

clap when you land

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by [quietafterdusk](#)

Summary

AU — The Centaurs' plane crashes. No deaths are reported, and that should be a relief.

Ilya survives. He just isn't waking up.

As Shane waits, the world continues on, and he's forced to confront just how fragile their life truly is.

Completed

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

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Losing absolutely *sucked*. And against *Washington*? God, the day could not have been worse.

Shane slumped against his locker, shutting his eyes as his mind wandered into its usual checklist.

He had to call/text Ilya (he's going to have a field day when he sees the score) - but he was flying later. He had to take a shower, but maybe an ice bath was better? Maybe he should foam roll? Did the hotel even *have* a decent foam roller?

"Whoa, whoa, whoa - fuck, guys. Centaur's team were in a plane crash," J.J. announced loudly.

Shane jerked his head around. J.J. was clutching his phone, his thumb rapidly scrolling through the article. His brows knit as he brought his thumb to his mouth and started biting on his nails.

No.

"What did you say?" Shane asked, standing up and feeling his heart rate start to pick up. He looked over to find Hayden walking over slowly to the duo. His eyes darted between the two players.

"ESPN just posted that there was a plane crash. No other details," J.J. said, looking up to see team members starting to form a circle.

There was a cold dread blooming in Shane's stomach. His mouth had gone dry, as if the water bottle he drank right after the game didn't exist. But if there was a plane crash, that meant, that meant that-

Shane's hands started to shake. He tried flexing his hand to calm his nerves. He had to ask, he had to *fucking* ask if Ilya was alive.

He tried opening his mouth, but every time he tried to get a word out, his brain would whisper:

Ilya's dead.

He died thinking you were ashamed of him.

“What do we know, J.J? Is there... are there any deaths being reported?” Hayden asked, his hand landing on Shane’s shoulder, squeezing it slightly. Shane dropped his head to stare at the dirty locker floor, drops of water mixed with the discarded dirty towels.

“No deaths being reported according to ESPN, but looking at CNN. Looks like they crashed somewhere near Georgia,” J.J. mumbled, and Shane could hear the clicking sounds of the keyboard. Focusing hard on the water droplets hitting the ground.

“*New York Times* is reporting that there are several injuries.... Lots of critical and severe injuries,” yelled out Comeau.

There was a sharp intake of breath from J.J. “They’re all getting airlifted to Savannah, Georgia. No deaths are being reported at this time.”

“So... they’re, they’re-”

“It’s too early to tell - families are being contacted right now. All games are on pause,” J.J said gently, a look passed over to Hayden before to Shane. “Do you, do you want to read?” J.J asked quietly as he held out his phone to Shane.

Shane took it, biting his lower lip hard as he started to scan the article. An official announcement from the league. His vision was blurring as he felt the tears threaten to spill, but he was in the *fucking* locker room. And he was trying to focus on the words printed on the screen but everything in him was screaming.

“I know you’re friends with Ilya... I’m sure he’s fine... he’s a fighter,” J.J said quietly, patting Shane on the shoulder as Shane looked up as he stared directly into the lights. That had to be the trick, right? To stop crying?

He had to fucking move. He had to get out of the room before he exposed them. But did it matter? Ilya was hurt. Ilya was alone. And Shane wasn’t there. He had to *move*. And the absolute fear of it all was keeping him locked in as his teammates started to mill around. Whispering as if speaking loudly was a disrespect to the tragedy.

“I have to, I have to go-” Shane mumbled as he shoved the phone back to J.J, avoiding his gaze.

“I’ve got your stuff Shane, here, let me walk you out.” Hayden said, jerking his head to the door, both of their bags slung over his shoulders.

Shane nodded, quickly matching Hayden’s pace. As soon as they were out the door, Hayden pivoted into the emergency stairway, looking behind him as the two entered the stairway.

As soon as the door latched behind them, Shane dropped to his knees and started to hyperventilate. He dimly heard Hayden as he started to sob, trying to get as many breaths as he could in.

He's dead.

"Breathe, breathe, it's going to be okay-"

"Don't fucking say that," Shane snapped as he snarled, looking up at Hayden's panicked gaze. "We don't know if it's going to be okay. I don't know where he is. FUCK." He slammed his fist on the ground.

An echo rattled off of the walls in the stairway.

Hayden took a shaky breath as he dropped each of their bags one after another. He slowly got down onto the stairwell floor, bringing up his own knees as he stared concerningly at Shane.

"I don't know how to get there." Shane blabbered, as he felt a new wave of tears swelling up. Do I fly? Is that safe? Do I go home first to get stuff? Will they... will they even let me see him?"

Suddenly, Shane couldn't get enough air into his lungs. Hayden was speaking, but Shane couldn't hear a word as he ducked his face down between his knees.

Oh my god, was Shane even Ilya's emergency contact? Who the *fuck* was Ilya's emergency contact?

Shane let out a wail. How unbelievably stupid they have been. And they were going to pay the ultimate price.

"Shane, Shane, buddy – your mom is calling." Hayden hesitated before going, "Here, let me just take it." Hayden said hurriedly, a panicked tone. And Shane could hear the swish in the track pants as Hayden stood up to take the call a bit further away.

Shane looked up, Hayden's back was turned to him, but he could see his head nod.

Was this the call?

A minute or two passed before Hayden turned around and held out the phone. "Shane, your mom wants to talk to you."

Shane grabbed the phone. "Mom?" he asked, his voice breaking as he started to cry again.

"Shane, Farah called us - your dad is already on the way."

"On the way where? And Farah? My agent?"

"Yes, Farah, your agent. Ilya has been listing her as an emergency contact. She called us as after she got the call. She's also on the way to Savannah, but dad is going to get there first."

"Dad's flying to Ilya?"

“Dad’s flying to Ilya, he’s already at the airport,” his mom said hurriedly, slightly out of breath.

“Are you,” Shane paused, his stomach twisting, “Are you going to go too?” he asked hopefully.

There was a pause, and an angry huff on the other end of the line. “Shane, of course I am,” his mom said exasperatedly. Shane’s shoulders relaxed a bit as his mom rattled on. “I’m packing up stuff right now so we all have clothes. I’ve got stuff for him, me, you, and... Ilya. He, uh, has been leaving things here lately,” she said quietly.

“Does that mean... he’s still alive?” Shane choked out the words, as he stared up Hayden who had his fist to his mouth.

“He’s still alive. But he’s in critical condition,” his mom said and Shane took his first real breath that settled his lungs and soul.

“He’s alive. Oh my god, he’s still-” Shane panted as he felt his hand shake.

“And Dad will be there soon enough. I have your ticket already bought and as far as the league... games are suspended for the next week. Farah is going to release a family emergency statement if your absence is noted.”

“Okay. Okay.” Shane paused before diving into the next question.

“Mom... Ilya is going to be okay, right? He’s going to survive this?” He cringed at how pathetic he sounded. But he just really needed his mom to reassure him that it was going to be alright. As if this was a bad nightmare she could soothe away.

He heard his mom take a sharp breath, “God, I hope so Shane.” And on the other side, Shane could hear her crying. And it was too much to think of her heart break on top of his.

“Okay, I’m going, I’m going to the airport then. Let me know when you’re boarding,” Shane said, wiping the tears from his face as he nodded towards Hayden.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Mom - I love you.”

He heard her laugh softly, “I love you too kiddo, I’ll see you soon.”

-&-

Hayden drove him to the airport. They sat in silence as they weaved through traffic. At one point, Hayden turned on the radio but the news started blaring about the plane crash and Shane had to turn it off.

There was no need to speed to get to the airport since the flight was later in the evening, but it

felt like they were speeding through time. As Shane stared at his phone, flipping through the screens, he noticed he had a notification on Instagram.

He only had his notifications turned on for one person.

Grinding his teeth, he looked over to Hayden who was staring at the road ahead. Both hands on the wheel.

Before he could psych himself out, Shane pushed on the app. Opened it up to the messages, and felt his stomach curl. His eyes kept skimming the lines. And his heart thundered in his chest as he read the last message, his breathing quickening.

Thank you for those.

Whatever happens, I am with you. Safe in your heart. I believe it.

No. No. No. No. These *couldn't* be the last words.

Shane could feel the saliva pool in his mouth, he only had seconds before his body reacted.

“Hayden, pull over.” Shane croaked out.

“What?”

“Hayden, pull over *now*.” Shane cried out.

Hayden swore under his breath as he quickly weaved into the emergency lane. There were honks and swear words hurled at them but Shane couldn't care. As soon as the car stopped, Shane shoved the car door open and vomited out into the asphalt. His seatbelt was still on, restricting him from face planting into his own sick.

Maybe that was for the best. But maybe, maybe, that's exactly what Shane deserved.

“Oh, Shane...” Hayden said softly, reaching over to rub his back in small circles.

Shane couldn't find it in himself to even feel shame over this. And instead, he cried for what felt like a millionth time for the day.

“He sent me... he sent me a message before... before.” And an inhumane sound escaped him. And he pulled himself up, shut the door, and looked at Hayden.

“I don't deserve him. It should've been me on the plane,” Shane said as Hayden's eyes widened, his face paling.

“No, no. Shane, *please* don't say that. Ilya would actually murder you for saying that. You two deserve each other-“

“We got into a massive fight.” Shane cut him off. “He wanted me to go to a party with him

and his team, and I said no. And it just spiraled. And I was such an idiot. I made it sound like I would actually choose hockey over him. And I didn't realize just how much he gave up so that I could be happy. So that I can continue to play with the team. That I can have my cake and eat it too."

Shane sighed, he could feel his face grimace as the shame washed over him. "We did talk. We did say sorry. And we were going to have a bigger talk, and my grand gesture Hayden... you know what I fucking had planned?" Shane snapped.

"Were you... were you going to propose?" Hayden asked hoarsely, his eyes trailing down to the center console.

Shane laughed, because *fuck* that was a better idea than what he had. "No, that wasn't even it! It was that I was going to see if he wanted to host another team party and that I would 'randomly' stop by! And we could stand next to each other as everyone else makes mindless small talk. And even if I couldn't hold his hand, or touch his waist while going to the kitchen... I was going to be there. That was my grand, pathetic excuse of a gesture." Shane shook his head, breathing heavily through his nose, staring straight ahead because he wasn't going to be able to stand Hayden's own judgement.

"Ilya will still like the gesture," Hayden said softly, his arm going out to pat Shane on the shoulder.

"I don't deserve him." Shane whispered again. And this time, Hayden unlocked his seatbelt and threw his arms over Shane. Shane didn't even realize that Hayden was crying until he felt the shaking of his body and cracking of his voice.

"You *deserve* him. He *deserves* you. You two are madly in love. It's fucking obvious when you're in a room together which is probably *why* no one who knows your secret would condone the whole, 'yeah party together'. You're going to work this out. It's going to be okay. He's going to be okay."

Shane squeezed his eyes shut as he let out a shaking breath. He grabbed on to Hayden's arm that was wrapped around his neck and just rested his head. Trying to get himself to believe.

"Just... did the party have a theme? Feel like we can gussy up the party, ya know?" Hayden said lightly, and Shane was able to let out a genuine laugh, as he pulled his hands away and Hayden was able to lean back.

"No... I'm actually terrible at party planning. I just know to make sure the fridge is stocked with coke and to grab anything sugary and colorful at the grocery store for him."

Hayden laughed, "He'd love that. And... maybe ask Jackie for some party planning tips, she's got a whole Pinterest board for that shit." Shane nodded his head, smiling a bit as Hayden started to put his seatbelt on.

"I do want to propose to him." Shane said, looking at Hayden. "I just... I have all these half baked ideas. And it was always, 'when the time is right'. I keep going back and forth if it

should be in the summer, or maybe the winter as a surprise? Because he loves surprises. Should I have a dog do it-“

“Absolutely yes to the dog. Ilya would lose his *shit*-“

“But what if he’s so distracted by the dog he doesn’t even realize that I’m down on one knee?”

“Hm, yeah, that’s a real valid concern for him.”

“I just... I don’t want to do it if he thinks I’m doing it out of fear of losing him. Before, that meant after a big fight or something.... Now.... That takes on a whole new meaning.” Shane blew out a breath as he heard Hayden start the car again.

“You’re going to figure it out. But now, let’s get you to the airport.”

Shane nodded his head and crossed his arm. It was going to be a long night.

-&-

Shane boarded his flight with no problem. Luckily, his hat and baggy sweatshirt hid him enough that no one realized it was him on his flight. He was even luckier that there was no one sitting next to him and he was able to snag a window seat. He immediately purchased the wifi, but he promised Hayden (and his parents) to not read the news and to let them text him updates.

But, at this point, the adrenaline had worn enough and though he was crashing... his mind was in full anxiety. He had no idea what to do with that energy, locked in a plane, with several hours to go.

His flight entertainment system had the map up. As if staring at the plane making small movements would spur the pilots to go faster, or cause time to move faster. But he knew, after countless flights chasing Ilya, that nothing would spur on time.

But sitting here, doing nothing was killing him. If he couldn’t scroll through his phone for news and if he couldn’t physically help the plane go faster... What could he do?

He wasn’t sure if he believed in God. His parents never discouraged him from going to church but they were never one to fully endorse the spiritual life either. Should he pray to God? Or was that frowned upon?

Staring at the window, the thought struck him of who he could pray to. Someone that felt right.

Mimicking the cross movements he’d seen Ilya do, he closed his eyes and clamped his hands together.

Irina. Hi. It’s me... Ilya’s boyfriend. I should have maybe prayed to you sooner? He would

want me to pray to you more than to God.

Ilya talks about you all the time, and if there was someone I could trust to guard while we all rush towards him- it's you.

I love your son and I want more than anything for him to be alive.

And healthy.

Preferably both at the same time.

Please, protect him and save him. I'll love him forever.

Just- please make sure he's alive when I land.

Amen.

Shane slowly opened his eyes, blinked a few times, before redoing the cross sequence. He looked around to see if other passengers saw him, but they were either sleeping soundly with their eye masks or glued to their screens with the latest bad film drop.

It felt insane to Shane that his entire life was falling apart, that his entire world had been tilted on its axis, and no one on the flight bothered to look up.

And while he didn't feel completely better, he did feel like he at least did something right. And right on cue, his phone buzzed. It was from his dad.

Dad: *I'm at the hospital. He's still alive.*

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Love it? Hate it? Let me know.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

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Shane got out of his taxi and grabbed his bags from the trunk. After thanking the driver, he wandered to the front of the hospital where his dad was standing, his hands shoved in his pocket, a grimace on his face.

Shane's stomach dropped and his bag slipped from his grip. "Is he--"

"Still breathing," his dad said as Shane rushed over to him, his arms going around him. The exhaustion of it all meant that he was barely registering his own emotions. And he felt like he could collapse on the concrete below him.

"Just, I want to talk to you before we go inside," his dad said, pulling back and looking down at Shane, his face unabashedly lined with worry. Shane, staring up, felt like he saw a mirror of his own grief.

Fuck.

"That doesn't sound good, Dad." And his dad gave him a look, his eyes tearing up, pressing his lips together that made Shane realize the severity of the situation.

They walked in silence and Shane could practically hear his dad rewriting whatever speech or news he had to give to Shane.

But Ilya *was* alive. And everything else that could be a problem felt fixable. Right?

"There's a reason I didn't text while you were getting here... just, let's go sit at this bench." His dad pointed to the battered bench that was in the atrium of the hospital.

Shane nodded as he marched behind his dad, biting his lip. Once the two sat down, they both stared out the window, neither looking at each other.

His dad always refused to dive into heavy topics right away, today was no exception. His dad was meticulous to his words; in some cases, this was preferred, on days like today, Shane was in agony.

"He doesn't look pretty," his dad said gruffly, folding his arms on his chest.

Shane shook his head, rolling his eyes. "Fuck, dad, I don't *need* Ilya to look pretty--"

"Shane," David said tersely, "He doesn't *look* good is what I'm warning you."

“Yeah—but he’s alive—“ Shane stammered, his eyes scurrying out the window. Alive is *alive*. Alive means a future, more games, more dates, more... everything.

“I don’t think I’m painting the right picture here. Ilya has wires coming out of all parts of his body. He just survived a plane crash by the skin of his teeth. He has broken bones in places I didn’t even know you had bones. To say he’s ‘bruised’ is the understatement of the century,” his dad rattled off, shaking his head bitterly and shifting his gaze down his arms.

“Dad, why are you telling me this?” Shane asked quietly, trying to focus in on the moment but suddenly realizing his world was about to tilt again.

David’s face started to crumble, biting hard on his bottom lip. “Because I wish the doctors told me that. They kind of did, but when I walked in—” at this, David’s voice broke, “—Shane, I didn’t *recognize* him.” David spat out before he started to cry, hiding his face in his hands.

Shane had to strain his ears and lean in closer to understand the rest of the description. “If it wasn’t for his curls and his necklace, I would have told them they gave me the wrong boy,” his father’s face was still buried in his hands, and Shane felt a new wave of horror watching his father break down in such a child like way. He couldn’t even move his body to hug or comfort his dad.

David lifted his head from his hands but focused determinedly on the ground. “I wouldn’t be a good parent if I didn’t warn you about what you were walking into. These next 72 hours are *critical*. I’m still your dad. And I want to protect you from everything, and son, this is a heartbreak and pain that I *wish* I could shield you from.”

Shane was shaking his head, because there was something else. There was *something* else his dad wasn’t telling him. They were building up to a detail that couldn’t go by text, couldn’t be shared over phone but in person.

And maybe, maybe Shane wanted to hold on to the hope that his dad was being dramatic. That he leaned back on the bench and stared straight ahead for a few seconds. Let his eyes focus in on the cars driving by with the sun rising, the city life beauty did nothing to ease him.

“But he’s alive... and bruises fade, and bones heal, and stitches—“

“He’s in a coma, Shane,” David said quickly, looking up and staring at Shane for the first time in the interaction.

Shane felt his stomach drop and felt like every part of his body was in pure ice. His heart started to hammer, his breath started coming in quickly, and his hands started to shake.

No. No. No. No. No. No.

“But they like—induced it, right? They know how to wake him up?” Shane asked, cringing at

the hope in his voice, and a million terrible episodes of medical dramas started to flash his mind.

Wasn't Rose in a coma? Her character came out fine if he remembered correctly.

His father heaved a breath and sat up straighter, and started directly out the window. Unable to look at Shane. "When they first found him, he was conscious, talking even. They had to sedate him for the airlift and intubate him on the site. They already suspected he had a brain bleed, and that was confirmed when they landed here. He went into emergency surgery... and now we wait. He should, hopefully, be waking up in a few hours. But Shane? They are already warning me that they *think* he won't wake up at the first chance."

Shane could hear his breath coming in shallow as he started to hyperventilate. He could *hear* his dad trying to calm him down. Some platitudes. His dad shifted closer to him on the bench and wrapped his arms around Shane.

Shane thought hell meant no Ilya. Shane thought hell was Ilya decisively and unequivocally *dead*. In none of his planning and worrying and anxiety did he ever think that hell would be in a limbo state where Ilya was alive but not awake. That Shane may get a front row seat of watching the love of his life die before his eyes.

And while Shane had wished to be with Ilya on the flight, to hold his hand, soothe his concerns... he never wanted Ilya to potentially suffer just so Shane could have clear consciousness of being by his side.

"I... I have to see him, Dad, please, I don't care. Just... Let me see him." Shane gasped, wrestling out of his dad's arms. He quickly stood up and felt a wave of dizziness, he had to sit back down. He had to take some breaths before he felt like he could get back up.

"I have to see him, *please* let me see him." Shane whispered, massaging his heart.

"Okay, let's go."

-&-

Entering the room, Shane realized his father didn't warn him enough.

Shane let out a gasp as he rushed over to Ilya's side. He was alive, the machines were beeping at soothing cadence. But the breathing tube down Ilya's throat scared him. The swollen eyes, the heavy bruising that had already reached purple and blue scared him. The bandage around his head scared him.

The dried blood matted in his hair was enough for Shane to rush by Ilya's bed side. And all he wanted to do was throw himself onto Ilya, the same way he did all these years, but was frozen staring down.

There were cuts on his hands and there was dirt (or was it blood?) under his nails. A splint on the wrist and Shane looked to the other hand to see a matching set. He reached his own hand,

hovering over various spots on Ilya's body. There seemed to be no place to touch that wasn't battered or bruised or bloody or ...

Shane started to let the tears fall.

"Can I... Can I even touch his hand?" He asked weakly, and he heard his dad walk over and stand beside him. A shaky breath he could hear from his dad.

"I found his thumb to be the least bruised, maybe just hold it with three fingers for now?"

Shane nodded as he sank into the chair next to Ilya. He gently took the thumb, and held it with his three fingers.

That was the only place he could safely touch Ilya.

-&-

Shane's mom didn't text them her arrival time properly later that day, which meant Shane nor David got run interference when she walked into the hospital room.

"Oh my *God*," she screeched, her hands flying to her face, her two large rolling suitcases abandoned. Shane and David immediately stood up from their respective sides.

His mom completely ignored them and stomped over to the bed, edging out David as she stared down in horror at the body below her.

"Ilya," she whispered, her hands hovering over his body, frantically trying to grasp a spot to hold onto.

"He has a good few fingers," David pointed out to the fingers before gesturing to rest of the body. "but his legs and arms... they're not in great shape for now."

She nodded numbly as she sunk into the seat as she stared at Ilya. She could only stay seated for so long before she sprung to her feet.

"I brought his blanket, I'm going to pull it out for him," his mom said, already heading back to the abandoned suitcases.

David pinched the bridge of his nose. "You can't put it on him... I misspoke when we were on the phone."

"Well... why not? Do I need to talk to someone?"

"We're in the ICU, Yuna, no outside fabric near him. David plainly stated as his mom became indignant before their eyes.

"But it's from our home! There's nothing from our house that would hurt him! And maybe he'd feel more comfortable-" She croaked before putting her face in her hand and started to

weep, her shoulders shaking.

David sighed and stood up, wandering over to his wife and pulling her into a hug as she buried her face into his chest.

“I know, I know, and we can put his blanket out on the table so he knows it’s there.” David murmured, slowly rubbing his mom’s back.

Shane swallowed hard. Guilt flared at the thought that Ilya was in a coma and his eyes were swollen shut.

As if to atone, Shane forced himself to look. He couldn’t hold it and slipped his gaze to the corner of the bed. He’d been working up to longer than a few seconds. So far, he was failing.

“Which blanket did you bring?” Shane asked quietly, hoping the conversation would distract.

“Um, the white checkered one. From the living room.” His mom sniffled.

Shane nodded his head as he tried to locate a memory. A story. He felt like he should know which blanket in the house was Ilya’s.

“When did it become Ilya’s blanket?” Shane asked.

“It’s the one he always pulls for movie nights or game nights. And... he’s spilled so much ice cream on that blanket and so many cookie crumbs-” David started.

“Does that happen often?” Shane raised his eyebrows.

“Only when he’s watching you play.” His mom said, looking up to meet Shane’s eyes. She started shaking her head as if trying to clear the memories. “He gets so *intense* when you play. Yelling at the tv, shouting at the ref, and when you played his trick.... I thought he was going to break the ice cream bowl.” His mom said, smiling fondly at the memory. His dad chuckled behind her.

Shane heaved a sigh and looked back at Ilya and stared around the room. A few beeping machines, barren walls, and lonely chairs. This was going to be their home for the next few hours, and maybe even days, and it felt more like a jail cell.

As if reading Shane’s mind, His mom turned on her heel and went back to the suitcases. She quickly unzipped them and pulled out the famous blanket and a few homemade cards plus a sign.

“Did you... did you make that?” Shane asked as his mom looked around the room to find a spot to display the sign.

“No, no, it was Ilya’s neighbors’ kids. You know, the neighbor that he always stops by before games? I stopped by his house and I saw the sign and went in and introduced myself as Farah your agent-”

“Mom, that’s *fraud*—”

“And said I was going to see him and that I wanted to have the sign for his room. And the mom said yes. And that the kids were happy to make more for him. We exchanged numbers.” His mom said softly.

She looked over to Shane and his dad, both with bewildered faces. “Okay, I feel a *bit* bad for the lie but it was for a good cause. Plus, this was a good sign for the kids at that age—”

“Eh, I think they could have done better—”

“Shane, you’re not one to talk, your art at that age was more abstract. At least here I can *tell* what’s a heart and what’s supposed to be Ilya, even if his muscles are disproportioned,” she snapped as she fiddled with the placement. Once she was satisfied, she went back to the blanket and placed it on the bed side table, resting her hand on it lightly.

“He’ll be able to get the blanket soon, Yuna, once he wakes up, he’ll have it. It won’t be long. Just till tomorrow,” David said, repeating the refrain again under his breath like a prayer.

-&-

Ilya missed the first wake up window. Which, as the doctors told Farah (as well as the rest of the crew), was expected. Everyone was calm, there was even a smile here and there. But when Ilya missed the second window, the doctor’s tones started to shift.

Suddenly, more doctors and nurses filed in to take note of numbers. There were quiet whispers of Ilya moving to another ward.

“*How* unusual is it? Can we get an estimate? He’s been out cold for *three days*,” Farah pleaded, she threw a look over to the bed.

“It’s outside the typical window, but still within what we see for this kind of injury.”

“Can we just wake him now? Can’t some drugs do that?”

“We don’t wake patients like flipping a switch. If we reduce sedation too aggressively, we risk worsening swelling or triggering another bleed.”

“So we just... wait?” Farah asked.

The doctor pulled his shoulders back, and nodded. “For now, we wait. We are actively monitoring him and we’ll update you as we get more information.”

“We are assessing everything we can and trying to figure out with imaging what is going on. I promise to update you... and the Hollander family once I have more information,” the doctor said calmly, though throwing a suspicious look over at Shane who was standing next to Farah.

Shane felt uneasy as he zipped up his hoodie and slouched more. He *knew* he was safe but he still felt paranoid of all the eyes on him while he was with Ilya.

“Thank you.” Farah said before the doctor walked away.

Shane looked over at Farah, who grimaced as she put her hand on his shoulder.

“One day at a time, right?”

“Right,” Shane said, nodding. At that moment, his phone started to buzz in his pocket. As he pulled it out, he saw Hayden’s name.

“I better go get this.” Shane gestured slowly. Farah nodded and pushed back into Ilya’s room. Shane picked up the call and drifted aimlessly down the hallway.

“Hey, did he wake up?”

“He’s still in a coma. The doctors are saying it’s unusual but expected. They want to keep him like this while he heals.”

Hayden sucked a breath in. “Alright, okay, not the ... not the news I was expecting but okay.”

“Tell me about it,” Shane said dully, leaning back on a wall as he rubbed his eyes.

“You guys are staying at a hotel, right? I think I remember you texting me that you had shifts and such.”

“Yeah, yeah we do - why?”

“The kids want to send some stuff over... they know about the accident... and they are freaking out to say the least.”

Shane had to rub his chest, as he thought of Arthur, Ruby, Amber, and Jade hearing about Uncle Ilya getting hurt. He could almost see their faces tearing up and even throwing a tantrum to get Ilya better *now*.

“That means a lot to Ilya... and me.” Shane said quietly.

“They saw the media coverage, they saw some videos and images of the accident.” Hayden whispered.

Shane blinked a few times. It never occurred to him to even look up the images or videos. Should he?

“I-I didn’t even know there were images-” Shane stammered, feeling stupid for not putting the pieces together.

“Don’t, whatever you do, *please* don’t look them up. I’m only telling you this so that you’re not alarmed with how many cards and pictures they’ve made.” Hayden hesitated for the next part, “And Arthur is insisting on sending Chompy.”

Shane had to blink a few times to connect the dots. He felt like he was in a fog. “He wants to give Ilya... Chompy?”

“Loan is probably the right word. He, uh, definitely wants it back as soon as Ilya wakes up. But he wants to send it.” Shane had to put the phone to his chest as he looked up in the fluorescent lights. How bad did it look if Arthur *wanted* to send Chompy?

“He’s going to love it. He knows how much that means to him. Tell him thank you.” Shane said quickly on the phone, blinking away tears and pushing off the wall. He had to keep walking for this conversation.

“Also, Jackie and I are putting in letters. We’ve been looking up things about coma patients and we would want to read it to Ilya if we could? I know, I know it’s a lot to ask-”

“It’s a good idea, and I can, uh work with you to figure out what time works out best.” Shane said, sniffing slightly.

As if sensing the question in the silence, Hayden spoke up. “I know, I know it looks like I hate the guy... I don’t. I just need you to know this. He irked me in our early seasons with his jabs.” Shane screwed his eyes tight, brought his fist to his mouth, bit on his knuckle. “It *annoyed* me how fucking arrogant he was - remember when he said he was going to score fifty goals? Fucking insane!”

Hayden took a heavy sigh, “But, he shows up in a lot of ways. Like when he helped Jackie with her ankle. The way he is to Arthur, even showing me up as a dad when he painted his nails, and all the things he does to make you smile. He loves you, I love you, and that’s enough for me. And he loves my kids so that’s another thing. So I guess I’m trying to say - I love him too. Even if he drives me fucking insane.”

Shane wiped the tears off of his face, his shoulders relaxing. “That’s, uh, more than I was expecting. But much appreciated. I’ll text you later, kay?”

When he hung up, the loneliness settled in. The machinery still hummed while the voices stayed low.

He leaned against the wall and wondered how long he could live like this.

-&-

A/N: Love it? Hate it? Let me know.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

On day four, Shane *finally* heard back from Svetlana. He had tried to text her after the accident, but all of his texts kept getting rejected. Given how often Svetlana traveled for work, Shane had half expected this.

He'd need to get the rest of her numbers for the future.

"Hey Svetlana, are you back stateside?"

On the phone, Shane could hear her huffing as it sounded like she was walking. Maybe back to her apartment? "I am, I just got your messages. But I've been watching the news. It looks like some team members are released? Is Ilya?"

"Ilya is still here," Shane said quickly.

He heard a clatter of keys, a swear in Russian, before he heard her again, "Right but he's going to leave the hospital soon-"

"Are you inside? Are you somewhere where you can sit?"

Another round of silence. "Hollander, I do not like what you are saying."

"Neither do I. But are you inside?"

"I am, I am grabbing a drink and I will sit down for... whatever you have to tell me."

"Sorry, I wasn't sure what to text you and what you were seeing and when the texts weren't coming through--"

"Hollander, I get it. I was having issues contacting you and with all the flights... we are here now though, right?"

"Right. Right, okay, uh, Ilya is in a coma."

He could hear her gulp. "Okay, well coma patients wake up, when is he going to wake up?"

"He missed the first two expected wake-up windows. The next one is supposed to be tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

“Tomorrow.”

“Do you think he will wake up, Hollander?” Svetlana asked quietly.

“I... I have hope he will. I mean, he’s gotta, right?”

“Right. Should I come now? I can book a flight and be there when he wakes up?”

Shane felt immediate relief. “Yes, please. I mean, I know they have Russian translators but I would feel a lot better—and I bet he would too—if you were there to help with translations. And you’re family. And I know he would want you there.”

“Yes. I will be there, I am looking at flights now.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, and Hollander? I really wished you had told me I did not need to come,” and with that, she hung up the phone as Shane squeezed his eyes shut.

Blinking slowly, sniffing a bit, he wrote a text to Svetlana.

Shane: *I can still be overreacting. Watch you come tomorrow and he throws a fit that I scared everyone.*

Svetlana: *I hope for that too.*

-&-

Shane entered the hospital early the next day. He was feeling how uneasy he was settling into a routine with his parents. How effortlessly they moved in the hotel. His mom grabbed the snacks, his dad was in charge of beverages, and Shane always got the breakfast.

None of them were sleeping well in the hotel. Shane kept tossing and turning. His dad would snore. His mom would sneak into the bathroom to shower.

He once heard a wail.

Rubbing his eyes now, walking into the hospital, he spotted two of the Centaurs players napping in the waiting area.

Shane looked over his shoulder. He *knew* that some of them had been released. Some were lucky to only have a few fractured ribs and bruising. The others were here for a prolonged amount of time with a clear timeline. Ilya was the only one whose prognosis was uncertain.

Shane tried to walk quickly past, clutching his coffee, hoping that no one would-

“Shane? Shane Hollander? What are you doing here?” Luca asked groggily, sitting up

slightly.

Shane shut his eyes and swore under his breath before backtracking.

“I’m, uh, going to see Ilya.”

Luca’s eyes widened. “*You’ve* gotten to see Ilya?” With the mention of Ilya, the player next to him stirred and started blinking, “What about Ilya?” he asked.

“Um, you know. We’re friends. He has the same agent as I do. My mom works closely with Ilya. So we came by to help.”

Shane fidgeted with his coffee, heat creeping up his neck as the lie settled.

Luca, maybe he still had a concussion, or maybe it was too early for logic to operate, just nodded his head. “That makes sense—has he woken up? All we heard was that he’s in a coma.”

“Still in a coma. Uh, Farah said something about today being important? So I figured I’d drop by. Hang out.”

Luca blew out some air. “You’re lucky man, she has *barely* let anyone else from the team visit. Something about Ilya’s privacy? But he is our captain.”

“Yeah. Totally.” Shane shook his head. *Fuck.*

“Do you think you can talk to her? Maybe let us visit for a bit? Look, I know he’s in rough shape but—”

“I’ll see what I can do. But it’s Farah’s word at the end of the day, and I uh, I think Svetlana is coming,” Shane scratched his nose. “Do you know Svetlana? Ilya’s friend? Curly hair? They know each other from Russia and I think Farah may start to default to her as to who is visiting.”

Luca and the other player looked up, as if they were mentally trying to figure out who Svetlana was.

“Wait, is she the one in Boston? I think she came out one night for a team celebration.”

“Yeah... yeah that sounds about right. Listen, I have to go but uh, I’ll talk to you later?” Shane said, quickly taking the steps to leave the two players behind.

-&-

Shane walked into the ICU floor and made a beeline for Ilya’s room. Giving a tight smile as he noticed all the posters and cards that were outside of the room, the one from his neighbors was hung prominently.

He opened the door and slunk on through, and his first line of sight was always Chompy on the bedside with Hayden's kids cards. There was a team photo on the bedside table as well.

Shane focused intently on the team photo, pressing his lips down not to completely scream and lose it in Ilya's room. He forced himself to glance over to Ilya, where he could feel his shoulders relax.

"Morning, Ilya," he said softly, walking over and kissing him lightly on his forehead, focusing largely on the curl that was intact versus the hues of a sunset that littered on Ilya's face.

Ilya's eyes stayed shut and the machines kept beeping. So much for true love's kiss.

"Morning, Shane," Farah said from the corner, and Shane shifted his focus to her.

"Morning... looks like the Centaurs are coming in full force," Shane grumbled as he sat down next to Ilya, swishing his coffee around.

Farah sighed, "About that, we need to talk about strategy. They all *really* want to see Ilya-

"They can see Ilya, no one is stopping them-

"You know the visitation rules limit only a certain amount of people-

"I am leaving the room so that *they* can see him-

"Shane-

"What the fuck am I supposed to do?!" Shane half whispered and half yelled at Farah. He could feel his eyes pop out as Farah took a step back.

"I am *trying* to be fair with not hogging all of his time. I really, *really* am but I'm so tired," Shane whispered, dropping his head to stare at his coffee.

"I'm so tired of having to pretend that I'm some side character. And not just being able to ... hold his fingers when I can when they're in here. That I can adjust his hair right when *they* messed it up. And I know, *I know* it's not their fault-" At this, he looked at Ilya.

"It's ours. And if I'm being *really* honest... it's mine for not wanting to come out sooner," Shane whispered as he looked around the room. It was a nice room filled with cards and love for Ilya from around the world... but there were no cards or photos from Shane.

Farah stepped closer to Ilya's bed, her hand on her heart. "I *know* this is tough. And everyone who knows the full truth... we see how hard it is for you. And I know if roles were reversed... Ilya would have probably destroyed your room at this point," Shane snorted, because Ilya would do that.

"Right now, we *just* need to take it one day at a time. And today is another wake up window."

“It is. And he’s going to wake up,” Shane said numbly, nodding as he stared at Ilya’s necklace.

“Yes. He is.”

There was a silence that cloaked the room. And it was clear that neither were confident in their answers.

“And when he wakes up. We can figure out what happens next. But I guess... until then... we keep going. I can pick up Svetlana-”

“Oh, Shane, that’s so sweet-”

“Ilya would have wanted me to. He’s got this...” Shane started waving his hands around, “thing about picking up family members and friends. Especially his female friends.”

Farah smiled softly. “Sounds like a chivalrous man.”

“He *is*,” Shane cleared his throat. “If Svetlana’s flight lands early in the afternoon, and it takes... what an hour or so to get there and back... that’ll put me in time for when he wakes up... right?”

“Right,” Farah grimaced as she nodded her head.

“Right,” Shane sighed as he looked at Ilya.

“That’s enough time for the team to come in... and then he’ll be awake... and we’re all done here.”

-&-

Shane kept grinding his teeth as he navigated traffic. His heart kept skipping a beat every time he thought *Ilya will be awake when I come back, he’ll smile, he’ll...*

Well, the doctors told them not to expect a fairy tale ending. That it won’t be easy, but Shane couldn’t help but let his mind wander to better days. The same way his thoughts kept ruminating through their summers and holidays... to their last fight.

He bit his lip as he switched lanes, forgetting to use his turn signal.

-&-

“Wow, Ilya is right. You *are* boring,” Svetlana said as she eyed the Subaru that the family rented for the trip.

Shane gave a small smile as he gave Svetlana a hug. Letting himself just rest in her arms and take in the curls. She wasn’t Ilya, but she still felt a bit like home.

“Dad picked the first sensible car he found,” he whispered as he pulled away to take a look at Svetlana.

She was never one to skip her routine. Curls intact, makeup carefully done, and her outfit looked like she stepped off of the runway.

Shane looked down at himself. The same track pants he wore yesterday. A spare grey t-shirt that he pulled on this morning and a black hoodie. There were some food stains and coffee stains if you looked closely.

Did he even put on deodorant this morning?

“Shall we get to the hospital? He should be waking up soon?” Svetlana asked, her eyes running through Shane’s outfit.

Shane nodded as he helped Svetlana put her suitcase in the trunk. And in the last second, sprinted over to open the car door for her. Svetlana raised her eyebrows.

“He taught you well.”

“Yeah, well, he will kill me if you tell him I misbehaved.” Shane joked, and Svetlana gave a small smile.

“Yes, he would.”

-&-

There wasn’t a single phone call nor text throughout the drive. And Shane kept gripping the wheel tighter and tighter, the knuckles flushing white. They drove *slightly* over the speed limit.

“I am excited to meet your parents. In person,” Svetlana said quickly, Shane glanced over with a surprised look.

“Oh yeah? Have you met them on-”

“Skype video. Ilya was excited to introduce us. Your parents are very cute.”

“Oh, thank you. That’s, uh, kind of you to say.” Shane stumbled before shaking his head. “Sorry, I didn’t realize he did that. I mean, it’s fine, I just thought he would have shared-”

“I think Ilya saw it as a small thing. It was very quick. Barely a hi,” Svetlana paused. “But he *did* say that your mom and I would get along. Something about both of us very.... Intense about hockey?” She asked as Shane smiled and leaned back in his seat.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. I just, uh, I wish this was happening when he wasn’t in a hospital,” Shane said, running his hand over his face.

“Well, he will wake soon and once he realizes that everyone he loves is in one place... well that is one party Ilya will *love* to throw,” Svetlana said with a smile that reached her eyes.

