the training room, most likely fighting with their trainer Matt, trying to convince him that he didn’t need to go to a hospital and that he was fine - “Russians don’t feel pain,” Shane was stuck. Shane knew whatever Ilya claimed was a lie, his husband was the biggest softie he knew. My god, he wants to get out of here.

The room comes back into focus, humming with expectation. Cameras whirr and pens hover.

A reporter near the aisle in the first row raises his hand.

“Do you think emotions played a role tonight,” he asks, “given your personal relationship with the player who was hit?”

The word *personal* lands wrong. Too intimate. Too pointed.

Shane raises his eyebrows. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You left the bench,” the reporter presses. “You were visibly upset. Do you think that impacted the flow of the game?”

Shane's jaw tightens.

"I mean," The reporter continues, "Given what was said on the ice, and the nature of the hit..."

"I know exactly what was said, because my Captain was lying on the ice when it was said to him." Shane says, interrupting him. "And I reacted because Rozanov took a dirty hit," he says. "What I did didn't affect the game. The hit did."

The reporter nods. Reasonable. Professional.

"And what about what was said to Rozanov afterwards, while he was down?" he asks. "There's been a lot of chirping on the ice between Ottawa and Montreal these past few seasons. Do you think you may have overreacted to what was being said?"

Shane goes still.

"Chirping," the reporter continues lightly, "is part of the game. Do you think?"

"No," Shane cuts in sharply. "We're not doing that."

The room freezes. "There's chirping," Shane says, voice low, furious, "and then there are slurs. And if you can't tell the difference, that's a problem."

Harris shifts besides the cameras. *Careful*, the look says.

Shane's jaw tightens. "Rozanov took a dirty hit and then he was called a slur. Not because of how he plays. Not because of the jersey he wears. But because of who he goes home with."

A murmur ripples through the room and dies. The reporter doesn't back off.

"I'm just saying," he continues, "when emotions are high, lines blur. And given your relationship?"

Shane has always prided himself on keeping his head on straight...most of the time. Ever since the video was released, both him and Ilya have been bombarded with questions about their relationship. Shane has always been a private person, separating work and his personal life as best he can. But when those two worlds collided, it was like people felt this sense of entitlement to his life. He would usually ignore and deflect, to not dignify these questions with responses.

But tonight, he's hit his limit.

"Don't," Shane snaps. "Don't imply that who I love is the reason someone else chose to cross a line."

A beat.

Shane sighs, taking a deep breath. He closes his eyes for a second, to regain control. He really wishes he was home. He opens his eyes, keeping them trained on the floor in front of the

table.

“I’ve been asked before at other games why I never retaliated. Because this isn’t something new, other players, going after Rozanov and it’s definitely nothing new for Montreal.” Shane looks up at the room of reporters. “I’ve been asked why I don’t lose my head. Why I don’t make it worse.” He exhales sharply through his nose.

“Beacuse I have spent my entire life being told to rise above it. I have spent my entire life hiding who I am. And so while I do have a personal relationship with a player, I also have a professional relationship with him. And when we’re on the ice, *that* is the relationship I maintain.”

He folds his hands together, knuckles whitening. He draws in a breath, preparing to move on. To shut it down. To give them the version of himself that survives these rooms.

The reporter doesn’t let him.

“Just to be clear,” he says, holding his mic steady, “I’m not excusing what happened tonight.”

Shane nods once, stiffly.

“But” the reporter continues, “this is a very physical league.” His voice is calm and measured, but Shane can hear a touch of smugness to it. He’s looking for a rise, a reaction - he’s looking for a headline.

“Everyone here knows that this is a physical league. You and your husband are two of the most visible players in the sport.” Another pause. “That visibility brings attention. From fans. From opponents and from the media.”

Something in Shane’s chest tightens.

“So when we talk about risk,” the reporter says, “isn’t it fair to ask whether being so publicly open about your marriage creates additional risk for you and your husband on the ice?”

Shane couldn’t even believe what he was hearing. It was so absurd he couldn’t do anything but laugh. He saw the reporter furrow his brows, other reporters and journalists start shifting in their seats, looking around, not understanding.

“You know it’s so fucking hilarious, the irony of that statement, isn’t it?” Shane says, chuckling. He can see Harris stiffen up at the curse word. He knows he should end this - whatever this fucking thing is - before it goes to far. But he is so fucking tired, so fucking sick of the double standard. And it has already gone too far, these thinly veiled insults disguised as interest and curiosity.

A few heads tilt and Shane sees a few people inch closer in their seats, leaning forward like that would help them understand better. But they’ll never understand or maybe they just don’t want to understand.

“You call us visible,” Shane sighed, bringing a hand up to rub at his forehead, hoping to rub away the worry lines. He lowered his head, staring at the table. “And then talk about us like

we're careless." he continues.

He finally looks up.

"My husband and I are private to the point of obsession. We don't post our lives. We don't give interviews about our relationship. We don't offer timelines. We don't give you access."

Shane pauses. He hears the door open at the back of the room, a mop of curls he knows intimately slips in quietly. A few of his teammates stagger in behind him, a wall of protection, the way they stand behind Ilya. He sees the way Hayes crosses his arms and looks around the room, making sure everyone is in his line of sight. He's always been like that - the most observant on the team, probably what makes him a damn great goalie. He sees Troy, Boodman, and Luca stand shoulder to shoulder with Hayes. He feels something warm well up in him, love for a team that has his husband's back, that has his back. It's more than he ever got before, and maybe more than he deserves.

Ilya stands there, with his arm in a sling and a bruise on his cheek. Shane's sure if he lifted his husband's shirt up, he would find red and purple marks up his ribs. He feels his chest constrict at the sight. God, he loves this man. He looks directly at his husband as he continues.

"And if I'm being honest," Shane adds, quieter now, "that's more on me than it is on Ilya." Shane sees Ilya's brow furrow. He's missed the beginning of the interview, he doesn't know that Shane is revealing more than he should. He can probably see how Shane is losing it. But Shane can't seem to stop.

A few heads nod, considering this statement.

"My husband is very good at making sure I'm comfortable. But if it were up to him, he'd scream his love for me at the top of his lungs." The corner of Shane's mouth twitches, not quite a smile. He sees Ilya stiffen a bit, but then a small, lazy smile flickers across his mouth. He sees his teammates look between them quietly behind Ilya. They know how private Shane is, they know how protective he is over his life.

"And it's not that I love him any less. I don't" His voice tightens. "My god, do I love that man! Sometimes it feels like a weight on my chest, constricting my airways just by how much I love him."

He sees Ilya draw a breath in at the same time as him. It's like Ilya is holding his breath, probably wondering where Shane is going with this.

"And I've always been this private person. But there's a difference between being private and being almost nonexistent." He swallows. "And I've been taught - over and over- to take up less space. To be less present."

His gaze drifts from his husband, to the floor, unfocused.

"I've never been straight enough for this league. Or white enough. Or neurotypical enough." A beat. "I grew up with so much internalized homophobia that for a long time I didn't know

who I was allowed to be, or who I was allowed to love. And honestly, I still struggle with those demons.”

The room is silent.

Shane continues, steady but raw now, “I struggle daily with the fear that people are watching me. Judging me. Looking for a reason to hate me.” His fingers curl into his palm. “Hiding isn’t easy - it’s hard and gut wrenching. But it’s a learned behavior, a downward spiral that is hard to unlearn. And it’s what I had to do to survive.”

Shane took a beat. “But it shouldn’t be. I shouldn’t have to worry about every little thing.” He mutters, looking up. “I agonize over the words I use in rooms like this. I think about every sentence. Every implication. Every way something I say might make someone else uncomfortable.”

He sees Troy walk over to Harris and whisper quietly in his ear. Harris quickly looks over his shoulder at Ilya and Ilya looks back, trying to ask *What the hell is going on?* Harris shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head. *I have no clue.*

“But you can’t have it both ways.”

The words land clean.

“You can’t tell me I’m too visible when all we’ve ever done is try to make ourselves smaller. You can’t accuse us of inviting attention while also demanding more of our story.”

Shane is grinding his teeth so hard, he’s afraid they might chip.

“Ilya isn’t just my captain. Or my teammate. Or my line partner. He is my husband. And loving him does not mean I forfeited my right to professionalism. It does not mean I forfeited my right to safety.”

He unlocks his fingers and rests them on the table in front of him, lightly rubbing his fingers back and forth, something to soothe him.

“And it does not mean other players get to decide that just because they know who I go home with at night, that my family is suddenly fair game.”

Shane follows the movement of his fingers, calmed by the repetitive motion and the texture of the fabric. “I don’t touch him more than other teammates. I don’t speak to him differently. I don’t celebrate with him in public differently. I am constantly aware - painfully aware - of how closely we’re being watched.”

His words carry a heavy weight.

“He is the man I love. And I should not have to make myself smaller - make my life quieter, colder, more palatable - so that other people don’t have to confront their own discomfort.”

He takes a breath in through his nose.

“But calling my husband a slur makes it personal.”

His eyes lift now. Sharp. Unyielding.

“That is not chirping. That is not part of the game. That is an attack on my family.”

Shane sees Ilya shift forward, but he shakes his head lightly, hanging his head and looking down so people don't notice that he was shaking his head at Ilya. Shane doesn't want the attention to shift to him, he doesn't want Ilya to be hounded the way he's being. He wants to protect him.

“Ilya took a dirty hit tonight, and after my husband was already lying on the ice, injured, someone decided that our love was the sharpest thing they could throw at him.”

Shane takes a deep breath and holds his head up high.

“There is an unspoken rule in the league,” Shane says, “That out on the ice, families and partners are off limits. Wives are off limits. Girlfriends are off limits. Children are off limits.”

Shane looks back to that first reporter, the one who started this.

“So tell me why is it different for me?”

Silence.

He takes a moment, preparing to move on. To shut this down and end it here. To give them the version of himself that survives these rooms.

“I didn't mean any offense” the same man says. Shane thinks this man is asking to be punched. He hates when people say something offensive to then just say “no offense.”

“And I hear what you're saying,” the reporter replies, nodding like everyone else in the room is in agreement with him. But from the looks Shane sees the other reports giving this man, he's not so sure that's true.

“But with all due respect, this wouldn't be an issue if there weren't so many unanswered questions. Part of the reason people keep asking is because you've never clarified when this relationship began.”

He lifts his mic slightly.

“You've asked for privacy, but you've also acknowledge when it first came out that this relationship has been going on for several years before it was revealed. A pause. “How many years? Through which phases or your career did it start?”

Shane's fingernails are back to clawing at his hands. He feels the pressure before the pain, if he was more aware, he would be afraid of drawing blood.

“Given that you and Rozanov spent years as rivals, sometimes as teammates, as opposing captains, - how do we know this never affected a game's outcome? Whether intentionally or

not? I'm not trying to be an asshole here but you won Montreal three cups, how many of those cups were maybe already predetermined? I mean, I'm just going to say what we're all thinking, have you or Rozonav ever thrown a game for the other? Did you truly trip in that game a few years ago?"

Someone gasped in the crowd, and the room went deathly still. Most of the reporters in the room were giving this man disgusted looks, but some look genuinely interested in the answer. This was the first time someone was so blatant in asking. Ever since it happened, ever since he tripped, people would tiptoe around the topic in the politest way possible - but those still felt like sharp knives to the jugular. Shane could see Ilya fuming the in the back, Hayes and Troy both holding one of his shoulders. One would consider it a reassuring gesture, but it looked more like they were holding back a ticking bomb - one about to explode. Shane shifted his attention back to the reporter in the first row.

The reporter continues his questions. "Don't you think it's reasonable for people to want to know whether that personal relationship ever overlapped with professional competition?"

He looked Shane directly in the eyes. "So," he says, gently, like he's being kind, "honestly - how long has this relationship been going on, Shane?"

The room stills, deathly silent in the wake of this man's condescension.

Shane doesn't answer right away. Because this isn't new, this isn't a new fear. This is the thing they talked about in hotel rooms with the lights off. In whispers. This is the fear that sat between them when they decided to give themselves a shot. To hide away, to keep to themselves. To not say anything at all. This whole night has been a fear coming true - a nightmare in real life.

Shane remembers lying in hotel rooms with Ilya's hand laced with his, staring at the ceiling and thinking *What if loving me gets you hurt? What if choosing me ruins you?*

Shane can see people shifting uncomfortably in their seats. He can hear a camera lens zooming in, slow and deliberate. This night has gone off the rails and Shane wants nothing to do with it. The reporter waits patiently - he's not sneering or being loud, but his judgement can be felt all throughout the room. He sits there with a calm look on his face like he's asking something reasonable. Like love has made Shane compromise his morals and who he is as a person, as a player and as a captain.

Shane looks out at all the faces in the room - some familiar and comforting, some with pity written across their faces. Shane sees his husband, his gorgeous beautiful husband standing there looking like he wants to take him in his arms and protect him from everything bad in this world.

He sees the door on the left side of the room open quietly, and his heart seizes up. Four Montreal players slip in - Drapeau, Hayden, J.J. and Comeau are all standing there - looking at him. Looking at Shane with his hands on the table, and the posture he's perfected - controlled, contained, managed, and something inside him...just gives up.

Shane stops. Not abruptly. Not for effect. He just - stops.

He exhales, long and unsteady, and when he looks back to the room again, his anger is just gone. What's left is exhaustion. Bone-deep exhaustion. The kind that comes from holding your breath for decades.

"I can't do this anymore," he says quietly.

The room closes in, leans forward without meaning to.

"You're asking me if I fixed games," he says, "You're asking if I threw away my body, my career, my integrity, just because I fell in love?" He leans forward.

"I bled for this league. I broke bones for this league. I gave it everything I had." His eyes burn. "And you think I'd cheapen that because I'm in love?"

Shane can see Harris moving to the side of the room, closer to the table, inching forward like he's about to intervene.

Shane becomes unreasonably irritated by this - he has been silent for too long and he will not let anyone else silence him - including a friend.

"You want to talk about risk? Shane continues, voice low in a growl. "You want to talk about what makes someone a target?"

Harris moves in. "Shane, I think we should-"

No," Shane says, slamming his hand on the table, "I'm answering this." He sees Harris step back, until he's closer to the wall and he's hit Troy's chest. Troy must've followed him up, one of his hand steadying Harris's waist, the other resting on his shoulder. He looks a little miffed at Shane, at the way he talked to Harris most likely. But Shane can see the worry marring both their faces, outweighing any other emotion. He'll make sure to apologize later.

He steadys himself again, dropping his shoulders, staring once again at his hands. These hands that have fought and strategized and loved.

"I have spent my entire life terrified of people finding out who I am. Of people looking at me differently." His voice cracks. "I have lived my whole life in the shadows, and behind doors and I hid the love of my life for years. Fucking years."

His breath comes hard. "Do you know what it's like to have a fear so big you can't breathe? To lie awake shaking because you know if anyone ever finds out, everything changes?" His eyes are fogging up. "To be a lonely kid who hates himself because the world taught him that loving someone like that makes him a problem?"

Shane thinks of his old team - how they changed when he told him. How they confirmed every one of his worst fears and he hates them for it. He hates them for how they left him and how they hated him and how they threw him away. Why is he still protecting them? Why does he care so much?

"I came out to my old team long before the video was ever posted," Shane admits. "Before any of them knew about me and Ilya. I came out to them as gay and they told me it wouldn't

change anything.”

He looks up now. His vision blurring with unshed tears, his face red. He looked right at them - his old team, his old friends...his old family. He never thought one could have an “old” family - family was forever. Family was your ride and die - they had your back for everything. But these people - they left him out to dry. No...they threw him out and they locked the door - maybe he put his faith in the wrong people. Maybe he was too naive to actually believe them, to trust them and take their word at face value. Maybe...maybe he was the problem.

A bitter laugh wells up. “Well, it fucking did. It did change everything.” He stares down Drapeau and Comeau - unflinching in his gaze and the betrayal he felt open for everyone to see.

“I knew those guys for eleven years. I bled for them. I stood beside them on their wedding day as a groomsman. I held their kids. I was an uncle to their families.” His jaw clenches. “I held them up when they fell apart as they lost a loved one” He looks straight at Drapeau as he says this, remembering the day he broke down in Shane’s arms - crying at the loss of his dad. “And when they found out who I loved, without giving me a chance to explain, they threw me away like garbage.”

Drapeau and Comeau grimaced and looked down at their shoes - looking ashamed for the first time since everything happened. Hayden looked like he couldn’t decide if he should be pissed, sad, or guilty and J.J. - well he chose guilt.

Someone in the room gasps, a sob. Quiet and unchecked.

“They said it wasn’t about me being gay. And maybe for some of them that’s true.”