“Yeah, he’ll wake soon,” Shane said, clearing his throat, still feeling something stuck. “A party sounds nice.”

-&-

As Svetlana and Shane walked through the hospital, Shane noted the growing discharged Centaurs patients.

Svetlana stopped in her tracks staring at all the tired and bandaged men with their Centaur gear. The chatter was low among them, while others were trading phones. She looked between Shane and the men before quickening her step to reach Shane.

“How long have they been there?” she hissed.

Shane shrugged, “Some the full five days. Refusing really to leave due to survivor’s guilt. I mean, they go back to the hotel that their team has bought out. But they just stay here as long as possible until their family and friends force them to take a break from here-”

“How bad is he that they are all here like this,” Svetlana snapped, her arm thrown back and pointed to the waiting room.

Shane grimaced. “It’s bad, Svetlana. I can’t... I can’t sugar coat it.” Her eyes widened as she started to take deep breaths. And Shane started to see the telltale signs of someone spiraling.

Fuck.

“Look, look.” Shane said, turning fully to her and grabbing her arms. “We’re reaching another wake up window. And Ilya is going to be the annoying brat that he is and wait till the last second to start opening his eyes or moving his hands or whatever. And then, everything can *start* to get back to normal.”

“You don’t believe that,” she accused bluntly.

Shane let go of her arms, a shock rippling through his system. “What did you say?” He asked incredulously.

“You don’t believe it. I am simply stating the truth.” Svetlana said, folding her arms in front of her chest as a way to egg Shane on.

Shane rolled his eyes, and made a fist. “I don’t know *what* to believe anymore. Just... come see him and *maybe* you can understand why I’m not full of fucking *hope*,” Shane snarled as he stomped off to the ICU, with Svetlana cursing in Russian following him.

Shane *knew* he should have tried to ease her into the whole setting. But was there even an

easy way to do this? As if a PowerPoint or an email could cover the horrible fluorescent lighting, the cold doctors, the friendly nurses, and the *whispers* that echoed the hallways like ghosts.

He fucking *hated* this hospital and it was his new home. How does one treat a guest in this hell house?

At Ilya's room, Shane softly knocked before poking his head in. Farah was in there with two other Centaur players.

"Sorry, uh, Svetlana just arrived and wants to see Ilya. I'm so sorry-"

"No, no worries man, we were just done anyways," the guy took a look at his partner as they leaned on their thighs to stand up, heads down as they shuffled out. Shane eyeing them down the hallway before widening the door for Svetlana.

Svetlana took small measured steps into the room. Once she was fully in, Shane hurriedly came in and shut the door. Leaning back on it, he rested his eyes for a second as Svetlana crept closer.

"*Ilya*," she whispered. She started muttering things in Russian, looking around the room as if she could find something to stabilize her. Her eyesight landed on one of the chairs and she rushed over.

Collapsing on it, she hugged her chest tightly as she eyed him.

"You can, um, hold some of his fingers. His hands are still fragile from the accident. But the wrists are a clean break... no surgery there for him," Shane said quietly, sniffing as he took a step closer.

Svetlana's eyes started to tear up. "I have seen Ilya many times after his games or fights... this is the worst. I cannot... I cannot bandage him up like when we were kids." Her eyes skittered over Ilya's body. A noticeable wince at his heavily bruised face.

"No one is expecting you to do that. We just want you here to be *with* him for *when* he wakes up. Your presence is more than enough." Farah said softly. Svetlana breaks away from Ilya to look at Farah, nodding slightly.

"It would be nice if I could just fix him though. Can I put ice on his bruise? Would that help?" Svetlana asked, looking behind her to Shane.

Shane's lips tugged into a small smile. "I already asked, they said it doesn't work that way. But... great minds think alike?" Svetlana smiled back before turning her gaze back to Ilya.

-&-

Shane noticed his mom had put on a bit of makeup, her hair even was brushed through. And his dad... his dad was wearing a clean set of clothes.

Shane had a pit in his stomach, as they got closer to him. Shane was leaning on the wall outside of Ilya's room. Once they got close, he could tell the question. He slowly shook his head as they approached.

"Nothing?" his mom asked in disbelief, her jaw dropping slightly.

"Sailed right through due date and extension," Shane said, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling.

"Well, are the doctors inside?" his dad asked quickly, standing on his toes to see inside.

"We were waiting for you. Uh, Farah wanted to make sure one of you was there."

His parents turned to one another. His dad cocked his head. "I was there for the last debrief, you go in this time," his mom nodded her head, pulling her purse higher on her shoulder.

"Let's go kiddo," she said, gesturing to the door as Shane angrily pulled it out and walked in. He scrunched his nose slightly as he saw the Doctor and a bruised Ilya.

The doctor, some generic last name, was standing at the foot of Ilya's bed as Farah stood to the left. Shane slunk down to the right hand side, blocking Chompy's view as he rested his head on Ilya's bed rails. The tight sheets with the clean corners rubbed in how Ilya had *not* moved.

"I know that this isn't the news we wanted-"

"You can say that again." Shane mumbled.

"*Shane*," his mom reproached as Shane shook his head, letting his arm hang down.

"We were really hoping to see some response by now," the doctor carried on as if he hadn't heard Shane's petulant commentary. "And we need to start adjusting how we think about Ilya's recovery. At this point, recovery doesn't follow a clear timeline. The changes will be slow and less predictable-"

"But will he even wake up at this point?" Shane snapped, pulling his head off the bed rail and staring at the doctor. "Like, is there *anything* pointing that he'll snap out of this-"

"He is not stuck, he is injured," the doctor pressed on as Shane could hear his mom stomp a foot. A warning to him.

Shane rolled his eyes. "Fine. Whatever. Not stuck. But is there anything that tells us he'll wake up? Have *you* ever had patients in coma wake up after this long?"

"Yes, we have seen it," the doctor said calmly.

Shane sucked a breath in, something dangerous as hope blooming in his chest. "And the fact that he is stable is good. And every image that comes through with no new injury, that's also good. All this tells us right now is that this is a significant injury that Ilya needs to rest and

recover from,” the doctor said in a low voice,

Shane leaned back as he put his hands behind his head. He could hear his mom and Farah start peppering with questions as he stared at the ceiling tiles. He slowly started to count out the tiles as he tried to regulate himself.

He got to twenty-four before he lost track and started at the corner again. He kept clenching his jaw and closing his eyes as he heard his own mom’s voice shift to annoyance.

Should he stomp his feet?

The moment passed and he heard the doctor walk out of the room. He heard Farah start to snuffle and his mom's chair scraped back.

He got to forty-one tiles before he looked down at Ilya.

It was hard to look at Ilya these days, he noticed this particularly as new teammates came in and stood in shock. Or how his own parents had to focus their gaze elsewhere when they were by his side.

The bruising and the swelling just kept going. It felt like every day Shane would notice a new bruise that shifted from red to purple to black. An eye was swollen shut. And Shane still only had a thumb to hold on to.

“You always did like to show up late to party *moya lyubov*,” he whispered as he leaned forward to take the thumb.

-&-

Shane walked over to the waiting room where the rest of the discharged team members had assembled. He felt as if he was walking through molasses and the idea of having to tell half of a hockey team that their captain was *still* asleep was unappealing. And Svetlana...

Oh, how she had dressed up for today, an ugly twist in Shane’s heart. Shane grimaced as he flashed back to picking her up in the morning. The contrast to them was so jarring that Shane had a hard time shaking it off.

How long would it be till Svetlana stopped with the makeup? Did she bring comfortable clothes?

Svetlana was sitting further away from the group, anxiously biting, what used to be, her perfectly manicured nails. At his footsteps, Svetlana looked up and pushed up from her chair.

“Well?” she asked, signaling the rest of the team to also stand up and form a circle around Shane.

It almost felt like they were in a locker room before a game. *Almost*.

Shane started to shake his head as he unclenched his jaw, shoving his fists in his hoodie pocket. Everyone's shoulders slumped, some groaned and walked away, and others turned to look anywhere else but their teammates. A lot of swears were heard bouncing off of the relatively empty waiting room.

Svetlana, determined, shushed the men before turning back to Shane. To Shane's surprise, the men quieted down. "Okay, but what did they tell? When is the next... wake up window?" Svetlana kept pressing. Leaning in, and focused on Shane.

Shane shrugged his shoulders, red hot anger started to pump through. "He's not on a 'clear timeline' anymore," Shane bitterly said and threw his hands up for the airquotes. He huffed out a laugh. "His changes are 'unpredictable' at this point--"

"That's fucking *bullshit* man, aren't the doctors supposed to know something?" One player stepped forward.

"What does it mean there's no clear timelines - is he going to be like this forever?" Another asked worriedly.

"For fuck's sake, can't they wake him up?" Another one practically shouted as he towered over Shane.

The questions kept piling and Shane's head started to throb. Svetlana stepped closer to him and grabbed his arm as they stared at half of a hockey team pouring out all their frustrations.

The dull throb that started only a minute ago had escalated to a war drum. Shane tried to take one deep breath, and another one before he snapped. "I DON'T KNOW! I don't know and--" Shane yelled, running a hand through his hair.

"Well you fucking should! You're the one in the room while the rest of us are out here--" Evan shouted, jabbing his finger at Shane and coming dangerously close to hitting Shane's chest.

Another deep breath as Shane started to shake.

"Why are *you* in the room?" Evan kept pushing. Murmurs rippled through the crowd as the circle became tighter and tighter.

"Because *I* want him there," Svetlana snarled, breaking away from Shane and stepping in front of him. Her arms at her side as she leaned in, "I have known Shane longer than *any of you* and I have known Ilya back to the days when he was a *piece of shit* of a hockey player back in Moscow. So if I want Shane Hollander in the room, he fucking stays in the room."

There was complete silence as everyone shuffled their feet. But still, the current was raw and while a few stepped back, others were more eager to lean into the fight.

Shane heard running footsteps. Shane looked behind him and saw security, forming their own circle around the team.

Fuck.

Then, with little warning, the players in front of him and Svetlana were grinning. Shrieks of *joyous* laughter. Before Shane could ask, he heard the booming voice.

“Well, it seems like I missed the party. Was anyone going to invite me?” Coach Wiebe barked out.

Shane turned around to see that Coach Wiebe was being wheeled into the lobby by his wife. While he was also decorated in bruises.

Coach Wiebe folded his arms on his chest. “Now, I heard that you’ve been causing some rakus-”

At this point, every player exploded with their own questions and sentiments. Shane noted that the security guards started to inch closer, one started to go for his radio.

Wiebe put his hands up, silencing the team.

“I *know* you’re all tired and frustrated. I *know* you’re all healing from your own physical injuries. And I know you all want Ilya to wake up. He’s your captain, and you care for him all deeply. And he knows that, even while he’s resting,” Coach Wiebe gestured behind him.

The team smiled but quickly faded as Coach Wiebe crossed his arms.

“However, that is no reason why you should be attacking Shane or Svetlana,” Svetlana, at this point, moved back to her spot next to Shane and huddled close to his side, folding her hand into his.

“You *know* that Ilya has no family. None that he speaks positively about or would support him in this time,” Shane squeezed Svetlana’s hand in indignation, jaw clenched.

“From my conversations with Svetlana and Farah, the Hollanders *are* that family for Ilya. They stay. Farah retains power of attorney and full discretion over visitation.”

Coach Wiebe looked around at the team, many had shoved their hands in their pockets while others were biting their lips. There was grumbling, and Shane felt the hair on his neck stand on end.

“Now, you may have noticed that we have additional guests with us,” Coach Wiebe pointed to the security guards who seemed puzzled to have been included in the circle. One nervously waved while another glared at the team angrily.

“I’ve been told that you’ve been loitering. Not sleeping. Not eating. And not *showering*,” and everyone shifted uncomfortably. No one argued.

“If you want to be there for Ilya and the rest of your teammates who are still actively

recovering... you need to take care of yourself.” Coach Wiebe’s voice softened. “That’s *not* optional. Tonight, everyone goes back to the hotel. You eat, shower, and *sleep*. And you come back tomorrow better than this.”

Grounds rippled through the group and sharp protests started to rise. Coach Wiebe lifted a hand up.

“It’s either you follow my orders,” he said evenly, “or their orders. Remember, you are *still* representing the team.” A few nervous gulps, one tense second. Then, slowly, the team began to disperse, collecting bags and jackets, heads down.

Shane let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. Finally, they were *leaving*. He squeezed Svetlana’s hand twice. Maybe she could share stories of Ilya from the early days. Maybe they could all pretend that this was a normal outing versus an utter nightmare.

Coach Wiebe turned back to Shane and Svetlana.

“Shane,” he said, and before Shane could thank him, Wiebe went for the kill. “Shane, you’re not on my team but I’ve heard the hours you spent here. I’m asking you go back—”

“No,” Shane said simply.

He shook his head, lips pressed so tightly together they went white.

“Shane, please—” Coach Wiebe raised his voice.

Shane stepped forward.

His fists were tight and by his side, he didn’t even realize he had let go of Svetlana’s hand. He wasn’t a violent person, but towering over the coach; he felt his adrenaline hum as something ugly coiled in his chest.

Svetlana moved fast. She stepped in front of Shane, and placed a hand on his chest, blocking his line of sight.

“Just go,” she whispered, “I’ll be here. I’ll stay.”

Her gaze flickered to the lingering security guards nearby.

“This is *bullshit*, Svetlana” Shane hissed, his arms shaking.

“I know,” her voice broke, “I”m sorry. Just go - please. I don’t want you to get in trouble tonight.” She pleaded, her eyes wide with tears.

Shane nodded his head once. Then-

“Fine!” he shouted into the room and threw his arms up. Everyone froze. All heads snapped to him.

“Fine. I’ll go so the *team* can have a *fucking* good role model-”

“Shane, please-” Svetlana pleaded.

“No, it’s fine just...” Shane backed into the doorway, breath coming in fast. Shane slammed his fist into the wall hard, and stormed out. Not giving a *fuck* of the repercussions and the gasps that followed him out.

-&-

DeuxMoi

Anon please! Visiting my sister at the Savannah Memorial and saw Shane Hollander arguing with an unknown woman and the coach of the Centaurs over who was staying at the hospital tonight for Ilya Rozanov.

Is there something there?

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Wow, incredibly overwhelmed (in the best way) with people's reactions to the story. Thank you for all the kind words and hope you continue along this story. I promise, there are brighter days ahead, even if we aren't there yet!

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Shane returned from his early morning run, still out of breath as he entered the hotel room, the music blasting in his ears as he kicked off his shoe and nearly ran into his stony-faced parents.

Shane removed the headphones and could hear, “–We need to talk.”

“About what?” he asked, sidestepping his parents as he started to throw his phone and headphones to the bed. Hunched over, he scanned the already made bed. “I need to shower so I can be ready to go to the hospital with you two–”

“You’re not going this morning.”

Shane sharply turned around as he glared at his parents. “Excuse me?”

“We heard what happened last night, and we think you need a break, honey,” Yuna said, her lower lip trembling as she looked over to David.

“Oh, you mean when the team ganged up on me and Svetlana?”

“Shane, lower your voice, *please*–”

“NO!” Shane shouted, and his parents took a step back, Yuna’s hands twisted nervously in front of her chest.

Shane squeezed his eyes tight. “I am *tired* of being told to be quiet or to let others in to see Ilya more. It’s not *fair* that I can’t be the boyfriend I want to be in a time like this!”

“Oh, Shane–” Yuna’s voice broke.

“Mom, please, I just– I have to go in,” Shane pleaded, trying to appeal to her senses. Walking over to her, he placed his hands on her shoulders and briefly wondered if he should fall to his knees.

Would they let him go if he begged?

Yuna looked over at David, who shook his head, his lips a firm line. “You’re exhausted, son, and you need to rest–” David started quietly.

“Would you stay back if mom was in a coma?” Shane boldly asked.

David's eyes nearly popped out of his head as he advanced on Shane, Yuna moving quickly to the side. Shane's legs hit the side of his bed as he had to lean back as his dad glared down on him. "Shane, I'm *warning* you – if I have to sit outside that door to make sure you don't leave this hotel room till you've slept and ate then help me God I *will*," David thundered as Yuna whimpered.

Shane started to shake, "You want to be there for Ilya? Then you need to take *care* of yourself. And remember *why* you two decided to hide this for so long. You two wanted to protect your careers. You two wanted to make sure that Ilya didn't face political consequences if he was sent back to Russia. You two *agreed* to act sensibly to survive in this league," David continued, as Shane glared at his dad, breathing heavily through his nose.

"And right now, you are *dangerously* close to throwing *everything* away. The consequences for you are lighter than for Ilya."

Shane felt his heart drop, his anger thick enough to choke on. He looked down, almost winded by the shame that poured over him with *how* he's been acting.

"What the *hell* were you thinking yelling at Coach Wiebe? While he's in a wheelchair? And an entire grief-stricken team? Do you have *any* idea how that looks *or* sounds?"

"I was angry," Shane mumbled, running his hands through his hair.

David threw his hands in the air. "Noted! Next time you're angry, *walk away*. Go work out. Go take a nap. Eat something," David scowled as he turned his back on Shane, shaking his head.

"How did you find out about last night?" Shane asked, finally able to look at his parents, his lip trembling.

"The security guards came to talk to us. They gave us, and the entire team, a warning." Yuna hesitated on the next part. "They mentioned how bad it would look if any of this got out."

Shane slid to the floor, his energy draining out of him all at once. He hugged his knees to his chest as he rested his head on his knees.

"I'm sorry, I'm so *sorry*. I just... I know that if Ilya was here and if roles were reversed—"

"Then I definitely would have to handcuff him to the room and stand guard while your mom goes to the hospital," David softly stated, as he heaved a sigh getting down to the floor with Shane. Mild grunting, and something about 'damn knees'.

Shane looked up, a small smile on his face. "You think? You think he'd be messing up like I am?"

David chuckled. "Honestly, yes. Remember when you were knocked out cold? He nearly got thrown into the penalty box. And that was *before* you two had even properly dated. What do

you think he would do now?"

Shane sighed. "I'm scared. I'm scared that *everything* is going to blow up. Or we'll be stuck in groundhog day forever. And I don't, I don't have hope-" Shane's voice started to shake as he took a deep breath, his mom getting down on her knees in front of Shane.

"Shane, have you read his chart?" she said quietly, reaching out to grab his hands. "He *is* having neurological improvements. We are seeing signs. We're even seeing some... spontaneous breaths."

"And so what?" Shane said, staring at the carpet.

"It means," his mom started carefully, as if explaining a basic concept to a five year old, "That we are *one* step closer to getting the ventilator out of him."

Shane's head picked up more. "Wait, but if he gets off the ventilator-"

"Then his brain has healed enough to take on some of the basic functions. And we are *one* step closer to him waking up."

"Why wasn't that said?" Shane asked indignantly.

Yuna pursed her lips. "I don't think you *listen* as much as you think you are when you're in the room. You're so focused on the next step that you're missing the small wins. And we *have* to start doing that if we're going to make it through this. For you and Ilya."

Shane nodded his head, sinking back against the bed. "Maybe... maybe a morning rest would be good." The words felt wrong coming out of his mouth, but he knew a losing battle when he saw one.

His parents beamed, their shoulders lowering with relief. "Yeah, order some room service. Treat yourself to some pancakes or whatever healthy omelet appeals to you." Shane laughed.

"There's one more thing, kiddo..." his mom trailed off, her head cocking to the side.

"Just one?" Shane joked.

"Games are coming back next week. And Montreal has been asking-"

"I don't want to play," Shane said simply, the words slipped out before his brain could catch up. His parents raised their eyebrows at him, clearly both racking their brains for the last time Shane Hollander had said he didn't want to play a game or go to practice.

Shane exhaled as he tilted his head side to side. "I mean... I don't know," he said doubtfully.

Roles reversed, Ilya would've feigned a cough to get off the ice. There was no doubt in his mind about what Ilya would do in that situation.

“It wouldn’t be fair to the team if I were on the ice anytime soon.” Shane said, looking between his two parents for an answer. “And I get how this *looks* and maybe, maybe I can figure out some travel plans, but until Coach Theriault really demands I come back... I want to skip the practices and games. If I can.” Shane said, biting his lip and looking at his parents.

“Can we tell Farah to release a statement? Tell Coach I have mono? Whatever gets me out of the games and practice?” Shane begged, looking at his parents.

Shane’s parents deliberately didn’t look at each other. Yuna’s hand gripped David’s as David cleared his throat.

“And if people start to chatter or the league starts to make it a bigger deal-”

Shane scoffed. “Nothing we haven’t dealt with before.” His memory flashed back to his meeting with Crowell.

“One day at a time, right? Isn’t that what you two always say about this situation?” Shane threw back at them.

“We have our answer,” David muttered and Shane tried to recall when there was a question asked. His parents exchanged looks, a mixture of raising eyebrows and subtle head nods.

“We should get going.” His mom said, slapping her thighs before pushing off as his dad grunted getting into a standing position.

“And call Hayden, he’s been worried sick about you and wants to check in on you. It might be good to get another pep talk. Yeah?” Yuna said, walking towards the door, David closely at her heels.

“I can come in the afternoon, right?” Shane asked quietly.

“You can come at 2 PM and no earlier.” David shouted back.

The door clicked shut, and the room went quiet.

-&-

Shane wasn’t sure exactly when he decided to get off the floor, but eventually, his stomach growled and Shane was painfully reminded that he was still human.

Instead of fumbling through the apps to find food that fit in his diet, he ordered the first three breakfast items on the menu. And then he picked up the phone again to order the cookies and cream milkshake with ginger ale. And as soon as he hung up the receiver he picked it up again and meekly asked to include some takeaway containers.

Shane *knew* it was a mistake when he felt overwhelmed with which meal to start. The food alone was not enough to fix him, but it was enough to tame his stomach. So he picked at them like a bird, and gravitated to whatever felt comforting.

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket, and pulled it out. Hayden's name with the cheesy photo with Arthur popped up. A ghost of a smile came on Shane's face. Grabbing the milkshake, he moved to the bed before picking up the phone.

"Hey! Your mom said you were resting this morning and wanted me to give you a call," Hayden boomed into the phone, shrieking kids and banging the door made Shane truly smile. He could *see* Hayden looking over his shoulder as he snuck out to the garage or whatever room he did his fanmail.

Jackie must be home if Hayden was able to call in the middle of the day.

"Yeah."

An awkward silence fell between them, Shane took a sip from the milkshake.

Hayden sucked in a breath, "Okay, listen, I've been thinking--"

"Uh-oh. That's a mistake." Hayden teased softly.

"No, no, listen. This is a *good* idea. Remember--" Hayden hesitated, "Remember in the car how you told me you wanted to propose to Ilya? Well, you kinda need a ring for that, right?"

Shane narrowed his eyes, stomach churning which had nothing to do with the mismatched meal. "Hayden, what the *fuck*--"

"Do you have his ring size?" Hayden pushed. And the first thought that popped into Shane's head nearly made him choke.

I know what cock ring size to get him, does that count?

And rather than voice that inappropriate thought out loud, Shane pressed his lips together as Hayden rambled on. "Did I ever tell you how I got Jackie's ring size?"

"I assumed you *asked* her or took her to the jeweler or something. Look, Hayden--" Shane clutched the drink closer to his chest as he started to take a sip.

"I measured her finger while she was sleeping." Hayden blurted out. Shane stopped mid sip of the milkshake and lowered the shake.

"That sounds... messed up and maybe a bit creepy?"

Hayden let out an exasperated groan. "*Why* does everyone keep telling me that? Hear me out, you'll realize I'm *brilliant*."

Shane chuckled, "Okay, tell me this story."

Hayden cleared his throat and Shane rolled his eyes. Hayden was clearly pushing out his

chest in preparation for this epic tale. But Shane was glad to step back into his banter with Hayden.

He wanted to stay in the moment forever and forget about the hospital.

“Obviously, when I realized I wanted to propose to Jackie, I had to get her a ring. But I didn’t want to let her *know* I was proposing-”

“Didn’t you go too far and she thought you were breaking up with her?”

“That’s later in the love story and totally *not* relevant here.” Hayden mumbled. “Anyways, I had to get the ring size. So, one night, while she was sleeping, I took a cell phone charging cable-”

“Jesus, *Hayden*, this sounds like you’re going to murder her-”

“-And I snuck into our room,” Hayden raised his voice, talking over Shane, “And I wrapped the cable around her ring finger, used my fingers as markers, and then I snuck out to the kitchen and measured out the cable markers with a ruler.” Hayden said confidently as Shane, took a noisy sip of his milkshake.

“Okay, I get that you’re not impressed yet-” Hayden continued on, though his confidence was clearly shaken.

“I’m sorry, there’s more to this story?” Shane asked, his eyebrows going up.

“Well, yeah, I had to make sure I had the *right* size. So then, in the kitchen, I remembered we had twine-”

“Why did you have twine?”

“I don’t know, Jackie got it for some meal that went sideways, again *not* the point,” Hayden sounded exasperated, and Shane grinned to himself. “So then I cut off a piece of twine-”

“And this is how you murdered Jackie?” Shane asked playfully, taking a small sip as Hayden let out another sigh.

“Oh my god, no one gets murdered,” Hayden said exasperatedly, “I then go back into the bedroom and do the whole thing again. And I took the *average* of the two numbers-”

“Oh my *God*-”

“And that’s how I got to her ring size!” Hayden said proudly.

“That is clever... but wait, didn’t you have to resize the ring anyways?” Shane asked, a brief memory of Jackie explaining the ring shaping process when they first got engaged.

Hayden hesitated slightly. “Okay, *yes* but it wasn’t by much! The jeweler was impressed by

my methods.”

“Was this before or after you put down the deposit for the ring?”

“Why would that matter?” Hayden asked, genuine confusion.

Shane let out a laugh, “Sometimes, you’re so hopeless,” the brief thought flashed his mind, *I can’t wait to tell Ilya this story*. His stomach twisted as he placed the drink down, clearing his throat.

“But, uh, yeah I figured... Maybe you can do that for Ilya. It’d be a perfect time for you to get the measurement. And you can probably do it more accurately than I did with a tape measure or something.” Hayden muttered on the line.

Shane’s heart softened at the thought, his eyes prickling at the idea of going through the effort. “That... uh, you know, actually isn’t a bad idea. I just can’t do that now. His fingers are so swollen that it would be a bad measurement.”

“Oh.” Hayden said quietly, “Well, maybe that’s a milestone to go after. His finger swelling going down for you to measure? And then you can order the ring, I know you have one picked out-”

“How do you know that?” Shane asked sharply, and embarrassment heated his cheeks.

Shane could almost *hear* Hayden roll his eyes. “One, I know you and know you wouldn’t just say ‘I want to propose’ without looking into rings and two, I room with you. I see what you look at on your phone sometimes.”

“Fuck *off*, stalker much?” Shane said, making a mental note to buy a privacy screen for his phone.

“No, it’s just cute. It’s nice to see you in love and happy. You have a dopey look on your face.”

“Alright, alright. Enough about me. I’ll... take what you said into consideration. It’s, uh, nice to have things to look forward to other than the big wake up.”

“Yeah, exactly. The small wins.” Hayden said quickly.

The pattern matching of Hayden’s speech and Yuna was too spot on to miss. Shane rolled his eyes, but done with love. They cared and it showed in all the small ways.

“What’s going on with you, how’s the team? You’ve got practice soon.”

There was a bit of silence. Shane’s skin prickled as a small set of panic crept in. “Hayden? How’s the team? Is there practice? Is something going on?—”

“So sorry! I muted myself, can you hear me?” Hayden bellowed into the phone as Shane

pulled the phone away from his ear.

“Oh my God, yes, I can hear. Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah. The team is fine. I think everyone is shaken up by the crash and Ilya that no one is really noticing that you’ve ducked out for a bit. Plus, I think the league is trying to ease back into the schedule.”

“Got it. Well, let me know if there is a team meeting or something comes up. I’ve pretty much disabled all calls and texts except for you and a few others.”

“For sure! Alright, listen man, I’ve gotta go, Jackie was taking care of the kids and I need to relieve her.”

Hurried goodbyes and the phone line went quiet. Shane took the last sip of his milkshake as he pushed himself out of bed and started to put the food away. Feeling a bit better and optimistic for what was ahead; even though he wasn’t sure how long it would last.

-&-

Hayden hung up the phone and placed it down on the counter. He leaned against the edge, and pinched the ridge of his nose and screwed up his eyes. He hardly noticed when Jackie sauntered in, leaning casually against the entryway with her arms crossed.

“You didn’t tell him, did you?” She asked, a small smile on her face as she stared at Hayden with concern.

Hayden cringed as he shook his head. Adjusting his stance so he could stare at his wife and puffed out some breaths, eyes avoiding hers. “I... did not. Didn’t think it was a good idea to hint at everything going on.”

Jackie sighed, concerned, filling her eyes as she approached Hayden who was hunching over, still glaring at the ground. She reached out and started rubbing his arm, pulling on his sleeve slightly to get him closer to her.

“He just... seemed hopeful? Like *actually* hopeful when we got towards the end, that I couldn’t bring myself to tell him what else was going on,” Hayden said, taking the hint from his wife and snaking his arms around her, pulling her in as he leaned in to sniff her hair. The vanilla scent that he now associated with *home* calmed him down.

“I think it’s good you didn’t tell him. It’d be another thing on his plate, and he would *absolutely* crash the team Skype meeting,” Jackie said, pulling her head out a bit to stare into Hayden’s eyes.

“*Fuck* this is going to suck,” Hayden said, enunciating the swear loudly causing the girls in the living room to shriek with delight.

“Daddy said a bad word!”

“I know, *I know* and Daddy is sorry!” Hayden shouted, throwing a guilty look over to Jackie who just smiled. “Hey girls? Can you turn up the tv volume? Mommy will be over in a few minutes.” Jackie shouted.

A beat of a second as Jackie and Hayden could hear the volume of the tv show increasing. Hayden was sure he should feel guilty about damaging developing eardrums, but he figured that was a future Hayden problem.

Once the volume was high, Hayden plowed on. “Coach Theriault has already ordered the entire team to delete all social media apps and to stop commenting-”

“Well after J.J. started fighting Zullo *and* Kent in the comment section, can you blame him?” Jackie said in a sing-song tone that sounded more like a children show than a serious conversation.

“No, absolutely not, Zullo has been off his rocker since he’s been released. But J.J. should have *never* taken the bait and involved half of the league-”

“But he did and now Coach Theriault is involved-”

“And so is Crowell. And he’s buying every story out there to squash it,” Hayden said, looking down in time to see the fear in Jackie’s eyes as she gasped. “He’s, uh, trying to force Farah and Yuna to get Shane to play again to ‘quieten’ the noise.”

Jackie’s fear was quickly replaced with a small knowing smirk. “Crowell is scary but I wouldn’t go up against those two,” Hayden swallowed, unable to correct his wife’s confidence.

“Yuna and Farah are calling around to see what stories everyone has on him and I think some of the players are talking. And I even heard a rumor that coaches may speak out too.”

“Like who?”

“Well, Scott Hunter for one. I think Leah also was willing to share. And if they get enough voices-”

“They can sell their own story,” Jackie finished. There was another yelp as the parents looked over to the entryway. When there was no follow-up noise, they turned back to each other.

“You think this will work?” Jackie said, hopefully.

Hayden exhaled as he stared at the ground, unable to meet Jackie’s eyes.

“Crowell *always* gets what he wants.”

-&-

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all who have left comments! And a special shout out to my beta readers who make sure each chapter lands! See you soon with a new chapter.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

As much as Shane hated to admit it, his parents and Coach Wiebe were right.

The rest, the food, and the call with Hayden cleared his mind. While he knew it was impossible to control the situation, he at least felt like he was in control of himself.

Walking back into the hospital, food bags in hand, he diverted from his original route. His feet felt like lead, but he *knew* he had to do one thing before he went to Ilya's room. Otherwise, the guilt in his stomach would continue to twist and grow.

Once he reached the door, he took a deep breath and knocked. Once he heard an affirmative answer, he pushed the door open a crack and poked his head through.

Coach Wiebe was sitting upright in his bed, his wife sitting by his side, squinting at her phone with her glasses on. Coach Wiebe's eyebrows shot up, but his lips curved into a smile as he beckoned Shane into the room.

Shane gingerly walked in, taking in all the plants and flowers that circled the room.

Shane felt a stab of jealousy. Ilya was forbidden to have plants or flowers in his ICU room.

"Shane Hollander," Coach Wiebe boomed, "To what do I owe this pleasure?" He settled his arms across his chest.

Shane gritted his teeth as he bowed his head, shuffling his feet as he focused on his dirty shoelaces. Taking a few deep breaths, he looked up again at Coach Wiebe's face, his eyes darting with embarrassment over to Mrs. Wiebe, who had put down her phone.

Coach Wiebe turned to his wife, but she spoke first, "You know, I could use some coffee. I'll go grab some, Shane, can I get you anything?" she asked kindly, as she gathered her items.

Red hot shame flooded Shane's face as he shook his head, mumbling a "No, thank you, Mrs. Wiebe." He averted his gaze as Mrs. Wiebe passed him, her hand resting for a second on his shoulder, a small squeeze of comfort before leaving the room.

Shane wished she shoved him into the wall.

Shane stepped closer to Coach Wiebe's bed. "I came here to apologize for my words and actions from last night. It was unprofessional and out of line. You were right to recommend that I go and rest." At this, a lump formed in Shane's throat, and his eyes prickled. "And I

know Ilya would be furious if he saw me act out like that. He speaks really highly of you. You're one of his favorite coaches he's had as a player."

Coach Wiebe tilted his head with a small smile, "That's certainly high praise considering how many coaches Ilya has had in his lifetime. And I appreciate your apology and consider it accepted."

Shane nodded. "Thank you, sir." He was turning away from the bed, hand still on the rails, when Coach Wiebe interrupted.

"Shane, I know we don't know each other at all. And, if you ask my wife, she will tell you I am the worst when it comes to gossiping. But I *do* hear things."

Shane's skin prickled as an icy fear swept through his body. He immediately shoved his hands into his hoodie pocket.

Coach Wiebe hesitated, tilting his head to the side. "And I've had my *own* experiences as a player," Coach Wiebe continued carefully. "Specifically, I've had my own experience with developing close friendships with *other* players."

Shane's mouth dropped. "Outside of my wife and him, you're the only other person who knows. And so, I understand why you *and* Ilya would want to keep things private. Do you understand, Shane, what I'm trying to say?"

Shane quickly shut his jaw and nodded. "Yes. I just, I am surprised," he said hoarsely.

"I can tell," Coach Wiebe said kindly, as they both nervously laughed.

"Listen, I was going to do this even if you hadn't come up for a visit. But it's clear to me that you're in no shape to go back to practice or to the games. And I take it that you don't *want* to leave right now anyways, right?"

"That's correct," Shane said quickly, shocked how fast he admitted that out loud.

Coach Wiebe nodded, "I am going to call Coach Theriault and let him know that you're in no emotional or physical state to get back on the ice. Talk to him coach to coach. It'll be best for all parties, especially for you, to let you stay on the bench until things have calmed down."

Shane hesitated. "Do you think he'll listen? Do you think he'll suspect?"

"Coach Theriault is old school where he'd rather believe the lie than the truth. But underneath that, he's a good man and I know he cares deeply about the game. If I tell him that you won't play at your best, he'll take it. We go way back, so I think my word counts for *something*." Coach Wiebe teased as Shane flushed.

A small knock and Mrs. Wiebe stepped back into the room, holding a tray of two coffees and a water bottle. "Shane, I picked up some water for you, never can be too hydrated!" she said kindly, as she passed the bottle to him and she walked to her husband's bedside.

Shane smiled, and he could see why Ilya liked Coach Wiebe so much. “Thank you, that’s really kind. I should head back, but sorry and thank you again, Coach Wiebe,” Shane said, waving slightly as he left the room.

Once the door clicked, Coach Wiebe turned to his wife. “Can you hand me my phone? I’m going to call Coach Theriault. And then, I’m going to talk to Yuna and Farah.”

-&-

On his way to Ilya’s room, Shane shared some of the food from the hotel with the Centaurs team in the waiting room. After yesterday, everyone was a bit over the top with the pleasantries, and awkward glances to match. But, for the most part, Shane felt like everyone was on the same page.

Knocking on Ilya’s door, Shane shuffled in to see Svetlana and his dad sitting across from each other.

Svetlana smiled, as she jumped out of her chair to hug Shane. Shane hugged her back and whispered, “I’m so sorry for yesterday.”

“It is fine. Ilya was fine last night and you are here now. Rested.” Svetlana said kindly, pulling away from Shane. “*And* you smell nicer. Much better than before,” Shane laughed as he heard his dad get up.

“Hey kiddo,” his dad said, giving him a hug. “Glad to see you slept in a bit.”

“Thanks, where’s mom?” Shane asked, looking around the room.

“Oh, she’s working with Farah on messaging and helping out with a few logistics. I should go check in on her actually,” his dad said absentmindedly as he started to gather his belongings.

“I’ll let you three be!” his dad said cheerily, as he left the room. Shane wandered over to his dad’s spot as he plopped down.

“Hey Ilya,” he said, reaching over to hold on to Ilya’s thumb. He noted that the scratches on Ilya’s hands were fading and the swelling was going down. He felt a small smile on his face as he realized, perhaps he could do Hayden’s ring plan sooner than expected.

“Ilya has been sleeping. Doctors told Farah that they are seeing more good signs on scans and he’s breathing more on his own. They all were happy but said they were taking it slow.”

Shane nodded, more of a smile on his face as he gazed upon Ilya’s face. The bruises were still deep shades of ugly colors, but Shane could have *sworn* that some looked like they were healing rather than expanding.

He could see the seeds of hope that everyone else had been taking note of all along.

“You know what I was thinking last night, staring at Ilya’s face?” Svetlana asked loudly, breaking Shane’s yearning stare.

“What?”

“This is the perfect time to put makeup on Ilya. He will never see, we will have fun, we will have photos to share when he is awake. And I have always wanted to see Ilya in a full face of makeup,” Svetlana said wistfully.

Shane, taking the pragmatic view, leaned back. “Well, he wears makeup for the ads.”

Svetlana made a tsk sound as she batted her hand. “Does not count. I want bright red lips. Gold eyeshadow. Very drawn on eyebrows. He would look pretty, yes?” She asked, as Shane laughed.

“I am biased, I always think he looks pretty,” Shane gazed down on Ilya, lingering on the curls.

Svetlana rolled her eyes. “So much mush. Well, I did ask the nurse if I could put some makeup on him. You know the nurse that always has pigtails?”

“The mean one?” Shane asked, shocked. Svetlana shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah, I guess the mean one, she got *very* angry at me. And threatened to ban me from Ilya’s room if she sees me with a makeup brush in hand,” Svetlana rolled her eyes. “It’s a shame. I think she would like her job more if Ilya were prettier.”

“Has Ilya *ever* let you do his makeup?” Shane asked, feeling a bit of glee expand in his chest. It was rare that he got to hear stories of Ilya from someone who loved him as much as Svetlana did.

Plus, who *wouldn’t* want some new teasing materials for when Ilya woke up?

Svetlana threw her head back and laughed, “Maybe once *or* twice. But we were little so I think we saw it as an art project rather than putting on makeup.”

As if on cue, the nurse with the pigtails (or the mean one), walked into the room and grabbed the chart, noting some numbers down.

Shane looked at Svetlana who rolled her eyes. “Never did that as a kid. I was always so involved with hockey. And I don’t think my mom has fun makeup,” Shane said as Svetlana smiled.

“Oh please, Hollander, every woman has fun makeup. Could be red lipstick. Could be eyeshadow.”

“You’ve met my mom. You really think she has ‘fun’ makeup—”

“On this, I’m certain. She has *red lipstick*. It’s a staple in every woman’s collection!”

Svetlana shot back. And Shane rolled his eyes and snuck a glance at the nurse who was watching Ilya *very* intently.

“Is everything okay—” And Shane felt the words catch in his throat as everything in the room fell away.

Shane saw Ilya’s head move ever so slightly towards Shane’s voice. Not a full head turn, but enough that it felt like he was listening, and following along with the conversation. Shane thought that if he waited one more second, Ilya would grin that crooked smile and side with one of them.

It was like Ilya was *there*, listening to the conversation.

“*Ilya? Ty menya slyshish?*” Svetlana whispered, breathless. As Ilya then turned his head slightly towards her.

Shane’s heart thundered with joy as he looked at Svetlana. Tears gathered in his eyes as she covered her mouth with joy. “This is good! This is *great*. Can he wake up soon? Right?” he asked, turning to the nurse whose lips were in a thin line as she slowly put Ilya’s chart back down.

“Right?” Svetlana asked, throwing a pleading glance at the nurse who was still silent, clearly trying to see how to communicate.

“It is good,” she said in a measured tone. “But it can also be due to reflex. We *cannot* put a lot of meaning or hope on a head turn. Or a heart rate spike.”

“But it is better than nothing, right?” Shane pressed on, his palms sweating slightly as he turned back to Ilya.

“It is. But we want to see *more* before we can confidently say timelines. With injuries like these, recovery can be non-linear.”

“Yeah, *we know*,” Shane said, staring up at the ceiling as he felt his heart coil. The hope he had was still there, but it was a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I’ll let you three be,” the nurse said quietly before leaving.

Shane barely let the door shut before he huffed out a breath, “I told you she was the mean one.”

-&-

Farah returned to Ilya’s room towards the end of the day, followed by a doctor and Shane’s dad. Svetlana, taking the silent hint, vacated her seat and promptly left the room.

“How are we doing?” Farah asked as Shane rubbed his eyes.

“Could be better. What’s going on here?” Shane asked.

The doctor had picked up the chart and started flipping through the pages, taking a cursory look at the machines. “We’re reviewing Ilya’s respiratory numbers,” he said. “If they continue trending the way they have been, we may attempt extubation.”

“You mean to take out the ventilator?” Shane’s dad asked, his hand on Shane’s shoulder as he stared nervously at the doctor.

“Yes. It would be a trial to see if Ilya can maintain breathing on his own.”

“With the ventilator being removed, does it mean that Ilya is getting better?” His dad asked, squeezing Shane’s shoulder tightly at the last word that was filled with quiet hope. Shane bit his lip as he stared at Ilya’s hands, slowly counting the scratches.

One, two, three, four...

The doctor sighed, clearly choosing the next words carefully. “It means that his body is doing enough on its own that we no longer need the ventilator. It doesn’t tell us yet whether he’ll wake up.”

Shane fluttered his eyes shut. Breathing was good. But he had to quell the hope that was springing in his heart. Breathing felt like a victory Shane didn’t trust himself to celebrate.

Ilya would celebrate every win in huge ways, but he *never* celebrated consolation prizes.

“Is it painful to remove?” Shane asked, reaching forward to grasp Ilya’s hand. Feeling braver and holding more than the thumb, he was careful with the splinted and buddy-taped fingers. It was as if he was trying to comfort Ilya about this procedure.

Or maybe, it was the other way around.

The doctor paused, “It is uncomfortable but he will be sedated and will not remember it.”

“Are family members allowed in the room?” Farah asked, and Shane glanced at her to see she was taking notes on her phone. He would need to ask for those notes later.

“Yes, we generally encourage it if we believe that it will help the patient stay calm.”

Something short fused in Shane’s head. “But Ilya is still in the coma, he won’t wake up during this procedure.” Shane swallowed. “Will he?” he asked quietly, unsure if he wanted Ilya awake if it meant he would be in pain.

But he would give *anything* to see Ilya open his eyes. Even a glance would do. It was as if he was back to being nineteen and hoping that the star Russian player would give him any attention.

The thought made Shane feel pathetic, and the guilt that he wanted Ilya to open his eyes

(even if he was in pain) made him feel like a complete monster.

“No, he will still be unconscious,” the doctor explained. “We keep patients sedated, but there is a chance he may become briefly agitated when we reduce the medication. He might move. He might open his eyes briefly. He may react to the sensation. And that would be reflexive. It wouldn’t mean he’s awake.”

“Can I be in the room?” he asked softly, staring at Farah. He hated that he had to ask her.

He still didn’t have a single photo in the room.

Farah nodded her head, “Of course you can Shane. I figured you’d want to be and maybe have Svetlana in the room? And one of your parents-”

“I’ll be there,” David said quickly and gruffly. He was unable to meet anyone’s eyes.

The doctor nodded, “If his numbers remain stable, we can discuss timing tomorrow. Either late tomorrow or the following day.”

And with that, the doctor left the room. Shane let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding in, letting his forehead rest against the bed rails, and letting the comforting sounds of Ilya’s heart rate beeping through the machines calm his nerves.

-&-

-&- *TRANSLATIONS* -&-

Ilya? Ty menya slyshish? (RU): Ilya? Can you hear me?

-&-

Chapter End Notes

Posted earlier today given that tonight will be busy! Shoutout again to my ever patient beta readers and I’ll see you all in the New Year! Thank you so much for reading and all the sweet comments/bookmarks.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter includes a non-graphic medical procedure. Details are noted at the end of the chapter for those who want to know more.

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

-&-

Shane: *Didn't you star in a medical drama that had you in a coma? Did you do research for that? Any insight you can share?*

Shane was currently in the car, in the parking lot of the hospital. He had left Ilya's room to allow other visitors. And the thought of sitting in a waiting room or pacing the hospital was enough for him to go crazy. And so, he opted to sit in his parked car like a serial killer as he looked up various medical terms and read stories.

Shane nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone started to ring. Rose's face filled the screen. Smiling slightly, he picked up the call.

"You know, being an actress who has *played* someone in a coma doesn't give me medical insight. You know I didn't have to talk to doctors or anything like that, right?" Rose said teasingly as Shane rolled his eyes.

"I know, I know, but I keep going online-"

Rose gasped, "Shane, get *off* your phone! Stay *off* of the internet! I thought you texted me that you had a strict no social media/news rule!"

"I do, and I'm still respecting that," Shane said quickly, sighing slightly. "I just, I had to go on WebMD to search some things up and then see about coma patients and their ability to wake up-"

"He's going to wake up," Rose said quickly, almost as a reflex. Like everyone those days, as if there was no other option. People mistook speed for confidence, and Shane was starting to hear the difference.

"I know," Shane said tiredly. But then, even quieter, he said, "I think he's going to wake up." The uncertainty thick in his voice.

"Today was a bad day?" Rose asked gently as Shane sighed and leaned back into the seat.

“*Every day* feels like a bad day. And everything is moving *so* slowly. And no one has the answers that *actually* make me feel better. It’s always some confusing bullshit of, ‘it’s nonlinear recovery’ or ‘can’t promise shit’,” Shane said bitterly.

“I’m sorry. That feels super shitty,” Rose said quietly. “What can I do for you?”

Shane shrugged. “Nothing. Just listen.” He mumbled.

“Well, what if you sent me the medical stuff to look up?”

“No, it’s fine, I should just keep asking the doctors or something versus search through Reddit boards for stories and such.” Shane pinched the bridge of his nose, he knew he was desperate if he was willing to scroll through and lurk on Reddit boards.

“Well, what’s *one* good thing that happened today?” Rose asked.

Shane hesitated. “I know the one I *should* be telling you but it’s not the one I’m most excited about... even if it’s nothing.”

“Let’s start with the boring one first.”

Shane stalled, picking at the loose thread on the wheel. “Looks like he’ll have his ventilator removed soon.”

Rose gasped delightfully, “Shane, that *is* good news.”

Shane rolled his eyes, “Yeah, I know.”

“But it’s not the one you were excited about?” Rose asked in a confused tone.

Shane shook his head as if she could see him. “No, uh, the other one feels really stupid now-”

“Come on, tell me.” Rose urged on.

Shane gripped the wheel, his knuckles white, “I saw him move his head. It was really small, but it felt like he reacted to my voice? Or the voices in my room? And I know that others have noted the chart, but it was the first time *I* saw it. And... I don’t know, it felt nice to see instead of reading it in the chart.” Shane shut his eyes as he heard Rose gasp.

“Shane, that’s great-”

“But the doctors said not to get too excited, that it’s just a reflex,” Shane said quickly, feeling like shit that he was suddenly like every doctor that *had* to steal the joy away.

“Well... I’m not a doctor. But I think, I *think*, for the next few seconds we can be happy about it and treat it as big news. And then after that, we can go back to our normal selves worrying over Ilya.”

Shane smiled, “Yeah, that would be really nice.” And he let himself grin from ear to ear, his heart pounding as he let the daydreams of sunny days, clear blue lakes, and a laughing Ilya flood his mind.

-&-

When Shane walked to Ilya’s room the next day, even before he turned the knob, he heard the Centaurs team howling with laughter. Stepping into the room, Shane’s glance swept around to the semicircles, the cards, the blanket, Chompy, and the heart rate monitor. As another joke was told, the monitor spiked.

Shane grimaced slightly, staring at the door as his jaw clenched. Ilya’s heart rate hadn’t spiked when *Shane* was talking. Shane rolled his shoulders, as if to shake the feeling, and the team fell silent.

“Take it you’re next on shift Hollander?” Luca asked, scraping back his chair as the others followed suit.

“I am,” Shane said, taking a small sip from his coffee cup, the taste barely registering.

“Well, enjoy! He had some movements and twitches. I think he’s hearing us,” Luca said gently but enthusiastically. The other player, someone Shane hadn’t bothered learning the name of, rolled his eyes. “Of course he is dumbass, it’s not as if his *hearing* was impacted.” And the two argued out of the room, Shane quietly clicking the door shut.

“*Privet, moy utyonok*,” Shane whispered as he took his spot next to Ilya, curling more of his fingers around his hand. There was only the steady beeping of the machine, and Shane had to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

“The ventilator should be removed soon, it’ll be nice to breathe on your own, right?” Shane asked, thinking he felt a finger twitch. But looking down, it didn’t seem as if Ilya had moved.

Shane worried he was starting to hallucinate.

The sound of soft knocking made Shane pull his hand away quickly, guilt flaring in his chest. But a moment later, Svetlana poked her head through the doorway.

“Ah, it’s just you,” Shane said, returning his hand to Ilya’s, focused on the possibility that Ilya might move again.

Svetlana huffed as she made her way to the seat across from Shane. “*Just me?*” she asked in a mock hurt tone, “I am *offended*.”

Shane grinned. “You know what I mean.”

“I do. How is our favorite little *gnil-iy?*” Svetlana asked sweetly as Shane’s brow furrowed.

“That’s not... *milij*. Hang on,” Shane paused as he racked his brain for the Russian words he

knew. “Wait, did you call him *rotten*?” he asked in a bemused tone as Svetlana beamed.

“Ah, I thought I could trick you.”

“With rotten?” Shane asked, laughing a bit as Svetlana nodded.

“He is a bit rotten sometimes. Fitting,” she said as Shane rolled his eyes and tightened his grip ever so slightly on Ilya’s hand. He thought he heard a small spike in the machines, but he scratched his ears and assumed it was his mind playing tricks.

The doctor stepped into the room, and Shane, for the life of him, could barely remember the man’s name. He clutched Ilya’s hand a little bit more tightly as the doctor flipped through the chart, noting some new numbers.

“Based on Ilya’s numbers, we are able to extubate and see if he can breathe on his own.”

Shane smiled as he squeezed Ilya’s hand tenderly. “How soon can we do it?”

“Tomorrow morning, I just paged-ah, here she is,” the doctor stated as a woman knocked before entering the room. She smiled slightly as she walked in. “This is Paige, she’s the respiratory therapist who will be performing the extubation.” Paige reached forward to Shane and then Svetlana for handshakes.

Shane already liked Paige as she seemed like a genuinely happy person. “As mentioned, I’ll be doing the extubation, and I will walk you through how the procedure goes so that there are no surprises.” The doctor did a half wave and Paige nodded her head at him before he quickly exited the room. Shane felt like a dark cloud had exited the room.

“Will it be just you two in the room when this happens?” Paige asked gently, and Shane whipped his head around, as if his dad was crouched in the corner.

“No, my dad will be here, but I can explain it to him afterwards.” Paige nodded and started to go through a very clearly rehearsed speech.

“First, I’m going to suction his mouth and throat. That helps clear the area so he can breathe easier when the tube comes out.” Paige paused for questions, and Svetlana, instead of asking a question, started to repeat the lines in Russian to Ilya.

Shane’s guilt intensified, he should have been studying his Russian harder for this *exact* scenario. Once Svetlana had finished, she nodded to Paige.

“Beautiful language. I wish I knew it!” Paige said brightly, “The second part is removing the tube. As we remove the tube, he will be gagging and coughing a lot. This is completely normal.” Svetlana went ahead and translated, and Shane tried to pick up a word.

He understood none.

“After we remove the tube, we will immediately put him on oxygen and monitor him to

ensure that he can truly breathe on his own.” Paige, at this point, grabbed the nearest chair and sat down, sitting up straight.

Shane threw a glance at Svetlana who was also eyeing him at this change as she continued to talk to Ilya, though distractedly.

“One thing I want to make clear to patients’ families, especially in cases like Ilya’s, there is a chance that he will open his eyes, try to talk, and maybe even grab a hand.” Shane’s heart started to pound at the thought, holding his breath slightly. And even Svetlana paused her translations.

“So he can wake up?” Shane asked hopefully, biting his tongue in anticipation.

Paige gave a sad smile, “He won’t wake up. We still have him on sedation. At most, his reflexes will kick in, so you should think of it as a reflexive action versus a wake up. And,” Paige paused, “he may do nothing at all.”

Svetlana covered her mouth as her nose twitched, her eyes tearing up. Shane shut his eyes. Would he want Ilya to have his eyes open? Or for Ilya to continue sleeping?

“Is one reaction better than the other? Like in the long run?” Shane asked, choking slightly on his words. But a small part of him knew the answer already.

Paige shook her head. “Neither reaction is better than the other. He still has injuries that he needs to recover from.”

Shane started nodding. “Right, right, that uh, makes sense,” he said, quickly rubbing his eyes as he heard Svetlana taking steady breaths. But he could hear the shakiness in her breathing.

Why wasn’t he reacting like that?

“Are there any questions?” Paige paused, looking at both Svetlana and Shane. Svetlana quickly shook her head while Shane had waited a beat longer before shaking his. “Alright, well, I’ll be back tomorrow with a nurse. You can ask more questions before the procedure,” she said, quickly exiting the room.

-&-

Shane laid awake that night, when he definitely should have been sleeping. Running through hockey drills did nothing to tire his mind, so he shifted to tomorrow.

His anxiety told him that if he replayed all the worst and best case scenarios, he could be ready to intervene, to save Ilya.

But his mind kept looping over Ilya grabbing his hands. Ilya’s hazel eyes finding Shane. A twitch of a smile.

Don’t.

Ilya gagging. Ilya's face contorted in pain. The monitor going flat-

He went back to the hockey drills.

-&-

The morning came soon enough, and Shane, his dad, and Svetlana made their way to the hospital for the extubation. Shane and Svetlana gave some quick notes of what to expect; he interrupted with a few questions to which neither of them knew the answers.

"What were you doing yesterday when Paige was here?" Shane asked, slightly annoyed that he had to be the messenger in this situation.

Shane's dad scratched his neck, "I was helping your mom with some statement stuff. It took longer than expected," he answered quickly, sitting beside Shane as he rolled his eyes.

"I noticed mom was out of the room this morning-"

"She couldn't sleep, decided to go for a walk," he replied, his eyes resting only on Ilya and not Shane.

Shane shrugged his shoulders as he took a seat. Paige walked in with a nurse, "Alright, I know you two," she pointed to Svetlana and Shane, "were able to sleep on this. Were there any questions from Dad?" she asked.

Shane's dad shook his head, "Let's get that damn tube out of him."

"Like the spirit!" Paige said, as if it were a hockey game versus a medical procedure. "Danny will be assisting me today." Danny the nurse waved his hands.

"I'll be at the head of the bed, Danny will help suction and I'll go ahead and remove the tube. Dad, if you can be at the end of the bed, and Svetlana, if you can step over to Shane's side, that would be great." Everyone nodded their heads and started to move, Shane took a sip of his lukewarm coffee and placed it behind him, rolling his shoulders back as if to cram in a final stretch.

Shane noticed bags under Svetlana's eyes, and her hair was tied back into a messy bun and she was wearing athletic clothes. It was as if she was about to jump into a race as well.

Paige went to the head of the bed as Danny moved to the side. Paige did a quick glance over the monitor before nodding to Danny, who started to press some buttons.

"Danny is lowering the sedation here. Once Danny is done, I'll check Ilya's vital signs, and afterwards we can move to suction," Paige said briskly, moving the oxygen mask closer.

Svetlana quickly whispered the narration as Shane took a deep breath, his sweaty hands around Ilya's fingers.

Ilya always complained about his sweaty palms.

There was complete silence in the room as Paige's eyes stayed glued to the monitors. After what felt like hours, she moved to pick up the suction tube. "This will be loud," Paige warned.

An awful guttural sound filled the room. Wet, sickening sounds that triggered Shane's gag reflex. His heart was pounding as he turned his head, resisting the urge to completely squeeze Ilya's hand in a crushing grip.

It took everything in him to not yell out, "*Stop!*"

Svetlana grabbed his other hand, and he felt her bury her face in his arm, breathing heavily. Her grip was strong and shaking as Paige continued the suctioning, as if she were vacuuming her house.

Finally, *finally*, Paige stopped and placed the suction to the side. She smiled sadly at the crowd. "How are we doing?" She asked, as she moved to deflate the cuff.

Svetlana sniffled, as she moved her face away from Shane's arm. Her face wet with tears as she grimaced at Paige. Shane's own father looked like he could faint, his hands gripping the end of the bed, his knuckles a pearly white.

Shane's voice was unusually steady as he said, "Fine, let's keep going." Biting his tongue slightly as Svetlana and his father shot him a look.

"And here we go," Paige said, as she removed the tube. A quick cough from Ilya, and the oxygen mask on his face, his chest slowly rising with each shallow breath.

Shane looked down at Ilya's hand, it had remained exactly in the same spot throughout that horrible procedure. He could register that Paige and Danny were talking, sounded positive, but he could only hear a silent hum.

He was waiting for *something* to shift, to change within him.

Shane didn't notice when Svetlana left his side to hug his dad. Or how Svetlana sobbed into his dad's chest as David rubbed circles in Svetlana's back, making gentle shush sounds to soothe her.

Shane had braced himself for any sign.

And he got none.

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Privet, moy utyonok (RU): Hi my duckling (term of endearment, not as a child)

Gnil-iy (RU): rotten

Milij (RU): sweet/dear/darling

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: This chapter includes a non-graphic medical procedure (extubation). Please take care while reading.

A/N: Happy New Year!! Once again, shout out to my beta readers who have patiently gone through this chapter and left notes!! <3

I've gotten a few questions on this, but aiming to update this fic every other day! AM/PM my time will vary since that'll be based on my schedule for that day.

The good news... Majority of the chapters are written and are going through edits right now. Once I have finished writing all the chapters, I'll update the fic to show the total amount we are expecting. As of now, it's looking like we'll be sitting at 20, but given I've had to expand my outline twice for plots/coma reasons... I'll hold off till all is completed!

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter! <3

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Shane stepped outside of the room, leaving his dad and Svetlana alone with Ilya. He was exhausted. He leaned back on the door, wondering if he should go for another cup of coffee.

He could have sworn he'd just had one in his hand.

Without thinking about it, he took the back way out of the ICU unit, hoping to avoid the team. He didn't think he could stomach their hopeful gazes and casual jokes. As he walked out, he started to look for his mom.

Wasn't she supposed to be here?

He pulled out his phone and quickly dialed her number. She picked up after a few rings.

"How did it go?" She asked breathlessly.

"Fine. The tube is out. He's breathing on his own."

"That's good. Am I missing something?" his mom asked gently.

Shane shut his eyes in shame, feeling his eyes prickle. "It's stupid. I thought he would react more, since they lowered his sedation, but he hardly moved. I *wanted* him to move," Shane said forcefully, tilting his head up to the ceiling, expecting tiles, but getting a popcorn ceiling.

So much for counting.

"Oh, Shane," his mom said, her voice full of sorrow, "We know that this could have happened and I know that's not what you *wanted* to happen... but at least he can breathe on his own. That's a step. That's a small win you should hold on to." She said confidently.

Shane grimaced, the awful guttural sound filling his head. He wasn't sure if that was truly a win. And he was so *sick* of being told this was a win.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. You sound busy." The words came out sharper than he intended. Hating how bitter he sounded, and how pathetic it was for him to wish for another outcome.

"If you want me to come-"

"I'm fine. I think I'm going to go for a walk. Love you." Shane said quickly, hanging up the phone before she could respond.

-&-

On the way to the coffee shop he tried to call Hayden. There was no answer. And then he tried to call Rose, which also went to voicemail.

Shane tried not to take it personally. He knew, logically on the surface, Ilya was ok. He wasn't actively dying in the same way he was the first twenty-four or forty-eight hours of the tragedy.

But he still wished his friends picked up the phone right away as if they did after that morning.

-&-

Hayden: *I'm so sorry - I was at practice. Can I call you in a few hours? Gotta help Jackie with the kids.*

Rose: *I'm on set!! Promise to call later this evening!!*

-&-

Shane found himself inside the hospital chapel. Low lighting and the small collection of burning candles soothed him as he walked down the aisle. The stained glass windows glowing slightly.

There was only one other person, sitting in the front row, on their knees praying.

Shane envied that type of devotion. What was it like to have faith so strong that you could depend on God? He had Irina, but his faith was wavering. And while every part of him screamed at him to get out of the chapel, especially with a coffee in hand, he sat down in the back row and stared ahead.

The pew creaked loudly as Shane settled in, hoping to not disturb the devoted up front.

Please, Irina. Help us.

-&-

He felt a hand on his shoulder and he jerked back to see Mrs. Wiebe's face.

"Sorry," she whispered, as Shane shuffled out of the pew noisily, "Your parents are looking for you. They got concerned when you didn't pick up your phone."

Shane went to his phone to find half a dozen missed calls, frantic text messages, and his stomach dropped when he saw how much time he spent in the chapel.

"So sorry, I just, here, we can step out." Shane said, as they quickly moved to the doors. He threw a glance back to see the same person still deep in prayer.

He hoped someone heard their prayer.

Exiting the chapel, the typical hospital sounds rushed back. The blinking fluorescent lights and the chatter of families outside. It felt entirely too bright in this world.

“Sorry, I guess I zoned out.” Shane said again, running a hand through his hair as Mrs. Wiebe gave him a sympathetic look.

“It’s okay. I think we all want to make sure you’re okay after the extubation. Your parents are waiting for you outside Ilya’s room.” Shane nodded, as he started to take a few steps, looking back to make sure Mrs. Wiebe was following him.

They walked in silence, Shane taking sips out of his now empty coffee cup.

Once they got to the ICU unit door, Mrs. Wiebe gave Shane a quick hug, offering no empty promises or small platitudes. Shane was both grateful and scared that she had offered none.

Shane quickly made his turns before he found his parents outside of Ilya’s room. His mom opened her arms and Shane reached for them, burying himself into her.

“Where’s Svetlana?” Shane asked.

“She’s back in the hotel room. She needed some sleep after today.” Shane’s mom said quietly into his hair. Shane pulled back, slowly, unable to meet his parents’ eyes.

“I’m sorry-”

“Nothing to apologize. Just wanted to make sure you were safe.”

“Can I go in? Or is someone with him?”

“He’s all yours.”

Shane gulped, and walked into the room, his eyes going straight to Ilya. Shane smiled a bit, because while there were evident bruises and cuts on Ilya, the breathing tube was gone. And he could see Ilya a bit more clearly.

He headed over to the chair that he was at only hours before, collapsed back into it and took Ilya’s hand. A well-practiced routine at this point.

“I’m sorry I was gone after the tube.” Shane said, his eyes prickling with tears. “I just-I thought it would go differently? And I can’t tell if I’m awful for wanting that, because that means you would be in pain?” Shane said, letting the tears fall as he sniffled. “I just wanted to know that you were here, you know?” He asked, croaking out the words as a dull headache started to grow.

The monitor spiked, a heart rate change.

Shane didn't look. He couldn't tell if it was reflexive.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I crossed 1K kudos and that honestly boggles my mind. Thank you all for that!

And thank you all for going through this journey with me, and trusting the process. I do not take it for granted that this is a heavy story and really appreciate the comments that folks have written.

As always, shout out to my beta readers and I'll see you all soon with the next update!

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

To Shane's surprise, all of the Centaurs players stayed in Savannah, determined not to leave until the last of them was discharged. With many still hospitalized, the league postponed the Centaurs' games, their fate pending health reports.

Shane was glad the team had healed well. He was frustrated, though, with how many people were now on the roster to visit Ilya every day. He *tried* to frame it as something positive.

But Shane was selfish and only wanted Ilya for himself.

On the ninth day, Shane walked into the room to see Luca and Zane laughing in chairs beside Ilya.

"What are we talking about?" Shane asked awkwardly, leaning against the wall as the teammates readjusted in their chairs. They snuck glances at each other as Shane zipped up his pullover.

Luca cleared his throat. "Discussing Ilya's greatest jabs on the ice," he said earnestly, the monitor spiking briefly.

Shane raised his eyebrows, pressing his lips tightly together as Zane and Luca cracked a grin at the monitor. "Ilya, you're always so vain," Zane said boisterously.

Shane had to stop himself from rolling his eyes or pointing out that it was *just* a reflex.

"Well, do you have good ones to share?" Luca asked shyly, a small grin on his face as he hesitated with the next question. Shane looked up to see Luca leaning forward in his chair. "You guys *hated* each other at the start, right?" Luca asked, turning to Zane, who was nodding.

Shane smiled, letting his shoulders relax. He was *allowed* to be honest here. "Hated may be a bit strong. But yeah, everyone knows the fifty goals story."

"Absolute *legend*," Zane barked out.

Shane had to think through all of his memories for a story worthy of Luca's hero worship. All of the jabs that Ilya took on the ice had a flirtatious undertone when he was with Shane. And it was hard for Shane to separate which ones were appropriate to share; he'd have a dopey smile on his face.

And then, their first meeting came to mind.

“When I first met Ilya, I introduced myself to him while he was smoking a cigarette in the parking lot. And he was kinda a dick, he told me I wasn’t going to be so nice after I lost against him,” Shane said, omitting how he liked the way Ilya’s curls poked out of his hat. How effortlessly cool he looked, despite struggling with the lighter for a solid minute.

Some memories he kept close to his chest.

Luca laughed, “Well, he was right! Didn’t you guys get *wrecked* by Russia that year? Like by an *embarrassing* amount?”

“It was Juniors!” Shane said in defense as Zane snickered. Shane’s eyes flickered to Ilya, where he could have *sworn* there was a face twitch.

Feeling emboldened, Shane leaned back. “Luca, you know who has a *ton* of these stories?” A look of confusion crossed Luca’s face. “Scott Hunter,” Shane said plainly, and Luca’s eyes lit up.

“Don’t they get in regular fights? Ilya *always* tells us Scott is like a thousand years old-”

“He’s *three* years older than Ilya,” Zane interjected, shaking his head fondly.

Shane grinned, “It’s the *fastest* way to rile up Scott Hunter. If you start shit talking about his age, you’re sure to get under his skin. I’m honestly surprised he hasn’t tried to let it go,” Shane said, thinking back to the various nights when Scott regaled the crew with his encounters at some award show. Shane distinctly remembered tuxes being involved.

“There was one year,” Shane said, scratching his nose. “The year the Admirals got the Cup, so Ilya was in Boston, Scott Hunter punched Ilya in the face. Gnarly black eye,” Shane said, shaking his head at the memory.

Luca hooted with laughter, stomping his feet slightly, Shane grimaced as he looked over at Ilya, who was unbothered by the sound.

“What did Ilya say to Scott?” Luca asked, practically at the edge of his seat.

To Shane’s surprise, Zane chimed in with an awfully thick Russian accent, “I’m disappointed, I heard you were good again. Guess no!” And even Shane had to laugh along at the absurdity of the quote.

“And Scott *won* that year too! Did Boston even beat them that night?” Luca asked, his head swiveling between Zane and Shane. Zane made eye contact with Shane, both shrugged their shoulders as they smiled.

“Honestly, I can’t even remember. We were all talking about the black eye afterwards,” Shane said, as he tried to remember what the final score had been. He turned to Ilya, the question on his lips before he stopped himself.

There was a sharp ringtone beep as Zane nearly fell out of his chair. He pulled out his phone and swore. "I gotta go." He stood up quickly as he looked down at Luca, clapping him on the shoulder.

Luca raised his eyebrows, a quick glance at Shane, "Are you talking to-"

"Going to check in on Troy," Zane said, staring at Luca, a small shake of his head. Luca bobbed his head, "Good luck. Let me know how it goes."

Zane shuffled out, throwing out a quick goodbye to the crew before leaving.

"Since Zane left, can I text Evan to come?" Luca asked, his phone already out, and Shane felt like he was the babysitter to some awful play date.

Shane gripped the table behind him, wishing he could kick everyone out of the room and be alone with Ilya.

"Sure, invite Evan," he said stiffly.

-&-

Of course, once Luca invited Evan, Evan wanted to bring in Nick, but Luca wanted to stay. Suffocated by the noise of the three men in what was usually a quiet room, Shane excused himself and stood outside the room, resting against the wall, trying to take a deep breath.

One of the nurses came up to him, a short woman who always wore her hair in a messy bun. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, how are we doing?"

Shane nodded his head, looking towards the door as he heard another round of laughter, and possibly music leaking through.

Didn't Ilya always tell him that Evan had bad taste in music? Or was that Luca?

"I can go in and tell them to quiet down," the nurse said. Shane nodded his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as he tried to relax. "In the meantime, when was the last time you ate?" she asked gently as Shane thought guiltily of the early morning breakfast, long enough ago that he knew he would be scolded if he told the truth.

"Uh, not long."

"Hm," the nurse said, looking him up and down. Shane gulped. "Well, the volunteers have set up a coffee and cookie station down the hall. And they have good coffee this time, none of that burnt crap." Shane smirked.

"Plus, it's the high schoolers, they're *always* terrified to talk to you. You'll get that peace and quiet." Shane chuckled, looking down the hallway as he eyed the students setting up.

"I'll go tell them off, and you go get some refreshments," she said, patting Shane on the shoulder as she headed into Ilya's room.

-&-

The tenth day, Shane walked into Ilya's room to see his mom hunched over her computer and his dad working on a puzzle.

Shane slowly closed the door, unsure how to feel about the scene in front of him. It was another day that Shane walked in, expecting just him and Ilya, only to find more supporters. And why did his dad have a puzzle?

"Ilya, I know you like to just dump the pieces out and go one by one. But that's just *not* practical. I got these nice containers from our takeout food to separate the pieces by color. I already got to the border of this *gorgeous* outdoor wildlife scene with some wolves, bears, and some ducks."

Shane cocked his head to the side as he advanced to observe the puzzle. Half of the border was completed, some spare pieces were clipped into place.

"Dad, is that a *puzzle mat*?" Shane asked in disbelief, looking at his mom who paused from her computer to look up.

"Amazon! Isn't it great? Now, the doctors said we should try to continue with normal life. And well, Ilya and I were working on the puzzle before the accident. Not this *exact* puzzle because, well, it's something for us to look forward to - right son?" Shane's dad asked Ilya, his voice slightly louder, as if Ilya were across the room.

Ilya's only response was his shallow breathing and beeping machines.

Shane's dad beamed, "Exactly! He gets it, so for now, I get to do this puzzle as Ilya helps me out."

Shane turned back to Ilya, because he *thought* he heard a groan. Which would fit the scenario, but his dad continued on his puzzle gleefully while his mom furiously typed away on the computer.

"Ilya, you're looking better," Shane said quickly, daring to brush the back of his fingers across Ilya's face.

Ilya's bruises had faded, they were turning green and yellow, not *exactly* in Ilya's color palette, but Shane would prefer those any day to the darker pinks and blues from before. The eyes that were once swollen shut were now puffy and thick.

"His ribs are healing up nicely too," his mom said absentmindedly.

"That's good," Shane said quietly, eyeing Ilya from head to toe.

If Ilya were awake, he'd accuse Shane of checking him out.

“Do you want to help with the puzzle? I promise it will be fun!” Shane’s dad exclaimed. Shane grinned, walked over to the table and plopped into a chair. It *almost* felt like he was back at home. All that was missing was Ilya’s jabs.

“How many puzzles have you done with Ilya?” Shane asked as he started to pick at the pieces.

“Oh, a few dozen. Right Ilya?” Shane’s dad asked, throwing a look over at Ilya before focusing back on the puzzle. “We like to do this when Yuna is working or going out, and we want to just be boys and have a good night in.”

Shane raised his eyebrows as he fidgeted with a puzzle piece in hand, the rough cardboard edge pinching into his skin. “This is what you consider boys’ night in? Puzzles?”

“With the good vodka. Sometimes just beer. Always with pizza though,” David said, sticking out his tongue as he thoughtfully examined a puzzle piece.

“We’ve got a dark blue one, empty holes to the side, I assume that it’ll be for the sky and putting it in the blue container,” David said, as he placed the puzzle piece into the container.

Shane threw an arm on the back of the chair and turned to his mom.

“Has he been doing this for every single piece?”

Shane’s mom paused and looked up, silently nodding as she turned back to her laptop and typed furiously.

-&-

Later, Svetlana walked in and helped Shane’s dad with the puzzle, even going as far as describing the puzzle pieces in Russian for Ilya’s sake. And occasionally, she had Shane try it in Russian. She corrected him gently when he mixed up his shapes and colors.

Shane’s dad even learned the basics. By the end of the puzzle session, he could correctly and confidently say: *siniy*, *medved*, *utka*, and *korichneviy*.

“It’s like preschool again, fun!” she said as she deposited the piece in its designated container.

Shane stood up and took a candid photo of Svetlana and his dad, something to show Ilya when he woke up. He hesitated before taking the second photo, one with David, Svetlana, and Ilya’s sleeping figure in the background.

He wasn’t sure if he’d ever show that one to anyone else.

-&-

On day eleven, Shane walked into Ilya's room early in the morning. He was rewarded when he saw that he had Ilya all to himself. He shrugged off his jacket and placed his coffee to the side as he went over to Ilya's side.

"Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy," he whispered, kissing Ilya on the forehead and gently pushing some of his curls away from his face. Should he ask for a headband for Ilya? He used to complain about long hair causing acne...

The door opened, and Shane sprang back and put his hands behind his back, caught. He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized it was one of the nurses checking in on Ilya.

"Morning, Shane. Morning, Ilya," she said as she walked over to the machines, grabbing the chart along the way.

"Morning," Shane said, moving closer to Ilya, reaching for his hand. "Anything notable?" Shane asked as he stared at the same numbers that seemed to mock him.

"Everything is looking steady here," she said, glancing down at the chart before looking over at Ilya, her brows furrowed.

"Everything okay?" Shane asked, peering over Ilya to see what was out of place.

"His lips are a bit dry. We just need to put on lip balm," she said, reaching over to the cabinet that held the supplies. She handed it over to Shane who took it wordlessly, looking at the door.

"Want me to put the sign up?" she asked kindly, and Shane nodded his head as he waited to hear her pull out the laminated sign and creak the door open, before attaching it to the mechanism. It was a bright red, "DO NOT ENTER."

"Thanks," Shane said quietly, his shoulders easing as he undid the lip balm top, grabbing one of the cotton swabs from the side as he dipped it into the balm. Methodically, he traced Ilya's lower lip, his upper lip, then finally the corners.

"You're getting good at this," the nurse observed as Shane wiped off the excess with another cotton swab.

"Thanks," Shane said weakly as he put the tools aside, tidying up around the space as the nurse did her final checks. It had become his morning routine.

"Why don't I leave that sign out there for five more minutes? I'll be at the station and drop it back inside after a bit," she said gently, and Shane dipped his head, surprised by the tears in his eyes.

"That would be nice. Thank you," Shane said as she left. Shane pulled the chair close, holding Ilya's hand as he rested his forehead against the bedrail.

-&-

Later in the morning, Shane walked into Ilya's room to find Svetlana already lounging on the side. Her hair in pigtails, with some of her bangs framing her face.

"Hey, I brought some coffee," Shane said, lifting the cups as Svetlana stood up to grab one.

"Thank you, I need this," Svetlana said greedily as she gulped the coffee down.

"Figured. Hey Ilya," Shane said, noticing that Ilya's head turned slightly, a small twinge on Ilya's face.

"He moves more now," Svetlana said simply, taking a seat next to Ilya as Shane joined across from her.

"I've been noticing that. It's nice. I think, or I'd like to think, he's reacting more to us versus being reflexive," Shane said, taking a sip of his coffee and placing it next to Chompy.

"Hmm, me too. But the nurses do not like it when I say that, so I only share it with you," Svetlana said, throwing a glare at the door as if the mean nurse would walk through.

"Same," Shane said, relaxing into his chair, the plastic creaking underneath him. His eyes darted down just in time to see Ilya's face scrunched in a grimace, his splintered arm moving towards his chest.

Shane's mouth went dry. His hands started to shake. He heard the scraping of the chair before he realized he'd stood up.

The typical rhythm that Shane had grown to rely on shifted to erratic beeps, layered with flat, buzzy alarms. A nurse calmly charged into the room, taking in the numbers as they dropped and rose.

"His oxygen saturation is dropping and his heart rate is going up," the nurse narrated as a second nurse walked into the room.

"I'm going to need you two to step back," the second nurse said gently, as Shane and Svetlana numbly stepped back. Svetlana stared at Ilya in shock, her hands covering her mouth as Shane put his hands behind his head.

"Ilya, can you hear me? You're in the hospital," the first nurse said. Shane glanced over to Svetlana who was still frozen, trembling at the sight before her.

Taking a gulp, Shane stepped forward, "*Ilya, vy mozhetе menya slyshat'? Vy nakhodites' v bol'nitse,*" Shane said in a thick accent, hoping he had studied the right words for this moment.

Svetlana dropped her hands as she stared at Shane, nodding as if approving of his translation. Shane held onto that as everything around him was slipping.

At this, Ilya barely opened his eyes, struggling as he tried to move in the bed as the nurses

lightly restrained him. Ilya's bloodshot eyes slid from Shane before landing unsteadily on Svetlana.

"*Sveta-*" Ilya gasped hoarsely, "*Pomogi-*" he rasped out. Shane's mind quickly translated the last word as help.

Svetlana took a step forward, only to have the second nurse push her back. The first nurse said calmly, "Increasing his sedation." Shane watched in horror as Ilya fell back against his pillows.

The machines went back to their scheduled tones.