His voice drops. “But some of them did have a problem with me being gay.” Comeau and Drapeau’s shoulders stiffen as he says this.

“And the rest?” Shane says, his gaze shifting to Hayden. His best friend. He loves Hayden and his support meant the world to Shane. But there is a small part of Shane - a part he feels guilt about most of the time - that is angry with his best friend. And a part of that is that he’s angry that Hayden was so careless and that the video was released but most of the time he’s grateful everything is out in the open - he just would’ve rather he’d been the one in control of it. But no - most of that anger is because even though his best friend never had an issue with him being gay - he has an issue with whom he chooses to love. He makes small jokes and quips about his husband - would joke asking “*You couldn’t have found a nice guy in Montreal?*” And Shane knows they’re jokes and he knows that Ilya and Hayden don’t actually hate each other - but they don’t exactly like each other and that hurts. It hurts that his best friend can’t be happy for him, can’t try and be friends with his husband - not Ilya Rozanov the Captain of the Ottawa Centaurs, not the asshole from the ice - but his Ilya. The most caring and loving and amazing man he knows.

Shane continues as he looks at his best friend. “They said it was because it was *him*.” He sees Hayden flinch - he knows Shane is talking to him. He never wants to hurt his best friend, but

he's been hurt these past few years and he needs relief. "They said they could look past me being gay, but me being with Ilya was too much. *Too Much?*" Shane mutters.

Shane's eyes blaze with years of pain. "Do you know what it's like to lose your entire team, your support system, your career and legacy - your family - all because of the person you choose to love?" He swallows hard. "I chose him. I choose him every day, after every struggle and every cost - I will always choose him over everything - even hockey."

His voice breaks open at the end. Shane wipes at his face quickly, head down so people don't see the first tear fall.

"But the truth is - I also never really had a choice. Because it has always been him."

He exhales, long and unsteady, and when he looks up again, he looks wrecked. He looks at that reporter - and he looks...Shane doesn't know. Uncomfortable, intrigued, smug, sorry - all the above?

"I am done protecting other people's peace at the expense of my own." His voice is softer now. "I'm done being terrified and polite and small."

He raises his eyebrows. "You want to know about us?" He asks. "Then listen."

He moves his gaze to his husband, who's silently crying in the back of the room. Crying for Shane, for himself, for them. Shane's gaze softens as he starts, finally sharing the truth.

"I was a boy who fell in love with another boy." Shane says.

Shane's gaze stays on his husband, caught by him once again. He knows he might regret revealing so much later - but right now he just wants everyone to know how powerless he was to Ilya Rozanov. How falling in love with him was the easiest thing in the world - it was the world that made everything else difficult.

"My first thought when I met Ilya in that alley outside that dingy rink at the Junior Championships was *"My god, he's gorgeous."* Shane snuffles, and he hears many people gasp. "My second thought was *"My god, he's an asshole."* A ghost of a smile flickers and fades on his face. "Neither of those things have changed." Shane can see Ilya huff out a small chuckle.

"We didn't mean for this to happen. We weren't brave or rebellious - at least I wasn't." Shane concedes. The room gives a small huff - a sign of life within a otherwhat quiet room. "We weren't trying to make a statement - we were kids. Ilya and I didn't plan it, didn't choreograph it, didn't choose it the way people like to believe love works. It just...did - work that is. At least in a way." Shane admits - guilt warring inside himself that he doesn't think he will ever be able to truly let go of.

"There are a thousand things I would change if I could go back. But there are also things I wouldn't change for the world." Shane's voice tightens, he feels like his throat is closing up, being overwhelmed with all these emotions.

He looks down at the table as he says, "I have only ever loved one person in my entire life. My first love. My only love." He looks up at the room, scanning faces - searching for answers. "How many people get to say that? How many people are lucky enough to meet the person who sees them at their best and their worst - on top of the world and completely shattered - stripped of every title, every wall, every defense? How many people get it right the first time?" Shane wonders what the answer is - at least in this room.

"And that's not to say Ilya and I got it right from the start, because we definitely didn't. We fucked up so many times - both too afraid to say anything to each other. But we found our way"

He sees people wiping their eyes, most of the phones and microphones sitting on laps or limply hanging from peoples grips.

"I am a man who loves another man. But that isn't how it started. It started with a boy who thought another boy was cute. People keep asking *"how long."* As if you're owed a number. As if love is something that can be measured in seasons and contracts. As if love keeps score. As if you are entitled to the timeline of our hearts." He swallows. "You want answers, you want a number - then fine. Here it is."

He takes a moment. Makes them wait.

"I was seventeen." A breath catches in the room. "He was supposed to be my rival. My competition. The guy I was meant to beat. The guy standing between me and the top spot." Shane's voice softens. "I wanted to introduce myself to the competition but also meet the player who was amazing to watch - who could keep up. I saw him leaning against the building smoking somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. The first thing I ever said to him was, *"You're supposed to smoke over there."* Shane shakes his head chuckling at his younger self.

"He looked at me and I forgot how to breathe. He had these ridiculously soft looking curls and the most unfair eyes I'd ever seen and just like that, something in my chest split open." He can hear a snuffle from the back of the room. His husband reliving that day with him.

"It had nothing to do with hockey. Nothing to do with medals or rankings or flags on our jerseys. We were just boys. Boys falling in love with each other. If you ask him he'll tell you he fell first. He jokes about it. Says it was my freckles - his Ангельские поцелуи, *angel kisses* he calls them. I fell for his confidence. We had no idea what we were doing. We were kids pretending to be men on a world stage where people expected everything from us. We carried our entire countries on our shoulders - he carried expectations and I carried fear. We were terrified - terrified to acknowledge what we felt, terrified to what it would cost us if we did."

Shane can feel tears silently falling down his face, their warmth a stark contrast to the cold he feels inside. He feels his face tingling and his hands are shaking. He puts his hands in his lap behind the table.

"We were afraid to admit what we felt for each other, to name it, so we didn't. We went years seeing each other - pretending it didn't mean anything. No attachments, no commitments, no

strings. But if I'm honest with myself I fell in love faster than I admitted to him or myself at the time. I was committed to him most likely from the beginning. I loved him long before I ever said it out loud."

Someone snuffles and Shane sees a camera being lowered.

"If you're wondering whether we fixed games - no. Never. That accusation is insulting." He shakes his head, containing the small spark of anger at just the thought. "And many of you keep saying *"rivals"* like it's a falsity, like it's the plague." Shane continues. "I want to be very clear about something."

He looks directly into the camera at the back of the room.

"Yes. We were rivals. That part is true. We pushed each other harder than anyone else in this league ever did. We play liked we had something to prove every time we shared the ice. But there was never hate there."

Shane looks at Ilya - a little afraid as he doesn't think he's ever told his husband this.

"What I hated," Shane starts, "was myself. I hated how much I wanted him. I hated that I didn't understand it, that I didn't know what it meant, or what it could cost me, and how I wasn't allowed to feel it." He sees his husband brow furrow.

"The rivalry gave me somewhere to put all of that. It gave me control. It gave me an excuse to watch him, to care about him, to want him, without ever having to say why." He continues to watch the emotions playing out on his husband's face - his face falling at each of Shane's confessions.

"And if I'm being honest - I liked the rivalry."

He could see the surprise on other peoples face in his periphery view. But his eyes never strayed from Ilya's. A few murmurs rippled throughout the room but quickly died down. It was like everyone was afraid to break the silence in fear of Shane stopping. But it's like Shane can't stop.

"I liked the rivalry because even when I was convinced this could never work - that *we* could never work - at least it meant that his attention was always on me. At least I mattered. At least I wasn't invisible."

And that seems to be the thing that breaks Ilya, Shane can see him sob quietly and tears fall down his face. Ilya brings a hand to cover his mouth, like he can silence his pain by sheer will. Shane sees their teammates rally behind him. All holding on to him in some capacity - trying to be his strength, to be each other's strength.

Shane looks back to the reporters in the room. This part was a message for them.

"So don't rewrite our history into something convenient." Shane demands, "You spent years calling us rivals because it was easier to understand. And now you want to take the truth -

that there was something more - and twist it into something ugly.” He shifts his jaw slightly, having pain from clenching it too tightly.

“Loving someone doesn’t make you dishonest. Wanting someone doesn’t make you unethical. And it doesn’t mean every moment that came before was a lie. We weren’t scheming. We weren’t fixing games. We weren’t playing some long con.”

His voice softens as he breathes out. “We were two kids doing the only thing we knew how to do in a world that didn’t give us any room to be anything else - competing, pretending that was all it was because it had to be.”

Shane sighs again, it’s like his body and his mind have finally decided to reveal his exhaustion of this whole thing.

“Can you imagine accusing someone of throwing away their entire career - eleven years of your body, blood, your life, for a secret you were already afraid to hold?”

Silence.

“Imagine asking a straight man if he threw his career away for following in love with a girl. Just imagine a guy falling in love with a girl at seventeen and being forced to hide her. Being told that his love was suspicious. Dangerous. That strangers had a right to dissect it. That’s what you’re asking of us. Imagine telling him he didn’t deserve his wins because he had a heart.”

Shane hiccups, fully crying. He closes his eyes, not wanting to think about the worst parts of their relationships.

“I almost lost the love of my life in a plane crash and no one would’ve known. No one would’ve known about us. And it’s not like I can show people our lives. We don’t even have that many photographs together because we were constantly scared. Of being exposed. Of being punished. Since the beginning, we hid - because the world taught us to be afraid. We lived in constant terror of being discovered, of someone breaking into our lives and stealing the only thing that was truly ours.”

And it was theirs - it was terrifying and tragic and gorgeous.

“I didn’t even tell my parents for most of it. They found out by accident. Do you know how lonely that is, to lie to your family and friends. To know this thing about yourself but be so ashamed of it. But to have this person you love and be so proud of them and not be able to share them. I couldn’t tell my mom about this amazing man in my life. I couldn’t show my Dad that I had a partner who would help carry the load. We were completely alone for those first few years and I admit - at the time that’s how I wanted it. There is so much shame that comes with being an athlete and being queer, or just differently. So we loved quietly. Carefully.” Shane says quietly, having no more energy to fight.

Shane breathes slowly, a small smile making his way onto his face.

“But my god you should’ve seen us - it was beautiful. Our love was beautiful...it is beautiful.” Shane whispers. He straightens, a sense of pride rushing through him.

“I am a man who loves another man. But once, I was just a seventeen-year-old boy who fell in love with another boy. Do not punish those kids for finding beauty in each other in a world determined to tell them it is wrong. Do not punish those kids for simply falling in love.” Shane begs.

He looks back at the man - that fucking man.

“We were fucking seventeen. Did you have it all figured out at seventeen?” He gestures helplessly at the room. “Your first kiss? Your first love? Did you know who you would become? Would you have wanted the world demanding answers about your heart?”

Shane wipes at his face once, rough and unashamed.

“Ilya and I have a foundation for mental health in sports because I worry about the next kid like us. I worry about the next seventeen-year-old who thinks they’re alone. Who thinks they owe everyone their silence.”

His heart breaks thinking about some lonely kid out there by themselves. He looks around the room - he really looks at them. He can see his teammates practically holding up each other. Crying for him, grieving with him. He can see the way Ilya’s shoulders are tensed and back, posture pin straight - the best it can be with the sling. He can see most journalist wiping their eyes or looking away when he meets their eyes - ashamed of their behavior.

Shane breathes. He really breathes. He lets go of everything. He feels free - free in a way that feels scary. Like he’s in freefall - and it feels exhilarating but soon he will get closer and closer to the ground and he doesn’t think he has a parachute or something to soften his landing. He’s going to crash. But he keeps going - he keeps going for the next kid.

“They don’t owe you explanations. They don’t owe you timelines. They don’t owe you shame.”

Shane pushes his chair back.

“They only owe themselves the right to fucking live.”

Shane starts to stand up - he leans forward into the mic.

“There will be no further questions.”

He gets up and turns toward the door - walking out and leaving behind everything else.

The room is crying when he walks away.

Even the ones who never thought they would.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed it. Long time reader, but I've only written two other fics so please be kind to me.

Would love feedback.

If you want to come yell at me, I'm on Instagram and Twitter.

Username: pause_to_read

I'm not the best at keeping up with social media, but I'm going to try to be a little more present and keep you updated.

Like Shane Hollander, I also love praise, so please leave any comments, likes, and love.

All my love,
P2R

Chapter 2: Where He Lands

Chapter Summary

After the press conference, Shane unravels - the world grows too loud.

Sometimes holding yourself together costs more than falling apart.

Chapter Notes

CAUTION

This story has a severe emotional breakdown that might be too hard to read. There are some aspects of self-harming behavior in the form of punching. Please be careful and don't read this if it could hurt you.

Before you start reading,

I've never been someone who is proud of themselves — someone who can easily claim their own accomplishments. I can defend someone else to my last breath, but when it comes to myself... I go quiet.

You all have been so kind in the comments that I've genuinely wanted to cry.

As I've said before, *I've never considered myself a writer.*

I'm not trying to be humble or modest — I've just never thought of myself as smart enough or good enough compared to the writers I admire so much. I've always had ideas, but they rarely turned into anything.

But with Shane, it's different. As someone who is neurodivergent myself, I connect with him in a way I've never connected with a character before.

So I wrote a story — and you all loved it.

And that feeling was indescribable. But then the ideas kept coming, and suddenly I was terrified. Everyone loved the first part... how could I possibly live up to that? How could I ever compete with myself?

The imposter syndrome hit hard. So hard that I almost deleted this whole chapter out of fear it wouldn't measure up.

But I couldn't do that — it felt like I would be erasing a part of myself if I did. Like I would be making myself smaller, more manageable, easier for the world to digest... simply by avoiding it.

Shane deserves better.

I deserve better.

We all do.

There's something I've said before in another work that feels important to say again here.

I think many of us turn to fanfiction because it gives us a place to feel things safely. Even when the story hurts, it's a chosen hurt — one we can step into and out of. We are allowing ourselves to feel something intense in a safer place, through characters who mean something to us. We get to explore these difficult emotions without having to sit directly in our own. That can be cathartic - like releasing something you've been carrying by giving it to characters who can hold it with us.

That release matters.

Shane's breakdown in this story is messy, repetitive, and overwhelming, and not always easy to read — because it comes from a very real place. From lived experience.

So if it feels heavy, please know that it was written with care. Keep that in mind as you read and be gentle with yourself. Be kind to yourself, be kind to others. And please, be kind to this author - for she was only trying to be brave.

This story is for everyone who has ever felt like they had to shrink themselves to survive.

For the kids who were too much or not enough.

For the queer kids.

For the neurodivergent kids.

For the kids who weren't mainstream enough, who aren't straight enough, who aren't "normal" enough.

For anyone who was told — directly or indirectly — that they took up too much space.

You are not too much.

You never were.

You are enough for me.

You are enough for us.

And I hope one day - even if the world tells you otherwise - you see that you are already enough for yourself.

All my love,

P2R

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

There are moments when Shane feels like his body is broken. Not injured. Not failing in any way that can be fixed or diagnosed or taped over. Just - wrong, in a way that sits too deep to name. His head, at least, he understands. His mind has always been...different. Odd, in the way people say gently when they mean something sharper.

His parents would hate that word. *Broken*. They would hate what he sometimes thinks about himself. They worked too hard to teach him otherwise.

They told him, over and over, that being autistic wasn't a defect. That it didn't mean something was missing - just that his brain moved through the world differently. They tried to give him language for it, tried to make space for him. And they did better than most parents would have, especially back then.

Shane was diagnosed when he was three, back in 1994 - a very different world from the one he lives in now. Back then, there wasn't much research and even less compassion; a diagnosis like that landed like a verdict, not an explanation, but his fate predetermined.

He can imagine the room: his parents, young and tired and already bruised by years of trying for a child, being told that their only son - the child they fought for, the one they thought they might never have - wasn't normal.

People didn't expect much from autistic kids then. Some still don't.

Shane grew up trying anyway.

Trying to be normal. Trying to be perfect. Trying to be easy. He carried guilt like a second spine - guilt that he wasn't the son his parents deserve, guilt that loving him sometimes required more patience than they should have had to give. He knew, even as a kid, how lucky he was. His parents loved him fiercely. They never treated him like a burden.

And still...

Sometimes they only knew the stereotypes. Sometimes they knew *he* was autistic, but not what that meant when he couldn't find the word for what he needed, when his chest felt too tight or his skin too loud or the world too close. Those were the moments when he felt unbearably alone, stranded inside himself with no translation.

Other times, he masked so well that people forgot entirely. They forgot until the mask slipped. Until he misread a room, or reacted too strongly, or did something strange and unmistakable. Then it wasn't autism - it was just one of Shane's weird little quirks. Something to laugh off or make fun of.

Something not worth understanding.

And there are moments - quiet ones, dangerous ones - where he wonders if everyone else has been right all along.

If maybe he really is broken.

He doesn't know how he makes it out of the press room on his own two feet, but somehow he does. The door closes behind him and he staggers into the far wall, his shoulder hitting it a little too hard. He puts his hand up on the wall to stabilize himself. The hallway feels wrong immediately. Too bright. Too loud. Every sound lands at the wrong volume. There's a high-pitched ringing in his ears, thin and relentless, like feedback that won't cut out.

The ringing sharpens, climbing higher and higher until it feels almost inhuman. Shane has the brief, absurd thought that this must be the frequency dogs hear at - the one people joke about, the one that isn't meant for human ears.

And then, just as briefly, he wonders if that's the point.

If maybe he's so broken he's tuned wrong.

If maybe he isn't built for the same world everyone else is.

His body feels heavy, dragged down by its own weight, while his mind races out of control - untethered and frantic.

Shane knows what sensory overload is. He's lived with it his entire life. Still, the contradiction never makes sense when it's happening - how everything can feel slowed to a crawl and out of control all at once. His mind races ahead while his body lags behind, like they're no longer speaking the same language.

He's tried to explain it to Ilya before. Never successfully.

It's like reaching for something and feeling your arms respond seconds too late. Like watching yourself move through molasses while your thoughts sprint miles ahead. And if you try to move faster - to match your body to your mind - it only makes things worse.

He remembers one episode so vividly it still tightens his throat: the world moving impossibly slow, his thoughts screaming to keep up. He'd tried to force himself through it, heart pounding harder and harder until everything collapsed inward. He doesn't remember how he got there - only lying on his side in bed, hands clamped over his ears, the scream of his own voice pulsating throughout his head.

stop, Stop...please... Stop....stop.stop.stopstopstopstopstop..STOP IT. STOP IT. STOP IT.

The words ricocheted inside his skull, frantic and useless. He couldn't say them out loud. Couldn't move. His body had gone empty, drained of everything but noise.

It felt like being locked within his own mind.

Trapped by himself.

Shane thinks, not for the first time, that irony has always been cruel to him.

He remembers how it wasn't just an episode that burned hot and passed. It wasn't just a moment. That particular day stretched until time lost its meaning.

He had stayed like that all day. Not asleep. Never asleep. His eyes closed sometimes, but his mind never gave him the mercy of rest. He laid on his side staring at the bedroom door when his eyes were open, seeing nothing but black when they weren't. Time had moved around him without meaning. Hours must've passed or maybe just seconds - Shane honestly had no clue. He only knew that at some point, when his eyes opened, the light had changed: the thin gray of morning shifting into afternoon gold, then softening toward dusk.

He hadn't moved. His hands had been clamped over his ears so tightly they ached, elbows drawn in, body curled around itself like he could make himself smaller and quieter if he just tried hard enough. His thoughts kept screaming at him even when his mouth wouldn't.

Over and over.

Like the soundtrack of his demise.

He'd frightened Ilya that day. He knew that now. Knew it in the way you know things retroactively, with guilt blooming too late to fix anything. At the time, there had only been sensation and pressure. Later, memory filled in the rest: Ilya hovering at first - talking softly, pacing, kneeling beside the bed - until Shane's flinch had taught him what not to do. After that, Shane had simply been. Suspended in nothingness as life continued.

Waiting.

Watching.

And Ilya had loved him from a careful distance, in intention-filled silences.

Shane doesn't remember when the shift happened.

Not waking - because he'd been awake the entire time - but coming back into his body in pieces. The first thing he'd become aware of was the weight...a good weight. Heavy. Grounding. Pressure across his chest and stomach and legs, pinning him to the mattress in a way that didn't feel like restraint.

A weighted blanket.

The one he kept shoved in the back of the corner of the closet, hidden behind coats and spare hangers. The one he had never quite admitted helped, because needing it felt like failing at something he'd spent his whole life pretending he had under control.

It had been a gift. A team gift, technically. Someone - JJ, he thinks - had laughed when they gave it to him, and said something about how since Shane never got laid or had anyone to keep him warm at night, they figured the blanket could do the job. *Just don't fall in love with it*, J.J. had joked.

Everyone had laughed.

Shane had laughed too.

He'd taken it home to show he could take a joke.

He remembers how it had been draped over him like an anchor, holding him in place. Someone had moved him onto his back - carefully, impossibly carefully. His hands weren't over his ears anymore. There were earplugs in instead, snug and dulling the edges of the world. The lights were low. The curtains pulled. Somewhere nearby, Shane could hear some soft noise - a soft sound he hadn't been able to hear clearly due to the ear plugs. But it hummed beneath the surface - steady and unobtrusive, like breathing.

Thinking back, he's surprised he hadn't noticed being touched.

He hates being touched when he's like that.

The realization came with another one: whoever had done this had known what to do.

He hadn't known there was something you could do. Not really. He'd spent his whole life thinking these episodes were something he had to survive - something to grit his teeth through, something that made him more of a problem, more of a burden.

He thought they were proof of his failure. Evidence that he was too much.

But that day - the weight, the quiet, the way his body was being met instead of fought - it helped.

The knowledge hit him hard enough it made his chest ache.

He didn't have to fight all the time.

He didn't have to hate his own body when it did this to him.

He didn't have to endure.

He remembers how he carefully tested the edges of himself, like he had been afraid the moment might shatter. He'd wiggled his foot lightly, just enough to slip it from beneath the blanket.

Immediately, there was movement beside him. A hand had closed gently around his ankle - not gripping, just there - and had rubbed up and down in slow, repetitive motions. The pressure had been firm enough to feel real, but careful enough not to overwhelm.

Shane had felt movement on the bed and then someone lightly tapped one of the ear plugs. It was a question: *Is it okay to remove?*

Shane wiggled his foot again and then the person had removed both ear plugs carefully. He felt the movement fade away back to the end of the bed, their grip still reassuring on his

ankle. After the earplugs were out, Shane had realized the humming he had heard was a speaker playing white noise throughout the room.

A voice permeated the room, quiet and accented.

“Okay?”

It was another question. Not an assumption.

Shane couldn't speak. Even nodding had felt like too much effort and trying to force himself felt like it might shatter whatever fragile equilibrium he'd managed to achieve. So he wiggled his foot again. Up. Down. Once. Twice.

There was a soft chuckle. Fond. Relieved.

“Okay dorogoy.” Ilya murmured.

The term of endearment settled into Shane's chest and stayed there.

They had sat like that for a long time. No talking. No fixing. Just the steady weight of the blanket, the rhythmic motion of Ilya's thumb, the shared silence that didn't demand anything from him.

Later they had talked. Later, Shane explained...and apologized, a lot.

Because it would happen again.

They made plans. Gentle ones. Signals that didn't require words. A light tap against his knee or foot to ask if touch was okay. A squeeze to the ankle to ground him. A short list of people who were safe, just in case Ilya wasn't there - an idea Shane resisted fiercely.

He apologized again. For being too much. For scaring him. For taking up so much space. He cried that he was sorry he couldn't get it under control but that he would try. He apologized for not being the man Ilya thought he was.

Ilya had wiped every tear from his face like it was the easiest thing in the world and whispered, steady and certain, *“You're just enough. I know exactly who you are.”*

Then softer, like a promise meant only for them:

“You and me. We're together.”

And Shane believed him.

The words linger in Shane's head now, even as the memory fades. Shane exhales shakily. There's a hum that Shane can lightly hear - a vibration. For a second, he almost believes it's the speaker again - that Ilya is nearby and that he will make everything better once more. But then the sound sharpens. Fragments itself. Becomes voices down the hall. The squeak of shoes. The hollow echo of a space that is very much not his bedroom.

Shane looks at the floor as the world bleeds in too fast. He keeps his hand on the wall as he walks further away from the press room. The repetitive motion soothing and grounding. His shoes strike the floor in a rhythm that doesn't quite belong to him, each step deliberate in the way people are deliberate when they're afraid if they stop moving, something worse will catch up. His body knows where to go even if his mind is racing ahead...or is it lagging behind? Shane can't focus. It's like he's a half a beat behind everything, like he's wading through water.

He keeps his head down, avoiding eye contact. He sees the shoes of the people that pass by him in the hallway. He doesn't know if they speak to him or not. He's not sure of much right now, other than that he has to get out of the open.

He registers fragments instead of retaining moments - lights overhead, the faint echo of his own footsteps, doors swinging open and shut behind him. His chest feels tight, compressed, like the air has been pulled thinner without warning.

By the time he reaches the locker room, his fingers are black from all the dust he collected off the walls. Pushing open the door to the locker room takes way too much effort than it should. As the door opens and he steps into the room, he notices the room goes quiet.

Not abruptly - not like a switch being flipped - but gradually, in the way a space settles when something fragile enters it. Shane sees it happen in pieces: the way quiet conversations trail off, the way bodies still, the way eyes shift, and lift, and then dart away again, careful not to stare.

Shane knows right away that they saw it - the press conference.

He looks towards the TV mounted high on the wall. It's still on. He sees the press room. The table. He sees Harris standing in front of the table, his face tight with concentration as his hands move in front of him. He's talking but the volume on the TV is too low and the ringing in Shane's ears too high for him to hear what he is saying. He's most likely trying to manage the fallout Shane just left behind. The captions at the bottom of the screen are a blur of white text against black boxes, words stacked on top of each other, urgent.

Someone moves. Dykstra reaches the TV first, too fast to be casual, not fast enough to hide it. His hand comes up, blocking part of the screen before the rest of him does, body angling instinctively as if he can shield Shane from the reminder of what just happened. The screen goes dark and Shane can just see the reflection of the ceiling light in its place.

The silence afterward feels heavier for it. Shane doesn't comment. He doesn't thank him. He just keeps walking.

His stall feels farther than it should be. When he reaches it, his hands are still shaking, the tremor fine and insistent, like his nerves are buzzing under his skin. He reaches for his tie and fumbles, fingers clumsy, the fabric suddenly unbearable where it presses against his throat.

Too tight.

He exhales sharply through his nose and tries again, tugging harder this time. His dress shoes come off quickly- one kicked aside, the other landing crooked on the floor. He notices that, distantly, the way he notices everything that's wrong tonight. Normally, he'd line them up. Heel to toe. Symmetry.

Not now.

His socks are not comforting tonight as they usually are. Right now they feel like the worst thing Shane has ever put on his body. Scratchy. Too present. The sensation crawls up his legs and sets his teeth on edge. He bends awkwardly, trying to hook one off with his toes while still wrestling with the tie, his balance off, movements jerky.

Pain flashes suddenly - sharp and bright.

"Shit," he mutters reflexively, as his toenail cuts deep into his skin and the warmth of blood begins pooling along his leg.

He barely registers the sound of someone behind him - murmured, concerned - before his knee clips the edge of the bench and he stumbles forward, the impact just jarring enough to be irritating.

He throws his hand out instinctively to catch himself and stabilize. Once he is steady, he goes back to the godforsaken tie. It finally gives and he rips it free, throwing it somewhere behind him, landing out of sight. He shrugs his dress coat off his shoulders and lets it fall, puddling on the floor. He tries to undo the buttons to his dress shirt but his hands are shaking too much to grab hold of one. He feels like the walls are closing in the longer the shirt is on. His hands move again, faster now, frantic. He tears the shirt open, buttons scattering across the floor, the sound sharp and wrong in the quiet room.

There's a sharp inhale from somewhere nearby.

They've all seen his habits. They know his rituals - fold, place, align. Order and routine. Shane has always needed to know where everything is before he takes himself apart.

The absence of that order is its own kind of alarm.

Shane turns, facing the locker room door, and his legs give out. He drops onto the bench, elbows braced on his knees, head bowed and his spine folding inward. He rakes his hands through his hair, fingers digging in and curling tight, until the sting becomes something he can hold onto. Something solid.

His breathing comes out wrong. Too fast. Too shallow. It echoes in his ears, loud and uneven.

Shane stares down at his leg. The cut looks worse now - blood streaking down his calf, to his ankle and darkening the white fabric of his sock, soaking through in a way that feels almost deliberate.

He thinks, distantly, how strange it is that it's always the smallest things that do the most damage.

He'd meant to clip his toenails the night before. It had been on his mental list one of those manageable things that help keep him oriented. It was something he did - small grounding tasks he used to prove to himself that he was in control. That he was functioning. That he was fine.

But the day had slipped sideways on him.

It had been one of *those* days where nothing sat right in his body. Where every sensation came in too sharp or too dull, where his thoughts refused to line up no matter how carefully he tried to arrange them. Where every feeling felt too sharp but not in focus, too close to the surface but still not within his grasp.

He had started his day as usual. He'd gone for a run in the morning, hoping to burn the static out of his veins, but it hadn't worked. He didn't feel like he did enough, like he had achieved something, as he usually did. He'd pushed harder, longer, until his lungs burned and his legs shook, and still the static hadn't quieted.

He went home, hoping his breathing exercises and yoga cool down would help reset the weird feeling in his chest. It hadn't. He'd spent the day antsy - untethered. He spent the day looking for something to put his unwanted energy towards and he couldn't find it. His thoughts were skidding in loose circles. Ilya had therapy that morning, then a captain's meeting, and then lunch with Svytelana, who was in town. The house had been too quiet, too empty of the one person who usually grounded him. Shane told himself that he was fine. That he could manage a few hours on his own.

He wasn't able to do it. He got restless, tried watching tv but couldn't focus. He tried sleeping but it wouldn't come. He tried not to think about the game the next day, the team that he once called his. He tried not to think about all he lost but rather everything he had gained.

He went on another run. And that still didn't help settle him.

Ilya had found him in the kitchen, barefoot on the cold tile, his hair still damp from his shower, and in a hoodie that definitely didn't belong to him as it was too big. It was one of Ilya's old sweatshirts - the faded Boston Bears logo barely readable from the continuous wears and washes. It was really Shane's sweatshirt now - he always stole Ilya's clothes when he was feeling overwhelmed. Mainly his sweatshirts; they were hefty and soft and they made him feel warm and protected. Ilya only wore them every now and then to make sure they still smelled like him, because he knew how much it comforted Shane.

Shane had been standing too close to the counter, hunched over reading the nutrition label for something he didn't even want to eat. He wasn't even hungry. He knew that. His body felt wrong in a way hunger couldn't explain. Still, he kept reading the numbers, the ingredients, the neat columns of certainty. He became stuck in the numbers. The order of them, because numbers made sense to him. The numbers behaved. It was the comfort of something measurable...something he could control. He was just stuck there...fixating. Letting the numbers replace the noise in his head for a while.

He had barely noticed the sound of the door opening behind him. Ilya's presence registered slowly, like warmth moving through cold water. A shift in the air. A quiet awareness. Shane didn't look up. He didn't need to. He already knew the shape of him, the weight of him, the way he filled a room without trying.

He felt the pause - that careful moment where Ilya took him in and understood more than he said.

"Hey" Ilya whispered carefully into the charged space.

Shane's shoulders tightened. His fingers had curled against the edge of the counter.

"I'm fine," he'd said too quickly.

Ilya didn't argue. Didn't call him out. He just stepped closer, close enough that Shane could feel that warmth of him at his back. One hand came to rest lightly at his waist - not gripping, not demanding - just there.

Shane's breath stuttered. He loved how much his body responded to that touch. How quickly his body leaned into it, how easily the tension shifted. He loved how in sync their bodies were together.

Ilya didn't say anything else. He didn't point out the box in front of him, or the way Shane's gaze was still locked on the numbers. He'd just reached past him, turned the box over so the label was face down, and slid it a few inches away.

A small thing. A mercy.

Shane swallowed, throat tight. The relief came too fast, too sharp, and with that came shame - hot and familiar. He'd promised himself he was past this. He'd worked so hard to be better. To be normal.

But Ilya didn't comment. Didn't make a joke. Didn't lecture.

He just rested his forehead briefly against Shane's shoulder, grounding and warm, and said quietly, "Come upstairs."

Shane let himself be guided. He didn't fight it. He didn't ask why. He let himself be steered away from the kitchen, from the numbers, from the spiral he'd already fallen into.

Upstairs, Ilya moved around him with practiced gentleness. The kind born from knowing exactly when to touch and when not to. He took care of him the way one learns to take care of someone they love - by paying attention.

Shane let himself be undressed. Not hurried, not rushed - just guided. He had let himself be eased out of his clothes and into the quiet of the room, had let himself be folded into the bed like something precious instead of fragile. Ilya moved around him with the kind of care that didn't ask for anything in return, hands steady and sure, grounding him without ever demanding his attention.