-&- **TRANSLATIONS** -&-

Siniy (RU): Blue (Dark)

Medved (RU): Bear

Utka (RU): Duck

Korichneviy (RU): Brown

Ilya, vy mozhete menya slyshat'? *Vy nakhodites' v bol'nitse.* (RU): *Ilya, can you hear me?*
You're in the hospital (Formal)

Pomogi (RU): Help

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Well, some of you did want Ilya to move more...

Also, in case it's not totally obvious, I do not speak Russian. If there is feedback with the transliteration I'm using, feel free to drop it in the comments. Thank you again for my beta readers for the feedback and edits.

I'll see you all soon for the next update!

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter does have a trigger warning, please see notes below.

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

-&-

Shane stared numbly as the nurses reset the room, as if it were a play. One was fixated on the numbers on the screen, readjusting Ilya's pillow (should Shane be doing that?). The other was working on dimming the lights. It felt choreographed, down to the speeches.

He registered that the nurses were talking, and he could *hear* the words but none of it was landing. Something about Ilya being tired, how this was a big step.

“*Sveta-*”

There was no mistaking it, Ilya had called out to Svetlana.

“*Pomogi-*”

Ilya had asked *Svetlana* for help.

Shane shut his eyes as he backed farther to his side of the room, adrenaline coursing through his system, his stomach turning. He tried to focus on the tones coming from the monitors, but the ringing in his ears was reaching a fever pitch.

He opened his eyes to see Svetlana gingerly walking toward him, her entire body shaking. “Shane?” she asked.

And in that moment, Shane wanted nothing more than to *destroy* this entire room, rip every single card to shreds and stomp on every photo. Fuck Chompy too. It would be cathartic as fuck to rip that stupid stuffed animal's head off.

Did Ilya call out to Svetlana because he didn't trust Shane?

Did he even *see* Shane in the room?

Did Ilya think that Shane *wouldn't help him*?

“Shane?” Svetlana asked again, higher pitch this time. She was a lot closer, and she was reaching out as if she wanted a hug. He needed *space*. Shane shook his head, feeling the tears

fall down his face.

“Don’t touch me,” he spat out, and, feeling the anger so raw in his throat, he stormed out of the room. He had to leave before he did something he *truly* regretted. Not caring for the nurses’ warnings to be quiet, not minding at all the look of hurt on Svetlana’s face.

-&-

Shane briskly walked out of the room, nearly knocking into various staff. Not even a quick sorry left his mouth as he focused on getting the *hell* out of this hospital. He heard steps behind him, but didn’t think much of it.

If it was a security guard, he thought, he’d love a fight right about now.

Shane broke into a full sprint once he was out of the ICU unit, navigating the hallways until he found himself outside in the parking lot. Off to the side, he backed against the wall as he rubbed his eyes.

He heard someone panting and looked up to find Svetlana, hunched over as she grabbed her sides.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?” Shane snarled, angrily wiping at his tears as Svetlana looked up at him terrified.

“I-”

“You came here to gloat? How Ilya said *your* name? Here to mock *my* Russian as you just *stood* there-” Shane bellowed, towering over her as she caught her breath.

“Gloat?” she asked, stunned, the shock all over her face as her mouth formed an “O.”

“Yes! Gloat! Brag about how *Ilya* turned to *you* when you said nothing-”

“You think I’m crying tears of joy right now?” Svetlana snapped, fully standing up as she turned her own anger on Shane. Shane laughed cruelly.

“Didn’t you hear the nurses? We should be happy about this ‘big step’!” Shane said mockingly. “Should we announce to the world that Ilya woke up, and it looked like a fucking zombie horror movie? Or maybe, maybe, we should tell everyone that the *only* person he registered was his friend-”

“That’s *enough* Hollander-” Svetlana said, her voice cracking.

Shane still raged on, “The same friend he fucked-”

Pain exploded across his face as Svetlana slapped him *hard*. Shane clutched his cheek. Her breathing was ragged as tears fell from her face. She brushed at some tears with the back of her hand, missing several.

“How *dare* you talk to me like that.” Svetlana’s voice shook, but she was clear. “Shame on you for attacking me with such *stupid* accusations. And what, blame me for not speaking Russian? I was just as scared as you were!” she snapped. “And he looked *horrible* with his eyes. And I’ve *never* seen him in this much pain.”

Shane bit his lip as he forced himself to stare at Svetlana. Shame was quick to knock him back into his senses. He wanted nothing more than to turn away, avert his gaze, keep running away from her, the hospital, and this nightmare.

Svetlana’s voice broke, “I just wanted him to wake up and tell us he was okay, but he asked for help. He’s in pain.” Svetlana wailed, her eyes going wide as if everything clicked. She stumbled, nearly falling into the wall as Shane rushed forward to hold her. She tried to squirm out, before she started sobbing into his chest, arms holding him tight and close.

He’s in pain. Shane shut his eyes, trying not to imagine Ilya’s eyes or jerky body movements. The anger subsided slightly as pure dread started to creep in.

“I hate this. I hate *him*. I want him to wake up,” Svetlana muttered into Shane’s chest. Shane took a shaking breath, focusing on the cars, the uneven buildings on the horizon.

He didn’t know how they could keep doing this.

-&-

They stood out there for a while, interlocked with one another, as Svetlana’s sobs eased and Shane’s own tears dried. Shane could sense his eyes were swollen and puffy, but that was earned. The only thing left was the aftermath of their ugly encounter, shame layered thick.

“Can we, can we go for a walk?” Shane mumbled, sniffing slightly as he felt Svetlana’s head nod. They pulled back, and Svetlana reached out to brush her fingers on his slightly red cheek.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, offering a small smile.

Shane shook his head quickly. “No, I deserved it, I’m sorry, I should have never said or implied- I was just so-” Shane paused, unable to find a word to summarize all that he was feeling after Ilya.

“I know. I felt the same. Still do a bit,” Svetlana said, averting her gaze.

“I can’t- I can’t go back there. Not right now,” Shane said gruffly, trying to push the memory of Ilya to the back of his mind, focusing on Svetlana’s tight curls.

“I can’t either. I need- I need air,” Svetlana said, slightly laughing at the last word, her head tilted back to the sky.

“We can take a break. I’ll text my parents. I don’t want him alone,” Shane said, pulling out his phone and quickly shooting a text to his parents.

He felt guilty leaving Ilya behind as he strolled around the neighborhood. But Shane knew that if he stepped back into that hospital or that room, there was no telling whether he’d throw a punch or break down in the room.

The lack of certainty scared him.

Shane shoved his hands in his pockets as he started walking away from the hospital. A quick glance back, and he felt better to see the building recede. Even if he knew he was also leaving Ilya behind. Ilya and his haunted gaze, Ilya with his raspy breath, Ilya-

“Where should we go?” Svetlana asked, breaking Shane’s train of thought.

“Gas station. Could pick up some snacks,” Shane said, eyeing one that was conveniently only a block or two from the hospital.

They walked in silence. Shane stole a glance at Svetlana, and it was clear that she was also lost in flashbacks of the day’s event. Shane let the new soundtrack of honking cars and tires squeaking ground him.

It was a nice change to the hospital sounds.

A bell tinkled as they walked into the gas station. Shane felt confused. What the *hell* was he doing in a gas station, middle of the day, while Ilya laid in a hospital bed? Should he sprint back?

“Hey, let’s get some water. And we can go back, yes?” Svetlana said, tugging on his arm to pull him into the store. Shane nodded numbly as he wandered down the chips and candy aisle. Svetlana headed straight to the beverages.

He grabbed every bag and snack that could *not* be found in the hospital vending machine. And in a careful balancing act, he dumped all the food on the counter, Svetlana mimicking him a few seconds later.

The guy behind the counter raised his eyebrows. “Big adventure?” he asked as he started to scan the items and throw them in a bag.

“Something like that,” Shane said as his eyes fell to the cigarette case, lingering on the brand that Ilya *always* bought (the type he claimed just “showed up” in his jacket pocket). The guy, taking note of Shane’s stare, looked at the case before turning back to Shane, “Do you want one?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, uh, can I get the Marlboro with a lighter? Thanks,” Shane said as the guy grabbed the items.

“Can I see some ID?” he asked pointedly as Shane fumbled for his wallet. He flushed as he

realized he had *never* bought a pack of cigarettes before. Not even when he turned the legal age.

He felt a pang in his heart as he handed over his ID, *Ilya would have loved to have seen this*.

Once the payment went through, Shane and Svetlana grabbed the bags and exited the station quickly. They walked with a faster pace back to the hospital. And though the walk took five minutes, it felt like an eternity.

But as they got closer to the door, Shane stopped in his tracks. Svetlana looked back. Shane jerked his head to the side of the building where they were before and she followed him. Once they were off to the side, away from prying eyes, Shane dropped the bags, leaned against the wall, and pulled out the cigarette packet with the lighter.

He awkwardly tore off the plastic as Svetlana watched, holding her breath to see if she should intervene or not.

Once Shane had the plastic off, he grabbed a cigarette and lit it. He watched as the smoke lazily drifted upwards.

“Are you going to smoke it?” Svetlana asked curiously, staring between the cigarette and Shane.

Shane shook his head. “I don’t think I know *how* to smoke,” he said gloomily. It was *such* a dorky confession.

“*Hollander*,” Svetlana said with glee as she laughed, her first *real* smile and laugh after everything.

Shane smiled. “I hate the smell. And I hate when I can taste it on Ilya. But, it also reminds me of him,” Shane said quietly, watching the ash collect at the end. He tapped the cigarette the same way he had seen Ilya done a dozen times. He inhaled the smoke, wishing that he was tasting it on Ilya's lips.

-&-

An hour later, Shane and Svetlana were sitting on the ground. Shane had burned through a few more cigarettes, and allowed Svetlana a puff or two, as they munched on the snacks they’d purchased.

“Think I’ll get in trouble with the nurses for running out?” Shane asked, shoving a chip in his mouth and chewing loudly.

Svetlana shrugged. “I feel they must be used to this. We didn’t fight inside. That, we would have gotten in trouble for. Big trouble,” Svetlana said, quietly sucking on a sour lollipop.

Shane nodded, glancing at his phone as his parents reassured him that all was good and they had notes for him when he was ready to come back in. He guessed the nurses had told them

what happened if his parents were being this patient over text.

There was a sharp ping, and Shane glanced down at Svetlana as she pulled out her phone. Her eyes went wide as she gasped. "Crowell is out!" she said gleefully, passing the phone over to Shane who skimmed the headline.

Clear as day, and if he were transported back to his former life, he *knew* he would be elated that Crowell was out. The slimy motherfucker deserved *nothing* but the worst. But at this moment, the news felt average. Mediocre at best.

"Thank God, he was such a racist, sexist, homophobic-"

"I was just going to say 'asshole' but you're right. He's all those things," Svetlana said, continuing to read through the article. "Looks like some players and coaches spoke out, league was pressured, blah blah blah," Svetlana rattled off, putting her phone away. She was notably lighter.

Shane smiled. "You want to tell him the news, don't you?" he teased as Svetlana nodded eagerly, already throwing their trash in a bag.

"Maybe, *maybe*, Ilya will wake up to the news?" Svetlana said hopefully.

Shane stubbed out the cigarette, and hoped that Ilya would smell the cigarette smoke on Shane and wake up to *that* news.

-&-

Crowell sighed as he poured himself a glass of American bourbon, neat of course, in his preferred tumbler.

It had been a *long* day. And he was utterly disappointed with the league.

The league, that had stood for the integrity of the game of hockey, had caved so *easily* to the whims of Farah and Yuna (what kind of names were those anyways?). When did people care more about the players' social lives over the games? What was wrong for wanting to protect the image of the sport? Of the teams?

Whatever happened to the good old days when everyone kept their mouths shut, their lives private, and exuded the morality that hockey so deserved?

Well, those days were long gone apparently, thought Crowell as he stared at his computer, his resignation letter typed out. The league, at the very least, had the decency to allow him to quit rather than fully fire him from the job.

And, it's not as if Crowell was being kicked out onto the streets. Prior to accepting the job, he had negotiated a tidy severance package for himself in case he was ever put in this position. He was already looking forward to the luxurious trips he was going to take, the first one to Switzerland tonight for the Alps. His wife was at home packing for him.

But gosh, it did *irk* Crowell that *women* named *Farah* and *Yuna* had convinced the league to push him out. All because he wanted Shane Hollander to do the damn job he'd signed up for, a job that Crowell reminded everyone multiple times paid *exceptionally* well given Shane's unusual background.

Crowell opened up his computer, navigating to a locked file and quickly typing in the password. At once, his screen displayed several folders with different players' names. His mouse hovered over the "Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov" file.

Crowell had *earned* his success. He was *owed* every single promotion. And part of that had to do with the fact that he had the ultimate power: knowledge.

Double clicking on the folder, images of Shane and Ilya together flooded the screen. Crowell had hired a private investigator years ago when he first heard the rumors about Shane, and he had been shocked to see what his PI brought back.

Countless photos of the two holding hands. Stolen kisses near Shane's cottage. Loving looks that weren't meant to be exchanged between archrivals. After *everything* the league had done for these men's careers... they had become overnight sensations with their rivalry! Their careers would not have been as successful if it weren't for the league setting them up. Did these men think that they *fell* into this rivalry? As if the league hadn't carefully orchestrated it to bring out the best in them and line the seats of the arenas.

And so, Crowell stewed on this knowledge, this power, for years. Oh, how it would ruin their careers! Let them see the consequences of disobedience, let them know that *this* is why some secrets are better off hidden in the dark of a closet.

Crowell mechanically dragged the file to an encrypted email as he sent it off to his contacts. They would know what to do and would make sure that this was all over the morning papers, maybe hit online early in the morning.

Shame. Crowell would be well on his way to his much deserved ski trip when the news hit the press.

-&-

-&- **TRANSLATIONS** -&-

Pomogi (RU) = Help

Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning: Forced outing; Implied racism, sexism, and homophobia. Please take care while reading.

A/N: Crowell has his own tag for a reason, and now you all know.

As always, I love reading the comments from you all so feel free to drop them. I get that this is a tough chapter, so I don't mind if you want to share your thoughts/feelings in the comments. I've also gone ahead and added my Tumblr to my profile so if you wanna be friends, lemme know!

Otherwise, I'll see you in a few days...

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

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

Shane was startled awake with repeated banging on the door, his eyes landing on the clock that flashed 3 AM. Confused and disoriented, he shoved his glasses on before rushing to the door, peering through to see Farah's distorted, yet scared, face.

Shane opened the door, and Farah nearly hit him in the head. "Where's Yuna?" she asked, stepping into the room.

Shane rubbed his eyes and suddenly, cold fear drenched his body. "Is Ilya-"

"He's fine," Farah said, shaking her head as if that was the *least* of her concerns. "Shane, I *really* need to talk to your mom," she said urgently.

Shane looked behind him. The lights were still off in the room, and he could hear his dad snore in the adjacent room. "I can go get her. And you can come fully inside." Shane said doubtfully, as Farah shoved her way into the room, leaning back against the closed door.

Shane shuffled to where his parents were sleeping, unable to comprehend why Farah was here if it wasn't about Ilya. He knocked on the door gently before opening the door to see his parents blissfully asleep.

Shane walked to his mother's side, where she slept on her back, hands stiff at her sides. He shook her gently. "Mom? Mom," he whispered, and his mom's eyes shot open as she startled awake, her hand on her chest.

"Farah is here? She said she needs to speak with you?" Shane said tentatively, and in the low light, he couldn't see his mom's face, but he could hear her gasp.

Shane kicked himself; he really needed to make sure not to dramatize the situation. He could also use some coffee. "It's not about Ilya. He's fine. But-" Shane said, as his mom quickly turned on the side table lamp, eliciting a groan from Shane's dad.

"I know it's not about Ilya," she said quickly, nearly tumbling out of the bed. "Farah?" she shouted.

"Yuna? Can I come in?"

"Yeah, come on through, we can meet in the bathroom here." Yuna shouted, as she grabbed a worn Montreal Voyageurs sweater and pulled it over her head. Farah moved into the room, and Yuna ran into the bathroom with Farah tailing her.

"Dad?" Shane asked, as his dad was slowly getting out of bed, turning on an extra light.

“Shane, can you go make us some coffee in the other room?” his dad asked, as he started to pull on his own sweater with the Ottawa Centaur logo front and center.

“Uh, sure. Will you then tell me what that’s all about?” Shane asked, shuffling over into the main room where the coffee machine and mini fridge was stationed.

“Maybe, depends on what Yuna and Farah have to say,” his dad said, as he shut the door behind him, a worried glance as Yuna’s and Farah’s voices rose.

The coffee dripped into the pot, slightly bubbling when shattering glass rang out, and an even louder French swear filled the hotel suite. Shane looked at his dad, and they both pushed through the doors, and into the bathroom.

Shane stopped in his tracks, nearly causing his father to trip at the scene in front of him.

Farah was leaning over the counter, her face tilted downward as she practically panted. Shane’s mom was kneeling on the ground, shakily picking up the broken glass pieces, small cuts on her hands, and droplets of blood dripping to the floor.

“Mom, no, let me do it.” Shane said, reaching over as his mom avoided his gaze, as she numbly threw the glass shards into the bin. They worked in silence as each glass pinged against the others in the bin. When the last visible piece was thrown away, Farah handed Shane’s mom a towel wordlessly, and his mom pressed the towel against the largest cut.

“What, what is going on?” Shane asked, his dad leaning against the doorway, rubbing his face with one hand.

There was a pause that hung in the air, acting as a warning siren for Shane.

“Before Crowell left, he was pressuring the Voyageurs, your mom, and I to get you back on the ice pronto.” Farah said, turning to face Shane.

“But,” Shane hesitated, “You told him I was sick? That I needed time? Family emergency?”

Farah nodded, “Yes, I did. I even went as far as to forge a doctor’s note and Crowell said he would only accept a death certificate. And said it was what was owed, since he had bought all the news stories about your fight with Wiebe.”

“But I thought - I thought that fight was contained?” Shane asked, replaying the memory in his mind.

It *was* in a public space. And yes, there were security guards involved. And okay, they were all in a waiting room that had non-hockey players, but... who would sell a story like that to the press? From a *hospital waiting room*?

“Largely because Crowell made sure that the only place that would publish such a story

would be the most untrustworthy sites. He was worried about the image of the sport.” Farah continued.

Shane gulped, his vision narrowing in on Farah and his mom who was standing up, staring resolutely at her own blood on the floor. His heart rate picked up. Suddenly, he didn’t need a pot of coffee to keep him awake.

“Crowell threatened to expose you, to out you to the press if I didn’t drag you by your ear back to the ice.” Yuna stated, her gaze unwavering from the ground. “I refused, I even *begged* him to think like a parent and he just *laughed* in my face. *Connard*,” Shane’s mom swore, shaking her head with such controlled rage that Shane took a step back.

“So, we came up with our own plan. We thought that if we got enough stories and voices exposing Crowell’s dirty work throughout the years, he’d let it go, let you be. We only wanted to show him what we had to scare him off.” Yuna continued, finally shifting her gaze to Shane. “Once people started talking to us and others, people realized there was enough for legal action. The League asked us for a copy of what we had, and we had to comply.” Yuna said, her lip trembling, and turned to Farah for help.

Farah jumped in, crossing her arms. “They negotiated with Crowell that if he leaves quietly, then the file we have wouldn’t reach the press. There’s talk of,” Farah grimaced, “compensation for those impacted by him.”

Shane’s stomach turned, “And what does this have to do with me, then?”

His mom looked up at the ceiling, her eyes brimming with tears. “We thought he only wanted to go after *you*. And we *believed* he would say or do nothing once the League pushed him out.” The first tear leaked down her face as her mouth tightened, as if searching for the words for the next part.

Farah took over. “Coach Murdock alleged that Crowell had files on every single player and certain coaches, with potential blackmail material if he ever needed to force someone’s hand. He was the *only* one we talked to who mentioned this, so we thought that maybe-”

“-Maybe he didn’t actually have a deranged system like that because what sick *bastard* would?” Shane’s mom said hoarsely.

There was a heavy silence that filled the room, and the bathroom walls were closing in on Shane as his thoughts started to overlap with one another.

“Did he - did he out me?” Shane asked, his heart hammering in his chest as Farah’s face crumbled before his eyes.

He held on to the shred of hope.

If it was just him, they had options. Maybe-

“He outed you *and* Ilya,” Farah whispered, the first set of tears falling from her eyes, handing

over her phone as Shane glanced down. He scrolled quickly, pausing at the photos of him and Ilya walking outside their houses, Ilya walking into Shane's home, and the final one of Shane and Ilya kissing passionately on the dock just outside of Shane's cottage, their one safe space.

Shane shoved the phone back to Farah and turned toward the toilet, retching up whatever was left in his stomach from the night before. His eyes, still puffy and sore from earlier, had hot tears as he kept gagging.

This can't be real. Shane felt his dad's presence as he dropped to the floor beside him. His dad rubbed his back as Shane continued to heave. He could hear his mom crying as Farah kept taking in gulps of air.

Shane fell back, his father stepping out of the way, Shane's back hitting the edge of the shower. Pinching the bridge of his nose, as he had to repeatedly tell himself that this *wasn't a nightmare*.

"I'm going to get some water." David muttered, dashing off to the kitchen area and returning promptly with water bottles for everyone. Farah immediately chugged hers, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, the bags under her eyes heavily pronounced.

"I have, uh, started coordinating with the hospital on extra security. The hospital has already been working with local law enforcement, and we'll continue to increase that as needed. In addition, we should expect press and paparazzi tomorrow-"

"Paparazzi?" Shane asked in shock as he gasped at the absurdity.

Farah nodded, "Expect paparazzi. We have two captains, who've been archrivals for *years* and suddenly they are in a committed relationship and one of them is in a coma. This is *exactly* the story these leeches love." Farah said angrily, taking another gulp of water.

"We'll be directed to less public entrances of the hospital. No journalist or paparazzi can come onto hospital grounds. We will also be placing extra security at Ilya's room."

Shane rubbed his face, his eyes welling up at the thought of security guards outside of Ilya's door. Terrified by the fact that they were absolutely needed in this situation.

"Centauris and Voyageurs have been put on a media blackout order until further notice." Farah continued, and Shane had a new fear run through him.

"We can't tell Ilya." Shane said sternly, looking at Farah and his mom, who both looked like they could collapse into tears again. "I want the ban on talking about this *extended* to his room. I don't want the nurses gossiping or the security guards outside. Ilya is not to be told a thing." Shane said quickly, not even bothering to feel embarrassed that he had asked his agent and mom to put a gag order for Ilya's room.

But he wanted to protect Ilya fiercely, and he was failing at it *spectacularly*.

“I can do that. I’ll text Coach Wiebe that right now.” Farah said, grabbing her phone. Shane frowned. *He* should have Coach Wiebe’s number. *He* should be dealing with some logistics. The guilt engulfed him as he continued to run through how this could have happened and what could happen.

He *really* just wanted to be the emergency contact.

“We need to get Svetlana. Before anything else, we have to understand how this would impact Ilya.” Shane said, getting up cautiously as he felt his head swim slightly.

“Do you want to call her?” Farah asked.

“I’ll call her and go to her room. I don’t think a group discussion would be helpful right now.” Shane said, walking towards the door. But before he could get closer, his dad pulled him into a hug, with his mom, and Farah joining in.

“We’ll figure it out. He’ll wake up. And one day, one day, this will be just a spot in the rearview mirror.” His dad said gruffly, badly disguising how close he was to crying. “We love you kiddo. And we love Ilya. We *will* figure this out.” Shane nodded numbly as the hug broke apart, unable to look his parents in the eyes as he left the room.

-&-

Shane (to Svetlana): Just tried calling. Need to talk. Ilya is fine.

-&-

Shane knocked on Svetlana’s door, his stomach in knots. Shane kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and finally, *finally* Svetlana opened the door. Her hair was pulled back in a silk scarf with curls escaping, a set of sweatpants, and an oversized Boston Raiders sweatshirt.

“Ilya is fine,” Shane said quickly. Svetlana blinked slowly, her confusion coming on as a delayed reaction.

“Ilya is fine, but you are here. Why?” Svetlana asked bluntly, her head tilting to the side.

“Can I come in? It will be easier that way.” Shane asked, biting his lip as Svetlana pushed her door open, giving enough space for Shane to walk over to the two armchairs.

“Hollander, I do not like this. It’s almost 4 AM.” Svetlana said plainly, and Shane’s guilt twisted in his stomach that he, *once again*, had to break the news to Svetlana. A chilling sense of déjà vu, washing over him as he sat down across from her.

He wondered if she felt the same as well.

“Um, you know how Crowell is leaving the league?” Shane asked, hunching over slightly as he balled his fists in his own sweatshirt pocket.

“Yes.” Svetlana replied, her arms crossed as she narrowed her gaze to Shane.

“He outed Ilya and I as his farewell gift. The media is starting to circulate the story.” Shane said, placing his phone on the table as Svetlana grabbed it with an urgency that was missing a few seconds ago.

“Is this, is this *legal*? Some of these photos, you would need-”

“A private investigator tailing you with some powerful lenses.” Shane finished, shuddering slightly as the idea of someone following him and Ilya was disturbing.

“And as far as legality, I’m not sure. I’m not entirely concerned about that right now. I’m more worried about Ilya and Russia.” Shane asked, the shame renewed as he was completely oblivious as to *how* this would impact Ilya in regards to Russia.

Anytime in the past he tried to talk to Ilya about it, he only got, ‘It would be bad. *Very* bad’ and Ilya would pivot the conversation. And Shane thought he was being a good boyfriend by not pushing the subject and letting himself get distracted by lazy kisses or silly chirps.

He was *so* fucking dumb.

Svetlana slowly placed the phone on the table as she put her arms down and put her head on the table.

“He will never be able to go back to Russia. Not safely.” Svetlana whispered. “He could be followed. Could be arrested on moral charges. He will not be able to see his niece.” Svetlana continued, raising her head to look up at Shane.

Shane nodded. “I know he hasn’t talked to his brother in years. But, I don’t think he would ever want him or his family hurt. Are they in danger?”

Svetlana shook her head. “No, Alexi is part of the police. He will make some general statement about how Ilya has been corrupted by the West. And how he should have stayed in Russia and played in the KHL. But, that is something that Alexi has *always* said. Maybe, he won’t speak about Ilya at all. Not even at home.” Svetlana mused. Shane struggled to think if it was a blessing or a curse to have a sibling never speak of you again.

“Alexi has barely tried to reach out about Ilya since the accident. All he asks for is money and it is easier to block him than to talk to him.” Svetlana sighed. “But Ilya was never going to go back to Russia. The only reason he would go back is to visit his mom’s tombstone.”

Shane felt as if he was sucker-punched in the stomach as he folded over. Shane could live with himself if confirming the relationship meant no more Alexi. He didn’t think he could look himself in the mirror if he cut Ilya off from Irina.

“You know he has dirt from his mother’s grave in a jar at home, right?” Svetlana asked.

Shane inhaled deeply as he leaned back in the chair, his eyes turned up to the ceiling, as he sorted through his memories. Fragments of moments blurred together, but one at Ilya's house in Boston stood out.

"There was once, early after we got together, he showed me a box of keepsakes. There were photos of him and Irina, cards, even a grocery list in her handwriting. And there was a spice jar that had dirt. I asked him what it was, and he said it was home." Shane said, a new perspective on the memory as he could *hear* the love when Ilya said 'home'.

Shane always thought it was Russia.

Svetlana nodded, "That sounds like Ilya. I saw him sweep the dirt after his father's funeral."

The realization hit Shane, nearly winding him as he turned to Svetlana.

"He never was going to go back, was he?" Shane asked, feeling a new sense of guilt grow in his chest. Their fight, their awful fucking fight kept playing as a soundtrack.

"Would you choose me?"

The words came back, cutting deep.

"I already chose you, Hollander."

Shane's tears fell down his face as he realized, not for the first time, all the sacrifices Ilya had made for *him*. For *them*. The shame came quickly, a heavy pressure on his chest as Shane struggled to breathe. How could Ilya forgive Shane?

"No. But it was not just because of you." Svetlana said gently, as if she could hear Shane's anxious thoughts. "Ilya's family, it is not full of love like yours. Just an obligation. A duty. They are *horrible* to him, his niece is the exception." Svetlana paused. "The only things he loved from Russia were his mother. His friends. And hockey. That's it."

Svetlana sighed, "Russia would never be home again. Ilya always had to watch his words, he had to be careful who he talked to and where he talked to them. Everything in secrecy." Svetlana pushed a strand of hair back. "That is not a home, that is just *survival*."

Shane nodded, feeling a bit steadied, the pressure easing from his chest as his mind started going through new tasks and scenarios. He was Yuna Hollander's son after all.

Svetlana let out a sigh, "Are we worried about citizenship? He has a work visa, and I can marry him if needed-"

Shane cut her off, rolling his eyes. "No. If it comes to that, I'm marrying him." He mumbled.

"Good." Svetlana said, fanning out her hands and lifting her left hand. "Because I would want a big ring with lots of diamonds if I had to marry him." She teased quietly as Shane smiled.

“I think I at least owe you some gifts after all of this is done. Once he’s awake.” Shane said gently, reaching over to her hand and interlocking their fingers. Svetlana’s eyes fluttered shut and squeezed his hand.

“Shane?”

“Svetlana?”

“I’m tired. I need to sleep before tomorrow. Or later this morning.” Svetlana rubbed her eyes. “Today already sucks.”

“Yeah, it does.” Shane said, breaking their grip and getting up to his feet. He blinked slowly in a way that he knew meant he had to be in bed soon. If only he was allowed to sleep through this part of the nightmare.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Connard (FR) : Asshole

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you all so much for the kind words on the last chapter! That was the chapter I was most anxious about posting & was happy to see that people enjoyed it. Well, enjoy is the wrong word - but you get what I mean.

Figured I'd post this a bit earlier given scheduling. Next week, I am aiming to keep it on the every other day schedule... but I will be posting the next chapter on Tuesday and starting the cadence there for every other day. I will most likely need to alter the update schedule. Some of the later chapters need a lot of revisions, and want to make sure I'm doing the story justice by dedicating time. I'll keep everyone updated in the chapters here though once I figured out an update cadence.

Thank you again all so much for reading!! <3 See you soon!

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Hayden: *I told J.J. not to call you.*

Hayden: *But text me after he calls you anyway.*

-&-

Shane woke to his phone ringing. A glance at the clock showed it was 7 AM. Enough light had bled through the curtains that Shane could see the hotel room. He grabbed his phone, his heart dropping when J.J.'s face filled the screen. Shane hesitated, took a breath, and answered.

"Hello," Shane muttered, pulling himself out of bed and heading straight to his bathroom. He could *hear* J.J.'s angry huffs on the other line.

"Please tell me this isn't true. That you and Rozanov *aren't* together?" J.J. demanded as Shane shut the bathroom door, resting against it.

"It is," Shane admitted, wincing slightly as J.J. started swearing in French.

"*Pourquoi t'as rien dit?*" J.J. asked, and before Shane could respond, J.J. went off. "You know I thought you had this one-sided crush on Rozanov? This whole time I thought, 'My poor best friend, Shane Hollander, crushing on the biggest womanizer prick of a human being-'"

"That's *enough*, J.J.," Shane said sharply.

J.J. continued on as if he hadn't heard Shane's anger. "Why do you think I kept trying to set you up with all these *nice* men? It was to get your mind off of fucking Rozanov, *putain de merde!*"

"His name is *Ilya*," Shane said through clenched teeth, pacing the bathroom as his anger made him restless.

J.J. had the audacity to laugh.

"Do you know how *embarrassed* I felt for trying to set you up? Do you know how many times I've just walked up to random men to see if they would want to date you? Or ask friends of friends for you?"

Shane rolled his eyes. Was J.J. *really* crying over his bruised ego at a time like this?

“I didn’t ask you to do that! I kept telling you to back off!”

“But you didn’t tell me *why* I should back off-”

“I didn’t tell *anyone* about Ilya-”

“*Vraiment?* You’re a *fucking* liar, you told *Hayden*-”

Shane stopped in his tracks and threw his hand up. “Hayden guessed! What was I supposed to do?” His voice was rising.

“Lie!” J.J. shouted. “Or confess to him *and* tell me!”

“Because you’re handling it so well right now?” Shane yelled back, leaning against the door. He shook his head, turning on the fan to cover the argument.

J.J. let out an exasperated sigh. “Shane, there is no *fucking* way Hayden Pike reacted well to this news. He still punches Rozanov-” J.J. quickly corrected himself, “I mean, *Ilya*, on the ice every chance he gets. Do not tell me he blessed this whole *thing*,” J.J. said, his tone thick with disgust, and Shane saw *red*.

He was exhausted. Ilya was *still* in the hospital. And J.J. sounded disgusted by the relationship itself. As if they were school kids and Shane said he had cooties.

Is this what he had to look forward to? His friends and teammates reducing this to a quick and dirty hookup?

“*Thing?*” Shane snapped. “Ilya is my *boyfriend*. We’ve been together for nearly *eleven* fucking years, don’t you *dare* downplay the relationship,” Shane shouted into the phone. He was gripping the phone so hard, his knuckles were turning white and the phone shook.

Shane heard a clatter and some mumbled noise before silence. Shane blinked, letting his grip relax slightly as J.J. got back on the phone.

“*Eleven years?*” J.J. whispered hoarsely, disbelieving. “The entirety of our friendship, you’ve been dating *Ilya Rozanov?*”

Shane sighed and sat on the floor, crossing his legs. “We weren’t together the whole time. But,” Shane fidgeted with the hem of his t-shirt, “we’ve been committed for the past few years.”

“He signed to the Centaurs for you, didn’t he?” J.J. said, the pieces clicking together. Shane rolled his eyes. Did *everyone* pick up on Ilya’s sacrifices *but* him?

“Partly. Mostly,” Shane said, blushing slightly.

“Well, that’s romantic as hell. I’ll give him that.” J.J. huffed, causing Shane to smile a bit. “But why didn’t you tell me? And don’t give me the whole, ‘no one knew’ or ‘people

guessed'. I got pretty damn close and you didn't crack."

Shane sighed, shutting his eyes. He had no good answer. "I don't know. I *wanted* to tell you. But I was worried you wouldn't be supportive-

"I'm supportive of you being gay!"

"But are you supportive of me loving Ilya Rozanov?" Shane asked gently.

There was a pause. "Okay, why him. Why go through *all* of this?"

Shane smiled. It was actually an easy question. "I love him. He loves me. I'm the happiest when I'm around him, I play way better hockey when I'm up against him, and I can go on about all the mushy stuff that I don't think you *want* to hear-

"Save it for the wedding vows, I'll hear it then," J.J. teased.

Shane's eyebrows shot up; hope spread through him at J.J.'s joke. "You jumped to marriage real quick."

Shane could see J.J. shifting his weight from leg to leg, maybe even scratching his nose. The nervous, awkward ticks of J.J. whenever he was put on the spot were familiar. "Yeah, well, it's kinda obvious, right? Eleven years, he moves teams for you, you're at his bedside... all of this screams happily ever after."

"I'd like that," Shane admitted, holding back the actual line he wanted to confess.

If he wakes up, if he is healthy, if he can...

Shane had to cut himself off before he got lost in another spiral, focusing himself back into the current phone call. "Look, J.J. I am sorry I didn't tell you. You were always going to be next on the list if that helps."

J.J. sighed, "I appreciate it. And look, I still need time to adjust to this. It is a lot. I don't want to be mad at you, especially at a time like this."

"You can be mad. Just don't stay mad forever, that's all I'm asking," Shane said, biting his lip.

Shane could hear the grin through J.J.'s voice. "Deal."

Shane let himself fully relax against the door, pulling his knees up, and resting his head on them.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd get through the day in one piece.

-&-

Hayden: *Just heard from J.J. Sounds like you two had a good talk.*

Hayden: *Call if you need anything, phone is glued to my hip today.*

-&-

Shane left the bathroom to find Farah and his parents sitting around the small table. Each of them clutched a fresh cup of coffee, staring anywhere but at Shane. A clear sign that they heard parts of the argument.

Shane stretched his arms out, trying to release the tension in his shoulders. “Anything new? Or is the story picking up?” he asked as he headed toward the coffee pot.

“Story is picking up, media blackout still holds, and no updates on Ilya,” Farah ticked off as Shane filled his cup, the smell of burnt coffee filling his nose.

He could hear his mom tap nervously against her cup, her rings pinging quietly. “We need to talk about whether we should release a statement confirming the relationship or if we want to deny it,” she said softly as Shane joined the group at the table.

He thought he had an answer to this question last night, after Svetlana, but in the morning, after a few hours of pitiful sleep, and the reality of J.J.’s conversation settling in... he had no idea how he wanted to handle the situation.

He *desperately* wanted to talk to Ilya. He woke up several times in the middle of the night, thinking that if he turned over he could quietly chat with Ilya in the dark. His hands reached for his phone anyway, as if to send a text. He just wanted to talk to Ilya and make this decision as a *couple*.

And yet, Shane was here on his own. Having to call the shots. And he didn’t want Ilya to suffer anymore because of Shane’s wants and needs.

“I don’t know,” Shane said, letting out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “I want to think about it more. I want to evaluate the risks for Ilya if we confirm, I want to get a sense of how my team could react... J.J. seemed to take it okay, but that’s just *one* person.” His mom put a hand on his arm, gently squeezing.

Shane turned to her, “I know I can’t wait forever, but can I have a day? Maybe two? We can start drafting official statements either way.” he asked as she nodded her head.

“We can do that. I know that Coach Wiebe was going to stop by-”

A pitiful knock came at the door, irregular and slow. Shane got out of his chair, already aware of who was going to be walking through the door.

Standing in the hallway was Coach Wiebe, balancing delicately on two crutches as he hobbled through the doorway. He awkwardly maneuvered through the room, clearly unsure of where to put his weight.

Farah and Shane's dad quickly got up to help Coach Wiebe into a chair, placing his crutches to the side as he settled in. Coach Wiebe exhaled, as if he'd come from a strenuous workout. Shane went to get a coffee for Coach Wiebe, grabbed some sugar and cream, before returning to the table and offering it to the coach.

Coach Wiebe smiled, muttered a thank you, as he proceeded to dump a sugar packet and creamer into this coffee. He turned to Shane as he took a sip of the coffee, slight wince at the taste.

"Shane, I am so sorry that you and Ilya had to be exposed in this matter. It is unforgivable," the coach said, genuine sympathy filled his face. Shane shifted his weight, uncomfortable with the apology coming from possibly the kindest man on Earth.

"Am I right to assume that you and Ilya are serious?" the coach asked gently. If it had come from anyone else, Shane would have thought it was an accusation or a jab. But from him? It felt like a parent who just wanted to know more.

Shane nodded, surprised by the lump in his throat. "I love him. And he loves me. I'd say it's serious," he said quietly, sniffing, staring down at his cup and staring at a small crack.

Coach Wiebe nodded, "I thought that."

"Are you, are you going to bench him for this? Or try to trade him?" Shane asked quietly, scared to look up to see the coach's face in case he saw the answer before he heard one.

Coach Wiebe took a sharp breath, shaking his head. "No. I will not bench Ilya for being in a loving relationship with the captain from the Voyageurs team. I'll keep him on the bench so he can heal. And if his injuries take longer and I get pressure from the league to trade him... I'll fight to keep him on the roster. Or the team payroll, if that's what he wants."