It wasn't about want. It wasn't even about comfort, not exactly. It was about being brought back into himself. It was about connection - allowing him to grasp something tangible: the love Ilya had for him.

When they were like that - when the world narrowed to the warmth and quiet and the steady presence of another body - Shane didn't feel whole or fixed.

He felt held.

It wasn't peace, not exactly. Not relief. It was the absence of noise, the softening of edges. The fading of the world and the loosening of something controlled too tightly for too long. For just a moment, the constant pressure inside him loosened its grip - just enough for him to be distracted, and he could breathe without bracing for the next impact.

He had always thought of himself as something fractured. A thing made of mismatched pieces, edges worn sharp by years of trying to fit into places that were never built for him. He carried those fractures everywhere, learned how to hide them, learned how to pretend they didn't exist. Learned how to pretend he wasn't made of them.

But in Ilya's hands, the story shifted.

Ilya didn't treat him like something that needed fixing. He didn't smooth the cracks or pretend they weren't there. He touched him like someone touches a work of art - careful, reverent, aware that every line and fracture carried its own history. Like the brakes were not flaws, but evidence of something that had survived.

Shane didn't feel repaired. He felt *held together* - focused in the moment of just them. Held in a way that allowed him to exist without flinching, to be still. And in that space - between breath and heartbeat, between the warmth of skin and the quiet of being seen - he stopped fighting the world long enough to rest inside it. Just for a moment. Just long enough to forget the weight of what waited for him the next day on the ice.

It didn't mean he was better or that the fear was gone. But for a little while, wrapped up in the quiet of Ilya's breathing and the closeness of Ilya's warmth, and the togetherness of Ilya's love - Shane wasn't unraveling.

He was simply there.

Later, after Ilya had taken him apart and put him back together, he had run them a bath. Ilya washed him in a way like the act itself was a promise. Water over skin. Familiar hands. The steady reassurance of touch that asked for nothing and expected nothing. Shane let himself sink into it, let the tension drain from his muscles, and his head quieted the worries about seeing old friends that next day.

Once they had dried off and curled up in bed together, Shane thought about how easy it was to slip back into old habits - ones that steal more from him than he is able to give. He thought about how easy and quietly it had happened. How frighteningly natural it had felt. But he had let himself curl into Ilya's chest and listen to the beat of his heart - the soundtrack of his life.

The tightness in his chest had eased, the worries about seeing Montreal didn't fade, per se, but Shane was able to block them out in exchange for focusing on Ilya.

Shane's ears are still ringing, the shrill not as oppressive but still fully enveloping his senses. The world is still muffled - small noises filtering in and out - but not clear like when he's present. There's no clean sound - just low vibrations of murmurs, or small shuffles of feet. He's still staring at the floor. At the darling red soaking into his sock. At the way the blood spreads, slow and calculating, as if it's thinking about where it wants to go.

His fingers are curled so tightly in his hair that his scalp aches. He doesn't register the movement until the pain blooms into something sharp behind his eyes, something tangible - and even then it's distant - another sensation layered on top of too many others.

He doesn't hear the room shift. He doesn't see the air change. He doesn't register the squeak of the door hinge as it opens, or the click of its latch as it closes.

He doesn't hear anything, frozen outside of time. But then his body reacts before his mind does. His shoulders hitch, his breath stutters, his eyes blink.

His chest tightens and cracks, just enough to let something through - to let the softest of voices penetrate.

"Shane."

The sound of his name carried through the charged air cuts through everything else in his body.

Like a lighthouse signaling the way out, the way home. Shining a light just for him.

The ringing doesn't stop, but it dims. The noise doesn't vanish, but it softens just enough around the edges, just enough he won't cut himself.

Shane looks up.

Ilya stands by the door, arms still in a sling, his face blooming with bruises that weren't there this morning. His shoulders are tense in a way that must hurt his collarbone, eyes soft and hurting, worried and searching Shane's for answers. He looks tired and broken, and heartbreakingly beautiful. He looks achingly young - he looks like the young boy Shane fell in love with - worried, and unsure, and fiercely protective.

And something inside Shane gives way.

His chest caves in on itself and the words come spilling out, tangled and breathless, tripping over each other as if they've been building grain by grain and the hill has finally collapsed.

"I'm sorry," he gasps out, his voice cracking. "I'm- I'm so sorry. I couldn't - I couldn't let them do that. I couldn't let them talk about you like that. Like it was your fault. Like someone else's hate is your responsibility to answer for." His breathing is hitching, coming out in erratic bursts. "Like our love is the explanation for someone else's disgust."

His hands are shaking in his hair, his fingers opening and closing again, reintroducing pain as a stimulant, a friend, something he can count on.

“I know I shouldn’t have let them get to me. I shouldn’t have said anything without talking to you. I should’ve just-” His voice trails off. “But I couldn’t just sit there and listen as they turned what we have into something ugly to fit their headlines. I couldn’t-” his throat closes. “I couldn’t let them turn what we have into something disagreeable.”

His eyes drift to the floor again, eye contact too vulnerable, too honest, like they can see the confessions of his soul.

He shouldn’t have said anything, he shouldn’t have revealed their hearts without Ilya’s permission. He shouldn’t be the one freaking out, he doesn’t have the right to.

The room feels too close. Too loud. Even the quiet presses in on him, thick and heavy.

He squeezes his eyes shut.

He needs to fix this. He needs to apologize for...something. He should apologize to the team, to Ilya, to everyone. He needs to apologize for making it all about him again.

He looks up at his husband. He stares directly into those gorgeous eyes and he tries to convey everything he’s feeling in that one gaze. He needs to be better.

“I didn’t-” he starts, voices breaking as breathing becomes more difficult. “I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry I’m...” the words drift, his tongue choking on itself. “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t mean to. I’m trying...I can’t stop.” Shane is unraveling.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Give me a second. I’m being stupid. I’m sorry.” Shane repeats over and over again, the words losing shape, losing meaning. He looks back down at his feet.

“I’m sorry. It’s stupid. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so stupid-”

The repetition collapses into itself, into something smaller and more desperate. Shane is slowly losing grasp on the room, his thoughts becoming small murmurs of repetition, a soothing pattern of harmful behavior.

“Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupidstupid.”

He’s suddenly hyper aware of the room as he dissolves into sound rather than language. His breathing is ragged, uneven, too fast. His whole body caving into itself as he tries to make himself smaller - make up for taking too much room.

He hears people breathing heavily, someone in the room snuffles. He hears small movements of shuffling around the room. And then he hears his husband’s voice, close to his ear.

“Shhhh...dorogoy. Shhh.” Ilya whispers in the space between them.

Shane can’t seem to stop, tears spilling down his face as something long contained finally finds its way out.

“Shhh...calm dorogoy. Shhhh.” Ilya squats in front of Shane. He repeats small “shh” or “chhh” noises, repetitive sounds that allow Shane’s mind to focus on. Shane feels his left hand encircle one of his wrists in his hair, applying pressure and keeping it in place. Shane hadn’t realized he was lightly punching himself in the head.

Shane looks up enough to see Ilya kneeling in front of him. The hand on Shane’s wrist keeps constant pressure on his wrist, while Ilya slowly works Shane’s hand out of his hair. Once he’s able to pry one hand from his hair, Ilya slowly brings that arm down to Shane’s knee, laying his arm face up on his leg and maintaining light pressure. Shane’s other hand is still tightly wound through his hair, but his punching has stopped, his body focusing on the pressure and presence of Ilya.

After a moment, Ilya lightly loosens his grip and allows Shane to have a moment. His husband recenters himself and lightly taps Shane’s knee. Asking if touch is okay to continue. Shane hesitates...he truly doesn’t know. But he lightly knocks his knee into his husband’s hand twice, a sign that he wants his husband close but to go slow with the touch.

Ilya’s hand comes back up to the arm resting on his knee, applying that gentle pressure to his wrist.

“I’m sorry,” Shane repeats, like a broken record.

“No, No, No. Shhh. Nothing to be sorry for, sweetheart.” Ilya murmurs. “You and me, hmm? We’re together, yes?” Ilya asks, in a way to reassure Shane, not actually needing an answer. But Shane nods anyway, to remind himself that nothing else matters.

They don’t say “it’ll be okay” when things are hard, and out of control, and definitely not okay. They don’t lie to each other like that - give false promises and superficial words. They’ve already had years of unspoken words - they just say the one true thing they have left - each other.

“You see, moya lyubov’,” Ilya says, “All that matters - you and me. We’re together.”

Shane keeps nodding slightly, but he can’t help himself from repeating, “I’m sorry.”

Ilya shakes his head, and scoots a little bit closer - not too much to overwhelm him - but enough to make him feel encapsulated - in their own little bubble.

“Nothing to be sorry for. You are right, I do not care who knows. I will shout from tallest building in Ottawa that I love you.” Ilya says, trying to keep his voice light as his thumb rubs soothing circles on Shane’s wrist.

Shane huffs a little, trying to focus everything on Ilya. “Wow, tallest building in Ottawa.”

Ilya’s breathing is steady and exaggerated - something for Shane to copy. Ilya chuckles low and Shane can hear the small smirk in his voice.

“I will shout from the tallest building in the world.” Ilya takes a beat, and then amends, “Actually let’s do the smallest building in Ottawa, easier for people to hear me.” Ilya jokes,

and Shane can hear small huffs from somewhere in the room. Shane stiffens a little and he tries not to think about other people, tries not to focus on the shame he can feel welling up. His breathing is still too fast and his body is tingling all over and he can still feel tears falling silently down his face.

Ilya must feel him clench up a bit, because he continues. "You know what, I just stand on street yelling at everyone how much I love you. Much simpler." Ilya promises, "So people understand how much I love you."

Shane breath stutters on a small sob - one that comes when you're crying but trying to calm down from it. He whispers lightly into the room, "That's all I wanted them to know, to make them understand - how much I love you." He sniffles. He knows he should let it go, can feel himself getting worked up again, but his brain won't stop racing. "How can people not understand that loving you is the easiest thing in the world - it's them - everyone else in the world that makes it seem difficult." Shane gasps.

Ilya moves his hand to the back of Shane's knee and applies pressure there - trying to bring him back down, ground him enough before he crashes.

"Shhh...yes, yes, I know. Very easy to fall in love with me. I have such pretty face." Ilya teases. Shane makes a sound that sounds more like a ragged hiccup than a chuckle.

"Oh my god. You are such an asshole."

"Yes, big asshole." Ilya concedes, and Shane, he thinks back to that first night in that hotel room. How nervous and afraid and hopeless he had been. How inexperienced he had been and how Ilya had made him laugh when he felt his most vulnerable. Ilya probably didn't even realize how much that helped - but it made Shane feel...safe in some weird way. He thinks back to the very beginning and how easily they fit together - how easily he became Ilya's.

Shane sobs harder this time, moving his one hand to the front of Ilya's shirt, clutching it tight. Tapping over his heart three times, before bring it back down to his knee.

"But you're my asshole, Ilya. You're mine, they can't take that away," he confesses, like committing to an oath, creating a prayer, releasing a confessional of everything that is tattooed on his heart.

"You're mine. You're mine. You're mine. Youremineyouremineyouremineyouremine..." He repeats, his heart, his soul, his very essence being split open for all to read. He doesn't realize he's losing himself again, not realizing he's started punching himself again. Until Ilya's hand grabs the wrist that was beating his knee.

Shane can't follow much of anything anymore. His whole body feels like it's tingling - like when your foot falls asleep and then starts waking up again. He can hear his blood singing in his ears and his heart dropping to his stomach. He needs to get out of here - out of this room, out of this building, out of his head.

His head is firmly raised up - a hand tightly grabbing the back of his neck.

“Shane.” Ilya demands firmly, voice strong and in control. Something to listen to, to follow.

“I need you to focus, sweetheart. You’re coming apart and I’m going to help you.” Ilya tells him, “But I need to go grab some things from the car.” Shane whimpers when he hears this, trying to lower his head. But Ilya’s grip on his neck is solid and unshakable.

“I know, but it’s much easier if I grab them, will be much faster. But I need you to focus for a few moments. You aren’t in the right headspace, baby. I know we never got a chance to update the list, but I can’t leave you without someone right now.” Ilya voice is clear and precise, but it takes Shane way too long to comprehend what’s being say.

The list...the list of people safe to touch him if Ilya’s not available. Shane whimpers and tears start falling faster, he doesn’t want anyone else but Ilya.

“I know sweetheart. I know. I am sorry, but it would take to long to get the items you need if I sent someone else. And besides, I can’t hold you the way you need to be held right now.” Ilya apologizes, pain in his eyes. “I know your head is slowing down, but I need you to focus for a minute. You need to pick someone...or two.”

Ilya and him had been talking about it lately - Ilya recommending that maybe Shane add someone from the team to the list - to help him if Ilya couldn’t. Shane didn’t want the list in the first place, but it brought Ilya peace of mind. But right now he didn’t want anyone but his husband.

“No...please...no,” Shane begs, “Just give me a minute. I just want you...please.”

Ilya looked down at Shane and Shane could see the absolute torture behind his husbands eyes. His husband is hurting because of him - always because of him.

“I’m sorry.” both him and Ilya whisper at the same time. Ilya shakes his head, “No, sweetheart. You’ve done nothing wrong.” Ilya promises. “How about this, you give me two names and I’ll take care of the rest. Just pick two people...please. Let me help you.”

Shane sits there looking at his beautiful husband and something inside himself hardens - he can do this. He can keep his head above water, he can keep himself together for his husband. He will claw and clutch at the edges of the world long enough for his husband to get back. He can be strong.

“Wyatt,” Shane breathes lightly. “Wyatt...and Luca.”

“I love you. Great job. You are doing amazing.” Ilya praises, maintaining eye contact with Shane, maintaining contact and tethering him to this moment as he takes charge of the room.

“Wyatt?” Ilya asks.

“Yea Roz.” Wyatt responds quietly to the right of Ilya.

“Go into my stall and on the top shelf is my cologne.” Ilya instructs, eyes never leaving Shanes. He’s squeezing the back of Shane’s neck in a light rhythm. “Spray a little on your shirt and wrist. Not too much. Don’t want to overwhelm him.” Ilya advises.

The word “overwhelm” hits Shane like a warming siren; he holds Ilya’s gaze and makes a small sound of fear - eyes holding Ilya’s so the room doesn’t swallow him whole.

“Luca.”

“Yea, Captain?” Luca stutters - voice cracking.

“Do the same, but put it in your hair.”

Shane hears the movement around the room, the shuffling of bags, the opening of Ilya’s locker beside his own. He hears the spray of cologne and the mutters of confusion, but he keeps his eyes on Ilya.

Shane can see Wyatt and Luca standing behind Ilya’s back and his body stiffens - his body preparing for impact, for uncharted territory.

“Shhh...calm love. They won’t touch you without permission.” Ilya promises.

Shane trusts his husband with everything he has, but his body doesn’t respond the same way. He can feel the edges of collapse back away in exchange for hyper awareness. It’s like his body - one just on the verge of collapse - is surviving on fear and desperation alone - triggering its fight-or-flight mode in the presence of something not familiar. His body is forcing his mind to come back into itself - to shelf the panic and fear and shattering for later - until he’s safe, until he’s somewhere familiar.

Shane uncurls his body, straightens up until he’s almost the eye level with his kneeling husband. His shoulders go back, his body tightens, his defenses sharpen - nothing like how they usually are - but enough to know where danger lies. He knows that’s wrong to think, to think his team is dangerous and in his heart he knows they’re not dangerous.

They are not the enemy.

They are his protection, not his demise.

But he’s only ever had three people touch him in the middle of an episode and only one of those he had complete control over. He knows that Wyatt and Luca are safe, that’s why he chose them. He had already been considering them before, when Ilya asked him if there was anyone on the team that would be safe. But he thought he would have more time to consider, to decide, to control.

His eyes never stray from his husband as he instructs his two teammates, his friends...his family on how to help him.

“Luca,” his husband acknowledges, “Sit against the base of his stall on his right side. Don’t touch him. Just sit close enough he can feel your warmth.”

Luca listens to his husband very intently, sitting on the floor of the locker room, facing the door on Shane’s right side.

“Lay your hand flat on the floor next to his foot. Let it rest there - he’ll decide if he wants to make contact.” Ilya informs, making sure to get across that no one should touch Shane without permission.

“Okay, dorogoy?” Ilya asks softly, checking in to make sure everything is alright.

Shane nods his head twice slowly - conveying that they have to be cautious, gentle - *go slow*.

“You’re doing great,” Ilya praises. “Now I need to focus - you know the rules - I can’t leave you without pressure and I can’t let you keep hitting your pretty little head. If you hit too hard, freckles might fall off.” Ilya whispers sadly, lightly trying to ease the weight of Shane’s discomfort. “I’m going to go grab the things we have in the car for emergencies - much faster if I do it. It’s also better if someone else grounds you - I can’t hold both wrists and I know you might not like this - but Wyatt has to hold your wrists.” Ilya whispers lightly, and Shane wants to get up and run out the door. But that would take much more energy than he has - energy he is focusing all into not completely self-destructing.

“We’re going to take this slow, okay?” Ilya tells him gently. “Wyatt, come here slowly and crouch down next to me.” Ilya instructs, moving slightly off to the left of Shane so Wyatt can be in front of Shane’s legs. Ilya maintains his grasp on the back of Shane’s neck and his eyes never leave Shane’s. Shane can feel Wyatt close, his heat in front of him. It’s different than Luca - this is right in Shane’s face - close to him. He takes a few steadying breaths and once he has control of himself again, he nods at Ilya.

“Okay, Wyatt, slowly and lightly tap the outside of Shane’s knee. You’re asking him if you can touch him. Tap it and then leave your hand to the side of his knee a little bit away so it’s not touching anymore but he can if he needs to.” Ilya directs, very deliberate and precise in his instructions.

“It’s up to Shane when he wants to be touched.” Ilya informs him, “When he taps your hand twice, that’s when you know it’s okay to touch.” Ilya pauses before speaking to Shane, “There’s no pressure - take all the time you need dorogoy.”

Shane can feel Wyatt’s movement, and can feel him getting closer. He breaks eye contact for a second to see where his hand is. He feels Ilya left hand squeeze his neck and he looks back to his husband. Ilya nods, understanding - *look, know what’s happening*. Shane looks back to his knee just in time to see Wyatt tap the outside of his left knee lightly, before pulling back. His hand suspended in the air right next to his knee. He stares at his knee and the hand of his teammate and slowly looks up at the man in front of him. Wyatt is looking at him with concern...but it’s not pity.

Shane had been so worried that his teammates would think he’s a freak, that they would think he’s weird and not worth the hassle, that he’s something to be pitied. He never really came out and said that he had Autism - he’d meant to, but it was just so hard to find the right words, to make the right moves. Ilya had told him he didn’t have to do anything he didn’t want to do, but he felt he owed it to his new team. He owed them and himself the truth - to know what they were signing up for. But he could never do - he was too much of a coward. So Ilya and him decided to lightly show it - through Shane’s routines, what he didn’t like. Small habits and rituals and orders that showcased who Shane is. They didn’t make a big

announcement, they just slowly didn't hide what they talked about. And Shane knew the team caught on - they understood that there was something more - even if not all of them knew the name. They just made space for Shane - they accepted that he needed to sit in a certain spot within a room, they accepted his little routines and his reluctance for change, and they accepted him - in all the quiet little moments. But Shane still had the small, tiny fears that one day it would all blow up and become too much and they would see he wasn't worth it.

But looking at Wyatt, he can see the man is concerned and sad - but he can also see his love for Shane. He doesn't pity Shane, he's not scared of Shane or disgusted with Shane - he loves him. He wants to help him.

Shane's breath flutters and he looks back down at that hand briefly before looking back at Wyatt. He moves his knee briefly - hitting Wyatt's fingers twice. He sees the way Wyatt tries to hide his surprise, hide his happiness at acceptance - to not react too big to scare him away - and that makes something warm bubble up in his chest. His teammate happy to help, happy to be accepted, happy to love him honestly.

Shane looks back to Ilya and sees a small smile on his face. "You are amazing, moya lyubov' - I am so proud." Ilya gasps, voice cracking with pride. "Now Wyatt, I need you to listen carefully. Take Shane's right hand that's still in his hair and lightly unlace it. Make sure not to be too tight or restrictive when you touch him." Ilya guides gently, looking directly at Shane - watching for any change in his features.

Shane feels Wyatt's light touch tickle the back of his hand and slowly slip under his closed palm, loosening his grip on his hair. Once Shane's fingers are no longer clutching his head - Shane feels a release of pressure at the front of his scalp - not realizing how hard he was gripping or the pain he was causing.

"Great, now slowly bring that arm to rest on his right leg - facing palm up like his left arm."

Wyatt does exactly what Ilya tells him to do, making sure to be gentle and telegraphing his intentions before doing it - giving Shane time to prepare.

"Now I need you to grasp both wrists and apply pressure to them - don't grab too tightly he can't break free if he needs too. Also make sure not to grab his hands or fingers - he doesn't like when those are restricted - just apply enough pressure to ground him." Ilya directs firmly and cleanly.

Wyatt's grasp on Shane's wrists is different than his husbands and his body reacts before his mind can stop it. He stiffens up a bit and he can feel Wyatt also stiffen up in response to his discomfort. But he then - not relaxes because this isn't relaxing - but lets his shoulders loosen a little. He lets himself focus on breathing in and out, he focuses on being present. Wyatt's hands aren't as calloused as Ilya's - Shane is surprised by this - expecting a goalie's hands to be coarser for some reason.

He takes stock of himself - he can feel his fight or flight responses trying to take over his body and he can feel the static trying to take over his mind - but he stays within himself and this moment - clinging hard to coherence - or the best he can do.

He looks back up to his husband and he nods twice - *fine, okay*. His breathing is still a little too fast to make this convincing, but he's okay enough for Ilya to get what he needs. He can be what Ilya needs him to be for the moment.

Ilya leans down - having stood up to let Wyatt have more room - his hand still on the back of Shane's neck and whispers "Ты — моё сердце. Я скоро вернусь." *You are my heart. I'll be right back.*

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed this. This is my soul on a display so please...be gentle - but honest.

And like Shane Hollander, I love praise, so please leave any comments, like, and love.

All my love,
P2R.

Chapter 3: The Weight of What Was Taken

Chapter Summary

Some wounds don't show on the ice.

Hate has a cost - and love can't be the cure.

Chapter Notes

CAUTION: This chapter depicts heavy topics like disordered eating, anxiety, depression, and hateful behavior. It also mentions a previous suicide. Please don't read if this could hurt you.

So... it's been a whirlwind.

I don't think I can fully express how surreal this past week has been — seeing so many people read my work, connect to it, and find pieces of their own experiences reflected back at them. That's something I never expected, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around it.

I know it's been a little while. Thank you for your patience.

This story has grown into something I never could've planned for. The fact that people are finding it through rec accounts, through social media — that anyone likes it enough to recommend it to others — still feels unreal to me.

I want to be honest with you.

Writing these chapters takes a lot out of me. Not because I don't love this story — I do — but because so much of it comes from lived experience. From places that are tender, complicated, and deeply personal. Like Shane, perfection often feels like the only allowance I give myself, and that means I spend an exhausting amount of time agonizing over the smallest details — even things as seemingly insignificant as chapter titles.

After the last chapter, I didn't have a breakdown the way Shane did on the page, but I felt the comedown afterward — the aftermath. That strange, hollow exhaustion where everything feels overwhelming and unfocused, like a raw nerve left exposed. Burnout hit hard, and working customer service forty hours a week when you're supposed to be part-time definitely didn't help. 😊

There were moments where I wondered if I could keep going.

I still had ideas — thoughts about Ilya's perspective, about other POVs — but I couldn't find the spark. I couldn't make myself care in the way I needed to. Eventually, I sat down and just... wrote. Without a plan. Without expectations.

And what came out wasn't what I thought this chapter would be.

I had ideas about Ilya reacting to the press conference — I still do — but instead, I found myself giving him space. Time. Depth.

Letting him exist in his own heart before colliding with Shane's breaking point.

When I finally looked up, I had over 11,000 words and the quiet realization that this might not be what people expected — but it might be what the story needed.

Insight before fracture. Depth before drowning.

I know this chapter may not be what some of you were hoping for next, but I truly hope you'll give it a chance.

I also want to be realistic. School starts soon, and while I *am* continuing this story — there will be more chapters — I ask for a little grace and patience as I work to give you my best. I'll do everything I can to keep writing and to keep moving forward, but these chapters take time, care, and emotional energy. I promise I'm not disappearing — just being mindful of what it takes to do this well.

And finally, thank you.

Thank you for every comment, every message, every bit of kindness you've shared. I may not respond to all of them, but please know that I read every single one and hold them close. I think I'm a little like Shane in that way — I agonize over words, worry they won't be enough, worry I'll say the wrong thing... and sometimes that means I go quiet instead.

But your words matter more to me than I can say. Truly.

Thank you for being here.

Thank you for trusting me with this story.

All my love,

P2R

Ilya has always hated playing Montreal.

Well — no. That's not entirely true.

When Shane played for them, Ilya loved it. He even looked forward to their games. Ilya found it intoxicating watching him on the ice — seeing Shane become someone else out there. Someone sharper. Certain. Unshakable.

Out there, Shane moved like instinct made real, like his body knew exactly what to do without needing permission from his mind. He didn't second-guess or overthink or let worries distract him — and if he did, Ilya couldn't see them. It was like whatever noise lived in Shane's head fell away, leaving only him and the ice.

Out there Shane was just...present.

There was something undeniably beautiful about seeing the man you love move with that kind of confidence — watching him exist without apology, without fear.

Shane on the ice was grace made physical.

It was like watching him breathe.

But now that they played on the same team, Ilya didn't find that same joy he did before when playing Montreal.

That's not to say Ilya doesn't love beating them — crushing them, humiliating them to their core. He relishes being able to show them how badly they fucked up by letting Shane go. But now, he revels in being able to play *with* his husband, seeing Shane in the same colors as him.

And Shane is still brilliant out there. Still lethal and completely centered when out on the ice.

That will never change — and Ilya loves that.

What Ilya hates is everything that comes before. He hates what these games do to Shane in the days leading up to them. He hates watching his husband retreat into a version of himself that Ilya thought — hoped — they'd left behind.

Because this isn't just another team.

This is *them*.

And facing them brings out every old fear Shane has been learning to let go of.

The thing about Shane is he's never been the most comfortable with public displays of affection and Ilya knows this. He's always known this. Shane spent too many years terrified of what other people would think, too many years learning to make himself less noticeable. Even now, sometimes, that fear still lives underneath his skin.

But he's getting better. With this team, at least, Shane has grown into something softer, more himself. It's nothing loud or obvious, but it's there in little moments.

Shane doesn't flinch away anymore when Ilya's hand finds his shoulder in the locker room. He leans into it sometimes, that subtle shift of weight that means *I'm here. I'm yours*.

He lets Ilya tap their knees together on the bench during the games. Lets him squeeze the back of his neck and bump their helmets together after a good shot. At team dinners, he sits close enough for their arms to touch, and doesn't pull away when Ilya's arm settles around him.

On team flights, he no longer fights sleep. Ilya still sees his hesitation in the way he rests his head against the window first, allowing the thrum of the engines to pull him under. But Ilya knows the trust is the act itself — knows that Shane is aware he won't wake up where he started. That he allows himself this small act of vulnerability. Allows himself to surrender. His breathing evening out and his body doing what it always does — seeking out safety where it knows it resides. Shane will shift, curling into Ilya's chest, and Ilya will hold him there without having to be asked.

These are the small things in the quiet moments.

Things that matter because Shane chose them and Ilya cherishes every single one.

But when Montreal appears on their schedule, Shane pulls away.

It happens gradually — so slowly that Ilya didn't even notice it the first time it happened. But when he finally did notice the changes, he couldn't unsee them.

Shane starts putting distance between them in spaces that used to feel safe. In the locker room, he sits a little straighter, a little farther. When Ilya reaches for him — just a hand on his back, a touch on his arm — Shane accepts it, but he doesn't lean into it. He holds himself still instead, like he's waiting for someone to notice. Like he's waiting for someone to say something — steeling himself for judgement that hasn't come but might.

It's not rejection, Ilya knows this. At home, it's different. At home, Shane can't get close enough.

He curls into Ilya on the couch like he's trying to crawl inside him. Presses his face into his neck and breathes him in. Tangles their legs together until he can't tell where one of them ends and the other begins. His fingers grip Ilya's shirt, a firm, desperate attempt to root himself in place. Like he's afraid someone might come and pull them apart if he doesn't hold on tight enough.

Shane never says anything during these moments. He doesn't have to. His body speaks for him in a language Ilya has learned to read fluently over the years.

I need you. Don't let go. Please. Don't let me go.

And Ilya doesn't. He wraps his arms around Shane and holds him as tightly as he's being held. He runs his fingers through his hair and murmurs soft things in Russian — promises and reassurances that Shane probably doesn't translate in his head because his body already understands.

I'm here. You're mine.

But what Ilya doesn't understand — what chips away at his heart every single time — is how Shane can't see it.

Can't see that he's already carved into Ilya's bones. Engraved into his heart in a way that nothing — not distance, not time, not the weight of a past he never fully escaped — could ever erase.

And Shane holds onto him like their love is something fragile that needs to be protected from the world. And maybe it does need protecting. However, what Shane doesn't seem to understand is that he's not something Ilya *has*.

He's something Ilya *is*.

There's no version of Ilya's life — no version of his heart — that doesn't have Shane written into every part of it.

But Ilya can admit that Shane might know something about cruelty that Ilya is still learning. Not that Ilya doesn't understand hate — he does. He's known it in its purest form. His father's rejection was never hidden, never dressed up as something softer. His brother's disgust was straightforward, honest in its cruelty. Ilya never had to wonder where he stood. The hate was clean. Direct.

And his mother's love was the same — pure, unconditional, never wavering. She loved him loudly, proudly, and openly.

Ilya has known both in their clearest forms. Love and hate. Side by side — both honest about what they were.

But Shane? Shane knew something different. Something worse, Ilya thinks.

Shane knew love with conditions he hadn't known existed. Love that looked unconditional until the day it wasn't. He thought he had a family — for eleven years he bled for them, stood beside them, gave them everything — only to discover their acceptance had fine print he'd never been shown.

That's its own form of cruelty. The kind where you can't grieve cleanly because you're too busy wondering what you missed, what you did wrong, how you failed to see the terms and conditions of your own belonging.

At least Ilya never had to wonder if his father loved him. The rejection was honest and he could grieve what he never had because it was never offered.

That would've hurt more, he thinks — believing you were loved, only to find out later it was contingent upon something all along.

Shane doesn't let people in easily to begin with — his trust is hard-won, earned over time. But he loves completely and without condition once you have it. To him, love meant permanence — he just didn't realize that wasn't true for everyone.

Shane's loyalty runs deep. Deeper than most people understand. It's the kind of loyalty that many people with autism and neurodivergence seem to experience — once someone is in, they're *in*. Proximity can become connection and shared experience becomes a sort of kinship. While Ilya doesn't and will never be able to fully understand it, he's been on the receiving end of that loyalty — something he is honored to have been given. It doesn't matter that Shane holds many things close to his chest, that he was hiding parts of himself from Montreal — that he never showed them his whole heart.

He was there. He was loyal. He was a part of them.

And in Shane's mind, that meant something permanent.

That meant family.

Loyalty like that doesn't break easily. Even after betrayal. Even after everything.

Shane still carries them with him — not because he wants to, but because loyalty doesn't have an off switch. You can't just stop caring about people you considered family for over a decade, no matter how much they hurt you. And it kills Ilya. He loves that Shane is so loyal, but he hates that he's loyal to his own detriment.

And so when they appear on the schedule, it's not just another game, another opponent. It's people — a past Shane is still loyal to, even as they haunt him.

And when those ghosts get too close, Shane withdraws.

He watches himself the way he used to when they first came out — when every gesture felt like evidence, every moment of softness something that could be used against them.

He erases himself in degrees so subtle most people don't notice.

But Ilya always notices. The changes are there if you know where to look — and Ilya is always looking at Shane.

In public, Shane becomes careful again. Measured. Meticulous in every interaction. It isn't the same unease he carries in unfamiliar spaces. This is heavier — memory sharpened into a weapon. Ilya watches as his control tightens tenfold, restrictive in how he moves, how he speaks, how he holds himself like he's waiting to be corrected. Like he's bracing for a mistake that hasn't yet been made.

He sees it in the way Shane's shoulders curl forward when he enters a room. The way his voice quiets — not in his usual thoughtful way, but in withdrawal. How his smile thins out and becomes performance instead of feeling. Shane moves through the locker room like he's apologizing for the space he occupies — like he's trying to be insignificant, to not disturb anyone on the team.

Proving he won't be a problem.

Showing the team that he can be easy to keep.

As though his place on the team is something borrowed, rather than what it really is.

Home.

And Ilya hates it.