Shane took a sip of his coffee, gulping down more than necessary to hide the tears in his eyes.

Coach Wiebe leaned forward, putting a hand on Shane's shoulder. "I came by to say that I'll support Ilya, and you Shane, in whatever happens next. I won't pretend that this is going to be easy. My phone has overheated quite a bit this morning with the calls and texts. But we'll weather this storm together."

"Thank you, sir," Shane croaked out.

If only Ilya was here to hear this.

Coach Wiebe withdrew his arm. He took another sip of his coffee, another grimace before he pushed it away. "I'd better be going, but please call me if you need help with any statements and such. We have our social media manager, Harris, on the ground and he can coordinate with Farah and Yuna on this." Coach Wiebe said, as he started to stand up.

Everyone gathered around, helping with the crutches, moving shoes or any obstacles out of

the way as he made his way through the door.

“Good luck, Shane, and I’ll see you at the hospital. Farah? Yuna? We’ll be in touch.” Coach Wiebe nodded to Farah before turning to Shane’s dad, a wide and genuine smile on his face. “Love the sweater, David.” Coach Wiebe said as he turned to hobble out the room and into the hallway.

Shane exhaled and sat on the floor, setting his empty coffee cup to the side as he buried his hands into his hair. It was starting to become clear that the Centaurs were a supportive group, from the top down. And even the Russia fears felt muted now.

The fear though, that the larger hockey forces would intervene and cause issues for Ilya and Shane loomed heavily. Shane adjusted his seat uncomfortably.

Why was he still hesitating on confirming their relationship?

-&-

Coach Theriault: *Mandatory team meeting tomorrow at noon. Skype invite will come through email, keep eye out.*

-&-

Shane sighed as he leaned back in the seat, the baseball hat pulled low over his sunglasses. Based on the instructions, he had to park the car a few blocks away and enter the hospital from the back entrance.

Unzipping his jacket, he got out of the car and started his walk towards the hospital. It was a nice change to feel the wind on his face rather than go directly into the stale hospital rooms.

Before he could appreciate the change, he spotted his first set of paparazzi. They were adjusting their lenses and scanning the roads for any notable cars. As if Shane would show up in one of Ilya’s flashy cars, versus one that blended into the traffic.

Shaking his head slightly, he hunched and hurried past, goosebumps on his neck as he anticipated the dreaded ‘click’ of a camera.

It never came.

-&-

Entering his name into the visitors log was still the same, the pen caught on the ‘O’ of his name, and the guard made the same tired excuse about a dried-out pen. What *was* different was the request for his ID, and when Shane looked up bewildered, the guard gave a tight smile.

“Sorry, protocol changes for this particular patient.” He answered grimly, as Shane pulled his ID out of his wallet. Once he was verified, the guard waved him off.

Another set of guards, outside the room, slightly covering some of the cards and posters that were tacked earlier in the week. Shane, much to his annoyance, had to pull out his ID again as the guards verified that he had been on the authorized list.

Shane dodged their looks as they eyed him wearily, connecting the dots. His cheeks heated as he realized that they knew *exactly* who he was and how he was connected to Ilya.

Finally, they let him through and Shane was able to enter the quiet room. Well, quiet for Shane now; the beeps and hums of machines could be his white noise at this point. The room had been dimmed greatly, as if Ilya hadn't quite woken up to the morning.

"*Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy,*" he whispered, kissing Ilya on the forehead as Shane took his hand in his own.

There was a small spike in the heart rate, and Shane was too tired to use reason and logic to stifle his hope. And instead, he let himself fully believe that it was Ilya's whispering back, "*Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy.*"

"It's been a long day already. And it's not even noon," Shane said, letting the tears well up in his eyes as he took a seat, sniffing slightly as he gazed at Ilya's face, his skin still healing but he could *see* him more.

God, he was beautiful. Bruised and broken bones, Shane still felt haunted by Ilya's beauty.

Instead of stopping the tears, he let himself fall apart.

He was safe to do that with Ilya.

"I know I say this all the time, but I wish you were awake. I wish you were here to talk through what's going on. I miss you *so* much," Shane said, his voice catching at the end, as he felt the tears streak down his face.

"I love you and I want to be better for you. And I know I was a bad boyfriend before- please don't argue with me here. I was and I'm so sorry."

Shane refused to feel embarrassed asking a sleeping man not to argue.

"I *want* to be better. I *can* do better." Shane let out a shaky breath as he focused on how the light caught Ilya's eyelashes, they were always so long. A flicker of a movement under Ilya's eyelid.

Shane pressed on. "And I'm scared. I'm *so* scared, Ilya." He said, switching the hands that held Ilya as he wiped the tears off of his face. "I'm scared that I'm already fucking up and I'll do something that will make you leave me forever. Beyond this whole nightmare."

"Please, just wake up and tell me what to do." Shane pleaded, tearing his gaze away from Ilya and up to the ceiling, counting the tiles overhead as he threw another prayer into the universe.

The machines hummed on as Shane continued to cry by Ilya's bedside.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Pourquoi t'as rien dit? (FR): Why didn't you tell me?

Vraiment? (FR): Really?

Putain de merde (FR): colloquially, "for fuck's sake" / "holy shit"

Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy (RU): Morning, my love

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you all so much for the kind words on the last chapter. It genuinely makes my day when people take the time to leave a line or two!

Quick note on update cadence: going forward, I'll be posting on Tuesdays and Sundays.

Thank you again for all the support! See you Sunday! <3

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

They were at the cottage. In the dream, the grass was vibrant, and the sun reflecting off the lake. Shane looked around, knowing that Ilya was just around the corner.

He stood on his toes and peered down at the lake. Only the water moved in the sunlight. Shane turned and saw a hammock appear where there hadn't been one before. An arm dangled over the edge. A loon tattoo marked the shoulder, beckoning him forward.

Shane smiled. He was going to see Ilya.

"Ilya! I was looking for you!" Shane called as he jogged over to the hammock. The closer he got, the arm started to morph, a splint at the wrist and bruises blooming before his eyes.

"ILYA!" Shane yelled as he sprinted to the hammock. He reached the hammock and leaned over the edge to see Ilya's sleeping face. The staples on the side of his head glinted in the summer sun; the bruises shifted shape in real time.

"Ilya," Shane whispered hoarsely.

"Are you too late, Shane Hollander? Or are you just on time?"

Shane looked up to see a woman standing on the patio above, with eerily similar facial features to Ilya, the exact same hazel eyes and lazy curls.

He didn't need to ask who she was.

Shane looked back down at Ilya. "Please, wake up," he whispered. A louder voice broke through.

-&-

"Shane, wake up! Shanel!" His mom's panicked voice cut through, and Shane jolted upright, panting as he frantically looked around the room.

"Mom?" he asked shakily. He placed a hand on his chest as she rubbed small circles on his shoulder, her gaze soft with sympathy.

"You were shouting in your sleep," she said, her lips in a tight line. She didn't need to say whose name he was shouting.

“Sorry,” Shane mumbled, eyes fixed on the comforter. His mom kept her hand on his shoulder as he steadied his breathing.

“You don’t need to apologize. Your dad is making some coffee. I’ll go get breakfast today. It looks like you slept through your normal alarms,” she said gently.

Shane nodded and glanced at the clock, feeling a jolt of alarm.

It was 8 AM, which was late in his world.

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll get ready in the meantime,” Shane said, rubbing his eyes and wincing. His eyes were still swollen from crying the night before.

“Are you going to be okay if I leave? I can ask dad to go get breakfast,” she said, a look of concern all over her face. Shane shook his head slowly.

“I’ll be fine. Thank you. I think I’ll wash my face and just shower,” Shane said, getting out of bed. His mom moved out of the way, hesitating for a moment before patting her pockets for her keys and wallet.

“I’ll be back. I love you,” she said, giving Shane a quick hug before leaving the suite.

Shane almost crawled back into bed, wanting to return to the dream and see Ilya. But his phone lit up and caught his attention. There was a missed call from Rose.

He grabbed his phone and went into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. A quick redial, and Rose picked up on the first ring.

“Hey, Rose,” Shane whispered, his voice echoing faintly off the bathroom walls.

“Hey, Shane,” Rose said breathlessly. “Glad I was able to catch you.”

“Yeah, it’s nice to hear your voice after the media frenzy.”

“I told my team not to release any statements about our dating history or friendship,” Rose said anxiously. “I don’t know if that helps or not.”

Shane smiled. “The league has a media blackout right now. And, I hope you take this as a compliment... I didn’t even think you’d do something bad here. So thank you for that.”

“You know I’m here for you and Ilya. Whatever you need, I’ll do it,” Rose said earnestly. “I am so sorry this is happening.”

“Same,” Shane said, staring up at the bathroom ceiling.

There was a beat of silence. “And are there any updates?” Rose asked quietly.

Shane shook his head. “You got the latest. Still fast asleep. I’m honestly a bit envious of him.

In some ways, I think it's good he's sleeping through this? Does that make me a monster?" Shane asked. He walked over to the sink, grabbed a cup, and filled it with water.

"Honestly, I would be thinking the same thing if I were you," Rose answered thoughtfully as Shane, not so gracefully, chugged his water.

"Do you know what you're going to do, or is that on the back burner for now?" Rose asked, as Shane stared at his empty glass.

"No idea. I know I have a team meeting later today, and my parents and Farah want to finalize a plan, and I still am not sure what's the right choice here."

"I don't think there *is* a right choice here," Rose said.

Shane paused, staring at the mirror and noticing the grease in his hair. "I think there is. The right choice would be to come out and confirm the relationship. But I would feel so much better if Ilya was here to talk it through. Or at least let me know he would be okay with it."

"Hasn't he told you a million times that he would be okay with coming out with a sex tape or something?"

Shane snorted. "Yeah, he *jokes* about it all the time. But is it a joke? Or is he being serious? I keep going back through old conversations, trying to find *something*. Then I have to worry about our careers. His team is handling it well, but I have no idea how the Voyageurs are handling this." Shane said, rambling.

"You'll find out later today, right? Team meeting? You can wait till then?" Rose pressed.

Shane sighed. "But what if I get off that call just as confused? Then what? I keep freaking out?"

"Then," Rose said gently, pausing on her words, "you'll call your friends. You'll put me, Hayden, and Svetlana on a conference call. And whoever else you want there and we'll talk it out. Or let you rant about hockey until the decision comes to you as an epiphany." Shane laughed.

"All I'm trying to say, you don't need to figure this out on your own. You have friends that love you *and* Ilya. We want what's best for both of you."

"You're right, you're right."

"As usual," she said, and Shane could picture her million dollar smile.

"Thank you Rose, this was helpful. Now, tell me about the movie. What's the plot again?" Shane let Rose talk about the movie set, the characters, and the plot. It gave him a little escapism before his day truly began.

-&-

Shane walked out of the bathroom to see his parents gathered at the table, the smell of fresh coffee and bagels filling the room. It was a rare treat to sit together like this with food and drinks.

“This looks good. Where did you go?” Shane asked his mom, taking a seat and grabbing a bagel that was bursting with eggs, sausage, veggies, and cheese.

His mom beamed. “Drove a little ways out and found a cute spot. Loaded up on everything that looked good. The coffee’s better than what we have in this room,” she added, taking a sip.

“Thank you, this looks great. Maybe you should be on breakfast duty now, right?” Shane joked, but neither of his parents laughed.

“I’m happy to do it if you want to sleep in. It was nice to drive around,” his mom said.

Shane’s guilt came on strong. He thought his joke was obvious. He could *still* do errands for the family during this time.

“No, I’m good to keep doing the breakfast runs. I just need to up my game now.”

They ate in silence; only the crinkling of bagel bags and sips of coffee filled the room.

“What are you thinking about today?” Shane’s dad asked, crumbling his bagel wrapping paper into a ball as he stared at Shane.

Shane shrugged as he swallowed his bite. “Not sure. I want to wait until the team meeting to make a choice.”

“That’s a good idea. And remember, Farah and I have draft statements for either option in your inbox. Coach Wiebe also looped in the Centaurs’ social media manager, if you want to talk through what to post,” his mom said a little too quickly, sharing a glance with Shane’s dad.

Shane nodded numbly. “Yeah, I saw all that. And thank you for the work. I think I might stay here to take the team meeting call here. But I’ll meet you at the hospital afterwards. I’ll text you how it goes.”

His parents took the hint. Both hesitated, then went to Shane for a hug, a kiss on the forehead, and a whispered “love you” before leaving the room.

His mom left an extra coffee cup with a heart and a smiley face on it. Just like she used to on his packed lunches as a kid.

-&-

Shane took a deep breath as he shifted his laptop to the center of the desk. The lamp was turned on, its harsh cool tone lighting his face. He glanced at his watch. One minute to go. He opened his laptop and clicked on the invite link in his inbox.

He was immediately in the video; nearly every player had their camera off except Hayden. When Shane's camera loaded, J.J. turned on his camera. Hayden smiled at the camera, and Shane's phone buzzed. Shane discreetly looked down, and saw a new group chat with Hayden and J.J.

Hayden: *We got your back!! It's going to be okay!!*

J.J.: *Merde!! :)*

Shane smiled, feeling a bit more confident as Coach Theriault joined the call. Coach Theriault was clearly in the main office. One by one, the rest of the players turned on their cameras. Shane noticed how many players were frowning or clenching their jaw.

No one came off mute to make small talk. Shane's chat was usually filled with jokes. Now the side panel was empty. Shane started to bounce his leg, hoping to calm the nerves that were sparking in his mind.

Coach Theriault cleared his throat. "I wish we were in person for this meeting, but given the circumstances, I appreciate that everyone came online today. Before we go further, I want to confirm, Shane, is it true what the press are reporting?" Coach Theriault raised his eyebrows, his lips a thin line.

Shane forced his leg to stop and nodded. "It is. I am in a committed relationship with Ilya Rozanov."

At once, the grid erupted.

"Are you serious? You just *lied* to us all these years?"

"You're the *nicest* guy in the league! Why are you *fucking* that *putain*-"

"Watch your mouth, Comeau!" J.J. shouted back.

Shane sat frozen in his chair as he watched the team completely disintegrate, with only J.J. and Hayden speaking on his behalf. It was rare to see the team shout at one another in a way that Shane thought was *only* reserved for their opponents.

All of a sudden, every player's microphone was muted; some kept wordlessly yelling and gesturing with their hands wildly for a bit before they realized what happened. Silence filled the hotel room. Shane felt his mouth go dry and he eyed the empty cup next to his computer.

"*Enough*," the coach roared, and everyone sat back on their chairs. Some players angrily shoved on a baseball cap.

"Shane is *still* a member of his team and your captain-"

Shane saw players openly laughing; others rolled their eyes.

”-he deserves the right to speak for himself. What do you have to say, Shane?”

Shane cleared his throat. “Alright, then let me be clear. I just got outed in a public international way-”

“That’s *not* what this meeting is about,” Dreapu grumbled.

Shane took a deep breath, curling his hands into fists to stop them from shaking. “I just got outed while my boyfriend, of several years, is still in a *coma* after a plane crash,” Shane said loudly, his own anger rising at the injustice of it all.

At least some of the players had the decency to look sympathetic and uncomfortable.

“I am still the same player as before. You just know more about me now than before,” Shane said, looking around the videos.

Some players had turned off their camera, replaced by black squares with names.

“Did you ever let him win?” Comeau asked. “Or did he ever let *us* win if you were extra good-”

“Of *course* not! I’ve won my games against Ilya fair and square. And he won his.” Shane spat out.

“It calls our wins into question. People are talking,” Comeau snapped, leaning in closer to his camera.

“That’s not the type of athlete I am! I’ve helped us win two cups back to back! Would you let your friends in Boston win if they were having a bad night?” Shane asked.

“That’s different.” Comeau shot back.

“Alright!” the coach yelled. Shane ran a hand through his hair, clenching his jaw. He saw notifications from Hayden and J.J. come through. He turned his phone over, slamming it harder than he intended.

“Obviously, this puts us in a vulnerable position. Our sponsors are asking questions and not the good ones. We support Shane and we wish Ilya a speedy recovery. Shane will be benched until the optics are stabilized. For everyone’s sake,” Coach Theriault said sternly, and Shane bit his tongue.

“There will be no statements about this situation, we’ll let it die down as it usually does-”

“I’m confirming the relationship,” Shane said simply, as a few team members leaned back to rub their faces. A few more went off camera.

The coach scratched his chin and paused, as if deliberating a play or a tactic. “If you do that,

know that things will be intense. That's the reality. I won't stop you, but I wouldn't be a good coach if I didn't tell you what's around the corner," the coach said.

"I'm sure," Shane said, surprised at how steady his voice came through.

The coach clenched his jaw. "Fine. You'll release your statement, the team will release ours supporting you, but *no other players-*"

"When Shane posts, I'm posting in support." Hayden said quickly, his nostrils flaring; a sign that Hayden was *angry*.

"Same." J.J. chimed in.

"Alright then, anyone else?" Coach asked, his eyes clearly scanning the screen.

No other player came off mute. The silence stretched on long enough that Shane had to wonder if Coach wanted to humiliate Shane.

"You guys... are unbelievable." Shane said hoarsely, the anger taking on a quiet form. "I've been at *all* of your engagement parties, weddings, and baby showers... I have played alongside some of you for over ten seasons, and this is how you treat our friendship?"

No one said anything. Someone came off mute, stammered once, then went silent.

Coach Theriault nodded. "Alright, Shane, let us know when you confirm the relationship. Hayden and J.J., you're good to show support. The team will share ours. Shane's on the bench until he comes back from his emergency, and let Ilya know he's in our thoughts, alright?"

Shane nodded, "Sounds good," he said, the sarcasm thick. And with a few other awkward goodbyes, Shane was finally able to slam his computer shut.

-&-

Hayden: *That team meeting was trash. They'll come around.*

Shane: *I'm not sure about that. But it's fine. I know where they all stand.*

J.J.: *I'll tie some of their skates together. Idiots.*

-&-

He texted his parents and Farah about the team meeting.

Shane declined their calls and texted them his decision to publicly confirm the relationship.

Smiling emojis and hearts filled the screen.

-&-

When Shane entered Ilya's room, his parents were either side of Ilya, holding his hands and chatting quietly. Shane took a second to take in his mom drawing lazy circles on Ilya's hand, while his dad held a steady grip on Ilya. Both looked so comfortable there.

Shane cleared his throat, and his mom hurried over to hug him. "I'm sorry about today," she whispered as Shane rested his head on her shoulder. He walked over to his dad, who let go of Ilya to give Shane a hug, adding a few pats on the back.

"We'll leave you two alone for a bit," his dad said, moving out of the way to join his wife, as they exited the room.

The exhaustion hit him all at once as Shane collapsed into the chair next to Ilya. He wanted nothing more than to climb into bed with Ilya and rest his head on his chest, falling asleep to Ilya's heartbeat.

"*Privet moy lyubimyy*," Shane whispered, taking Ilya's hand in his own. "I had a dream about you last night. Not the type of dream you'd like, but it was nice to see you," Shane said, hoping to inspire better dreams for Ilya.

"I don't think I like playing for the Voyageurs anymore. Your coach is nicer. Your team is nicer. That's for sure," Shane said, tightening his grip slightly.

He leaned over the bed rail. "I was looking through our photos today. We have a few good ones, but I want more. I want to see the photos you have. I know you have your own secret album. Which ones did you keep when I had my back turned? I can guess your favorites, but I want to hear you tell me. Will you do that when you wake up?"

Shane thought he felt a finger twitch, but the monitors showed no change.

"Ilya, I'm so tired. I hope you don't mind if I nap in your room. Maybe drool on your sheets. Would you wake up then to yell at me?" Shane asked, settling his head in the one place where he could hold Ilya's hand, the bed rails in the way, and rest his head.

"Wake me up when you do, okay?" Shane whispered into the dimly lit room as he fell asleep listening to Ilya's heart rate. Shane's fingers loosened as he drifted to sleep.

-&-

When the nurse came in later to take vitals, Shane was still sleeping, holding Ilya's hand. There was no medical reason to note in Ilya's chart that his resting heart rate was consistently lower when Shane was in the room. That was an observation every nurse had when monitoring Ilya.

It *was* medically relevant to note Ilya attempting to tighten his grip as Shane's hand shifted in his sleep.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Merde (FR): Shit; used here as a casual “good luck”/”Break a leg” equivalent in English.

Putain (FR): Literally, “whore”, but commonly used as a general insult; in this context, closer to “bastard.”

Privet moy lyubimyy (RU): Hello my love.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Miss me? I missed you! As always, thank you to everyone who has been following along this story. Special shout out to those who leave comments (I refresh that page way too often to be honest). I truly appreciate everyone. As a reminder, the next update will be on Tuesday! Can't wait to see you all then!

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

“Okay, show me your *favorite* photos of you two. I want to see,” Svetlana said, throwing out her hand for Shane to pass his phone. Shane glanced up from his phone, biting at his fingernails as he flipped through his photos.

“I’m really bad with this stuff. Ilya is the one who has the better photos and an eye for these things,” Shane said, glancing over to a sleeping Ilya.

There was a small twitch at Ilya’s mouth, a ghost of a smile. Shane’s heart didn’t skip a beat; he was used to movements that meant nothing.

Svetlana rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know the photos he has because he shows them off all the time. He’s not *that* good at photography,” Svetlana teased, thrusting her hand out again, clearly impatient.

Stressed, Shane let out a long sigh. “Okay, but if he’s bad then I’m terrible—”

Svetlana threw her head back and groaned loudly, tangling her hands in her curls. “Oh my *God!* Hollander! I want to see cute photos of you two! As long as they are safe for work, then I don’t *care*. Now, *please*, share,” Svetlana demanded.

Shane rolled his eyes and scooted his chair closer to Svetlana. He held the phone in the middle as he showed her the screen of all the photos he had collected over the years. Svetlana leaned forward, her brows furrowed.

“I thought we were picking your top *five* photos,” Svetlana asked, as she scrolled through the page. “There’s like fifty photos here.”

“I know, but obviously not all of these are top five material. But narrowing it down is hard,” Shane said, picking at his thumbnail again.

Shane didn’t want to admit that, after all these years, he *only* had fifty photos of him and Ilya. For some of the photos, he had to ask his mom and dad for their own collection. Because, despite begging them to delete photos of him and Ilya, he *knew* his parents kept a secret album and he never felt like fighting them on it. The other set of photos Shane had to search online for the professional ones taken for Irina Foundation events.

If Shane had to show only the ones he had saved on his phone that he and Ilya took, the number would be closer to a single digit.

Shane had already made a million promises to himself and Ilya of what he'd do differently when Ilya woke up.

One of them was to take more photos.

"Okay, but which ones *are* your favorite? And please don't tell me it's this one," she said, clicking on one and expanding a very professional photo of the two; it was from their announcement of the Irina Foundation.

"I figured I should have a professional photo in my top favorite photos!" Shane defended weakly as Svetlana clicked her tongue at him. "Okay, but *this* one is nicer. You two have such pretty smiles here!" Svetlana said, as she clicked on one where they were both in suits, clearly at another Irina Foundation event, but they were laughing to the press. Shane thought he remembered Ilya telling a terrible dad joke, or maybe Shane made a jab.

He couldn't remember.

"Okay, that is better than the other one. I'll star it," Shane said, making a mental note of the image.

"I like the one where you two are holding hands in the snow. Was that your parents' place last Christmas?" Svetlana asked, showing one where, to her description, Ilya was dragging Shane and they were grinning stupidly at each other.

Shane shook his head, grinning ear to ear at the memory. "That was our first Christmas together. Massive snowstorm. My mom wanted photos and Ilya loves the camera so we had a full photoshoot. That was already in my top five."

"Alright, now you show me one," Svetlana said, pointing the phone to Shane, "I've been showing you my favorites. I want to see one that you like. And not a boring one, please."

Shane laughed, as he scrolled through, reaching to the early days of their relationship. "Ilya gave me a copy of this photo for Christmas. I downloaded this app that can make collages, so I made this."

Shane showed the photo of their first ad together. At the top of the image was a shot of them facing off with such intensity that it looked like they were about to fight each other. Below it was one of the outtakes where they were laughing so hard, smiles reaching their eyes.

"I love this," Svetlana said warmly, "You did a great job with the collage there."

Shane beamed, feeling a glow in his chest. It was rare for him to get praise for his artistic abilities.

"Thanks. I, uh, also really like this one. It's from a few summers back at my parents' house." There was a display of the two of them on the docks, both had clearly gotten out of the water, making silly faces to the camera, arms wrapped tightly around each other.

“I like *both* of your abs in this photo,” Svetlana muttered, immediately zooming in as Shane laughed loudly, clutching his stomach, and the heart rate monitor picking up a small peak. Shane and Svetlana looked over, used to the changes, before looking back at the phone.

“What’s the last one you’d pick for your top five?”

Shane hesitated as he clicked on the last one. “It may be too much-”

“It’s perfect,” Svetlana said. “This is now *my* favorite one.”

Shane looked down, it was a selfie he had a hard time deleting. Shane was kissing Ilya on the cheek, eyes slightly closed as Ilya beamed at the camera. His head was tilted towards Shane, and his smile was so wide that his eyes were scrunched up.

“Do you think these are good enough to show Harris?” he asked Svetlana nervously, suddenly self conscious of his choices as Svetlana erupted into giggles.

“You’re scared that *Harris* will judge you for your photos? Have you *met* the man? He’ll probably convince you to quit hockey and go become a professional photographer!”

Shane rolled his eyes, still picking at his thumbnails as Svetlana handed back his phone.

-&-

Shane walked out to the hospital lobby to find the Centaurs lounging. At this point, every player had been discharged. There were still serious injuries, and several players would have extensive rehab and surgeries in their future.

But, for today, they were all patiently waiting for their captain to wake up. There were a few with comic books, while others were ranking the snacks they had gotten from the vending machines. And in the corner was Troy, sitting next to a rugged, bearded man. The bearded man was hunched over a computer and clearly explaining something to Troy.

“Harris?” Shane asked tentatively, waving awkwardly as Harris turned his attention over to Shane.

“Shane! It’s great to see you!” Harris said enthusiastically, putting his computer to the side as he got up to give Shane a hug. Shane smiled; he really had nothing to worry about.

“How are you doing? I heard the doctors cleared you a few days ago,” Shane said, eyeing Harris who rubbed his chest slightly. “Yup! Had to stay a bit longer thanks to pre-existing conditions, but nothing to worry about, so that’s good,” he said brightly.

Shane looked over to Troy who had a *dreamy* look as he stared at Harris.

Jesus, Ilya was right. Troy was *not* subtle.

“Great to see you, Troy. Glad you got discharged,” Shane said awkwardly.

“What? Oh, yeah, all good,” Troy said, giving a curt nod as he clutched the armrests of the chair.

“Mind if I steal Harris? Have to talk to him about-”

“He’s all yours,” Troy said gruffly, vaulting himself out of his seat to join Wyatt’s crew. Shane looked over to Harris who was *also* giving a wistful look at Troy, a small smile on his face.

Shane cleared his throat, clenching his jaw. Unlike Ilya, he felt uncomfortable with the obvious flirting and wasn’t about to call it out as Ilya would.

“Sorry, zoned out there for a bit,” Harris said, chuckling, as Shane took Troy’s spot and Harris grabbed his laptop.

“Alright, now show me the photos!” he said, practically clapping his hands together as Shane turned over his phone, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He relaxed a bit as Harris showered compliment after compliment.

“So the photos are good?” Shane asked, trying not to let his excitement show.

Harris put a hand on his heart as he looked at Shane with a smile. “Shane, these are great! And I know that Ilya will love all of these when he wakes up. It’s a shame you don’t have one with you two and Chiron-”

“The only reason why he ever wanted me to visit the team during the season was to meet the famous Chiron,” Shane said, laughing but still struggling to shake off his nerves.

After eleven years guarding how he spoke and what stories he shared, it was terrifying to freely tell the memories he hid for so long.

“Well, we’ll have to make sure that when we are back in Ottawa that you come and visit,” Harris said happily before turning to his laptop. “What I’ll do is make sure they’re sized right for Instagram. I’ll give you two options - filter or no filter.”

Shane nodded; it seemed easy enough.

“I just have to say, I *love* Ilya. He’s the nicest guy ever, it’s *wild* to me that people perceive him as this awful aggressive guy, you know?”

Shane blushed. “Yeah, I know, uh, exactly what you mean. It’s nice that Ilya is on a team where everyone can see that in him, you know?” Shane rambled, waving his hands.

“And your dad is absolutely adorable-”

“Wait, you met my dad?”

“Yeah. He needed help setting up an Instagram account. I helped him out.” Harris said, typing quickly on his computer, as Shane rushed out of his chair to find his parents.

-&-

Shane found his parents in Ilya’s room, where his dad had his glasses on and was staring down at his phone. He had his tongue out as he was focused intently on his phone.

“Dad, what are you doing?” Shane asked cautiously as he grabbed the chair next to him and peered over.

“I made an Instagram account, but I’m trying to figure out how to navigate the app. Harris has been super helpful, but I don’t want to take up all of his time.”

Shane shook his head, as if clearing the fog, “Dad, *why* did you make an Instagram account?”

His dad took off his glasses, and folded them into the front of his shirt. “Well, Farah said it would be good if we had a united front. And she said she would post something in support. And your mom already has an account, and she was going through her photos to choose a few photos. It was so *nice* to go down memory lane and choose our favorite photos, I guess I wanted to join in on the fun.”

Shane felt his jaw slightly drop and even looked over at Ilya, as if to communicate, *can you believe this?*

Ilya’s face twitched slightly. Shane interpreted that as a *yes*.

“Is that okay? I don’t need to post-”

“No, dad, that’s great. I was just surprised. You’re just not usually a phone person-”

“But this is important.”

Shane nodded, “You’re right, it is. Want to show me your photos?”

Shane howled with delight at all five photos his dad picked. They were all delightfully terrible parent photos, where Ilya wasn’t always the most stunning, but it was clear that someone who loved him took the photos. A parent who liked it best when Ilya’s hair was pulled back even if he was grinning awkwardly. Or the parent who liked the horrid candids compared to the posed smiles.

Ilya was going to hate but secretly love all the photos David had picked.

-&-

Shane: *I’m posting tonight at 6 PM.*

J.J.: *We’re right behind ya, already got my statement approved by management.*

Hayden: *FUCK! We were supposed to get it approved by management?!*

J.J.: *Cassie is in the office, she was pretty chill about mine.*

J.J.: *She just told me to turn off comments.*

Shane: *Oh, my management told me that too.*

Hayden: *Alright, emailed Cassie, should be cleared soon.*

Shane: *Thanks again. It means a lot that you two are willing to post. I'll invite you two over for dinner once I'm back in town.*

Hayden: *Are you still on your weird diet?*

Shane: *I can relax for a celebration. Ilya and I can cook up some non-weird diet food.*

J.J.: *Hayden, have you tried their food? Is it good?*

Hayden: *One of the perks of Shane dating Ilya, the meals are fireeee*

Hayden: *Ilya is also on team 'Shane's diet fucking sucks'*

J.J.: *LFG!!*

-&-

Shane: *I'm posting tonight at 6 PM.*

Rose: *Got my statement and photos ready to go! Both your team and mine cleared it!*

Rose: *Proud of you!!!*

-&-

At 6 PM, Shane gathered with his parents, Farah, and Svetlana. Somehow, Farah had sweet-talked the nurses to turn the other way for a few minutes as they all gathered around their phones.

Shane took a look around, his heart swelling with gratitude. It was hard to imagine that a few years ago he was terrified of letting *anyone* know what was going on with him and Ilya. To now see how his life was filled with love, joy, and support.

While holding Ilya's hand, Shane took a deep breath as his thumb hovered over the button. He looked over at Ilya, squeezing his hand, before *finally* pressing "Post" on his Instagram.

He wished Ilya was awake for this particular moment. They had talked about coming out a hundred and one different ways. Ilya was in favor of a big public moment and Shane was always looking towards the smaller, quieter moment.

Never once did they muse they'd have to do this alone, without the other.

His parents, Farah, and Svetlana posted shortly afterward. There were a few moments of silence as everyone looked at Shane. Shane made it a point to put his phone face down on the table, and everyone else followed suit.

They all giggled nervously. Svetlana surprised them all when she pulled out her flask and poured a bit of Ilya's favorite vodka into small Dixie cups. They clinked their cups together and whispered, "*Za zdorovye*."

Shane glanced down to Ilya, still soundly sleeping. The machines beeped steadily, but it felt like the tones were faster, as if Ilya knew he was part of the festivities.

Shane squeezed Ilya's hand once. He could only hope that he was having sweet dreams.

-&-

-&- **TRANSLATIONS** -&-

Za zdorovye (RU): Cheers/Good Health

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you all so much for your comments after the last chapter. Every comment & bookmark means the world to me and I do not take it lightly, so thank you from the bottom of my heart. I know the uncertainty has been heavy, and I want you to know that I've been very intentional with the pacing. Hopefully this chapter gives a bit of release. Until then, I'll see you on Sunday 

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Scott Hunter: *Congrats on coming out!! Call me anytime if you want to talk!*

Scott Hunter: *And holy fucking shit. I would have never believed you were dating Ilya in a million years!!*

Scott Hunter: *Can see it though, kinda obvious looking back now.*

Shane: *Right?*

-&-

In the hotel room, the next morning, Shane's parents sat with him on his bed. Sandwiched between the two, they passed Yuna's phone, which held all of the supportive posts.

"I love Hayden's post. And Jackie's was also very sweet," Yuna said, pausing on Hayden's post and scrolling through the photos. Shots of Hayden and Shane on the ice fist bumping, a photo of them with the cup, and the last one included Shane and Ilya dressed up in costumes clearly picked by Hayden's kids. Shane smirked, knowing that Hayden had *easily* picked the one Ilya would hate the most.

Hayden Pike: So proud to call you a friend and teammate after all these years @shaneHollanderHockeyPlayer!! Incredibly brave and my kids are lucky to have such a strong role model in their life!! Love ya. And @ilyaRozanov81 ... wake up soon so I can properly check you on the ice for giving us the biggest scare!

Shane scrolled down to see J.J.'s post. His photos were similar to Hayden's, and he even found one of Shane, Ilya, and himself from the summer camp.

JJBoiziau: @shaneHollanderHockeyPlayer you're the best captain and friend that anyone can ask for! Proud of you for living your truth and I can't wait to see you on the ice soon. @ilyaRozanov81 wake up soon so I can make sure you have the right intentions with my boy!!!

A few more scrolls later, and he stumbled upon Rose's. The photos she picked were of her and Shane in LA at Griffith Observatory, another one where Rose was proudly wearing Shane's jersey, and the last one was of Shane, Rose, and Ilya dressed to the nines at an Irina Foundation Gala event.

RoseLandryOfficial: @shaneHollanderHockeyPlayer I am so proud of you! I am beyond

lucky to call you my best friend! @IlyaRozanov81, hurry up and wake up so I can treat you boys out to a night in WeHo!!

Shane grinned as he continued to see post after post in support of himself and Ilya. He certainly felt lighter than he had in days after it had all been revealed, and especially with photos and texts that *Shane* had consented to share with the world.

He just hoped that Ilya would feel the same when he woke up.

-&-

“Shane! Wait, before you go see Ilya, I want to show you something.” Harris flagged Shane over from the waiting room. Shane nodded at his parents to go ahead of him, and walked over to Harris, who had his phone out.

“How are you feeling?” Harris asked kindly as Shane approached him.

“Alright. I’m pleasantly surprised at the support in the media. It’s a nice break from everything else,” Shane said truthfully.

Harris grinned. “Well, hopefully this makes your day just that much better. I saved some supportive tweets about you and Ilya, and thought I would screenshot a few of the more notable posts for Ilya. I know we aren’t sharing or talking about it right now in the room, but for later when he wakes up. I’m going to put them in a binder or something for him to read. What do you think?” Harris asked, as Shane scrolled through the phone.

Countless rainbow flags, hearts, and smiling emojis. He paused especially on the supportive tweets from former Russian hockey players, and even some active players. A small reassurance that maybe, just maybe, this had been the right decision.

“I think that’s a great idea, Harris. And the Centaurs post for Ilya and me... it was very sweet. Thank you for that,” Shane said, a lump forming in his throat as he quickly coughed.

Harris bit his lip. “I saw the Voyageurs post.”

Shane blew out an exasperated breath. “It’s support, I guess. It’s a team photo and one with me and the Cup. It’s something,” Shane said, scratching the back of his neck and looking down at the ground.

Harris gave Shane a hug, and it took Shane a few seconds before he returned it. The overwhelming love from the community came close to drowning out the silence from the Voyageurs team. Close, but not quite there.

“Give it time, they may surprise you. And if they don’t... you’re a free agent soon, right? I think I know a team that would love to have you...” Harris trailed, pulling back.

Shane nodded. “Right, I am. But I need to get through this first before I can think about the game again.”

“Of course.”

-&-

Shane entered Ilya's room just as his parents were stepping out, and in a rare moment, Shane had Ilya to himself that morning.

"*Dobroye utro, moy utyonok,*" he said, kissing Ilya on the forehead and taking in just how much he had physically healed over the past two weeks.

The bruises were still fading, the facial swelling had gone down, and he was starting to see hair growth around the staples. Shane winced at them, knowing they were doing necessary work but still counting down the days until they could be removed.

Hopefully in the next two days, according to the last doctor's notes.

Shane's eyes traveled down to the necklace that lay in the center of Ilya's chest, then to his fingers. He glanced quickly over his shoulder, gauging how much time he had, before moving to Ilya's left side of the bed.

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a soft tape measure. He took another look behind him before carefully unraveling it. His hands shook slightly as he took Ilya's ring finger measurement, squinting down to read the number. His heart was pounding so loudly that he was surprised Ilya hadn't woken up.

"What are you doing on my side of the bed—" Shane straightened up, immediately pulling the ruler, only causing it to completely unravel to the floor as Svetlana gasped. Shane's face flushed with embarrassment as Svetlana looked between Shane and Ilya.

"I thought, well, Hayden said this could be a good time to measure. And we were alone. I know, we are still waiting for him to wake up but just in case." Shane rambled, the words tripping over each other in his mouth.

This was stupid. Svetlana was going to think this was idiotic. What was he *thinking about taking* a ring measurement? Oh, she was going to pity him and tell him...

"What was the number you got?" Svetlana asked gently, bending down to pick up one end of the tape.

Shane looked down to Ilya's hands, "I don't know, I got startled when you came in."

"Okay, take it, and I'll write it down in a text for you." Svetlana said, rolling her end of the tape as Shane went to work with measuring Ilya's ring finger. Shane leaned further down to see the numbers clearly, "I'm getting 6.5 centimeters," he said loudly, quickly looking up to see if Ilya was stirring.

"You sure?" Svetlana asked, typing in her phone.

"Can you actually do the second measurement?" Shane asked, undoing the tape measurement and looking over at her. She nodded, they swapped tools and placement as Svetlana measured the finger.

“I’m also getting 6.5 centimeters.” Svetlana answered. “But his hands are still a bit swollen.”

“I can always resize later,” Shane muttered as he sent the text to himself. He looked up with Svetlana still holding the ruler, an expectant look in her eyes.

“Come on, Hollander, if we are measuring him, I have to measure you,” she said, beckoning him over with her hands, her eyes shining a little bright under the lights.

Shane sheepishly held out his left hand, still nervously checking down on Ilya.

This *would* be the time Ilya would wake up.