Hates watching Shane shrink himself into something manageable. Hates that the place Shane had once called home — the people he once considered family — can still reach across years and ice and twist him into something afraid.

This isn't about performance. It isn't about the game.

It's about what Montreal represents.

The place where Shane learned that love was provisional. That acceptance could be revoked. That being himself — autistic, queer, complex — meant being too much. The place that taught him survival meant erasure.

Shane carries every memory of that city and that team and those colors within him — agonizing over mistakes he never made, drowning himself in hatred that was never his to carry.

And that's the cruelest part, Ilya thinks.

That on the ice, Shane knows exactly who he is. Knows his worth. Knows where he belongs.

But everywhere else — when the past closes in, when ghosts with faces eerily similar to old friends resurface — he forgets.

That's why he hates playing Montreal.

Not because of what they do to Shane on the ice.

But because of what they take from him everywhere else.

Ilya sighs, dropping his gaze to Shane's sleeping form beside him. All these thoughts whirl through his head as his fingers move through Shane's hair slowly — a familiar path, one he's traced more times than he could count. The room is dark except for the pale light seeping in through the curtains, just enough to see the outline of Shane's face, the slope of his shoulder, the steady rise and fall of his chest.

Safe. For now.

He knows every strand of hair, every contour of his face. Knows the exact spot behind Shane's left ear where a single freckle hides. Knows the small scar near his hairline from his injury on the ice a few years ago. His thumb traces across Shane's temple, down the bridge of his nose, brushing lightly over freckles — his precious angel kisses. Spots he has memorized better than the lines of his own palm.

Earlier tonight had been worrying, like most nights this week.

Ilya had found Shane in the kitchen again, standing barefoot on the cold tile in one of Ilya's old hoodies — the one Shane pretends were lost years ago when they were really in his closet. Shane had been hunched over the counter, fixated on a nutrition label. Stuck in the numbers the way he gets when everything else becomes too loud.

Ilya recognizes it now. The pattern. The way Shane's mind latches onto control when everything else feels like it's slipping.

He'd approached carefully. Had rested a hand on Shane's waist and felt the way Shane's whole body responded — leaning back into him like he'd been waiting for permission to stop holding himself upright.

Ilya had turned the box over. Slid it away. Gently told Shane to come upstairs.

And Shane had let him.

That's the part that confuses Ilya. Not that Shane spirals — Ilya understands Shane's mind works differently, and that a lot of the time it works against him in ways that aren't fair or kind. What confuses him is how relieved Shane looked when Ilya intervened. Like he'd been drowning and hadn't known how to ask for help. Like he needed someone else to give him permission to stop.

Upstairs, Ilya had undressed him slowly. Had brought him back into his body in one of the only ways Shane ever fully allows — through connection, through Ilya's voice telling him what to do, being held while Ilya took control in a way that helps quiet Shane's mind. A language they've built together over years of learning each other.

Afterward, Shane had clung to him. Pressed his face into Ilya's neck and wrapped himself around Ilya like he could disappear into him if he just held on tightly enough.

He hadn't said anything. Hadn't needed to.

But Ilya had felt it — the fear, the need, the desperate attempt to anchor himself to something solid when his own mind felt too unstable to trust.

Ilya's fingers pause in Shane's hair, his chest tightening.

This need for connection isn't new. Neither is Shane's inability to see he's not the problem — that needing support doesn't make him less. That struggling doesn't make him broken.

Shane goes to therapy. Has been going for months now — every Tuesday morning when they're home, the same time slot, scheduled between practice and team meetings. He has virtual appointments when they're on the road, same time, same day, the same consistency Shane needs. He takes it seriously in the way Shane takes everything seriously. Never misses an appointment. Does the homework his therapist assigns. Talks about what they discuss in session sometimes — sometimes at Ilya's prompting. And Ilya tries not to push, to ask — he knows those sessions are private and Shane has the right to privacy. But while on paper, Shane is doing everything right, nothing is changing.

Or maybe that's not fair, Ilya thinks as he continues gliding his hand through Shane's soft hair. Shane is better at identifying his triggers now. Better at naming his feelings. Better at recognizing when he's spiraling.

But recognizing isn't the same as acknowledging, or stopping.

And identifying isn't the same as healing.

Ilya sees it in the way Shane approaches therapy the same way he approaches everything else in his life— with careful control. With studied vulnerability. Like recovery is another thing he needs to perfect, another box he needs to check to prove he's trying hard enough.

Shane *knows* it's a problem. He acknowledges it. He listens when Ilya brings it up, nods in all the right places, agrees with everything Ilya says because he does understand it's true.

And then, he apologizes...again.

I'm sorry for worrying you. I'm sorry I'm still like this. I'm trying.

Like his pain is an inconvenience. Struggling something he needs permission for. As though the real problem isn't the disorder itself but that fact that other people have to witness it.

Ilya has tried talking to him about it. Many times. But Shane doesn't resist help the way people expect resistance to look like. He doesn't get defensive or angry. He just..listens. Takes responsibility. Promises to try harder.

And then nothing changes.

Ilya stares at his husband, the most gorgeous man to ever breathe and his heart hurts as he thinks about everything he's gone through, and everything he's still struggling with. Everything Ilya can't fix just by loving him enough — because Ilya knows that isn't how this works. Knows that love can't be your saving grace. It can be a safe place to land, but it can't be the answer.

Ilya remembers a night similar to this one, not too long ago.

Shane's therapist had suggested medication. Ilya hadn't been there for that conversation, but Shane had told him about it that night. Had explained what his therapist had said — that sometimes anxiety and obsessive thoughts need more than talk therapy. That medication might help him quiet the thoughts enough for Shane to actually *do* the work instead of just worrying about it.

Ilya remembers how Shane looked at him — like he was waiting for him to laugh, to say how ridiculous her even suggesting medication was. How the thought itself was so absurd that he needed Ilya to also confirm its craziness. But Ilya had hesitated and when he lightly suggested that maybe Shane should consider it — that maybe his therapist knew what's best — Shane snapped.

He had shut it down immediately. It was one of the rare times Ilya and Shane truly fought.

Their whole relationship was built on competition and rivalry and fighting — and getting married didn't change that. However, for the most part, most of their fighting was playful — sometimes even foreplay. It wasn't hurtful or anything truly wrong — it was just one of the few ways they had been able to communicate with each other all these years without anyone finding out. And they kept that form of communication even after they had gotten together and married. But that night — Shane had truly gotten mad. He didn't get loud in Ilya's sense of the word — but he did get loud for Shane's standards. Had snapped that he didn't need them and that Ilya was being ridiculous.

When Ilya gently asked why, Shane kept spouting the same thing over and over — reasons that sounded logical on the surface. That he was managing just fine, that other people had it worse. But Ilya knew that wasn't true, that Shane was still struggling — maybe even more than he had before. He tried to talk calmly, to show Shane what he had been seeing without forcing him, but Shane had completely shut him down. It was the one time he wouldn't listen. He got more worked up, frustrated and irritated, until he snapped.

"I don't want to be someone who depends on medication."

Ilya knew he hadn't meant it like it sounded. He hadn't meant for it to sound like a knife thrown as an accusation — one aimed right at Ilya's heart — but it had. It hurt, and Ilya had flinched back, felt his face fall and a piece of his heart break. Ilya just nodded his head, thinned his lips, and got up and walked away.

He had heard Shane's whispered "Ilya..." He had known that Shane hadn't realized what he'd implied until it was too late, but he had been too hurt and in his head to respond.

He had gone and taken Anya on a walk outside to calm down, to get his thoughts in order.

When he came back later than he usually would, the house was dark, silent in a way that felt heavier. He didn't call out for Shane right away, taking the time — maybe too much time — putting his shoes away, Anya's leash on the rack. He put his jacket on the hanger in the closet that Shane always huffed he never used.

He had slowly walked upstairs, and when he entered their room his heart broke all over again. He had found Shane curled up on their bed, head buried into his pillow, wrapped up on Ilya's side of their bed. He slowly walked over and sat on the edge, lightly running his hand up Shane's calf. When Shane moved and lifted his head, Ilya saw the red in his eyes, the swelling around his nose, the puffiness of his cheeks.

"Ilya," Shane gasped, voice wrecked and raw, reaching his hand out to grasp Ilya like he was afraid Ilya would go away again. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

He pushed himself up, reaching for Ilya with his other hand, both shaking. Ilya caught them, brought them up to his lips, pressing light and reassuring kisses to them as he held them gently between his own.

"I didn't mean—" Shane's breath hitched. "I didn't mean it like that. I would never — you're not—" He broke off, trying to find words that would undo what he'd said.

I know,” Ilya said softly. “I know, dorogoy. You don’t have to say anything.”

“No. You deserve to hear this — even if you know it’s true in your heart. Because I hurt you.” Shane’s face had crumpled. “I hurt you and I didn’t mean to and I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Shhh.” Ilya had pulled him close, wrapping his arms around him. Shane collapsed into him, his whole body shaking with the force of his crying.

“I just —” Shane tried again, pulling back just enough to look at Ilya. His eyes were desperate, pleading. He took a deep breath, “I never meant to make it sound like you are less than, or weaker, or anything absolutely less than the truth. Because you are none of those things. You are the strongest person that I know, the best person that I know, and I love you. I love you so much I can’t breathe when you’re not near. I am so sorry for ever making you think anything less than the truth. You are not less and you never have been and you never will be.” Shane breathed out.

Ilya felt his eyes well, his husband's words like a balm over a cut he didn’t realize was hurting. He knew his husband hadn’t meant it and he knew that his husband loved him, but hearing it was the healing bandage he needed.

Shane bit his lip and looked down at their hands, playing with Ilya’s wedding ring. “I just — I just can’t do it. I’m sorry. I just can’t.” He had looked up again, the tears starting to well on his waterline. “I don’t know how to explain it. I just can’t. Please don’t make me.”

Ilya’s chest had tightened. He cupped Shane’s face gently, thumbs brushing away tears that kept falling.

“I would never make you do anything,” he promised, voice steady and sure. “Never, Shane. It’s your choice. It will always be your choice.”

“But you think I should —” Shane’s voice broke. “You think I need to and maybe you’re right but I just — I can’t. Please, Ilya.”

The plea in his voice was raw, frightened in a way that had nothing to do with Ilya and everything to do with something Shane couldn’t name.

“Okay,” Ilya said firmly, pulling him back in. One hand cradled the back of Shane’s head, the other rubbed slow circles on his back. “Okay. We don’t have to talk about this. Not now. It can wait until you’re ready.”

“What if I’m never ready.” Shane had questioned, terror lacing through every word — Ilya could feel it, Shane’s fear of his own mind, his own body.

“Then we’ll take it day by day. We’ll figure it out. You and me, right?” Ilya promised.

Shane nodded his head, tears falling down his cheek. His head bowed, and Ilya could see a tear drop off his chin.

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispered again, curling into Ilya’s chest. “I’m sorry I’m like this. I’m sorry I can’t just — I don’t know why. I wish I could explain it but I don’t know.”

“Shhh. No apologizing,” Ilya murmured. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I hurt you—”

“You were scared,” Ilya corrected softly. “You said something without thinking because you were scared. I understand.”

Shane had made a sound — half sob, half laugh. “You always understand. Even when I don’t.”

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “That’s what I’m here for.”

They had stayed like that for a long time. Shane clinging to him, tears soaking through Ilya’s shirt. Ilya held him steady, whispering soft reassurances in Russian.

Eventually, Shane’s breathing evened out and his hands had stopped shaking. He pulled back just enough to look at Ilya, eyes still red but clearer.

“I don’t know why I can’t,” he admitted, exhausted. “I wish I could explain it. I wish I could understand it. I just know that I can’t. Not yet” He admitted, then added quietly. “Maybe not ever.”

Ilya nodded. “Then you can’t. And I won’t push.”

“Is that okay?” Shane’s voice was so small. So uncertain.

“Yes,” Ilya said without hesitation. “Because it’s your body. Your choice. And I will love you exactly the same no matter what you decide.”

Shane’s eyes had filled again, the tears softer, relief mixed with something that had looked like disbelief.

“I don’t deserve you,” he whispered.

Ilya smiled sadly. “You deserved everything, *moya lyubov*. I just wish you believed that.”

He pulled Shane back down, guiding him to lie against his chest. Shane went willingly, tucking himself into Ilya’s side like he was trying to make himself small enough to fit inside the safety Ilya offered.

“Sleep,” Ilya hushed, fingers tickling the back of Shane’s neck, in a familiar and soothing rhythm. “We’ll figure it out.”

But even as Shane’s breathing had slowed, even as sleep came over him, Ilya had stayed awake. Staring at the ceiling. Thinking about the way Shane had said *I don’t know* like a guilty admission. Like not knowing was its own kind of failure.

And maybe, Ilya remembered thinking, maybe in a way it was.

Shane couldn't name what he was afraid of. Couldn't identify the fear that kept him from getting the help he needed. And that inability to name it, to look at it directly — that was part of the problem.

You can't heal what you won't acknowledge.

You can't fight what you refuse to see.

And Shane was so busy apologizing for the pain his disorder caused others that he never stopped long enough to face the issues itself.

Ilya didn't know when that would change. Didn't know if it ever could change. But he knew that waiting indefinitely — loving Shane through this without ever asking him to do the hard work — wasn't helping either.

At some point, something would have to give. Shane needed to break— not just react, but fully hit bottom before he could start climbing back up. Ilya hated thinking that, hated that it might be true, but he'd learned enough about recovery to know you had to own what is hurting you, to sit with the pain before you could heal.

But not tonight, Ilya had thought, as he had pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead.

That had been months ago, and yet nothing has gotten better. Nothing has changed since that fight. Shane still goes to therapy. Still knows there's a problem. Still apologizes for not getting better fast enough — so much that Ilya is about to forbid him from ever saying "I'm sorry" again in his life.

And he still refuses medication.

Ilya doesn't know what to do, how to reach Shane. He feels helpless, useless in a way he's only ever felt one other time — after finding his mother. And Ilya knows that logically, he won't find Shane like that. That Shane is here with him and he is alive and breathing, but he can't help the same terror he felt back then crawling up his throat. He couldn't do anything to help his mother before it was too late. He doesn't want to make the same mistakes again.

He spends a lot of his own therapy sessions talking about this with Galina, about how useless and powerless he feels. How sometimes it makes his bad days more frequent — that feeling of uselessness becoming all-encompassing. And he knows that's wrong — feels guilty for essentially blaming Shane's illness for making his own worse — but he just doesn't know what to do anymore.

And he still doesn't know the reason behind everything Shane does, or refuses to do.

He had heard the fear in Shane's voice that night in this very room all those months ago. Sees it now in the way Shane still fixates on ingredients, in his rigidity around meals. How careful Shane is when it comes to maintaining everything that goes into his body.

But fear of *what*? What is he so afraid of?

Ilya's thumb continues to brush across Shane's cheekbone. He doesn't know how to get past this, get through to Shane. He knows he promised he would wait, that he wouldn't push, but as he looks down at his husband, Ilya realizes that they can't go on like this. Shane needs help, real help. Ilya needs help getting through to Shane—in getting him to see that he needs more help than he's willing to accept. And that isn't something he can do on his own.

Shane shifts slightly in his sleep, a soft sound escaping his throat. His hand tightens briefly around Ilya's stomach. Once again clinging to him like he's something that can be lost, even his subconscious riddled with fear.

Ilya pulls Shane closer and holds him like the treasure he is — irreplaceable. Not the kind of treasure you possess, but the kind that possesses you. The kind of treasure woven so deep into your blood that losing it would mean losing yourself. The kind you'd recognize blind, would find in the dark, would know across lifetimes.

He kisses Shane's forehead one last time as he shifts down to rest comfortably against his pillow.

"I love you," he whispers into the dark. "I just wish you'd let yourself believe that's enough."

Ilya waks to the smell of muscle rub and tape adhesive, the steady hum of fluorescent lights overhead.

For a moment — just a moment — he's still in bed. Shane's hair is soft under his fingers. The room is dark and quiet and safe. And he swears he hears something that sounds eerily like that stupid Canadian wolf bird in the distance — the one that always wakes him up too early at the cottage, the one Shane insists is called a loon but Ilya refuses to call it anything other than "annoying."

Then pain blooms across his shoulder, sharp and insistent, and the illusion shatters. The sound resolves into something mundane — equipment beeping somewhere, the distant echo of people walking in the hallway.

Not the cottage. Not their bed in Ottawa.

The training room.

"Easy." Matt's voice, close and steady. "Don't try to sit up yet."

Ilya blinks, the room coming into focus in pieces. The examination table beneath him. Red and black team logos on the walls, cabinets labeled with organization strips denoting medical supplies. The dull ache radiating from his collarbone.

The game.

The hit.

The—

His breath catches.

“Rozanov.” Matt’s hand is on his good shoulder, grounding. “You with me?”

“Da,” Ilya mutters, though his head feels stuffed with cotton. “Yes. I’m—” He tries to push himself up with his right arm and immediately regrets it.

“Collarbone,” Matt says, easing him back down. “Likely a fracture, but we won’t know for sure until we get x—rays.”

Matt’s hands move carefully over Ilya’s torso. Ilya hisses when Matt presses against his side.

“Ribcage is pretty bruised too,” Matt observes, prodding gently. “Nothing broken from what I can tell, but you’re going to be black and blue for a while.”

Ilya makes a noncommittal sound, his mind still fuzzy around the edges.

Matt gives him a long look. “Pain scale, one to ten.”

“Four,” Ilya lies.

Matt’s expression clearly says he knows its bullshit, but he doesn’t push. “I’m going to stabilize it before transport. This is going to be uncomfortable.”

“Is fine.”

It’s not fine. It’s the opposite of fine. But Ilya’s had worse, and right now his collarbone is the least of his concerns.

The word still echoes in his head.

Ilya had heard slurs before. In Russia, he’d heard them hissed in dark corners — *Иедук*. *Иудоп* — words that marked you as other, as less than, as wrong. Words you didn’t say in polite company because they named something too shameful to acknowledge. In Russia, it wasn’t just hatred — it was pure erasure. You didn’t talk about it. You didn’t name it. And if someone did name it, if someone spoke that shame aloud, it was guaranteed violence.

His brother had called him that. At their father’s funeral, drunk, angry and terrified — spat the word at him like it was the ugliest truth he knew. Like Ilya’s existence — the thing they’d never named, never acknowledged — was the reason for everything that had gone wrong in his life. It had hurt because he took something unspoken and made it real. Made it an excuse to hate him.

But that was different. That was when Ilya was still hiding himself — when a part of himself also felt shame.

When he came to America, just a scared kid who barely spoke English, he’d heard versions of it in the locker rooms — casual, thoughtless, guys using it as some sort of connection. As a

way to bond, to prove they were a part of the team — *Just chirping. Just part of the culture.* It had confused him at first, how something derived from hate could be used so casually. But he'd learned to navigate around it, learned the difference between thoughtlessness and maliciousness.

Tonight was malicious.

Tonight wasn't some thoughtless chirp or locker room joke.

He wasn't some seventeen-year-old boy, still vying for the smallest amount of his father's approval.

Tonight he was married. Out. Proud of the man he loves. And someone tried to use that as a way to cut him open.

Tonight, someone had taken Ilya and Shane's love — their marriage, their life together — and tried to make it into something abhorrent. Something shameful.

Ilya has spent too much of his life carrying other people's shame and he refuses to do that again. No, tonight was different — his opponent's words made Ilya furious, not shameful.

He'd already claimed this part of himself, already declared it for the world to see. He would not let someone use his love as a joke to boost their own ego.

Stupid Montreal player wanted him to feel small. Wanted to use Ilya's love—his marriage—as a weapon that would land. But Ilya wasn't small. He was furious. Furious that someone tried to hurt Shane. Furious that even now, even after everything, people still thought they could use that word as ammunition against him.

This was the first time since they'd been outed, since they'd gotten married, that someone had weaponized it so openly—so publicly, so directly at them. The crowd had been so loud that most people probably didn't even hear it. Just Ilya. Just Shane. Just the players close enough to know exactly what had been said.

That's how hate works sometimes, Ilya thinks. Intimate. Personal. A violence that leaves no visible mark.

Ilya's jaw clenches, and the movement sends a fresh wave of pain through his shoulder. He forces himself to breathe through it.

"Where's Shane?" he asks as Matt begins carefully positioning a sling.

"Just headed into media, I think." Matt doesn't look up from his work. "From what I heard, Harris tried to get him to skip it, but—"

"He went anyway." Of course he did. Because that's what Shane does — what he thinks he has to do. Shows up. Answers questions. Maintains the image of control even when everything inside him is screaming.

Ilya's chest tightens.

The door swings open, and voices spill into the room — loud, joking, alive with the manic energy that always follows a win.

“—I’m just saying, if he’d kept his damn stick down—”

“Oh, like you’ve never cross—checked anyone—”

“That’s different, I’m not a—oh shit, he’s awake.”

Wyatt appears in Ilya’s line of sight first, hair still damp from the shower, grinning. “There he is. We thought Matt would’ve knocked you out with the good stuff.”

“Not yet,” Matt mutters, still working on the sling. “But I’m considering it.”

Troy follows Wyatt in, Bood and Luca trailing behind. They’re all freshly showered, still damp around the edges, and they crowd into the small space like they own it.

“How are you feeling, Roz?” Troy asks, his tone carefully light but his eyes sharp, assessing.

Ilya can see how the energy they exude feels forced, a little too bright, like they’re all trying to convince themselves everything’s fine now that Ilya’s awake.

“Like I got checked into boards,” Ilya says dryly. “Is accurate, yes?”

“Very accurate,” Bood confirms. “You went down hard, man. We all heard the crack from the bench.”

“Wonderful,” Ilya mutters. “Was very loud?”

“Loud enough,” Wyatt says, his grin fading slightly. “Scared the shit out of everyone.”

Ilya tries to shift his weight and winces. “Did we win at least?”

“3—2,” Troy says. “Bood scored the game winner with like 3 minutes left.”

“Was beautiful goal,” Bood adds with false modesty. “Top shelf, bar down.”

“Of course was beautiful. You scored it and Montreal lost.” Ilya manages a small smile.

“Good. Is good we win after...” He trails off.

“Yeah,” Wyatt says quietly. “After.”

There’s a beat of silence, heavier than before.

“Someone tell me what happened.” Ilya says.

Troy straightens, “You don’t remember? Matt, did you do concussion protocol?”

Ilya can feel Matt stiffen at his side, but he stops whatever worry would come.

“No, no. I am fine. I remember hit — a little too well. But tell me what happened, after hit. I only remember some things laying on ice. I couldn’t see or hear everything.”

The four of them exchange glances.

“Well,” Troy starts carefully, “you were down for a little bit. Trainers came out, got you stable —”

“Luca beat the shit out of Comeau.” Wyatt interrupts.

Ilya’s eyebrows shoot up. “Luca?”

Luca’s face goes bright red. “I—it wasn’t—”

“Kid fucking *destroyed* him,” Bood says, clapping Luca on the shoulder. “I didn’t even know you could throw hands like that.”

“I don’t usually—” Luca stammers. “I just — he said that thing and I just— I didn’t think, I just—”

“You dropped the gloves and went after him,” Troy finishes, giving him an approving smile. “It was beautiful man. Really beautiful.”

”Very sexy, Haasy,” Bood adds with a smirk.

Ilya sees Wyatt get a sly look on his face, “I’m sure LaPointe also thought so, huh Rook?”

The guys start laughing as Luca looks like he wants the floor to swallow him whole. “Not a rook anymore,” He mumbles, with no real heat. “And besides, I got five minutes for fighting.”

“Worth it,” Wyatt says firmly.

Something warm unfurls in Ilya’s chest. He’s always felt this protective instinct over Luca, even now when he’s no longer the youngest on the team. But at twenty-two and still baby-faced, quiet and reserved — he reminds Ilya of himself and heart-wrenchingly of Shane. Luca keeps his head down, does his work, and rarely makes waves. Ilya would never have expected him to be the one to drop gloves.

“You fought for us,” Ilya says softly, looking at Luca. “For me and Shane.”

“He shouldn’t have — “ Luca’s voice cracks slightly. “He shouldn’t have said that. It wasn’t right.”

“No,” Ilya agrees. “Was not right.”

“Kid didn’t even hesitate,” Bood chimes in. “Soon as that word came out of Comeau’s mouth, Luca just went for him.”

“Didn’t know you had it in you, Rook,” Troy adds, nudging Luca’s shoulder. “But good job.” The look of pride on Troy’s face must be enough for Luca to let the rookie thing go.

“I don’t know what came over me,” Luca admits quietly. “I just— I heard it and I saw Shane’s face and I just —reacted.”

“Shane’s face?” Ilya asks, his stomach dropping. “What—how was Shane?”

The light humor of the room, the one holding back the tension, drains immediately.

“Scary,” Luca says after a moment. “Like, really scary.”

“He didn’t do anything,” Troy clarifies quickly. “Didn’t fight, didn’t get ejected. But—”

“But he looked like he wanted to kill someone,” Wyatt finishes. “I’ve never seen Shane like that. He’s always so — composed. So contained. But after you went down, after Comeau started saying shit—” He shakes his head. “It was like watching someone on the edge of detonating.”

“The trainers had pushed him out of the way and he kept trying to get to you.” Bood adds. “The refs had to keep pushing him back and he was just — he was shaking. Like his whole body was vibrating with how much he was trying to not lose it.”

“But...” Troy starts, hesitating like he’s not sure if he should continue.

“But what?” Ilya demands.

“But it’s like he’s shaking one minute and the next he is pin straight and ice cold. He was so still it was weird,” Troy continues.

Ilya raises his eyebrow at all this information.

“I don’t mean Shane’s weird — it’s just, it was worrying in a way.” Troy trips over himself, rambling. Ilya doesn’t think he’s every seen him ramble before.

“What he’s trying to say,” Wyatt cuts in. “Is that we’re a little... worried? He looked like a rubber band pulled tight, and we all know what happens when you pull too far.”

Ilya closes his eyes. He can picture it too easily — Shane’s face white with rage, his body locked tight with the effort of not breaking, of maintaining control even as everything inside him screams to do something, anything.

“His game was a little sloppy after that,” Troy says quietly. “Not like — he was still effective. Still made plays. But you could see it, he was off. Made a few passes that weren’t quite right, took a penalty for interference because he was too focused on where Comeau was instead of the puck.”

Ilya opens his eyes with a sigh.

“That’s not like Shane,” Bood offers lightly. “Shane doesn’t get rattled on the ice, like ever.”

“But tonight, after you were off the ice,” Wyatt confirms. “He was rattled. Big time.”

“But he didn’t —” Ilya starts. “He finished the game?”

“Yeah,” Troy says. “Played the rest of it. But you could tell he was just waiting for it to be over.”

“How is he now?” Ilya asks quietly. “After game. Is he...okay?”

Ilya hates that word but English is always harder when he’s just woken up or in pain, and he just needs to know how his husband is. He needs to see him.

The guys exchange glances again, and something in that hesitation makes Ilya’s chest hurt again.

“What?” Ilya presses. “Just tell me!”

“Nothing bad,” Troy says quickly. “He just—”

“He went straight to the showers after,” Wyatt says carefully. “Didn’t talk to anyone. And—”

He stops, looking at the others like he’s not sure he should continue.

“And what?” Ilya asks, dread pooling in his stomach.

“He was in there for a little longer than usual,” Luca starts quietly. “And when I went in to grab my stuff, the water was running so hot there was steam everywhere. And he was just—” Luca makes a scrubbing motion. “Like he was trying to — I don’t know. Get something off.”

Ilya’s breath catches. He knows exactly what Shane was doing.

Shane does this. When things get bad — more overwhelming than usual — he turns the water scalding hot and scrubs at his skin like he can wash away whatever’s clinging to him. The weight of the day. The words. The fear. Like if he just gets clean enough, hot enough, raw enough, maybe it’ll all go away — stop hurting so much.

He’s trading one pain for another.

Ilya has found him like that before. Skin red and angry, water so hot it’s painful, Shane’s hands moving in compulsive circles over and over the same spots.

I just need to get clean, Shane always says. I just need to feel less.

Ilya makes a move to get up. Groaning at the pain that blooms across his chest.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Matt scolds. Lightly pushing his good shoulder down.

“I need to go see him.” Ilya grunts. “I am fine. Barely even an injury.” He’s lying through his teeth, but he just feels like he needs to see Shane.

“You are lying Roz. Stop moving and let me stabilize this shoulder.” Matt demands, Ilya seeing the little angry lines on his forehead.

“It’s fine. Russians don’t feel pain, remember? Comeau like irritating fly, can’t even hurt me right.” Ilya demands.

He can see the guys straightening and looking at him in concern. Comeau had hurt him just fine.

“Roz, stop moving or I will knock you out, so help me god.” Matt says, irritated. Ilya can see Matt give his teammates a look like *Control him*.

“Roz, man. It’s alright.” Wyatt starts, Ilya turning to look at him with apprehension written across his face.

Ilya scoffs. “You tell me my husband is not okay and you want me to think everything is alright.”

“Okay, you’re right.” Wyatt concedes. “Tonight has been shit and Shane is probably pissed. And I still don’t know why he went to media when Harris said he would get him out of it.”

Ilya raises a brow at that. They surely know Shane well enough to not be surprised about that.

“Okay, no I’m not surprised. But I checked in before he went out. He didn’t say much but he said he was alright and the shower seemed to do him some good.” Wyatt says.

Ilya wants to believe him — and a small part of him does. His husband is a professional above everything else when it comes to hockey, even to Ilya’s great annoyance. But he also knows that Shane has been cracking for a long time and he fears that his husband is going to try and bury tonight alongside everything else that hurts him.

Ilya thinks about his husband — his careful, controlled Shane who measures every word and movement. Who performs composure and calm when there’s a storm raging inside him. Shane who always, always holds it together in public.

There’s not much he can do until Matt finishes with his shoulder and Shane gets out of media. He hates being useless.

He looks at his teammates. “You sure he’ll be okay?”

Bood nods, “Of course. Shane’s always okay — well at least for Shane’s standards.” He laughs, trying to bring the jovial mood back to the room. While Ilya knows it’s his way of being okay — trying to make everyone else happy — his heart hurts at the statement. *He’s always okay*.

Yes, Ilya thinks bitterly, always okay because everyone expects him to be.

He doesn’t hold anything against his teammates for only seeing what Shane wants them to see — what everyone expects him to be. But he won’t lie and say it doesn’t hurt. It hurts that even the people closest to them sometimes can’t see how much they’re hurting. Hurts that

Shane feels the need to pretend. He looks towards Troy and Wyatt, seeing something like understanding behind their eyes.

Well...almost everyone.

Ilya nods his head, relaxing back into the training table. He closes his eyes and thinks about his beautiful husband. The one who has had a rough week — hell a rough few years. He thinks about Shane, who was probably barely holding it together in the media room. How Ilya had to put him back together just last night.

His beautiful, careful husband who can be downright sinful — with those beautiful eyes, and heartachingly gorgeous dimples. He thinks about how downright tempting and inviting those lips look, especially when wrapped around his —

Ilya's eyes snap open as a different thought surfaces, cutting through the worry.

Oh.

Oh no.

Ilya groans, this one sounding like it's coming from the depths of his very being.

“What?” Wyatt asks, slightly moving forward. “What’s wrong?”

Ilya just groans again — low and deeply pained.

They all tense immediately.

“Dang, is it bad?” Luca asks, worry creasing his face.

“Matt, I thought you said he was okay?” Troy cuts in.

“He told me it didn’t hurt that bad, stupid Russian pride.” Matt says, frowning. “I just need to finish up and then we’ll go to the hospital and get the x—rays. They’re getting a room ready for him.” Matt tells the guys. Ilya feels Matt move a little closer. “Is the pain getting worse? Do you want something to help with the pain?”

“No, no.” Ilya groans again, this time with a different quality to it. Frustration. Genuine dismay. “Is not pain. Is—” He gestures vaguely with his good hand. “My plans. Tonight. Are ruined.”

There’s a beat of silence.

Then Wyatt barks out a laugh. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“Very serious.” Ilya glares at the ceiling like it’s personally offended him. “Is tragedy.”

“Wait, I’m confused,” Luca says. “What plans?”

“He’s upset because he can’t fuck his husband,” Troy translates helpfully, smirk bright on his face.

Luca’s face, which had just started returning to its normal color, goes bright red again. “Oh. *OH.*”

“Cannot do anything with injured collarbone,” Ilya says mournfully. “Doctor will say no strenuous activity. Shane will make me listen to doctor. Is terrible.”

“Oh my god,” Bood laughs, shaking his head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I am *injured*.” Ilya corrects with wounded dignity. “Is different.”

“Russians don’t feel pain, huh?” Matt says dryly from where he’s finishing up the sling, looking like he’s enjoying this a little too much. “Pretty sure you’re feeling plenty of pain about your plans being cancelled.”

“Is different kind of pain, Matthew” Ilya argues, knowing Matt hates being called by his full name. Hmmpf. It’s what he deserves, getting off on Ilya’s pain. “This is pain of the soul.”