His hands shook as he held it out and Svetlana steadied them with one hand, while measuring with the other. Readjusting the ruler, she whispered out, “*U nego shest’ tselykh chetyre santimetra. Men’she, chem u tebya. Tol’ko bez shutok, Ilya.*”

Shane looked up at the ceiling, muttering his numbers in Russian. “Was that... 6.4?”

Svetlana beamed at him, rolling up the tape measurer and handing it back to Shane as he gave the phone back. “Look at my favorite student.” She said, sniffing slightly as she turned to her phone, repeating the number under her breath as she typed the numbers.

“Do you think it’s silly for me to think he’ll wake up soon?” Shane asked, sitting down and looking up at Svetlana. She gave him a quizzical look.

“Why are you asking *me* this?”

“Because, you’ve been here just as much as I have. And you’re not the type of person to tell me what I *want* to hear.”

Svetlana sighed as she took her own seat, staring at Ilya. “There are days where I sit and stare and think, ‘This is *our* life, we are doomed to be by his bedside.’” She leaned forward so she was resting on the guardrails. “And then there are days when I sit here, and I can *see* so much movement. And I can hear him, and I think, if I just stare long enough, if I focus on every curl, and count every eyelash... he’ll open his eyes. His chart keeps improving and so, I have hope. A lot of it.” Svetlana said, tilting her head slightly.

Shane’s vision blurred as he sniffed, “I feel the same. I’m glad I’m not alone. And thank you for spending so much time here, I know you have your job-”

“Psh, I have enough time off and Farah got me a note saying I was taking care of family. I can be here much longer before I need to worry.”

“I really appreciate that. And I know it’s not ideal... but it’s been nice to get to know you more. I can’t wait to hang out with you outside this hospital though.”

Svetlana laughed, grabbing Ilya’s hand and taking Shane’s hand. “Same. And I love you too.

Now, show me some photos of the rings you're thinking of buying. I want to judge and criticize-"

"Judge and criticize?"

Svetlana rolled her eyes, "Yes, I'm a woman. We all judge the rings. Now show me the photos!" She said, and Shane knew it would be silly to pretend he *didn't* have a short list of rings.

Of course, he was *always* going to ask for Svetlana's approval before he purchased it.

-&-

The next day, Shane walked into Ilya's room to find Farah, his parents, and Svetlana sitting around the doctor, Ilya's chart in the doctor's lap. Svetlana was twirling a curl while Shane's mom kept crossing her legs. Shane's dad had his hands folded on his lap, while Farah had pulled her hair back into a ponytail, her phone out and ready to take notes.

"We were just waiting for you," Farah said, patting the chair next to her as Shane walked over.

"Didn't realize we had a meeting," Shane mumbled, and the doctor gave him a sympathetic glance over his glasses.

"I came by unannounced. I do want to talk to you all about where Ilya is at with his recovery right now." The doctor paused as he lifted the chart, Shane picked at the cup sleeve of his coffee. "We *are* seeing an increase in movements and vocalizations. That is a positive sign as it tells us the brain is becoming more active." The doctor paused, placing the chart down. "I want to be clear, this doesn't tell us when or if he'll wake up. We are also seeing that he is needing less sedation, which is encouraging because it tells us that he can tolerate stimulation better."

Shane looked back to Ilya, letting Svetlana's Russian translation soothe him. He felt a fragile sense of hope, that if he thought too logically or even emotionally, he was going to lose it.

He focused on his coffee cup.

"I know that earlier this week we had a partial wakefulness and it was intense." Shane had to pull out his phone and look at his calendar. It had felt like it was *weeks* ago when Ilya had called out for help.

"As the brain recovers, there may be more episodes like that—" Shane felt sick, his stomach churning. "—and there may be calmer episodes of him partially waking up. Recovery like this is a non-linear process and it can be extremely confusing for friends and family members."

The doctor leaned back looking at the group, "It is clear that Ilya has an *exceptional* support system. I want to warn you, that this type of injury, the recovery process is a long one. There will likely be many ups and downs throughout Ilya's journey. And we strongly encourage family and friends to start seeking support at this time. This can look like counseling, talking

to our social workers, and even taking breaks for yourselves. A day away from the hospital even. This isn't something you're meant to do on your own." Everyone shifted in their chair uneasily. All were guilty of logging several hours.

"Right now, Ilya is moving in the right direction. We just need to follow his lead." The doctor finished. Shane nodded numbly as he leaned back to look at the ceiling.

Oddly, he still had hope. And for once, he didn't feel *shame* about it.

-&-

Farah: *Both Shane's and Ilya's jerseys have completely sold out. The backorder numbers are insane.*

Yuna: *!!!!*

-&-

"Hey, sorry, I've been in Ilya's room all day, just wrapping up before we head home and thought I'd call," Shane said breathlessly into the phone, walking through the hospital hallways.

"No worries! I wanted to check in and see how you were feeling after posting." Hayden said brightly.

"Honestly? Overwhelmed. In a good way. A lot of people are reacting positively, more than what I was expecting. I got some really nice texts from various players so... it's good."

"Any from-"

"Not other than you and J.J." Shane replied quickly, not *really* wanting to dwell on the lack of enthusiastic support from his own team.

God, he wished Ilya was here to throw in his own comments. The silence was louder without Ilya's constant chirping.

Hayden exhaled loudly, "I'm sorry man, that really sucks. And I'm disappointed."

"Same," Shane said, kicking slightly at the tiles. "But the doctors gave us some good news, Ilya is trending in the right direction. So, I feel like I have things to be happy for. Sorry, is that fucked up to say?"

"No. You've had *possibly* the shittiest weeks that anyone can go through. You're allowed to have conflicting feelings, it's called being a human." Shane rolled his eyes as he laughed.

"You're right. It's just, hard sometimes, you know-"

There were muffled sounds from Shane's phone and Shane paused. "Arthur, daddy is talking

to Uncle Shane. Hold on. Hey, Shane?” Hayden practically shouted the last part. Shane winced and held the phone away from his ear.

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay if we Facetime? Arthur wants to see you.”

“Oh, of course.” Shane said, quickly pushing his phone out and adjusting the headphones he was taking the call from. Hayden filled the screen, holding Arthur who had his head against Hayden’s chest.

“Hi Uncle Shane,” Arthur said shyly, burrowing his head into his dad’s shirt before facing Shane again.

“Hey Arthur, it’s great to see you buddy.”

“How’s Chompy? Is he being nice to Ilya? Or is he stealing all of his cookies?”

Shane bit back a smile. “Chompy is great. He’s keeping Ilya company, and he’s helped my dad do *a lot* of puzzles. And no stealing of cookies, should we watch out for that?” Shane asked, and Arthur nodded his head seriously. “Chompy *always* steals from the Oreo box.”

“Funny... because Chompy isn’t here and we are missing a *lot* of cookies.” Hayden said, eyeing his son as Arthur shrugged his shoulders.

“Is Uncle Ilya awake yet?” Arthur asked suddenly. Shane leaned against the wall as he paused to think about how to answer. It was a beat too long. “Oh, not awake. Not yet. Soon though,” Arthur said quietly to himself.

“Soon?” Hayden asked and Arthur nodded. “Soon. I can tell,” Shane hitched a breath before tightening his grip on the phone. Arthur, unaware, prattled on, “I know things. Okay, I want to go find Jade now.” Arthur said, wiggling out of his dad’s arms. Hayden placed the phone down, giving Shane a clear view of the ceiling before picking it up again.

“Sorry about that, he’s been asking a *lot* about Ilya. We told him it could be a while, so I’m not sure where he’s getting the ‘soon’ part. Not that we *don’t* think Ilya is going to be awake-”

“No, I totally get it. It’s all about expectation management, right?”

“Right.” There was an awkward beat of silence before Shane blurted out. “I measured his ring finger. I used a tape measure. It went well.”

“Oh yeah? Tell me, how did it go?”

Shane smiled, blushing, as he told Hayden his own measurement story.

-&-

Shane walked back into Ilya's room, his parents packing up their belongings for the day.

"We'll see you outside, okay?" His parents said, as Shane nodded.

Shane looked around the room, trying to see if he left any coffee cups or sweaters or anything out that he needed for the hotel. He padded his pockets to feel for his wallet and keys before walking over to Ilya's bedside.

"Hey you," he said, sitting down and taking Ilya's hand softly on his own. Shane glanced up at the necklace and then to Ilya's face. He took comfort in seeing Ilya's chest rise and fall, the steady beat of the heart rate monitor, and even the small movements he could see beneath his eyes.

It was easy to look at Ilya and have *hope*.

"Weird day, but mostly because it was a good day. Doctors seem more positive. Which makes *me* more positive. And I know I shouldn't get too excited, but it's hard whenever I look at you and see how much you've healed. It's incredible," Shane said, squeezing Ilya's hand, and he felt Ilya's fingers curl *slightly*. But it wasn't the first time, so Shane brushed it to the side.

"I just love you so much. I know if you were awake, you'd say I'm all mushy. But I guess you know my biggest secret, that I'm a big mush ball when it comes to you." Shane said, hearing a slightly faster rhythm of the heart rate monitor, and he turned his head to the machine. The heart rate was within the typical range, so he continued on.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say *spokoynoy nochi i sladkikh snov, moya lyubov*," Shane said, smiling to himself.

There was a raspy, nearly rattling intake of breath that did *not* come from Shane. He immediately looked to Ilya's face where Ilya's eyes were slightly open though unfocused.

Fear shot through Shane—if he moved, blinked, or even *breathed*, Ilya would disappear back to sleep as if this *wasn't* happening.

Shane's heart pounded as his vision tunneled, Ilya's name trapped in his throat. He needed to get a doctor, get a nurse, *someone*. But he was anchored to the chair, and he leaned forward just in time to hear the raspiest of the whispers:

"Shane?"

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Dobroye utro, moy utyonok (RU): Hello my duckling (term of endearment)

U nego shest' tselykh chetyre santimetra. Men'she, chem u tebya. Tol'ko bez shutok, Il'ya (RU): He's at six point four centimeters. Smaller than you. Please, no jokes, Ilya.

Spokoynoy nochi i sladkikh snov, moya lyubov (RU): Good night and sweet dreams my love.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aren't you glad that you only need to wait till Tuesday for the next chapter?
Looking forward to reading what your thoughts are in the comments and I'll see you all
on Tuesday 

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

“Shane?”

The nurses came in as Ilya’s eyes fluttered shut, but his monitors were still irregular; the tones and beeps Shane had grown accustomed to were uneven.

Shane hadn’t realized he was standing until he was gripping the bedrails, his knuckles white as he tried to figure out how to get words out of his mouth. He was suddenly parched and unable to say a single word.

“Shane, we are going to need you to step back for us, okay?” a nurse said, placing a soft hand on his shoulder, as he got out of the way and moved to the side of the room. His eyes never left Ilya’s face.

Ilya’s face was twitching and moving more than it had on *any* of the other days. Shane could see the sweat glisten on his forehead, as if saying Shane’s name took all the effort in the world.

“Ilya, you’re in the hospital. You’re safe,” the nurse said calmly, taking down some notes on the chart. She looked up at Shane, her head tilted to the side, as she shifted her gaze between Shane and Ilya.

Oh.

Shane’s heart pounding, he shook his head as if to find the words and sounds, until, “*Ilya, ty v bol’nitse. Ty v bezopasnosti.*”

“Ilya, can you squeeze my hand?” the other nurse asked, and Shane counted a second, another, and then he saw the smallest of curls of Ilya’s fingers. It wasn’t a grip, it wasn’t a hold, but it was *something*.

“Follows simple commands intermittently,” the nurse commented, staring down at the finger, giving Ilya time to do more.

His hand rested.

“Ilya, can you hear us?” the nurse asked. The question hung in the air. She turned to look at Shane, who stepped forward. “*Ilya, ty menya slyshish’?*” he said, biting his tongue hard as he waited...

“Mhmm,” Ilya groaned, eyes still shut as the nurses made eye contact. “That counts, put it in

the chart.”

“Ilya, can you open your eyes?”

Before Shane could figure out the translation, Ilya slowly opened his eyes. Shane could practically *see* the sweat and effort it took for Ilya to open his eyes, unfocused, but *open*. Shane saw a glint of the hazel eyes before they shuttered closed again. Ilya’s breathing slowed down and his heart rate evened out; the tones returned to normal cadence.

“Okay, good. He’s following and understanding commands. That’s enough for now, let’s lower the lights.” The nurses moved in synchronized steps as Shane stood frozen on the spot.

“Shane, let’s step outside. We can discuss what happened out there.”

Shane was rooted to the spot, his eyes glued on Ilya. He stared at the nurse and shook his head. There was *no way* he was moving.

“We can’t *leave* him—” Shane turned to Ilya, taking a step forward, but being stopped by the nurse’s grip.

Shane *swore* he saw Ilya’s hands twitch.

“Shane, listen to me,” the nurse said sternly, gripping his arm slightly to get his attention on her face. “He is being monitored right now, and I can clearly explain to you what happened outside the room. We don’t want to disrupt him with your questions, right?”

“Right,” Shane said hoarsely, still having to be pushed out the door, twisting his head slightly to catch as much of Ilya before the door shut on him.

-&-

Shane stepped out into the harsh lighting of the hallway, blinking as if it hurt his eyes, trembling as he followed the nurses. He was dimly aware that his parents, Farah, and Svetlana crowded around them as they walked into a room.

“Shane? Are you alright? What’s going on?” Shane’s mom asked rapidly. “Is Ilya okay?” Her voice pitched higher as Shane had to lean against the nearest counter, feeling winded as the questions came fast.

What if it was another partial wake-up?

What if this was another nightmare?

“Shane, let’s get you seated. And Melissa, can we get some water for him?” the nurse said gently, and she guided him to a chair, a bottle was handed to him as he took small sips.

The nurse took a deep breath. “Ilya woke up briefly, less than a minute.” Shane nearly crushed the water bottle in his hand as he sat up straighter. “He was able to follow commands

and open his eyes,” the nurse said calmly as gasps were heard around the room. Svetlana grabbed Shane’s hand, her eyes shining with tears as she squeezed his hand tightly. Shane squeezed back harder.

If he could feel her hand, this was real.

“Over the next few days, he will wake up intermittently. He will tire extremely easily from conversations. And to start, he’ll only be able to do a few words at a time. It is normal for patients with his memory to not retain any information at this time, so do not be alarmed if he repeats the same questions multiple times.”

“Can we stay here tonight? Can we sleep in his room?” Shane’s dad asked, his voice wavering.

The nurse nodded. “Yes. We recommend shifts at this time of one person in the room at a time. If he wakes up, stay calm, keep your voice low, and do whatever the nurse or doctor in the room tells you to do. We’ll work with you as we chart out what information to share with him at what time.”

The nurse turned to Farah. “At this time, we *will* limit the number of visitors in his room. One person at first, before we increase the size. I recommend we keep it to the core group this week. And we can allow for team visits as his condition improves,” Farah nodded her head solemnly, as she took the notes in her phone.

The nurse turned to the group, “Are there any questions?”

“He’s really awake?” Shane asked, barely above a whisper.

The nurse gave him a sad smile, “This is just the beginning.”

-&-

The morning after, Shane was resting his forehead on the bed rail, holding Ilya’s hand. He had barely slept the night before, but the mixture of caffeine and adrenaline was keeping him awake.

He had already been reminded by the nurses to stay calm, keep his voice low, and give short answers. They warned him that Ilya would ask the same questions multiple times, that his memory wouldn’t retain the answers. That it was normal.

Stay calm, voice low, short answers.

Shane felt Ilya’s hand twitch and he snapped his head up. His breath caught in his throat as he stared at Ilya’s shifting face.

“Gdye ya?” Ilya rasped, one eye struggling to open while the other remained shut.

“*Bol’nitsa*” Shane whispered, hoping he was quiet enough.

“*Shane?*” Ilya asked as the other eye also opened. Ilya blinked rapidly, as if fighting against the dim lights. Ilya shifted his head, as if trying to line up his vision with Shane. Once Ilya’s eyes found Shane’s, he kept it there, brows furrowed.

“*Da,*” Shane said, his heart fluttering. Wanting to cry out in relief that at least Ilya remembered him.

“*Ostan’sya?*”

Shane panicked, and pulled out his phone with his spare hand, resisting the urge to pull his other hand out of Ilya’s weak grip. He had to stay *calm*.

His hands trembled, as he typed in the word to his translator app, nearly dropping the phone and biting his tongue not to swear. The nurse gave him a reproachful look at his scuffle.

“*Ostan’sya?*” Ilya repeated, the strain in his voice was unmistakable.

Shane stared down at his screen, jaw clenched as he felt the pressure build around his eyes, trying hard not to break into a sob.

Ostan’sya = Stay.

“*Da,*” Shane whispered. “*Da,*” Shane repeated, turning his gaze back to Ilya. He hoped that the tremble in his hand wasn’t too overwhelming for Ilya. Hating that Ilya had to wait one second to hear Shane say ‘yes’.

Shane was selfishly grateful that Ilya would soon forget this moment. He never wanted Ilya to think that he wouldn’t stay by his side.

Ilya’s eyes stayed on Shane a second longer, a small nod, before he closed his eyes, exhausted by the lengthy conversation.

Shane leaned back on the chair, breathing deeply.

Stay calm, voice low, short answers.

-&-

Later in the day, after Svetlana’s shift, Shane was back in the room, sitting next to Ilya as he watched him sleep. A nurse was nearby as Ilya started to open his eyes.

Shane felt a sense of pride. Svetlana said Ilya slept through her shift.

“*Gdye ya?*”

“*Bol’nitsa*” Shane replied, his voice steady as Ilya fixed his gaze on him.

“*Voda?*” Ilya’s eyes were on Shane. Shane had to look at the nurse.

“Water?” Shane translated for the nurse. She nodded as she leaned forward.

“Ilya, I can wet your lips with a sponge but you can’t suck on it, okay?” she said, taking a mouth swab and gently placing it against Ilya’s lips. Ilya tried to wrap his lips around the swab and the nurse had to pull it back. Ilya’s face contorted in pain as he looked over to Shane.

“*Proshu.*” Ilya begged, breaking Shane’s heart.

“Can’t he-” Shane started to ask but the nurse shook her head.

“He hasn’t passed his swallow examination. Until he does, we can only give him the sponge,” she replied.

Shane had already typed in the words in the translation app as he read out slowly, “*Ya mogu smochit’ tebe guby gubkoy, no pit’ nel’zya.*”

“*Voda. Proshu.*” Ilya pleaded again, louder this time, as if choosing to ignore Shane. Shane sighed as he looked down at Ilya before looking over to the nurse.

“It’s *water*,” Shane said sharply.

“Shane,” the nurse said quietly, “I need you to step outside for a moment.”

Shane had no interest in leaving the room. He couldn’t leave Ilya, begging for water, only awake when Shane was there.

And yet, Shane knew that if he stayed in the room, there was a chance of another outburst. Another media storm.

Shane pushed back on the chair; Ilya grimaced at the loud sound.

Fuck.

Shane forced himself to look down on the ground, watching the tiles seeming to shift underneath him as he walked towards the door.

“*Proshu.*” Ilya said, his voice catching as Shane left the room.

As soon as he was outside, he leaned against the door and slid down to the floor. He was clenching his jaw tightly as he drew his knees up and hugged them. He put his face down as he started to shake, trying to shake Ilya’s pleas out of his head.

Proshu. Proshu. Proshu.

He heard a set of footsteps approach him as he looked up to see one of the nurses crouch down with a box of tissues and a water bottle.

Shane wordlessly took the tissues but shook his head at the water bottle.

He didn’t think he deserved any at the moment.

-&-

It took a few days, but Ilya started switching to English when Shane was in the room.

“Where am I?” Ilya asked, his face pulled tight in pain, his eyes barely open. Despite the lights being dimmed, he was struggling with the light sensitivity.

“Hospital.” Shane answered calmly, watching Ilya as he started to move in his bed. Hoping he wasn’t going to have to stop him from sitting up *again*.

Ilya always teased him that Shane would be the enforcer of the two when they had kids.

He fucking hated that they were testing that theory out and proving it right with this hospital stay.

“Why pain?” Ilya asked clumsily, his nostrils flared as Shane could see his jaw clenched.

“You were in an accident. You are safe now.” Shane said slowly, watching as Ilya tried to retain the information.

“*Voda?*” Ilya pleaded and Shane shook his head, digging his nails into his palm.

“I am so sorry. I can wet your lips with a sponge. But you can’t suck on it.” Shane said in a measured tone, as he turned around to get a mouth swab, trying hard not to scream into the room.

Shane turned back around with the mouth swab and placed it on Ilya’s lips, gently dabbing. Ilya opened his mouth, and Shane saw the pink of a tongue trying to dart out. Shane pulled the swab away.

Shane didn’t hesitate this time, and that realization terrified him. Ilya looked at him in pain.

“Water. *Please*.” Ilya asked, and Shane had to bite his tongue and control the shaking of his hand. The nurse gave him a warning glance.

“I am sorry. I know. Soon.” Shane whispered hoarsely, swallowing down the lump in his throat.

“You stay?” Ilya asked, his eyelids fluttering and Shane knew he only had a few seconds.

“I stay. I’m here,” he said, biting his lip as Ilya drifted back to sleep.

Knowing that in a few minutes, Shane would answer the same set of questions. That Ilya would ask for something that would break Shane’s heart. And Shane would sit through this all for the promise of tomorrow.

Stay calm, voice low, short answers.

He could do that for Ilya.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Gdye ya (RU): Where am I?

Bol'nitsa (RU): Hospital

Ostan'sya (RU): Stay

Voda (RU): Water

Proshu (RU): Please

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

Can finally say... Ilya is awake 

Thank you so much for sticking with this story and with this chapter. It's a heavy one, but an important turning point. I wanted the story as a whole to feel as true to a hospital setting as possible. Which means including some of the painful and chaotic moments along the way.

As always, thank you for reading and for leaving such thoughtful comments. I'll see you all on Sunday.

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Shane, his parents, and Farah were squeezed into a small consulting room just off Ilya's room. All of them were nervously clutching their coffee cups as the doctor, nurses, and a few security guards walked into the room.

It was bizarre to see all the faces that Shane had gotten to know over the last two weeks squeezed into one room at the same time. While he could barely recall their names, he knew who would grant him an extra five minutes and who was stricter with the rules.

Shane fidgeted with the coffee sleeve holder as the doctor cleared his throat.

"Now that we have everyone here, I wanted to make sure that we are all on the same page. We *typically* don't hold such meetings but given that Ilya is a high profile patient, the hospital wants to ensure that we are all aligned," the doctor started grimly, pushing the glasses up on the bridge of his nose.

Shane glanced over at the security guards who widened their stance before returning his gaze to the doctor.

"At this point, Ilya's condition has stabilized enough that he no longer needs the constant supervision the ICU offers. We are working on transferring him over to the neuro floor," the doctor said neutrally, his eyes glancing down at the chart on his lap.

Shane furrowed his brow as he stared down at his coffee cup. Logically, it *felt* like he should be excited. Instead, there was a wave of anxiety and his heart started beating faster in response.

The change itself was terrifying.

"What will happen when he is moved to the neuro floor?" his mom asked, her phone out as she typed in her notes, glancing intermittently between the doctor and her phone.

"He will still be monitored, though it will feel less intense than in the ICU. We will rely more on family and friends to flag changes in Ilya's abilities."

"What does that mean exactly?" his dad asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"Since we will not be monitoring him as closely, we will rely on you to alert staff if he regresses."

Shane's dad nodded, as if this was completely normal.

Shane wasn't sure he would notice quickly enough. The fears came fast: what if he missed a slurred word? What if he missed a critical sign? What if—

“When will we be doing the transfer?” Shane asked, trying to fight the fear that was threatening to drown him.

“We are coordinating with the neuro floor now to see if there is an available bed. Once we receive that confirmation, we can start the process of moving him over,” the nurse said evenly.

Shane hesitated, picking at the sleeve a little faster as the next question tumbled out. “Are any of the nurses here going to follow Ilya?” His cheeks reddened and he stared at the cup.

“No, he will have a new set of nurses on the floor,” the nurse replied evenly and slowly.

“Is there a reason why you're asking?” the doctor asked, his head tilted to the side.

Shane scratched the back of his neck, regretting opening his mouth. “I just... I feel comfortable with his team here. They know Ilya well, and maybe it's dumb but I worry about the changing of hands. Especially since everyone here has been so hands-on with him and know what he's like,” Shane lowered his voice for the next thought. “And they know what I'm like.” Shane said, staring at the nurse who gave him a sympathetic smile.

“I promise you, the nurses and the team on neuro are more equipped to handle Ilya at this stage of his recovery. We're transferring all the notes we've taken during his time here to them, so they'll know everything that we know,” she said kindly.

Shane nodded and adjusted the grip on his cup. He barely listened as the conversation shifted to the security aspect. He was trying hard to focus on the idea that less monitoring and leaving the ICU was a *good* thing.

Why was he terrified of what was going to come next?

-&-

Ilya's transfer process began when he was wheeled to other parts of the hospital for exams and imaging. Shane's parents had already collected the belongings from the room and were moving things to the new floor.

Shane felt rooted to the room. The stack of cards and puzzles was tucked neatly into a tote bag slung over Shane's shoulder. He knew he should leave, he knew he should let the nurses do what they'd done a million times over.

And yet, Shane watched in a daze as the nurses slowly started to disconnect the machines in Ilya's room. They were talking freely in ways that they hadn't when Ilya was in the room. Someone made a joke. The other nurse laughed.

But Shane had to shut his eyes a few times as the machines powered off, their tones shifting before going silent. Shane felt his breath quicken with every power down, forcing himself to unclench his jaw with every change.

He had one too many nightmares of nurses turning off the machines for different reasons.

-&-

Shane stepped out of the room to see that Ilya was sleeping in his bed after imaging. His IV pole and portable monitor were still attached to him and the bedframe. Shane flicked his gaze to the nurse, who smiled in response.

“You ready?” she asked kindly, as Shane nodded, readjusting the bag on his shoulder, only sparing one look back at the room he just left. Shane would have happily burned that room to the ground and all the memories that would haunt him with it.

“You can walk beside him, put a hand on the rail if you’d like,” she explained, gesturing to the side of the bed. Shane quietly walked alongside him, putting his hand on the rail, letting the cold metal shock his system.

“Hey, Ilya,” Shane whispered, and Ilya, still eyes closed, lifted his hand to the rail, awkwardly overlapping his fingers with Shane before shifting them so he could grip properly. Shane ducked his head low, grinning to himself.

“Alright, let’s get moving,” the second nurse called out at the head, pushing on the bed to move through the hallway. The wheels creaked, and the fluorescent lights blinked harshly overhead as they moved closer to the elevator.

“Watch the corner—”

“Melissa, I see it,” grumbled the first nurse, though the bed nearly clipped the corner.

Once they reached the elevator, Melissa pressed the buttons and the doors opened with a loud chiming sound. Ilya’s face scrunched in discomfort at the noise, only for his frown to become more pronounced as his bed was shoved into the elevator, the wheels catching on the lip.

“Shane?” Ilya whispered, his hand slid down the rail opposite of Shane’s, searching. His fingers twitched and lifted, as if trying to find Shane.

Shane quickly shifted and placed his hand over Ilya’s. “Right here,” Shane whispered back, seeing how Ilya’s face relaxed at the words, his hand going still as the elevator shifted.

-&-

Shane walked with his parents to Ilya’s new room later that day. It had been nearly a full week since Ilya’s initial awakening.

The room on the neuro floor meant that Ilya could have more visitors at once (though, they still had to limit the stimulation for now) and plants. It was the small signs of changes and

growth that gave Shane some form of relief.

They knocked on the door quietly, and Svetlana cracked the door open to beckon the Hollander family into the room. She had pronounced bags under her eyes and strands of hair falling out of her braided pigtails.

“Hey,” Shane whispered, giving her a hug, rubbing her back as his parents walked into the room. “How are you doing?”

Svetlana sighed against Shane. “I’m okay. Just a lot of questions. He fell asleep a lot. But he’s starting to commit more to memory so that’s good.” Svetlana said, pulling back from the hug, yawning.

Shane took in her disheveled state, the hastily braided hair, and the dark circles under her eyes. “You should get some rest. We got it from here,” Shane said as Svetlana smiled, looking over at Ilya.

“It’s funny. He told me to sleep too.”

-&-

Ilya woke up shortly after Svetlana left. His eyes lingered on the bedside table where Chompy was sitting on top of his blanket.

“Chompy guards me,” Ilya said simply, his eyes fluttering closed before reopening. “I want my blanket.” He tried to reach for the blanket, his hand stopping halfway before he exhaled. His hands dropped limply to the side as he started to pant from the exertion. His eyes squeezed shut.

“Let me get that for you,” Yuna stepped in, carefully moving Chompy to the side as she unfolded the blanket and covered Ilya. She bent over and helped guide his arms out of the sheets and over the blankets.

“Better?” Yuna asked, looking down. Ilya opened his eyes, his breathing evening out as he stared down at the blanket. He was absentmindedly smoothing out the blanket, as if trying to tell if it was real.

“*Da*. Warm,” he said, a small sigh escaped his cracked lips as he adjusted his head on the pillow, his eyes closing once again. Ilya tugged at the blanket edge to bring it closer to his chest.

Yuna hesitated for a second, before leaning over and giving Ilya a small kiss on his forehead. When she pulled away, Ilya was fast asleep.

-&-

A few hours later, Ilya woke up, his eyes turning over to Chompy before looking down to see Shane, Yuna, and David at his bedside.

“Svetlana, still here?” he asked, his eyes darting jerkily around the room.

“She is still here. Sleeping right now,” Shane answered, leaning forward on his chair.

“Team safe?” Ilya asked, shutting his eyes.

“The team is safe here. You will see them soon.”

“Da. Nice,” Ilya exhaled as he opened his eyes again to look over Chompy. He raised his arm and placed it on the guard rail. Shane, starting to learn the micromovements of Ilya, reached for Chompy and put it on Ilya’s side.

There was a pause as Ilya stared down at Chompy, before clumsily clutching the stuffed animal, the exertion was too much, and Ilya fell asleep with Chompy close to his side. Shane hesitated before he took a photo of the sleeping pair and sent it off to Hayden.

***Shane:** We have another Chompy fanboy over here.*

***Hayden:** I’ll send you the Amazon link for you to stock up in case Ilya loses Chompy!!*

-&-

Later in the day, Coach Wiebe entered the room as Ilya was stirring.

Everyone agreed that it was best to introduce Coach Wiebe as the next addition to the circle. If only to prepare the team as to what to expect when they see Ilya later in the week.

Shane could see Ilya healing a little more each day in how present he was, how long he could stay in a conversation, and what he retained. He knew it would be a shock for the team if they were looking for their chirpy captain in full swing.

As Coach Wiebe approached the bed, Ilya opened his eyes and squinted. There was a pause as Ilya was clearly trying to place him.

“Coach,” Ilya said, resting back on his pillow.

“Hey Ilya,” Coach Wiebe said softly, leaning on a crutch as he made his way closer to the bed.

“Sit,” Ilya ordered, tilting his head slightly to the side as Coach sat down next to him, heaving slightly.

“It is good to see you, Ilya,” Coach said simply. Ilya’s eyes lingered on the crutch.

“Hurt?” Concern filled Ilya’s face as he kept his gaze on the crutch.

Coach Wiebe nodded, coughing lightly. “A little. Healing nicely though.”

“Good,” Ilya said, shutting his eyes.

“The team is safe and wants to see you soon,” Coach Wiebe whispered, glancing at Shane for guidance.

Or maybe it was reassurance.

“I want,” Ilya said, his breathing evening out, falling asleep mid-conversation.

David turned to Coach, “This happens. It’s good. Sleeping, healing... Each day is a little easier.”

Coach Wiebe’s jaw was clenched as he stared at Ilya. He breathed heavily through his nose as he simply stared at Ilya for a few seconds before turning his gaze away, giving himself a moment before speaking. “I’m going to step out. I don’t want to wake him up,” Coach Wiebe lifted a hand to his face, his eyes shining, before reaching for his crutch.

-&-

Over the next two days, they started having the team sit by Ilya’s bedside in small groups. Coach Wiebe was stationed nearby as the players tiptoed into the room. All were briefed, and slightly terrified, by the still-fragile state of Ilya.

Yet there were not enough warnings for some players.

Zane walked into the room with Luca. Luca, who was always quick to fill the silence of the ICU room with questions or stories, was silent when Ilya was awake. This was the same Luca Shane had once wished he could tape his loud mouth shut, now appearing to have taken a vow of silence. Zane, perhaps just as bewildered as Shane, attempted to fill Luca’s spot by talking loudly and far too fast, overstimulating Ilya almost immediately and earning the two of them an early break.

Still, Shane appreciated Zane’s mistakes over Troy.

Troy Bennet went into the room with Harris. While Harris calmly talked to Ilya in hushed tones, Troy sat silently by. With every whispered comment, Troy’s nostrils flared, his breathing quickened, and his shoulders hunched higher. At his breaking point, Troy shoved his chair back, nearly clipping Harris’ chair, before bolting out of the room and slamming the door behind him.

Already furious, Shane followed Troy out into the hallway. The words he’d prepared to shout died in his throat when he saw Troy on the ground. He was hunched over his knees as he pinched the bridge of his nose. Harris quickly appeared and huddled close to him, whispering softly as Shane retreated back into Ilya’s room.

-&-

But Ilya remembered each one. He chided some for looking ‘terrible’. He told a few to go to sleep. Only a few had to be reminded to lower their voices, as Ilya was still struggling with loud noises.

Shane noted the relief and terror on the players' faces as they left the room.

None of them could look Shane in the eyes.

-&-

Shane, after a few days, realized he liked the quiet in the new room. The beeping machines were no longer needed and he appreciated that the only notable noises were Ilya shifting his bed or attempting to speak. Shane could listen to that soundtrack for the rest of his life and never get bored.

Ilya opened his eyes, and looked over to Shane.

Shane waited, knowing that patience was key here.

Shane shifted his chair, wringing his hands slightly.

"I forget," Ilya said with a sigh, his brows furrowed in frustration as he stared at Shane.

Shane leaned forward and forced himself to keep his tone even. "What did you forget?"

Ilya looked up, blinking a few times as if searching for the words. He was breathing heavily through his nose.

Shane had to count the checkered boxes on Ilya's blanket to stop himself from prompting, something the nurses hammered into him. He *knew* it wasn't helpful but the instinct was strong.

"Things. Before this." Ilya said, raising a hand and dropping it on the bed out of frustration. "Some things are there. And others are missing." Ilya frowned as he looked at the blanket. "I know there is more," Ilya muttered.

Shane nodded, crossing his arms. "Yeah, that happens."

Ilya glared at Shane. "Why?"

Shane sighed, knowing it wouldn't be the last time he explained the injury to his boyfriend.

"Your brain took a bad hit. When that happens, some memories go missing. But they usually come back."

Ilya nodded, processing, as he clutched Chompy a bit more, "Okay. When?"

Shane hesitated, Ilya *always* hated this answer. "Some come quick. Some take a while. Others may never come back."

Ilya's jaw clenched, "Don't like that."

Shane reached over to take Ilya's hand. "I know. I don't either."

“You remember? For me?” Ilya asked, squeezing Shane’s hand. Shane noted the increased strength and felt so *proud* of Ilya.

A week ago, he couldn’t grip.

“I remember. I’ll tell you.” Shane said, squeezing Ilya’s hand, grinning.

“Make new ones?” Ilya asked hopefully.

“Yes,” Shane said, nodding as he swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Okay,” Ilya said, his shoulders relaxing as his eyes started to droop. Only for them to reopen, as if a new thought came to mind.

“I remember you.” He said, looking at Shane, as if he was worried that Shane *didn’t* know that.

Shane felt his breath catch, a laugh or gasp escaped him as his hands tightened around Ilya’s before he realized he had to be careful. He *had* to rein in his emotions.

“Yeah?” Shane said, his heart fluttering as Ilya nodded, a soft smile on his face that reached his eyes.

Shane’s chest tightened. This was a smile that he only saw in the summers, at the cottage, completely unguarded. It was the rare smile that Shane only ever saw on the lighter days. One meant just for him.

Shane struggled to remember the last time they’d had a good day together.

“You are Shane. You stay.” Ilya said confidently, tilting his head as his eyes closed.

“I stay,” Shane said, his voice trembling as Ilya drifted back to sleep.

Once Shane could tell Ilya was truly asleep, he let his body relax in the chair. The deep breathing of Ilya was all he needed to feel secure.

-&-

A guard let Shane into the room. While the security presence had gone down from the ICU days, there were still guards stationed in the hallway. The public was now aware that Ilya had started waking up and the press was actively covering the story.

Shane noticed how his parents *always* had their notifications turned off when they were in the room with Ilya.

Shane walked in to see Ilya and his dad having a conversation. His dad had his arms crossed as he leaned in close to hear Ilya better.

“So you were first here? You beat Shane?” Ilya asked.

David nodded. "I beat Shane. I was in the waiting room during surgery. I saw you when you got out."

Ilya pursed his lips, searching for the next words. "Can you stay? You have work. You all have work."

"Work is okay with me, Yuna, and Shane taking time off to take care of you," David said gently.

"Shane here a lot," Ilya said, staring at David.

David looked over at Shane in confusion before turning back to Ilya. "Do you want more alone time?"

"No. Just," Ilya said, scrunching his face up. There were a few beats of long seconds of silence before Ilya hung his head, shaking.

"Different," Ilya said, shrugging, brows furrowed as there was another question on his mind.

"Is normal to have guards in hospitals?" Ilya asked, his eyes darting to the door slowly before back to David.

Shane froze. So much for the guards being *subtle*.

David hesitated. "It is different. They are here to make sure you get the quiet you need to rest. It is just for now. Are they loud?" David asked concerningly, giving the door a reproachful look.

Ilya shook his head, eyes closing slightly. "Not loud. Curious."

-&-

"I think we need to tell Ilya today about Crowell," Shane said in the car, as his dad drove and his mom was in the front seat. Shane took his parents' silence as encouragement to continue talking.

"He's asking a lot more questions now. He's able to have longer and more difficult conversations. And I talked to the neuro nurse, you know the one with blond hair, and he said that we should tell Ilya directly rather than letting him piece it all together."

"Do you think he's ready?" his mom asked.

"I don't want to keep lying to him, even if it's by omission. He asked me yesterday why I wasn't at practice and worried that it was obvious I was with him," Shane said.

"Then we tell him," his dad said simply, turning to his mom. "If Shane thinks he's ready, we should follow his lead. I take it Farah spoke to you about the handoff?" his dad looked into the rearview mirror.

Shane's heart swelled, "She did. I'm getting looped in more now with the medical team. She's flying back soon to handle press and everything else for us back in Canada."

"We follow you then, we trust you," his mom said, letting her head rest on the window, hardly throwing a look back at Shane or peppering him with questions to try to sway him.

His parents, unequivocally, trusted him.

-&-

Once at the hospital, Shane talked to the nurses on the floor about the plan. They assured him that no one from the medical team needed to be in the room, and that they would be on standby if the conversation were to escalate.

Shane knew having too many faces would be overwhelming to Ilya, so he had his parents and Svetlana out in the hallway.

Ilya was awake, sitting upright with pillows propping him.

Shane's heart was pounding as he walked over to Ilya's bedside, his palms started sweating as he sat down next to Ilya, pulling in the chair close.