“Oh my god,” Bood wheezes.

“Very deep pain,” Ilya continues solemnly. “Existential pain.”

The guys are all laughing, except for Luca who looks like he’s about to melt into the floor.

“Okay, but real talk. I need to know.” Wyatt says, grinning now. “How often are we talking here? Because you two are always — I mean, you’ve left team dinners early before. Don’t think we didn’t notice. And Roz, you’ve had scratches on your back in the locker room more than once.”

“Is hazard of healthy relationship.” Ilya says with dignity.

Troy is smirking like he’s having the time of his life. “Shane used to get so embarrassed about it,” Troy says. “Remember last season? That first time someone noticed and he wouldn’t make eye contact with anyone for like three days?”

“He checked me every day before we left the house,” Ilya admits, smiling at the memory. “Would make me turn around, lift shirt. ‘Ilya, you have marks. Put on undershirt. No, different undershirt, that one is too thin.’” His impression of Shane is fond, affectionate.

“He’s so paranoid.” Bood says.

“Was very careful.” Ilya amends. “But now?” He shrugs his shoulder, forgetting about the injury and hissing in slight pain. He sees the disapproving look Matt throws his way, and sticks his tongue out at him. “He still checks sometimes. But not always. Is better now.”

“Better as in he doesn’t care if we see?” Wyatt asks.

“Better as in he trusts you not to be assholes about it,” Ilya corrects. “Mostly.”

“We’re *always* assholes about it,” Troy points out.

“Yes, but Shane knows is friendly asshole behavior now. Not mean asshole behavior.” Ilya pauses. “He even chirps back sometimes now.”

“He called Dykstra a ‘jealous virgin’ last month when he gave him shit about leaving dinner early.” Bood says, grinning.

“See? Growth,” Ilya says proudly.

“Your husband learning to take a joke about his sex life is not the kind of growth most people brag about,” Wyatt snickers.

“Is growth I am proud of,” Ilya insists. “Shows he is comfortable. Trusts team.”

The guys nod, all smiling at the acknowledgement of trust.

“We have schedule,” Ilya continues.

“Fuck off” Bood exclaims.

“There’s no fucking way you guys have a schedule.” Wyatt insists. “There is no way there’s actual *organization* to this madness.”

Ilya frowns, lines creasing on his forehead. “Mmm, no. You’re right. English is hard. Not schedule. Is wrong word.”

All four of them stare at him, waiting. “Is more like...” Ilya struggles, his accent thickening slightly when he gets confused, when he’s tired or hurting. “Planned? Like expected but obviously not expected if he doesn’t want. Not scheduled timeslot, just built into day. Is part of routine, yes? Morning coffee, run, time with Shane—” He makes vague gesture. “Practice, dinner, time with Shane. Is all part of day.”

“Oh my god,” Bood says slowly. “You’re saying it just...happens. Like, regularly. As part of your normal day.”

“Yes! This!” Ilya looks relieved that someone understands. “Is not on calendar with specific time. But is...regular part of life together. As much as we can.”

“Jesus Christ,” Troy mutters. “Where do you find the stamina?” Ilya hears him whisper under his breath. Luca somehow looks more red than he did before.

“I swear you two—” Wyatt shakes his head. “I thought the newly we phase would’ve worn the fuck off by now. It’s been like, what, almost two years?”

“Almost twenty months,” Ilya clarifies, primly. “And no. Has not worn off.”

“Clearly.” Luca stutters.

“We are in love.” Ilya says with pride. “Is supposed to want to be close to husband.”

“There’s close and then there’s whatever the hell you two have going on,” Troy argues, but he’s grinning.

“Is efficient use of time,” Ilya argues. “Why waste time when we can be together?”

“Efficient use of time,” Troy repeats. “You’re talking about sex.”

“Aahh. Am talking about intimacy,” Ilya counters, though his smirk gives him away. “Is important for healthy marriage.”

“Your ‘healthy marriage’ is going to give the rookie a heart attack.” Bood huffs. Luca sends him a silent glare — he really does remind Ilya of Shane. He looks like a tiny kitten — obviously Shane looks better as tiny angry kitten, but the similarities are uncanny he wants to laugh.

“Besides,” Ilya continues, ignoring Bood, expression turning sly. “Tonight was not regular... routine. Tonight was special plans. Surprise for Shane. Very creative plans.”

“Oh no,” Troy mutters.

“And now?” Ilya gestures mournfully at his sling. “Nothing. Six weeks of nothing.”

“Creative,” Wyatt repeats, looking terrified and amused all at once. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“Then don’t ask,” Ilya answers sweetly.

“You’re actually upset about this,” Bood observes, though he’s trying not to burst out laughing. “Like genuinely upset.”

“Yes! Shane is very beautiful man. Is very hard to not—” Ilya makes a vague gesture. “— appreciate him. And now I cannot appreciate him for six weeks. Is cruel punishment.”

“The cruel punishment is your broken collarbone,” Matt says, securing the last of the sling. “Not your sex life.”

“Disagree.” Ilya pouts.

The room dissolves into laughter — bright and welcome and exactly what Ilya needs right now.

“Very deep suffering,” Ilya continues, dramatically. “No one understands.”

“I hate you so much right now,” Wyatt grins.

“Is not my fault the universe hates me,” Ilya says mournfully.

“The universe doesn’t hate you,” Luca stammers, still blushing furiously. “You just — you got hit. That’s hockey.”

“Hockey is cruel mistress,” Ilya mopes. “She gives me beautiful husband and then hurts collarbone so I cannot—”

“Okay” Bood interrupts, loudly. “We get it. Your suffering is very tragic.”

“Is! Very tragic.” Ilya insists. Then, more quietly, almost to himself. “Shane is going to worry so much. Is going to hover. Is going to treat me like I am made of glass.” He pauses. “Will be very sweet but also very annoying.”

“He loves you,” Luca says simply. “That’s what people do when they love you.”

Something in Ilya’s chest warms. “Yes. I know.”

The bright humor fades slightly, replaced by something softer.

“Hey.” Luca’s voice is hesitant. “Are you...I mean, are you okay? Like, actually okay?”

Ilya looks at him. Luca’s still young, still learning how to navigate the complicated politics of professional hockey. Still learning when to joke and when to be serious.

Right now, he’s serious.

“Collarbone will heal,” Ilya says carefully.

“That’s not what I’m asking.” Luca’s jaw sets, and Ilya can see the same determination in him that Shane has. “That guy...what he said. That was fucked up.”

The room goes quiet, not quite used to Luca cursing. It’s heavier.

“Yeah,” Bood says after a moment. “That was way over the line.”

“Way over,” Troy agrees, his expression dark. “I’ve heard a lot of shit on the ice, but that—” He shakes his head. “That wasn’t chirping. That was just hate.”

Ilya’s throat tightens. He looks down at his chest, at the necklace that his wedding ring hangs off, the fluorescent light catching it.

“Yes,” he says simply. “Was hate. Did anyone else hear it?” Ilya asks.

“Some people definitely heard,” Bood says grimly. “It’s probably gonna be all over the sports networks by tomorrow morning. Someone probably catching it on a hot mic.”

“Good,” Ilya says, and he means it. “Then everyone knows. Knows what kind of person he is.”

“The league’s going to have to do something about it,” Matt says, carefully, not one to usually get into hockey politics. “They can’t just let it slide, right?”

“They will let it slide,” Troy says flatly. “They always do. They’ll give him a small fine, maybe a one game suspension. Then everyone forgets.”

“That’s bullshit.” Bood says.

“Yes. Is bullshit.” Ilya looks at each of them. “But is also reality.”

The room falls quiet again.

“How do you deal with it?” Luca asks suddenly. “Like...people saying shit like that. People being—” He struggles for the word. “—hateful.”

Ilya considers this. In Russia, he learned early that being different meant being a target. That loving his mother’s acceptance meant also accepting his father’s disgust, his brother’s contempt. That the world would always have people who thought his existence was wrong, was sinful, was something to be mocked, or feared, or eliminated.

But he also learned that hate is loud because it’s insecure. That people who are comfortable with themselves don’t need to tear others down to feel big.

“You don’t deal with it,” Ilya says finally. “You just...live anyway. You love anyway. You exist anyway.” He touches his wedding ring, a habit he’s had since the day Shane put it on his finger. “What he said — it is supposed to make me feel small. Make Shane feel small. Make us feel ashamed.” He looks up, meeting each of their eyes. “But I am not ashamed. I love Shane. He loves me. We love each other. That is not something to be ashamed of.”

“Damn right,” Wyatt says firmly.

“But also,” Ilya continues, his voice hardening. “I want to punch Comeau in the face. Very badly. Many times.”

“That’s fair” Troy says. “Very fair.”

“I already did,” Luca adds quietly, “But I can do it again if you want.”

The room goes still for a second, and then everyone bursts out laughing — including Luca this time, his ears still red but his smile genuine.

“I like this side of you, Haasy.” Bood says, grinning. “Very protective. Very violent.”

“I just—I couldn’t let him—” Luca shakes his head. “It wasn’t right.”

“No,” Ilya agrees softly. “Was not right. But thank you. For standing up for us.”

Luca nods, looking down at his feet.

The door opens again, and Terry sticks his head in. He’s in his typical team doctor attire — polo with the Centaurs logo, clipboard in hand.

“How’s he doing?” Terry asks Matt, though his eyes are on Ilya.

“Stable. I’ve got him in a sling. Just waiting on transport for x—rays.” Matt pauses. “And complaining about his sex life.”

Terry blinks. "What?"

"Don't ask." Wyatt advises.

"Wasn't planning to." Terry steps further into the room, pulling out a small flashlight. "Let's get you all set then. Rozanov, I need to do another neuro check before we move you. Just standard protocol."

Ilya submits to the examination — following the light with his eyes, answering questions about dizziness and nausea. Terry seems satisfied, making a note on his clipboard.

Matt moves back to Ilya's side, gently sitting him up. "Let me wrap those ribs before transport," he says, already reaching for the medical tape. "Or before you pull some Russian theatrics and do something stupid." Matt mutters snarkily, though there's no real heat behind it.

Ilya sees the guys trying to contain their snickers. They all know how much Ilya drives the medical team crazy. Ilya allows Matt to move him, only grumbling a little as he lifts his good arm. Matt winds the compression wrap around his torso—tight and restrictive, but it helps with the aching.

"Alright, transport should be ready for you in about ten minutes," Terry says. "We'll get you down there—"

"No x—ray," Ilya says flatly.

Terry blinks. "Excuse me?"

"Don't need x—ray. Is fine."

"Roz," Matt says from where he's organizing supplies. "We've been over this. You need —"

"Russians don't need x—rays," Ilya interrupts. "Is just small break. Will heal on own. Just put bandaid over it, good as new."

"That's not how medicine works," Matt says, his professional patience clearly being tested with Ilya.

"Is how Russian medicine works," Ilya counters.

"There is not such thing as 'Russian medicine,'" Matt says.

"There's just medicine." Terry cuts in politely. "And you need an x—ray."

"Canadians are weak," Ilya says with complete sincerity. "Need fancy machines to tell them what is obvious. Russians just know."

"Oh my god," Wyatt mutters, grinning.

“Roz,” Matt says, rubbing his temples. “I will knock your ass out with drugs if you keep resisting. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Would not work,” Ilya says confidently. “Russian constitution too strong for weak Canadian drugs.”

“I’m *this* close,” Matt says, holding his thumb and finger very close together, “to actually doing it. I have things that will knock out a horse. Don’t try me.”

Ilya debates whether to keep fighting him. He doesn’t think Matt would actually do that, but he looks very close to the end of his rope, and Ilya doesn’t want to risk it. Well, he would risk it, as it is fun irritating him, but he wants to see Shane first and if Matt knocks him out with horse drugs, he won’t be able to.

Ilya sighs, “Fine,” he mutters. Matt looks too smug for his liking.

“But first,” Ilya continues, treating this like a hostage negotiation. “First, I see Shane.”

Terry’s expression shifts slightly, his exasperation turning into something more understanding. “Shane’s in the media room. He’ll probably be another fifteen minutes or so.”

“I know. I still see him.” Ilya’s voice loses the playful edge, becoming steady and certain. “Just—need to see him. Then x—rays. Promise.”

Terry exchanges a glance with Matt, and something passes between them. A recognition, maybe, that this isn’t about stubbornness anymore.

“Alright,” Terry says finally. “But you’re taking some pain meds first.” He goes to the supplies on the other side of the room. Coming back, he shakes two pills out of a white bottle. “These’ll take the edge off without making you too loopy. And then you’re going straight to x—rays after you see Shane. No arguments.”

“No arguments,” Ilya agrees, swallowing the pills dry and grimacing.

Terry moves to the small TV in the corner— Ilya hadn’t even noticed it was there — and flicks it on. Probably trying to figure out how much longer Shane would be with the press before he could get Ilya to the hospital. Shane’s face fills the screen.

He’s sitting at the press conference table, shoulder tight, jaw set. His hands are folded in front of him, knuckles white.

Ilya’s chest constricts immediately.

“There he is,” Bood says. “Looks like he’s holding up okay.”

But Ilya can see what they can’t. The way Shane’s breathing is just slightly too controlled. The way his eyes are a little too focused. The micro—tension in his jaw that means he’s clenching his teeth.

Shane is holding on. Barely.

“...Yes, it was a physical game,” Shane is saying on screen, his voice carefully neutral.

“See?” Terry says. “He’s fine. Classic Shane.”

“No I’m not commenting on officiating.” Shane continues on screen.

“We’ll review the tape and move forward.”

Ilya watches his husband deliver the standard lines, the professional responses. This is Shane’s armor — the polished, trained version of himself he shows the world.

But Ilya wonders if even Shane realizes how much it’s costing him to maintain it.

A reporter’s voice, fills the screen, “Do you think emotions played a role tonight, give your personal relationship with the player who was hit?”

Ilya’s breath catches.

“Is the collarbone stabilized?” he asks abruptly, not taking his eyes off the screen.

“Yes,” Matt confirms. “The sling should hold it in place as long as you’re careful—”

Ilya’s already moving, carefully getting to his feet. The room tilts slightly but steadies. On screen, Shane’s eyebrows are raising, his expression carefully neutral.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Shane says.

“Roz—” Terry starts.

“I need to see him,” Ilya says, and there’s something in his voice that makes everyone stop. Not panic. Not fear. Just...need.

“You left the bench,” the reporter pressed on the TV. “You were visibly upset. Do you think that impacted—”

Ilya doesn’t need to hear the rest. He’s already moving toward the door, his good hand reaching for the handle.

“Wait, we’re coming with you,” Wyatt says quickly, and suddenly they’re all moving.

Ilya doesn’t argue. Doesn’t slow down. He just walks, each step calculated, his shoulder screaming but manageable with the pain meds starting to kick in.

He knows Shane can handle himself. Shane has always been so poised. Nothing getting through the wall of composure he puts up. He’ll do what he always does, answer every question perfectly — giving them nothing.

But Ilya just needs to see him. Needs to see Shane with his own eyes. Then he can sit still and let them poke and prod and confirm what he already knows — the collarbone is broken but he’ll heal.

Right now, he just needs to see his husband.

The hallway feels longer than it should. His footsteps echo. Behind him, he can hear the others following, their presence solid and reassuring even though Ilya's entire focus is on getting to the stupid press conference room.

Getting to Shane.

He doesn't know what he'll do when he gets there. Doesn't have a plan. Just knows that his husband is in that room answering questions after one of the worst games they've had — after watching Ilya go down, after being called a slur.

And Ilya needs to be there.

Even if Shane doesn't need him—even if Shane is handling it perfectly — Ilya needs to be there.

He rounds the corner, the press room just ahead. The door closed but he can hear the muffled sound of voices inside.

Ilya's hand closes around the door handle. And he pushes it open just as he hears Shane saying

“We don't give you access.”

Ilya slips in quietly to the back of the room, behind all the cameras and reporters. No one notices him at first—everyone's attention locked on Shane at the front of the room.

Then Shane's eyes find his.

For a moment, everything else falls away. The cameras, the reporters, the questions still hanging in the air. There's just Shane, looking at him with something he can't quite name. Shane doesn't look away. Doesn't break. Just holds Ilya's gaze as his voice carries through the room:

“And if I'm being honest, that's more on me than it is on Ilya.”

End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed it. Long time reader, but I've only written two other fics so please be kind to me.

Would love feedback.

If you want to come yell at me, I'm on Instagram and Twitter.

Username: pause_to_read

I'm not the best at keeping up with social media, but I'm going to try to be a little more present and keep you updated.

Like Shane Hollander, I also love praise, so please leave any comments, likes, and love.

All my love,
P2R

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