"Hey, can I talk to you about something serious?" Shane asked, looking at Ilya, and half hoping he would say *no*.

Ilya nodded. "Yes. Serious?" he asked.

Shane bit his lip and nodded slowly. "It is serious." Ilya reflexively took Shane's hand. Shane hoped that Ilya would still want to hold his hand after the news.

"Remember Roger Crowell? And how he doesn't like gay hockey players?"

Ilya nodded, his jaw clenching. "Yes, I remember."

"Well." Shane gulped. "He was angry I was missing practices, games, and was pissed that the press said I was at the hospital here." Shane paused, looking for any confusion on Ilya's face. Ilya nodded and Shane felt comfortable to continue.

"My mom and Farah pushed back. Players and coaches complained about Crowell to the league. The league fired him. But Crowell had photos of us kissing and holding hands that he sent to the press." Shane took a deep breath. "He outed us."

There was a delayed reaction, but Shane knew Ilya had understood when his grip tightened around Shane's hand and his eyes went wide.

"I did what I thought was best. I released a statement confirming the relationship. I even posted photos of us on Instagram. We are safe, and we still can play hockey." Shane said, forcing himself to keep his voice steady as Ilya stared down at the blanket.

“My fault?” Ilya asked in a quiet voice, his eyes focused on the blanket while his other hand was holding onto Chompy. Ilya was struggling to grip Chompy, his hands trembling in a way that Shane only saw in the early wake up days.

Shane ground his teeth together as he focused on the blanket pattern to anchor him. His heart fractured in ways he never thought possible. If it was any other time, he would be holding Ilya close and whispering over and over, *not your fault*.

Instead, Shane had to sit still, hold Ilya’s hand, and stay calm. He couldn’t sob or cry to overwhelm Ilya. But how was he *supposed* to respond when his boyfriend, fresh out of a coma, fucking asks him if it was *his* fault that they were exposed?

“Not your fault,” Shane said, squeezing Ilya’s hand gently, allowing himself a small show of ‘big’ emotions.

Thank God the nurse wasn’t here, Shane knew he would get a warning.

“People know about us?” Ilya asked, blinking rapidly and looking at Shane directly.

Shane nodded his head. “Yes. People know about us.”

“Who?” Ilya asked quietly.

“Everyone,” Shane responded.

Ilya’s brows furrowed, still confused, “Team? League?”

Shane swore in his head, realizing his mistake. He took a deep breath as he struggled to find the words that would convey just how public their lives had truly become.

“The team knows. The league knows. The general public knows. The news... it is all over social media. *Everyone* knows,” Shane emphasized.

Ilya nodded, “Everyone,” he whispered to himself. There was a pause as Ilya took in the information, his breath coming in quickly.

“When?” Ilya asked.

“Since two weeks ago. We were outed while you were in the coma and I confirmed it a few days later.”

“We safe?”

“Yes, we are safe. We can still play once we are out of the hospital and cleared.”

Ilya nodded, sniffing. He tried to swallow, but had difficulty doing so. “Is a lot,” Ilya said, leaning back and closing his eyes briefly before gazing over to Shane. Ilya’s eyes welled up with tears, and Shane was worried that he pushed it too hard and too fast.

“You stay?” Ilya asked fearfully, a tear escaped, as if this new information was going to change anything that Shane did.

“I stay,” Shane croaked out, as Ilya leaned back on his pillow, a look of pure relief on his face as he dozed off. Shane took in a shaking breath as he leaned over and gently wiped the tear off Ilya’s face.

He kept his hand there a moment longer than necessary.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As always, shout out to my beta readers who had to read this particular chapter several times.

Thank you to everyone who is reading along and commenting, I love reading people's thoughts and feelings on this story.

I'll see you all on Tuesday 

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

The conversation was enough to knock Ilya out for the rest of the day. Crying, even a single tear, was a workout for Ilya. The next morning, when Shane came in with his parents, Ilya was awake while Svetlana slept in a chair beside him. Ilya stared at Svetlana intensely.

Shane walked over to Ilya, whispering a “*Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy*” and kissing him gently on the forehead. Ilya looked up, a slow smile bloomed on his face, and he whispered back, “*Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy.*”

Shane’s heart leapt, butterflies rising in his stomach. It felt like the early days of dating again.

“Can you... blanket? Her?” Ilya asked clumsily, lifting the edge of his checkered blanket and pointing to Svetlana before looking up at Shane.

Shane looked down and saw that the blanket had been balled up to Ilya’s chest, as if he’d been tugging at it.

Shane took the blanket off Ilya and slowly draped it around Svetlana. She stirred in her chair, but leaned into the blanket as she continued to sleep.

Ilya looked relieved. “Better. *Spasibo.*” He leaned back, and looked up at Shane.

“You sleep ok?” he asked. Worry crossed his face as he searched Shane’s face, as if the answer would present itself clearly.

“I slept ok,” Shane said, nodding, touched at how much care Ilya was putting into the people around him considering the setting.

“Good. We all need sleep.” Ilya said tiredly as he leaned back to rest again.

-&-

Later in the day, after Svetlana had left, Shane was in the chair, scrolling through his phone, researching Ilya’s next steps in silence. The doctors had offered that Ilya could stay in the United States and continue inpatient rehab in Georgia, but the team doctors were urging that Ilya get medically transferred to an inpatient rehab in Montreal. Shane liked the idea of having Ilya close to home.

Shane would be happy to leave Georgia and never return. But there were clear pros and cons

to both options. And it felt *good* to finally be allowed to take on this work for Ilya. No longer having to hide behind Farah or his parents.

Shane heard stirring, and looked up to see that Ilya had opened his eyes and was staring longingly at him. Shane put his phone down as he reached forward to take Ilya's hand, his grip wasn't just stronger; it was quicker, too.

"Can I see?" Ilya asked, nodding toward the phone.

Shane furrowed his brows, trying to figure out *what* Ilya was referring to. There was no way he had seen Shane's research. He looked over at his parents who shrugged.

"See what?" Shane prompted, after several seconds of him thinking.

"The post. You said you made one?" Ilya said, squeezing Shane's hand.

"Oh, yeah, hold on." Shane said, pulling out his phone. He had already been warned by the doctors and nurses what they could do with screens and Ilya. He was careful to dim the phone's brightness before navigating over to Instagram. He clicked into his profile, then his post, a shock went through his system when he saw the number of likes.

He knew he could take down the photos if Ilya hated them, but the internet lived on forever. Fear started to grow in Shane's chest: that he'd shared too much, exposed them without Ilya's assurance.

"I'll show you mine. And my parents can show you their posts. We can have Harris show you what the team posted. It was very nice," Shane said, squeezing Ilya's hand.

"Yes. Nice to see Harris and his post. Later," he said.

"Okay, I'm going to hold the phone for you," Shane said, getting up and leaning forward to tilt the phone, his hands shaking. "Can you see?" Shane asked, and Ilya nodded. "*Da*."

Shane hesitated when he saw the words on the page. There was a lot in the official statement and he wasn't sure that Ilya would have the patience to hear formal speech. "The words... It just says that we are in a relationship. We are in love. We have been for a while. And that I want privacy right now." Shane said, slowing down when he realized he was talking too fast for Ilya, but Ilya seemed to only care about the pictures, not the caption.

"Next photo?" Ilya said, staring at the screen as Shane swiped through the photos. Ilya's smile grew with each one, threatening to split his face. He reached his hand out for the last photo, the one where Shane was kissing Ilya's cheek.

"You saved it," Ilya said simply, pausing before looking up at Shane. Shane nodded, biting his lip.

"If you want me to delete any of these, if you don't want them out there—"

"No. The photos are *so* nice," Ilya said softly, his hand resting back on his blanket. "Thank

you. Can I have a photo here? All of them?" Ilya asked, feebly gesturing to the bedside table where Chompy was resting, too.

Shane bit his tongue to stop himself from crying. "We absolutely can do that," he whispered hoarsely, brushing back the curls on Ilya's forehead and giving him a small gentle kiss. He pulled back, "Do you want to see more photos?" and Ilya nodded his head as he slowly turned over to Shane's parents who were standing close to the side.

"Make sure to turn the brightness down." Shane reminded them, as he quickly rubbed at his eyes, hoping to hide the tears.

His mom, mimicking Shane's movements, leaned over to show the photos and narrated the caption, "I am so proud of my boys, their love is one for the books. I can't wait to have my sons back home." Her eyes welled up as she swiped through the photos.

"Baking cookies. I remember." Ilya said fondly, looking up at Yuna, "Good day." He said to himself as Yuna chuckled, sniffing slightly as she gave Ilya a small kiss at his temple.

Shane's heart was going to explode with all the love in the room. He knew he'd remember how Ilya's face transformed with every photo, how *happy* he looked to see just how much he was loved. If Shane felt overwhelmed, he knew it may be too much for Ilya.

"Want to take a break?" he asked Ilya gently, placing his hand on Ilya's shoulder.

"One more?" Ilya pleaded, and Shane nodded his head towards his dad who stepped forward with his own phone. His hands trembled slightly, and Shane had to help him steady the phone for Ilya.

"I never thought I would be so lucky as to have a second son in this lifetime. I love Shane and Ilya, and I'm so proud of what these two have accomplished." David said tightly, as he swiped through the photos. Ilya's brow furrowed at each passing photo.

"I look..." Ilya started, paused as he looked for the word before uttering, "Boring," he said as he stared at the photo of him and David doing puzzles with matching headlamps. Both of them stared at the puzzle in front of them, an endless orange gradient in a maddening ombré. Shane's dad squinted at a piece as Ilya drank from his glass, side-eyeing the puzzle.

In short, Ilya looked like a complete dork.

Shane choked on his laugh, staring bewildered at his parents as their eyes grew wide in shock at the joke Ilya had made *completely on his own*.

"I think you look handsome." Shane said kindly, clenching his jaw as his dad pulled away the phone.

"You always think that," Ilya said bluntly, as he rearranged himself on the pillow, his eyes closing, "Good day. Nice beer. Bad puzzle," Ilya mumbled, drifting toward sleep.

“He’s chirping again,” his mom said quietly, the tears falling freely as she leaned into his dad, who had his own tears in his eyes.

“I still think we looked good,” David mumbled, and the three quietly laughed as Ilya slept on.

-&-

Shane: Are you free this afternoon to show Ilya the post from the team? I think he would really like that.

Harris: I’d love to! I’ll bring Coach Wiebe with me. Would 3 work?

Shane: Perfect

-&-

Shane drove to the nearest store that had a photo printer. He was still nervous, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. Despite his obvious nerves, the clerk helped him load the photos onto the kiosk with patience Shane envied.

“These are beautiful photos. You two look so handsome and happy,” the clerk complimented. She was an older woman with white hair and glasses, and Shane could only imagine her as a supportive grandmother.

“We are. Uh, are there frames I can buy here?” Shane asked, looking behind him.

“Yes, aisle 12. Want to go pick some out while these print?” Shane nodded, nearly bolting down the aisle to pick up a handful of basic frames. Once he had settled on them, he came up front to pay for the photos.

In the car, Shane carefully placed the photos into their frames. He made sure everyone was represented. Still, he’d bought an extra frame for himself to have one at the hotel room with his favorite photo of them.

Back in the room, Shane was careful to rearrange the photos so Ilya could see them clearly when he woke up.

Shane *finally* had photos in the room.

-&-

There was a soft knock on the door, and Harris poked his head through. Shane beckoned him in. Ilya stirred in his bed, gently opening his eyes as Harris and Coach Wiebe walked into the room. Ilya sat up as the two approached them.

“Want to see what the team posted for you?” Harris asked, and Ilya nodded as Harris pulled out his phone.

“Make sure the brightness is down, and hold the phone for him,” Shane said as Harris was quick to change the settings.

“Bossy,” Ilya said, and Shane felt a thrill go through his system as he let out a small laugh.

“Alright, here it is. We wrote, ‘We are proud to have Ilya Rozanov on our team. We are so happy for him that he’s been in a loving relationship with Shane Hollander. We are excited for Ilya to return to the ice soon, we all (especially Chiron) miss our brave captain!’” Harris said, watching Ilya, who nodded solemnly.

Harris swiped through the photos, Ilya with the Centaurs, a photo of Ilya with the cup, a photo of Ilya and Shane together during an Irina foundation event, and two photos of Ilya with Chiron.

“Chiron is at home?” Ilya asked, fear widening as he looked up at Harris.

“Chiron is safe at home,” Harris confirmed.

“We meant every word, Ilya. You belong on this team and nothing has changed in my eyes,” Coach Wiebe said sternly, reaching out to pat Ilya on the shoulder.

“Is nice.” Ilya said, looking down and blinking slowly as he fiddled with the blanket.

“Voyageurs post something nice?” Ilya asked, looking over at Shane.

Honesty is the best policy he thought bitterly to himself. Wishing he was allowed to lie at this moment.

“They said they supported me. Two photos,” Shane said, controlling his tone as Coach Wiebe and Harris looked away from Shane, their eyes squarely on the floor.

Ilya furrowed his brow. “Oh. Quiet. Not nice,” He said, clearly putting together the pieces.

“But, Hayden and J.J. wrote nice things. And I can show you those later,” Shane said softly.

“Maybe. Big day today with screens. Head hurts,” Ilya said tiredly, looking around the room.

“Is a lot. But nice. Thank you.” He said, turning to Coach Wiebe and Harris.

“I have a photo now of the team,” he said weakly, nodding towards the frame that Shane put on the table, looking over at Coach Wiebe for approval.

Coach Wiebe smiled and nodded. “I see that. I’m so happy you’re recovering. We miss you,” he said gruffly, as Ilya closed his eyes.

“Later. More.” Ilya whispered before easing into sleep.

-&-

The following day, Shane talked to a series of doctors from back at home and in the hospital. There was a push to have Ilya transfer back to Canada for inpatient rehab. The hope was to get him situated in Montreal, where many of the Centaurs were headed.

Transportation was *the* issue. No matter how fast buses could drive, flying was the only option. Shane was dreading having to have the conversation with Ilya.

Given that most of the team had medical issues that still needed attention, half the flight was going to have to be staffed with doctors and nurses across different specialties. Thankfully, many of the players were going to have access to sedation or other medication to ease the anxiety of flying.

The league had canceled the season for the Centaurs. Even though they were one of the smaller teams in the league, the accident had skyrocketed them to a popularity that they hadn't seen in years. Every jersey had been sold out, with Ilya topping sales. There was no question, the Centaurs were returning to the ice next season with a larger and more passionate fan base.

Shane was secretly pleased that his jersey was also sold out, and he even saw some posts of people framing his jersey next to Ilya's. The Funko Pop sales of the two were also sold out, and Shane had chuckled at how people posed their figurines together. The support was loud.

Shane still hadn't heard anything from his team outside of J.J's and Hayden's frequent check-ins.

But maybe, maybe it was because they were still in the season. They were focusing on the next few games, approaching the playoffs. He had been texting Coach Theriault about his workouts and potential return to practice.

Their text exchange was purely on hockey and Shane's return.

-&-

The next day, Shane found Ilya alone in the room, staring at the photos on the bedside with Chompy next to him. Shane smiled as he walked in closer, making sure to tiptoe slightly as to not startle Ilya.

"Privet, moy lyubimyy," Shane whispered, leaning over and kissing Ilya on the forehead.

"Privet, moy lyubimyy," Ilya whispered back, slowly dragging his eyes up to Shane's. Shane took hold of the chair next to Ilya and brought it closer, taking a hold of Ilya's hand with both of his.

"My hands. Stronger now," Ilya said, as he brought his other hand to cover Shane's.

"I'm so proud of you," Shane whispered, as his heart jumped to his throat, looking at Ilya who looked a bit blurry.

“Shh. Is okay,” Ilya whispered, as Shane shut his eyes as he tried to control his own heart rate. Ilya was rubbing circles on Shane’s hand.

Shane remembered the days in which he pleaded to the universe for a single movement from Ilya. A curl of the finger or even a grunt. It was overwhelming to have his prayers answered to have Ilya comforting him like he did before the accident.

After a long moment, Shane was able to open his eyes, and look at Ilya who was staring at him. “Shane?” Ilya asked quietly.

“Ilya?” Shane responded, a small smile on his lips as Ilya scrunched his nose.

“Room is nice,” Ilya said, lifting his hand up to gesture to the room slowly before returning them to Shane’s. “Am I here forever?” Ilya asked slowly.

Shane shook his head. “No. You’re getting better every day. And soon... we’ll transfer you to Montreal for inpatient rehab for a month and a half,” Ilya’s eyes closed, breathing in deeply.

“English is hard. Rehab?” Ilya asked, eyes still closed as Shane searched through his own Russian words to describe. He made sure to ask Svetlana for the translation after talking to the doctors.

“*Reabilitatsiya v bol’nitse*. You’ll stay there everyday as you get better.”

“Montreal... you’ll be close? Visit?”

“I’ll visit everyday. I stay, remember?” Shane said gently, squeezing Ilya’s hand as Ilya smiled.

“Yes. You stay,” Ilya said, staring at Shane. And Shane had to focus on the flecks of green and gold in Ilya’s eyes to stay calm.

“I am also going to be like you, brave,” Shane said, and Ilya looked at him in confusion. Waiting patiently as Shane figured the best way to share the news.

“I am going to talk to a therapist when we get home... I think it would be good to talk to someone. You know?” Shane said gently, as Ilya nodded his head.

“Galina, can I see her in Montreal?” Ilya asked, tilting his head.

And Shane smiled, because while he never knew her name, he had done his research and deduced that it was her.

“Yes, I can call her later about setting that for you.” Shane said, “I think it’s a great idea,” he said, as Ilya leaned back more on his pillow, his eyes fixed on the ceiling as he kept pursing his lips.

“I’m scared.” Ilya confessed, barely audible.

“I’m scared too,” Shane said, taking a deep breath and leaning forward, “but we get through it together. I stay and you stay, right?”

Ilya nodded, tightening his grip, “Yes. We stay. *Always*,” Ilya said with a confidence that made Shane’s heart soar.

-&-

The morning after, Shane found Ilya holding Chompy, his hand petting the stuffed animal.

Shane smiled as he approached the bed, “Should I be jealous of Chompy?” Shane teased, as Ilya looked up at him, slowly smiling.

“A little. He sleeps with me at night,” Ilya said, placing the stuffed animal down on his lap. Staring at it intensely.

“I need to tell Arthur thank you. Big deal, he sent me this,” Ilya said quietly, tilting his head slightly. “I think...” He trailed off, taking a deep breath and clutching his heart. “I scared him.” Ilya said gently.

Shane nodded, “You scared all of us.” He said, taking his seat next to Ilya as Ilya continued to stare at Chompy.

“Hayden and Jackie wrote nice letters.” And Shane’s heart thundered, he had told Ilya about those letters days ago and he *remembered*. “And a nice post.” He whispered, as if trying to work out a math equation, Ilya turned to Shane and asked, “Friends?”

Shane nodded. “Yes. They are friends. They are very happy to hear you’re awake.”

“Can we talk to them? Maybe just Hayden and Arthur. The girls,” Ilya grimaced, “loud. Too much,” he said, waving his hand.

“Let me call Hayden, he may be free right now.” Shane said, waiting a few seconds as Ilya nodded his head. Shane got up, and did the mental math of the time difference before making the call in the hallway.

Hayden picked up on the third ring.

“Hey Shane! How are you? How’s our favorite patient?” Hayden asked brightly.

“He’s good, he’s speaking more... and he wants to talk to you and Arthur actually.”

Shane heard Hayden let out a small gasp, “He wants to talk to *us*?”

“Chompy has not left his side. I think he’s really worried about how much he scared Arthur if he loaned Chompy. And he was really touched about your letter and Jackie’s. I haven’t been able to read it line by line... but I shared enough.” Shane hesitated at the next part, biting his

thumbnail partly before pushing forward. “He also is aware of how... unsupportive our team is with him and I. And he keeps asking about it. And then asks me if you and J.J. are still good.” Shane said quietly, looking behind him at the closed door as he paced away.

He heard Hayden sniffle on the phone. “That’s... wow, that’s a lot,” Hayden said, letting out a small nervous laugh.

“It is. So, are you free to chat? Or should we schedule?”

“It’s just Arthur and I. Jackie took the girls for a girls’ outing. So it’s perfect. Um, are there rules about how to talk to him? Anything I should tell Arthur?” Hayden asked, and Shane quickly went over the basics.

No loud noises. Short phrases. Not too many emotions at once. Ilya may fall asleep. Ilya wasn’t back at his jokes and chirps. Some Russian can slip out. Be patient.

“Okay, let me talk to Arthur. And I can call you back on FaceTime,” Hayden said, and quickly ended the call.

-&-

Fifteen minutes later, with the iPad set up on Ilya’s table and Chompy close to his chest. Hayden’s call request came through. Shane swiped for the two of them before sitting back on the chair next to Ilya.

The camera panned out to Hayden sitting at his kitchen table, Arthur on his lap wearing a superman costume. Upon seeing Ilya and Chompy on the screen, Arthur looked up at Hayden and smiled wildly.

“Hi Arthur. Hi Hayden,” Ilya said tiredly.

“Hi Uncle Ilya,” Arthur said shyly. Hayden nodded, a tight smile on his lips, as he readjusted Arthur on his lap. Hayden was blinking rapidly on the screen.

“Thank you for Chompy,” Ilya said slowly, lifting Chompy to the screen. “He has been very good guarding me... and,” He paused, looking up, Arthur fidgeted in Hayden’s lap as Hayden hugged him tighter, “holding my hand at night.” Ilya said.

“He’s good at that,” Arthur said. “Did he tell you that we miss you and love you everyday? I told him he had to do that before we sent him,” Hayden shut his eyes and turned his head off to the side.

Ilya nodded his head, “He did. He also told me he misses you and loves you. He wants to go home soon.”

“Are *you* coming home soon?” Arthur asked pointedly.

“Soon. Few days. I’ll be near *you* in Montreal.” Ilya said gently.

“Can we visit?” Arthur asked, fidgeting more in his dad’s lap as Hayden continued to hold him tightly.

“Of course. I need to give Chompy back,” Ilya was closing his eyes, and before Shane could gently end the call, Ilya opened them again.

“Hayden,” he said, and Hayden stared at the camera, eyes wide and head tilted to the side as he waited for Ilya to speak.

“Thank you for... all.” Ilya said, and he patted his heart, “Means... everything,” he said with great difficulty as he laid back on the bed, slowly closing his eyes once more and drifted to sleep.

-&-

Hayden called Shane back on the phone the second the FaceTime ended.

“I-I don’t know what to say.” Hayden said, clearly in shock.

Shane leaned back against the hallway, staring at the closed door.

“It’s a lot. I know. I really appreciate your patience.” Shane said, as he heard Hayden snuffle on the other end of the line.

“And you said this was better than earlier in the week, right? And he’s still improving?” Hayden’s voice cracked.

Shane understood the question behind the question. “They think he’ll play again. He’ll get back to his normal state. He just might need the full year.” Shane said, kicking at the floor.

“I never thought I’d say this, but I *really* can’t wait to see Ilya back on the ice.” Hayden said shakily, a nervous wet laugh accompanied the comment.

“I just want him home.” Shane whispered.

-&-

In the afternoon, Ilya rustled from his sleep, a lazy smile on his face as he saw Shane look up from his phone.

“*Privet moy lyubimyy,*” he said, reaching out for a hand as Shane took his hand, resting his chin on the guardrail.

“Good sleep?”

“Yes. Nice after talking to Hayden and Arthur.” Ilya said, stretching his limbs a bit before settling back into the bed. Staring up at the ceiling, Ilya’s grip tightened and Shane looked at him quizzically.

“Shane?”

“Ilya?”

“I have to go on a plane to go to Montreal, right?” Ilya asked, eyes focused on the ceiling as his chest quickly rose and fell.

“Yes,” Shane said gently, squeezing his hand a bit as Ilya shut his eyes tightly.

“I don’t like that,” he said simply.

“I don’t blame you. But you’ll take some medication so you can sleep.”

“Sleep is good.” Ilya sighed, looking over at Shane. “But coward?”

Shane shook his head. “Not cowardly. You need to sleep a lot anyway to heal. It wouldn’t be good for you to be awake throughout the whole flight.”

“Hmm,” Ilya said thoughtfully. “It’s like a... *loshad*. You fall, you get back on it,” Ilya said, waving his hand around.

“Horse?” Shane said, scrunching his nose as he thought back to the puzzle day in the ICU with Svetlana. There was definitely an ugly horse puzzle.

“*Da*,” Ilya said.

“I’ll be sitting with you. My parents will be there. And the whole team will fly home together.”

“Together is good,” Ilya said, squeezing Shane’s hand. And instead of falling asleep as Shane expected, Ilya lifted his other hand and slowly reached over to Shane’s face. Shane nodded, and the back of Ilya’s fingers traced the freckles on Shane’s face.

Shane closed his own eyes, his cheeks heating with the brush of Ilya’s fingers, and his heart thundered wildly in his chest.

Could Ilya hear it?

“Stunning.” Ilya whispered, and Shane opened his eyes to see Ilya staring up at him, the light hitting his curls. There was a way his eyes stared at him in astonishment that was eerily similar to early days of confessing their feelings.

It took Shane’s breath away, and he couldn’t help but fall in love all over again.

-&-

A date was finalized. In three days, the Centaurs were going home. Svetlana had purchased her own ticket to fly back to Boston. Shane's parents had already agreed to take turns making the drive from Ottawa to Montreal to help support Ilya and Shane throughout the week.

-&-

The day of Svetlana's departure, she came into the room with her suitcase and bag. Svetlana spent the afternoon with Ilya, where nearly all the conversations were in Russian. Shane picked up bits and pieces, but all he could gather was that they talked about everything yet nothing.

At dinnertime, Shane and his parents came into the room with small snacks to eat along with Ilya who was still on a soft food diet. Ilya made a comment about wanting fast food, and Shane had to stop himself from offering to get a blender and toss in a burger.

He'd already been warned by the nurses that blended burgers were a disgusting meal.

They all quietly ate. Ilya had to take breaks between small bites. But he was eating on his own, even if lifting a spoon was physically intensive for him. As they neared the end of the meal, Ilya turned to Svetlana.

"Ya budu skuchat' po tebe. Ty skora priyedesh' v Monreal'?" Ilya said, the confidence was strong when he spoke in Russian, but he was still slow with the words.

"Ya tozhe budu skuchat'. Da, cherez neskol'ko nedel' ya budu v Monreale," Svetlana responded, taking a hold of Ilya's hand.

"Ya lyublyu tebya," Ilya said, tears coming to his eyes.

Svetlana laughed quietly, *"Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu."* She got up and kissed Ilya on the forehead. She was close to crying, but sniffed away her tears as she pulled back to look at Ilya.

"Shane tebya vezem, da?" Ilya asked, his hand gripping hers tightly.

"Da, ty yego khorosho nauchil. On i menya zabra l. On u tebya khoroshiy," Svetlana said, smiling down as she pulled back.

"Znayu," Ilya whispered, a smile on his face as Svetlana stepped back. She looked around the room, and heaved a sigh. Before walking around the room to hug Shane's parents.

Shane's mom pulled her into a tight hug, tears streaming down her face. Shane could hear the small whispers of 'thank you' passing between them. They pulled back and Shane's mom wiped the tears from Svetlana's cheek with her thumb, a mom skill Shane had seen her do a thousand times before.

"We'll see you soon. You'll text when you land, right?" Shane's mom said as Svetlana nodded vigorously.

Svetlana looked over at Shane's dad, who held his arms wide as Svetlana collapsed into them. He hugged her tightly, rocking her. "Thank you for all the puzzles. I'll stock up for more when you visit." Svetlana let out a laugh, slightly wet with her tears as she pulled back.

"Are you ready?" Shane said, pulling out the keys, and Svetlana nodded at him. She took a few steps back, waving at Shane's parents and Ilya, blowing out kisses.

"Bye, I'll be back soon." Shane said, reaching over to kiss Ilya on the forehead.

"*Paka. Lyublyu tebya*," Ilya said quietly, his eyes closing as Shane froze in the spot.

"*Lyublyu tebya*," Shane repeated back, biting his tongue as Ilya rested his eyes.

-&-

Shane and Svetlana were quiet on the drive to the airport. The radio was playing, but Svetlana turned the volume low as she stared out of the window. Shane focused on the road and made every turn signal and matched the speed limit.

When they reached the airport, Shane sighed heavily as he put the car in park. He turned over to Svetlana, her head was ducked down as she readjusted the items in her purse. As she spent several seconds zipping up her purse, Shane put on the emergency lights on the car.

Shane sighed as he turned to her, making no effort to remove his seatbelt. Svetlana stared back, brushing her hair back into a ponytail. The tell-tale sign that Svetlana was nervous.

Shane wasn't sure when he picked up that knowledge, only that he knew when Svetlana wanted to bolt versus stay. And Svetlana wanted to stay.

Shane blinked rapidly and looked up at the ceiling of the car. "This is so stupid. I'm going to see you soon. And we're going to call and text," Shane said, laughing at himself as he rubbed his eyes.

"I know, but it's still sad. Even if it's good. Every day he's getting better, he's going home," Svetlana said to herself, crossing her arms over her chest.

"We get to hang out outside of the hospital. Eat a *real* meal together that's not dressed up ramen or candy desserts," Shane replied, trying to stop the memories from replaying in his mind.

"Would you eat a real meal with me? Not just your rabbit food?" Svetlana tried to tease, her eyes shining.

Shane placed his hand in the center of the console, Svetlana placed her hand in his as he squeezed it tightly.

"For you? I'd eat a seven course meal of everything I've banned in my diet *and then* go out to McDonalds with you and order all the McFlurries and fries you wanted," Shane said,

causing Svetlana to laugh wetly as she finally let the tears roll down her face. Which only made Shane laugh along. Slowly, their laughter died as they eyed traffic patrol staff walking past their car, giving them a dirty look.

Svetlana struggled with her seatbelt, Shane mimicking her movements. Svetlana paused suddenly, looked up to Shane and whispered, "I'm going to miss you."

Shane hopped out of the car, and ran to the other side, opening her door as he pulled her into a tight hug. Burying his face in her hair as he finally let his own tears fall into her hair.

"There's *no way* I would have survived this without you," he said, pulling back and pushing back the curls.

"I was going to say the same thing," Svetlana said, laughing slightly before crying once again.

"Come here." Shane said, as he pulled her back into his arms. They stood on a curb for a while, both of their doors wide open, and Shane couldn't be bothered to fight the honks. He just wanted to stay in the moment with Svetlana.

"I love you. Ilya loves you. And we are going to see you so soon," Shane whispered in her ear, pulling back to see her nod. "And you're going to text when you're at the gate. And then again when you're on the plane. And once more when you land and when you're back home," Shane said, causing Svetlana to laugh again, throwing her head back at every checkpoint.

"Okay, okay," Svetlana said, pulling away from the embrace and rubbing her eyes. "I love you too. Now help me with my bags before we get in trouble," she said, grinning and tilting her head at the staff that was making a beeline towards them.

-&-

Svetlana: *I'm at the gate!*

Shane: *Now that you see the gate, are you going to buy snacks?*

Svetlana: *Your mom snuck in sour patch kids for me!*

Shane: *ofc she did*

-&-

Svetlana: *Finally boarded*

Shane: *Anyone sitting next to you?*

Svetlana: *Don't jinx it!*

Shane: *Sorry!*

Svetlana: You jinxed it.

Shane: :(

-&-

Shane: Have you landed yet? Flight tracker says yes.

Svetlana: Stalker much?

Shane: My dad is the one who has been refreshing that website every fifteen minutes!

Svetlana: <3

Shane: Ilya has been asking us every every 15 mins. Dad's on Svetlana duty as we are calling it in the room.

Svetlana: Landed! Tell Ilya to go back to sleep and that I'm safe!! And tell David hi from me!!

-&-

Svetlana: Home!

Shane: No issues with bags?

Svetlana: None! Time to eat some pizza before passing out!

Shane: Get some extra veggies for me

Svetlana: Ew. Maybe.

Shane: lol

-&-

The next day, the last Centaur player had been discharged. The team boarded the flight as one, with medical staff, family, and friends. Everyone was tense during takeoff and through the flight. Many had attempted to sleep through it.

Ilya had intermittently slept through the flight, but when they landed, Ilya woke up. Ilya started to clap slowly. He put all his strength into it, clapping louder. The grimace on his face led Shane to believe he would be *passed out* by the time they reached rehab.

Instead of stopping him, Shane followed suit, until the entire flight joined in on the celebration.

Shane had to reconcile that he and Ilya were going to be the people who clapped when the plane landed.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy (RU): Good morning my love.

Spasibo(RU): Thanks

Privet, moy lyubimyy (RU): Hello my love

Reabilitatsiya v bol'nitse (RU): Rehab in hospital

Loshad (RU): Horse

Ya budu skuchat' po tebe (RU): Ty skora priyedesh' v Monreal'? (RU): I'll miss you. You'll visit Montreal soon?

Ya tozhe budu skuchat' (RU):. Da, cherez neskol'ko nedel' ya budu v Monreale.: I'll miss you too. And yes, a few weeks I'll be in Montreal.

Ya lyublyu tebya (RU): I love you

Ya tozhe tebya lyublyu (RU): I love you too

Sheyn tebya vezem, da? (RU): Shane is driving you, right?

Da, ty yego khorosho nauchil. On i menya zabra l. On u tebya khoroshiy (RU): Yes, you taught him well. He picked me up too. He's good/yours.

Znayu (RU): I know

Paka. Lyublyu tebya (RU): Bye, I love you

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you so much for reading along - we're slowly making our way back home. Every kudos, comment, and bookmark truly makes my day.

The next portion of this story will take place in inpatient rehab, and I can't wait to share those chapters with you. We'll still be on our usual Sunday & Tuesday updates.

So I'll see you on Sunday 

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

After they landed, it was a quick transport from the plane over to rehab. A medical van was already waiting for Ilya on arrival. It was a nondescript van, staffed with an EMT and one of the nurses from rehab. Ilya was blissfully asleep as they strapped him onto the stretcher.

“Alright, Shane. Come on in. You’ll be sitting next to Ilya, strapped into this bench. It should be a quick ride. We may ask you to move if we need to intervene,” one of the EMTs said, pointing to the small bench.

Shane hopped into the van, noting the many oxygen tanks and medical devices packed into the small space. He strapped into his seat, rolling his shoulders once as he tried to quell the claustrophobic feeling that was building in his chest, his back rigid against the cool metal behind him.

“Can I hold his hand?” Shane asked the EMT buckling in beside him.

“Go for it,” they said. Shane reached forward and took Ilya’s hand. He wasn’t sure who it was for, but it felt better to hold on to something as the engine came to life.

It was silly, but Shane had to remind himself to breathe throughout the journey. He had to remind himself that the small windows were tinted, and that every turn or road bump was normal and not catastrophic. There were a few times Ilya squeezed his hand, and it was certainly for Shane.

-&-

When they arrived at rehab, Shane was pleasantly surprised to find that Ilya’s room was ready. There was no waiting around in the lobby. The paperwork that Ilya had to sign off on was minimal, and he grinned at the parts where he finally got to put his name and contact information down.

After signing all the necessary documents, Shane walked over to Ilya’s new room. His parents were already in there with Ilya, slowly unpacking a few key objects. His mom had placed the blanket on the bed, and was slowly unloading Ilya’s clothes into the dresser.

Shane’s dad was carefully arranging the photos within Ilya’s line of sight. The cards and posters sat to the side with tape on top, a clear task to tackle once the photos were up.

Ilya was already in bed, his vitals being taken by a nurse. Quiet conversations drifted through the room as Shane recognized the blood pressure cuff.

Unlike the hospital rooms, there was a large window that let in natural light. The medical equipment was minimal, and Shane was struck by the silence. Gone were the days of the heart rate monitors and oxygen saturation machines. He no longer had to worry about the motion alarm placed under Ilya.

And yet, Shane kept looking around the room for them, their phantom tones lingering at the back of his mind.

Trying to shake off the unease, he turned and spotted a whiteboard near the entryway. There was a section for 'GOALS' and a schedule next to it. For today, it was simple.

GOALS: Settle In

Shane turned to his mom. "Can I do anything?" he asked. His mom pursed her lips and shook her head, looking behind her to see where everyone was at with their tasks.

"You're good. I think you can just sit and relax," she said, placing the last sweatshirt in the drawer.

Shane swallowed a lump in his throat. Somehow, that felt a herculean task.

-&-

For the first time in a month, Shane was explicitly barred from being near Ilya in the evening.

The rules at the hospital had allowed him to sleep by Ilya's bedside on rough nights. He had made friends with the nurses, and they turned the other way when he stayed a bit longer than allowed.

The in-patient rehab had very clear rules. No overnight guests. No sleeping in the waiting rooms. There was no grey area for Shane to argue, and he had to admit defeat and go home.

Shane *knew* Ilya was safe. He knew that going home was the best option. Shane had missed his bed and missed the privacy that only a home could provide.

But when he walked into the foyer, he felt sick to his stomach.

Had Crowell's PI taken photos through his window?

It was an insane thought, because his mother and Farah pored over the photos they saw. They quietly gave suggestions to Shane; his mom was already contacting contractors for larger hedges and window tints for the cottage. The only hint he had for his house was the front door being exposed, nothing about the windows in the living room.

Still, Shane felt like there were eyes on him, and he moved quickly. He went to pull his curtains down in every single room, his shoes and jacket still on as he completed the task. Once he was done, he went back to the foyer, finally going through his routine of removing his jacket and swapping his shoes for slippers.

Ilya's sliders were nestled on the shelf.

Shane stared at them for a few seconds, wondering if he could use that as an excuse to drive back. His hands twitched, as if itching to grab the shoes and run them back to Ilya.

If he kept staring at the shoes, he was going to go to his car, and nothing good could come from that. Shane turned toward the kitchen. Surely there was a task there for him to complete to distract him.

Shane went to his fridge, ready to sweep half (if not all) of the contents into a garbage bag. Except, he realized that someone had already cleared the spoiled food. Scanning the fridge, he realized that it was restocked with ginger ale, vegetables, and his favorite dips.

There was a Post-it note on one of the cans:

Welcome home! Wanted to make sure you came back with food!! We love you! <3 - Jackie & Hayden.

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose as he shut the fridge. He leaned his forehead against the fridge door, trying to focus on the subtle hum the machine made. He had to take several deep breaths before he had the ability to pull out his phone to text the Pikes. His hands shook slightly.

If the food was taken care of, Shane realized he could at least do laundry. It was quick to dump his dirty clothes from his suitcase into the machine. A few presses, and the machine came to life.

Shane eyed the room, realizing his chore list was short. He felt jittery as he looked around for *something* to do. His house in Montreal, which once felt like home, felt two sizes too big. Everything so neat and untouched as if Shane's entire world hadn't shifted on its axis. In the same way sitting in the van felt claustrophobic, Shane thought he was going to lose his mind if he paced around the too large rooms here. Going to bed, though he was tired, was out of the question somehow. Sitting idly on his couch, with his own favorite blanket, and watching TV felt absurdly normal in a way that felt foreign to Shane.

Without thinking too hard, Shane moved back to the foyer and stuffed his feet in some sneakers, grabbing his jacket and keys, he walked out to his garage and got into his car.

Maybe a drive would calm his nerves; Ilya loved driving to relax.

Though Shane had the full intention of driving aimlessly around town, he found himself in the parking lot of the rehab within minutes. He turned off his car, as he stared at the rehab building, slightly illuminated by the sparse street lamps. Shane had made sure to park at the back of the lot to avoid attention, and he pulled up the hood of his navy blue sweatshirt up.

There was a comfort that he found in a car, in the parking lot of a hospital, close to Ilya that he simply couldn't replicate back at home in his own bed. Even if he wasn't physically with Ilya, anxiously waiting in the parking lot felt like he was helping.

How many times did he take comfort in resting in the car when the waiting room was too overwhelming? Or when he truly needed silence?

Shane leaned back in his seat and let himself lightly doze off. Still caught between a sleep state and an awake state when his phone blasted to life.

Shane banged his knees on his steering wheel, swearing, as he looked down at his phone. Confused as this wasn't the car he was used to sleeping in; it took him a moment to realize it was *his* car and not the rental. On his phone screen, Svetlana's face filled the screen. It was a silly one from a hospital day.

Shane reached over to answer the phone, putting Svetlana on speaker.

"Why are you there? What is wrong?" Svetlana's questions came in quick, an edge of panic in her voice.

"Svetlana-

"You shouldn't be at the rehab this late. There's a *no visitors policy* and it's *after hours* so if you're there Hollander... What happened? Is he okay?" Svetlana asked, practically out of breath as if she was pacing her apartment.

Shane bit his lip, tempted to lay his head on his horn. He *forgot* that he was sharing his location with Svetlana. A wave of shame washed through him as he scrambled for any excuse to give Svetlana.

"He's fine, he's safe," Shane said numbly.

"Why are you there then?" Svetlana hissed on the phone.

"Why are you looking at my location?" Shane snapped, wincing at how aggressive he sounded even to himself.

There was a pause as Svetlana steadied her breathing. "I wanted to make sure you were home alright and when you weren't home. I panicked. I called." Svetlana said quietly, "So answer me, *why are you at the rehab?*"

"I couldn't... I couldn't sleep," Shane admitted, shutting his eyes briefly, completely embarrassed. "I came here to sleep. To relax," Shane said, hating how pathetic he sounded even to himself.

Shane waited for a gasp or a surprised laugh that never came. An endless silence stretched out as he watched the seconds tick up on the call.

"I didn't sleep the first night I was home," Svetlana said quietly, "I stared at your location for hours, knowing that if you were at the hospital and not talking to me, he was fine. And knowing that if you were at the hotel, he was definitely fine," Svetlana confessed, before letting out a harsh laugh, "And here I am still doing that... I didn't even *think*, I just called."

Shane placed his forehead on the wheel as he blinked down at his car mat.

“The kids are *not* alright,” Shane muttered, Svetlana let out a snort.

“We’re not,” she sighed, and Shane wondered if she was sitting cross-legged on the armchair in her apartment, the same way he saw her do a million times in the hospital.

He wished she was here, in the car right now versus a thousand miles away in Boston.

“I don’t want to leave, I don’t think I can physically make myself go,” Shane admitted quietly.

“Can I stay on the line? Just for a bit?”

Shane felt pressure building at his temples and nodded. He knew the right thing was to say no, to drive home, and pretend that none of this had happened.

“Yeah, that would be nice. I promise to try to go home in a bit, just a cat nap,” Shane lied as he heard the rustle of a phone being placed to the side on the other end.

They both stayed on the line. Neither one of them was willing to admit to the other just how unwell they both were. When Shane woke in the early hours of the morning, the sun still down, he saw the call was still on, the seconds ticking on the call.

It felt like they were back in Georgia all over again.

-&-

At practice, Shane tried to stretch out a crick in his neck that he definitely got while sleeping in the car. While he was able to nap before practice, it was hardly enough to get him as rested as he wanted to be for this practice.

He showed up to the locker room, getting ready when he saw Hayden and J.J. approach him.

Shane broke out into a smile as the group got caught into multiple hugs, lots of laughter as they all tried to talk over each other to simply say, *‘Hi. I’ve missed you. How are you?’*

“So. Big day. How are we feeling about practice?” Hayden asked, as he pulled back, looking Shane up and down.

Shane shrugged. “Just trying to take it one day at a time. Ilya has a lot of PT throughout the day, so it makes sense to come back here,” Shane said sheepishly, his mind flashing to Ilya’s schedule.

GOALS: Orientation, Sitting up with assistance.

Shane shook his head as if to shove the image out. J.J looked like he was about to crack a joke about Ilya’s PT before Hayden gave him a reproachful look. “How was dropping him off

yesterday?” Hayden asked quietly, as the rest of the team filtered into the locker room.

No one had walked over to join the group, and no one shouted a hello either from across the room.

Shane shrugged again as he stared at the ground. “It was fine. A little scary. Everyone in there was in wheelchairs and walkers... not exactly the most inspiring image for a hockey player, you know?” Shane said as J.J. and Hayden nodded solemnly.

“Well.” Hayden said, looking up to Shane. “It’s only a matter of time before Ilya starts chirping and causing fights amongst the walkers... willing to bet a paycheck that there’ll be at least one fight,” he said, and Shane laughed heavily as J.J. snickered.

As more players trickled into the locker room, Shane noted how many avoided glancing his way, none seemed brave enough to come over and say hello to their captain.

-&-

Shane drove back to rehab in silence after the practice. For once, he took the longer route with his EDM playlist blaring, something fast as he gripped the steering wheel tightly.

It was nice to be back on the ice. Reassuring even to feel his muscles respond quickly. Irrational, but he was worried that they had atrophied during the month in Georgia. And there were even a few fun moments like when he and Hayden made clean passes to one another.

That was nice.

He focused on keeping that memory tight, playing it on a loop to avoid everything else from that day. The team’s silence, the coach’s brief acknowledgement of Shane’s return caused grumblings. Shane heard that some had lost sponsorships, but those were the same players who also allied with Dallas Kent, so his empathy had a limit.

He readjusted his grip, skipping the song on his playlist, trying to think through exactly how his conversation with Ilya was going to play out. There was a time that Shane knew Ilya so well, he could predict word by word what Ilya would say with high accuracy.

Ever since the accident though, he felt like all that he knew was out the window. There was a shift in Ilya, understandably so, from the language to these reactions that it was harder for Shane to gauge how Ilya would respond.

-&-

“How was practice?” Ilya asked as Shane walked into the room, his jacket still on. Shane shrugged in what he hoped was a nonchalant way as took off his jacket.

“Fine. Boring,” Shane said quickly, shoving his jacket on the hook before walking over to Ilya, giving him a quick kiss on the forehead before resting his own forehead against Ilya’s.

“How was *your* morning?” Shane asked, as Ilya blinked slowly up at him.

"I slept. But practice was fine? Nothing bad?" Ilya pressed.

Shane took a deep breath as he pulled back, biting his tongue, "Fine. Nothing bad," he said, slumping into the chair next to Ilya.

Ilya narrowed his eyes, fidgeting with his fingers as he took in Shane. He heaved a sigh before reaching out his hand for Shane, Shane smiled softly as he placed his hand in Ilya's.

"You ready for another workout? Speech therapy should be fun," Ilya whispered as Shane laughed.

"Yeah, I'm ready, let me grab someone so you can get ready," Shane replied, thankful for a task to do.

-&-

Shane's first therapy session was uncomfortable. He had no idea what to expect and he was terrified. When he first made the appointment back in Georgia, it was primarily motivated to prove to himself and everyone that he was mostly fine.

But Shane kept going to the rehab parking lot for naps, kept looking over his shoulder, and was constantly on edge that he had to admit... he needed to seek professional help.

He fidgeted in his chair, picking at his thumbnails as his therapist looked over the paperwork, her eyes scanning quickly down the page. When she was done, she looked up and leaned back in her chair, giving Shane a small smile.

"Let's start with what brought you in today," she said, pushing her glasses up as she stared at him.

"A lot has happened in the past month... and everyone is telling me to come here." Shane said, shifting uncomfortably. "I'm sure you know what I'm referring to. Or maybe not, I don't know if you're a hockey fan or not," Shane said, flushing as he realized how conceited that must have sounded.

"I don't rely on outside information in my sessions. I let my patients decide what is important in this room."

Shane nodded, folding his hands together. "I guess... my boyfriend was in an accident. And he was in a coma. Now he's not. And we were outed in a pretty shitty way, and now I'm just trying to be better? And be there for him. I can't lose him," he said, grinding his teeth slightly as he heard the therapist take notes against her notepad.

"That sounds like you've been in survival mode for a long time."

Shane clenched his jaw. "I guess."

"What does 'be better' mean to you?"

Shane looked up at the ceiling as he tried to organize his thoughts. He thought the answer was obvious, but at the moment, he was struggling to conceptualize it all into words. He felt his cheeks heat up, it was embarrassing not to have a clear answer. “I want to be functional. I want to be there for him. And not do something that makes him break up with me.”

“It sounds like you’re afraid of doing the wrong thing right now, is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“That is a lot of pressure to put on yourself. Has your boyfriend said anything to make you think you’re doing the wrong thing?”

Shane sighed. “We had a fight before everything happened and I have been taking his sacrifices lightly... I mean, we made up before the accident but,” he bit his lip. They *had* made up, even if it was a brief conversation, but it felt like it was just a pause for something bigger.

“But, we haven’t been able to talk it out fully. And so I’m scared after all of this, it’ll make things worse.”

The therapist tilted her head to the side, “Has he brought up the fight since he’s been awake?”

Shane shook his head, “No. But he’s still getting memories back. And learning how to talk again, I’m not surprised. I just... want to be better.” Shane finished lamely.

“Therapy is ongoing work. If you decide to continue with the sessions—”

“I’m not locked in or anything?”

At this, the therapist truly smiled. “No, Shane, you’re not locked into my practice. And you have the freedom to try out different therapists if you feel like my methods aren’t for you or even if you don’t like me.”

Shane found it hard to believe that no one would like this kind woman with blue streaks in her hair as she fiddled with the sleeve of her overlarge cardigan.

“My main goal is to help you. Would it help to know how sessions would look?”

Shane nodded his head. And slowly felt himself relax into the chair.

At the end of the session, Shane scheduled his next few sessions, surprising himself.

-&-

A routine was established quickly. In the mornings, Shane would try to sneak a visit before heading to practice. If he had practice in the afternoon, he would try to spend his mornings with Ilya unless he was in physical therapy. Due to the nature of speech therapy, Shane would try to make it to as many of those that he could.

To Shane's surprise, he was discouraged from attending the physical therapy sessions. But he was encouraged to attend the speech therapy sessions.

But no matter what, Shane spent the evenings with Ilya. Sometimes his parents were there and other times, it was just the two of them. Each shared about their day until Ilya fell asleep. Then Shane was forced to leave.

-&-

GOALS: Conversation Endurance, Standing assisted

To Shane's relief, they had a speech therapist who *also* spoke Russian. Though they told Ilya and Shane that while Russian can be used, the therapy would primarily be in English.

"Ilya, can you tell us about your morning today?" the therapist said, smiling as he jotted notes down on his clipboard.

Shane clutched his coffee tumbler, hunching his shoulders as if hoping not to be asked about *his* morning.

Ilya let out a heavy breath, closing his eyes briefly as he went through the morning routine. He talked slowly about breakfast and getting ready. He paused for a few seconds before talking about the physical therapy, reverting to Russian to explain an exercise. There was another pause, a longer one than the first one, and Shane noticed how Ilya's breathing had changed.

"I think he may be a bit tired. Sounds like a long morning," Shane said gently, putting a hand on Ilya's shoulder. Ilya nodded, leaning into Shane's touch.

The therapist leaned forward, "Ilya, would it be easier to switch to Russian?"

Ilya shook his head, his fingers curling into a fist.

"Ilya, I'd like you to try telling us when you're tired or fading instead of Shane noticing you. It's important for you to understand your limits and advocate for yourself."

Shane took his hand off of Ilya's shoulder as if he had been burned. Wasn't he supposed to do that for Ilya? And before he could say something back, maybe something he would regret, Ilya spoke.

"Okay. I'm tired," Ilya said, annoyance lacing his voice as he glared at the therapist, his lips curled into a small snarl.

The therapist beamed, "Excellent! Let's continue on with the next exercise then."

-&-

Shane had to leave after speech therapy. Mostly because Ilya was shifting over to physical therapy (learning to stand). But mostly, Shane thought he was going to run through the walls

if he was told again to sit still, be patient, do *nothing*.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he waited for the lights to change in front of him. He was never one to drive around for the fun of it, especially in the city, and he found himself subconsciously driving to the grocery store.

He parked the furthest spot away from the entrance. After he turned his car off, he leaned his forehead against the wheel, resisting the urge to just lean into his horn and let *that* go off. It would fit his feelings, the turmoil of seeing Ilya struggle with the most basic functions and Shane unable to help him the way he used to in the hospital rooms.

But he could do errands. He could prepare for the future. With that resolve, Shane lifted his head from the wheel as he stared at the entrance. He usually had a list of foods tucked on his phone, a particular way he wove through the aisles.

That list hadn't been touched in weeks. Did he still have it saved in his phone?

Shane hopped out of the car, slamming the door forcefully, and headed towards the door. He pulled his jacket close against him, there was still a chill in the air even as they started to approach the spring months.

Would they be able to spend time at the cottage this summer? Or would they need to stay close to Montreal for doctor appointments?

Inside the store, Shane grabbed a basket as he pushed past the gates, and started mapping out the grocery aisles. Mid-day, the store only had a few shoppers, and Shane felt his shoulders ease as he marched towards the breakfast aisle.

He pulled down a sugary cereal he knew Ilya liked (Ilya got joy pulling out the heart shaped marshmallows and chucking them at Shane), he grabbed the Nutella (the largest size, because Ilya would eat from the container like it was ice cream), and finally some granola bars (he had to stay healthy *somehow*).

Shane weaved through the chips and cookies, suddenly struggling on which cookies Ilya liked. Was it the chocolate ones? Or the ones with fruit filling? Panicking, he shoved both into the basket.

Shane started marching over to the vegetables and fruit section, when he stopped dead in his tracks.

He couldn't get these items yet. Ilya was still in rehab. They'd all go bad in Shane's fridge. Shane rolled his eyes, annoyed at himself. Annoyed that *once again* there was another item in the universe telling him *no*. He was about to turn on his heel when a flash of color caught in his peripheral vision.

It was flowers.

Shane paused, staring at all the arrangements, overwhelmed with the choices as he stepped closer.

Ilya wasn't allowed flowers in the ICU. It felt silly to get them when he was on the neuro floor. But at rehab, he was allowed plants and flowers. And there was a swell of hope as Shane walked around the arrangements.

Orchids were too delicate, succulents felt juvenile, and cacti... Ilya was going to hurt himself if he accidentally touched it (and Ilya *was* going to try to touch them). Shane moved towards the actual flowers, where there were roses, carnations, sunflowers, and so many more whose names he never learned.

Did Ilya even like flowers?

Trying not to feel ridiculous, Shane grabbed some sunflowers and pink roses (red felt too serious). He weighed them in his hand as he side eyed his basket.

It was the first time in years he was purchasing this much sugar.

Why not buy flowers for the man he loved?

-&-

Shane returned back to the rehab a few hours later. He tucked the groceries in the back of his trunk in the corner, careful to pull the trunk cover over. While he was sure no one was going to steal his groceries (or even be tempted), he didn't want someone to try to see what he bought.

Or worse, try to get a picture to sell.

Shane clutched the bundle of flowers to his side, a blush spreading across his cheeks as he walked past the main desk. He distinctly heard an 'aw' and picked up the pace towards Ilya's door. The door was slightly ajar, so Shane lightly knocked as he pushed the door open to find Ilya resting on his bed.

Shane hid the flowers behind his back, and Ilya tilted his head, squinting at him. Shane shifted his weight, heat creeping up his neck.

"What do you have?" Ilya asked, and Shane hesitated. Shane pulled the flowers out with the vase, averting his gaze to the ground, expecting a laugh from Ilya. When he heard none, he looked up to see Ilya's jaw slightly slack as he focused on the pink and yellow flowers.

Feeling a little braver, Shane swallowed as he walked closer to Ilya's bed, "I figured, you can have flowers now and thought I'd get you these. Cactuses and succulents seemed stupid, so I got flowers-"

Confusion spread on Ilya's face as he shut his eyes, shaking his head as he put his hand out on the side.

"Shane, too fast." Ilya muttered, eyes still closed.

Shane took a deep breath and counted to ten in his head, before talking again. “I thought, we can celebrate that you can have plants in your room since you’re healthier. I wasn’t sure if you had favorite flowers, so I got these.”

Ilya nodded slowly, “Pink and yellow. My favorite.”

Shane smiled, placing the flowers on the bedside table. He reached over to grab Ilya’s hand, “You’re just saying that.”

“No,” Ilya said, squeezing Shane’s hand enough to sting. Shane felt his heart rate pick up, as he stared at Ilya. Ilya looked up, a clear sign he was trying to find the words. Shane glanced at the schedule, realized it had been a long day, before looking back to Ilya who was staring at him once again.

“*Mama lyubila rozovyye i zholtyye tsvety,*” Ilya tightened his grip on Shane’s hand, his gaze on their interlocked fingers. “*Mama* would buy them on bad days.”

Ilya exhaled shakily, pausing before the next part.

“Sometimes, I steal money from my dad to get her some when she rests.” His breath hitched. He pressed his lips together, eyes closing as if bracing himself.

“Feels like she is here. Is silly, I know. *Izvini,*” Ilya let out a nervous laugh, and Shane shook his head.

“I prayed to her,” Shane said quietly, “when you were in the hospital, I prayed to her *a lot*. You know I don’t believe in God, but you believe in her... so I believe in her.”

Ilya opened his eyes, his grip tightening around Shane’s hand. He opened his mouth, then shut it again. By the third time, Ilya started fiddling with his necklace.

Shane smiled softly. “So, no, not silly.”

Ilya tipped his head back, staring up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly as his eyes filled with tears.

And Shane, though he knew he should let Ilya set the boundaries, also knew crying was a workout for him. He took a chance, “She must be tired of me talking to her,” Shane joked. Ilya laughed and rubbed a hand over his face as he turned his gaze over to Shane.

“I love the flowers. Thank you,” Ilya said, resting further back on his bed, before asking, “What are your favorite flowers?”

Shane blushed, “You’ll think I’m mush.”

“I *know* you are mush,” Ilya said, his voice going lower, and Shane knew he was reaching the limit of tiredness.

“Lilies. Lilies have been my favorite the past few years.” Shane said, watching Ilya’s face

bloom with a smile that reached his eyes. He rubbed slow circles on Shane's hand with his thumb.

"Lilies... *lilii*," Ilya muttered, closing his eyes softly, "I will remember. For home," he said, already drifting to sleep.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

Mama lyubila rozovyye i zholtyye tsvety (RU): Mom loved pink and yellow flowers.

Izvini (RU): Sorry.

Lilii (RU): Lilies.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hope this chapter finds you all well! As always, thank you for reading and feel free to leave a comment. I'll see you all on Tuesday 

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

At the end of the first week, Ilya was back in his room, shivering slightly in his bed in just his t-shirt, the goosebumps scattered down his arms. Shane looked up from his phone and started scanning the room for the sweatshirt that was usually in plain sight. He turned fully in his chair, scanned again, and then gave up on trying to locate the sweatshirt. Shane pulled his own sweatshirt off, Ilya protesting; Shane only paused after it was bundled in his hands.

“Let me help you put it on,” Shane said, standing over Ilya as Ilya raised his left arm, carefully leaning forward. Shane worked carefully to guide the left sleeve over his arm, tugging it down until he was satisfied with it. “Good, other arm,” Shane said and Ilya dropped his left arm quickly, already fatigued. After a deep inhale, he lifted the right arm and Shane struggled with getting the sleeve down the right arm.

“You are better at taking it off than on,” Ilya teased, and Shane flushed furiously.

“Fuck *off*,” Shane muttered under his breath as Ilya chuckled and he *finally* got the sleeve untwisted. Ilya dropped his arm without prompting.

Shane took the top of the sweatshirt, looking between the neck hole and Ilya’s face, gauging the distance and what he needed Ilya to do at this moment. It was a simple action and yet Shane was struggling.

“Chin down—wait, no—ah yes,” Shane said, as Ilya went through the motions, almost reading Shane’s mind with the directions. Once Shane was confident, he pulled the rest of the sweatshirt over Ilya’s head. Ilya tugged at the hem of the sweatshirt and pulled the sleeves over his hands. Once the sweatshirt was settled, Ilya inhaled the collar and held it there a second longer before looking back at Shane.

“*Izvini*. I like how it smells,” Ilya said simply, and even in the dim room, Shane could see the tops of Ilya’s ears were turning pink.

Shane smiled, his heart jolting. It was eerily similar to the first time at the cottage together, when Ilya would steal Shane’s clothes. The first time, Shane suspected Ilya did it as a joke, to show off just how small the sweatshirt was on him. And of course, there was a round of banter where Ilya let it slip how he liked how Shane’s clothes smelled, which eventually led to the sweatshirt being discarded on the ground as other activities took place.

Ilya was protective of the sweatshirt, and Shane finally understood how all of his teammates gushed about how they loved it when their wives and girlfriends stole their sweatshirts. And Shane had a large collection of sweatshirts that he had no problem sharing with Ilya as long as he could take some of his.

“It’s okay. You can keep it. I have more to share,” Shane said, repeating a line he’d used years ago. Ilya let out a small laugh.

-&-

At practice, Shane was shoving his clothes into his duffle. His phone was abandoned to the side, a small buzz against the wooden bench. Shane peeked over. It was a notification from the coach about upcoming games.

Shane shook his head as he continued to look through his locker, trying to see if he had forgotten something before heading over to rehab, going through his checklist.

He was benched for the away games. Thankfully, there was only one left before they would start playing back home, leading up to the playoffs. It was a painfully awkward situation when Shane had to request to stay back to be put on the bench. He knew Ilya was safe. Ilya told him he would be fine if Shane left for a game, and even his mom offered to stay close to Ilya... but Shane couldn’t leave Ilya.

It wouldn’t be fair to the team if his mind was elsewhere on the ice. And Shane had seen other players on the team take similar time off when their families (always nearly *wives* or *girlfriends*) needed the players close, even if they were *physically* fine.

Coach Theriault did approve the request. But not without a series of pressing questions, all of which avoided mentioning Ilya’s name or his condition. Coach Theriault repeated, one too many times, that this was a stressful time for the team with the playoffs happening soon. And Shane chalked up the insensitive questions to *that*. It was playoffs. Afterwards, things *could* go back to normal.

Shane heaved a sigh as he started to zip up his duffle. He reached for his phone, only to see Hayden snatch it from his grip. Shane looked up to see Hayden and J.J. standing awkwardly with their bags. J.J.’s hands were curled into fists as he breathed heavily through his nose.

“What’s going on?” Shane asked, looking between the two of them, grabbing his bag as Hayden tilted his head towards the door. There was a screech of laughter from the locker room. Comeau was making a joke, and the voices were piling all over one another.

“Let’s go outside,” Hayden said, walking around Shane, patting him on the shoulder as J.J. followed. Shane looked over his shoulder before following Hayden. Similar to before, Shane followed Hayden to a stairwell. The three men crammed in. Hayden dropped his bag to the floor, crossing his arms with his hand still clutching Shane’s phone. J.J. stood stiffly as he bit his lip, avoiding eye contact with Shane.

“An email went out, and I need you to *know* that I do not care about you being gay and I have no issues with rooming with you or anything else,” Hayden said, staring at Shane intensely.

Shane shrugged, too tired to try to figure out *why* this was all coming out. “Hayden, I know that—”

“Shane, I *need* to hear you say this before I give your phone back.”

Shane shook his head, blearily trying to fight through the fog in his mind. “Okay, fine, I know that you don’t care that I’m gay and you have no issues with rooming with me or anything else. Can I have my phone back?”

“It’s the same with me. I would happily room with you. I just don’t want to break you and Hayden up,” J.J. said, finally raising his eyes at Shane.

“I’m sorry, what the *fuck* is going on?” Shane asked, turning between the two of them. Hayden looked over at J.J., who tilted his head to Shane. Hayden sighed as he passed the phone back to Shane.

Shane hunched over his phone as he unlocked it, pulling up the email. There was the normal blurb about away games, schedule updates, and social media usage. Shane was about to interrogate J.J. and Hayden about being so weird when he saw the paragraph. He had to read it a second time, because there was *no way*. By the third read-through, though, his blood ran cold as he finally processed the lines, unsure if this could possibly be real life.

We recognize that recent events may affect comfort in shared environments, including locker rooms and travel accommodations. If you are uncomfortable with your current rooming arrangement or locker room assignment, you are free to contact team operations. We will work to support individual needs where possible.

Shane’s hand shook as he stared down, his thumb hovering and twitching over the screen. Hayden sighed and took a step forward.

“Shane, trust us, *we* don’t feel uncomfortable—”

“Nearly half the team knew I was gay, and *now* they send out emails like this? This is such bullshit,” Shane snapped, shoving his phone into his pocket and angrily pushing back his hair.

“It is *fucking* bullshit,” J.J. agreed, kicking at the floor. “Hayden and I already emailed management saying we had no problems sharing a locker room with you or rooming with you... so hopefully they can accommodate *that* request,” J.J. said, a small smile on his face as Shane felt his heart lift.

“I just... is this normal? Does this happen every time a player comes out officially?” Shane asked, pacing the small space. “I *guess* these *could* be valid concerns—”

“They fucking *aren’t*—” J.J. snapped, attempting to stop Shane from his pacing, only for Shane to swerve the hand and continue to walk.

“Well how many of us have been on a team with an *openly* gay man? Maybe this is normal? This is fine?” Shane asked, stopping in his tracks as Hayden shook his head vigorously, letting out a ‘nu-uh’ sound.

“It’s not. I screenshotted the email and asked Hunter if the Admirals sent out a similar email. He confirmed that they didn’t and then just a whole string of text cussing out the Voyageurs... he was right to do that,” Hayden said softly, and J.J. grunted in agreement.

Shane leaned back on the wall and slid down to the floor. He pulled his legs up as he rested his forehead on his knees. There were *so* many things he had worried about when it came to coming out, from the public perception to the league's own homophobia. And in all of his lists, he had never thought to include his own teammates as being a reason *not* to come out.

Shane let out a bitter laugh at his naivety. *God* he was so *stupid*. He continued to laugh as Hayden and J.J. quietly sat on the ground next to him, both of them holding their breath to see what Shane would do next, letting Shane laugh until he quieted down.

“Did Hunter say anything else?” Shane asked, looking over to Hayden.

“He said that you could text him and that you *could* potentially look into filing an official complaint,” Hayden paused, looking over to J.J., who nodded encouragingly, “*and* you can join the Crowell lawsuit and include the email—”

“Fuck *that*, I don’t even have *time* for this shit. Between playoffs and Ilya... I’m not doing anything about *that* lawsuit for now.”

Farah and his mom had hinted once at the lawsuit, but it was shortly after Ilya woke up and Shane shut down the topic until Ilya was better, the goalposts of what “better” was constantly changing in Shane’s mind. The two hadn’t brought it up recently, but Shane had heard the rumours and saw some of the pieces *slamming* Crowell, Scott Hunter was vicious in his own postings.

“Are you going to tell Ilya about any of this?” J.J. asked tentatively.

Shane shook his head. “He’s learning how to *stand* and *walk* again... I’m not adding this shit to his plate,” Shane said bitterly. Hayden placed his head in his hands and J.J. puffed out a breath while staring at the ceiling.

Hockey was an unforgiving sport, and Ilya wasn’t the first nor the last to have to go through neuro rehab. It was a terrifying prospect for any player to imagine themselves in Ilya’s position.

“I should go,” Shane mumbled, standing up quickly as he grabbed his bag, the other two following suit.

“Just... call us or text us. We’re here for you, kay?” Hayden said quietly, and Shane nodded. He used the extra few seconds in the stairwell to steady his breath before shoving the door open. Hoping that his anger would evaporate before he saw Ilya.

-&-

The drive over to rehab did nothing to settle Shane’s anger, and he stood for a few seconds outside Ilya’s door, his forehead on the door as he took a few deep breaths. He forced himself

into his photo-ready smile and went in.

Ilya was on his bed, his arms crossed as he looked off to the side towards the window. His hands fidgeted over his biceps as he scowled. Shane felt the smile slide off his face as he approached the bed. He looked over his shoulder to see the goals for the day.

GOALS: ADLs (activities of daily living), Conversation endurance (recognize fatigue), Gait/Balance training

Shane exhaled as he sat down in the chair next to Ilya, scooting it closer. Ilya refused to turn his head towards Shane.

“Want to tell me what happened?” Shane asked quietly as Ilya breathed in heavily and shook his head. Shane looked over his shoulder again to look at the schedule, trying to figure out which session made Ilya this upset. Ilya had been excited this morning for ADL and gait training.

So which one let him down?

“How was practice?” Ilya asked as if he could *hear* Shane’s thoughts trying to figure out the day so far.

“Fine. It was okay,” Shane said quickly. Ilya turned his head over to look at Shane, his eyes narrowed.

“Always ‘fine’ or ‘okay’. Never ‘good’.”

Shane felt a wave of fatigue wash over him, and an overwhelming urge to crawl into the bed with Ilya. He just wanted to show the email to Ilya, Ilya threatening everyone and everything, and then spend the rest of the time in each other’s arms.

But what the fuck did Shane have to complain about? He was crying over some passive-aggressive email while his boyfriend was *literally attempting* to relearn how to live life again. And with that thought in mind, Shane stared at the whiteboard.

“Yeah, it is fine. Haven’t worked out hard in a while so still in that okay phase,” he lied easily as Ilya’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t say anything.

“How were the sessions earlier?” Shane asked, and Ilya shoved his hands into his sweatshirt pocket as he turned to look over at Shane.

“Fine. Okay,” Ilya said tersely. Shane pressed his lips together, the mirroring went noticed. But he also knew that getting Ilya to talk *right* before Speech was the worst idea.

“We have Speech next, right?” Shane asked and Ilya glumly looked over at the board, a small groan as he leaned back against his pillows. Shane started to stand up, looking behind his shoulder.

“I can get a nurse, we can cancel, or postpone—”

Ilya’s hand shot out to grab Shane’s arm, but he missed, his breath hitching as he tried again and finally caught Shane. “*Nyet*. It is fine. I will do therapy... just, not a good day,” Ilya grumbled, before shoving his back to the pocket, refusing to make eye contact with Shane.

Shane shifted his weight, looking back behind him again, weighing if he should push to cancel or—

“I said it is *fine* Shane,” Ilya said roughly, glaring up at Shane. Shane nodded, mumbled a sorry, before sitting back down in his spot, picking at his thumbnails for a stony five minutes before the nurse came in for Speech therapy.

-&-

“Okay Ilya, tell us about your morning,” the therapist said gently, and Ilya sighed heavily as Shane listened. Ilya took a few deep breaths, before he started describing his morning. He started in English, but slipped into Russian.

“Ilya, remember, English,” the therapist said gently as Ilya stopped, his fists clenched on the table. He opened his mouth, only to have Russian come out again.

“It’s okay to pause,” Shane said impatiently, immediately regretting the words as Ilya gave him a dirty look.

“English gone. Too hard. *Po-russkiy*?” Ilya asked, refusing to look over at Shane as he breathed heavily through his nose.

The therapist nodded. “*Da. Spasibo, shto skazal.*” Ilya nodded, relaxing a little, before talking in Russian.

Shane stared at the table, focusing on translating word by word as Ilya spoke. Despite Ilya having a slightly slower cadence of speech, it was still a bit difficult for Shane to follow.

At first, Shane thought Ilya was switching languages on purpose to hide from Shane, even punish him.

But then, Ilya started talking about how he fell during balance training, how he pushed too hard to try to walk and slipped. How he spent a minute on the floor, refusing help until the nurses gave him no other options. PT had to be cut short today because of it.

Shane forced himself to stay in the chair, fearing that if he moved he could be sick.

-&-

Shane walked alongside Ilya as the nurse pushed him down the hallway, Ilya lightly dozing off in the chair as they moved through the corridor. He got a quieter wheelchair today. Shane snuck a glance over to the nurse before looking down the hall.

Rehab, Shane was learning, was *very* different from the ICU and Neuro floor. He wasn't allowed to push Ilya in the wheelchair, and instead, had to be off to the side. It made Shane *almost* miss the mean nurse from the ICU. She'd at least let Shane perform some of these tasks.

Once they were in Ilya's room, the nurse paged for someone else to help with the transfer. Shane offered to help but the nurse brushed him off, citing policy. Shane rolled his eyes as the other nurse stepped in, helped with the transfer, before the two of them disappeared with a click of the door closing.

Shane walked over to Ilya's bed. Ilya was groggily moving around, blinking up at Shane as Ilya pulled his hands to his chest. And it was then that Shane noticed the fresh scratches on the knuckles. Shane reached his hand out, looked up at Ilya, who nodded, before letting his fingers drift over the injury.

"Didn't re-injure the bones, right?" Shane asked softly.

"*Nyet*. Bones good. Fingers stiff but normal," Ilya practically slurred as he started to make slow blinks. Shane focused on the scratches, rubbing his thumb over them. Shane hesitated for a second, looking up at Ilya, before bringing Ilya's hand to his mouth and kissing it quickly.

Ilya smiled, turning his hand over to grip Shane's, squeezing it quickly before the hand went limp. Ilya had completely passed out.

Shane pursed his lips, removing his hand as he took a look around the room. He walked over to the curtains to pull them shut, slowly pulling them across the window so as not to wake Ilya. Then he went back to Ilya's bed and draped the checkered blanket over him, tucking in the edges.

Satisfied, Shane resumed his spot in the armchair, placing his head in his hands as he spent the rest of the hour in silence.

-&-

-&- ***Translations*** -&-

Izvini (RU): Sorry

Po-russkiy (RU): In Russian?

Da. Spasibo, shto skazal (RU): Yes. Thank you for telling me.

-&-

A/N: Quieter chapter today. Thank you for reading and commenting along, I love reading your kind words. See you on Sunday 

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

On the away game day, Shane drove himself over to rehab. It was rare that he had a full day with Ilya, and his therapist encouraged him to take advantage of the quiet. He could have spent the time at home, but he just wanted to be with Ilya. He was more than happy to drive around or read if Ilya was sleeping or at PT.

Shane opened the door to find Ilya sitting up, his bed propped, surprise flickering across his face.

“Practice?”

Shane shook his head, shuffling into the room and closing the door. “Away game. Staying behind,” Shane said, shrugging off his jacket and hanging it up.

Ilya frowned as Shane took his spot by the bed. Shane pulled his phone out, glanced at the screen, then turned it face down. Ilya’s brows furrowed as he stared at Shane. “You could go to the game. I am safe. Good here. If you want.”

Shane crossed his legs, as he reached a hand out to Ilya. “I know... but I didn’t *want* to go.” Ilya hesitated for a second before placing his hand within Shane’s. Ilya’s gaze dropped to their joined hands.

“It is not the cottage. I have no fancy rooms or games to entertain you,” Ilya said sadly, glancing around the room, as if something would pop out. Other than the cards and pictures, the white board reminded them of the goals for the day.

GOALS: Gait/Balance training (no falls!), sitting up unassisted

“I am a simple guest. I *just* require a bathroom with an alarm I can pull if I fall,” Shane teased, squeezing Ilya’s hand as Ilya had a hint of a smile on his face. Encouraged, Shane put on an over the top thinking face, “And if I can be oh so annoying, I’d also ask for a meal with Chompy while you’re out. The finest jello flavors for us,” Ilya’s crooked smile came alive as he looked over at Chompy at the bedside.

“*Mr. Chompy* is quite busy. Maybe next week? Settle for me? I’ll give you *two* red jello cups to make-up for Mr. Chompy,” Ilya said as Shane laughed.

“I think I *won* if I get you instead of him,” Shane said, tilting his head towards the alligator. “Wait, *two* jello cups?” Shane asked, tilting his head as Ilya gave a small shrug.

“I have my ways,” he said as Shane rolled his eyes.

Ilya, noticeably brighter, looked around the room and smiled bigger.

“Can you get the whiteboard?” Ilya asked, and Shane shook his head, his shoulders stiffening. He *hated* breaking the rules.

“I don’t think we can just *take* it down,” Shane whispered to Ilya who snorted.

“Yes. You can. They do it when they write goals and schedules,” Ilya said impatiently.

Shane hesitated. “But are *we* allowed to do that?”

Ilya rolled his eyes, “Shane, is *Canada*, they will not call the cops on us,” causing Shane to laugh and to finally stand up to get the white board. He glanced toward the door as if he was about to get caught, making Ilya laugh, before grabbing the whiteboard and markers to bring over to Ilya.

“Great, clean it off, and make a grid with dots so we can play *kvadraty*—”

“Oh, dots and boxes—yeah, hold on,” Shane said, quickly sketching a grid out of dots, making sure they were large enough. He knew that Ilya had been working on his motor skills and didn’t want to push him toward tight precision on the white board. Plus, Shane was also terrible at creating the grid, his tongue stuck out as he concentrated on making everything even.

“Good, that’s enough,” Ilya said, tapping Shane’s arm lightly.

“What color you want?” Ilya asked, gesturing towards the black and blue markers.

“I’ll take black,” Shane said, grabbing the pen and passing the blue one over to Ilya.

Ilya went first, slowly drawing a line connecting the dots. They went back and forth in silence as they each drew a line. Ilya’s lines were wobbly, sometimes too thin, and sometimes too thick. It took a few minutes for Ilya to claim the first box. He drew an ‘I’ in the box.

“Good thing my name starts with an I,” Ilya muttered as Shane cocked his head to look at the board for this next move.

“I haven’t played this game in years,” Shane mumbled, drawing a line only to curse. Ilya laughed as he took advantage of Shane’s misstep to make another square and line.

“Me too, but is nice—*blyat*,” Ilya cursed as he made a similarly silly move, allowing Shane to claim two boxes from a single move.

By the end of the game, it was a tie, the board a mixture of imperfect lines and badly scrawled initials. Shane grinned down at the board, laughing at how bad his penmanship looked like on there.

“*You* need PT, I can’t read your ‘S’.” Ilya said, squinting down at the board.

“*Maybe* you need glasses, have you thought of that?” Shane shot back as Ilya smirked.

Ilya opened his mouth, about to shoot his own remark, when at that moment, the door opened. The nurse took in the two of them and then the empty wall, an annoyed groan when she noticed the missing board. She looked back to the men and narrowed her eyes at the board.

Shane quickly hid his marker behind his back.

“You are *lucky*, Ilya, that I remember your schedule. Are you ready for physical therapy?” she asked. Ilya nodded as Shane took the whiteboard and Ilya’s marker away. Shane ducked his head.

The nurse looked over at the board, holding out her hand as Shane handed it over to her, his eyes on the ground as she took it out of his hand. There was a beat of silence before there was a slight hum from her.

“Shane, I can’t tell which squares are yours and which are Ilya’s - I think *you* need to come to PT.” Ilya let out a short laugh, his smile reaching his eyes as they made eye contact.

“That is what *I* said,” Ilya said gleefully and the nurse chuckled, putting the board to the side. She walked over to the bed.

“I hope he doesn’t charge for autographs,” she teased Ilya.

“I charge *more*,” Ilya said, blinking both eyes, a blush spreading across his face. Shane’s heart stopped as he realized that Ilya was *trying* to wink. The nurse, clearly used to this, laughed along as Ilya stalled for the transfer.

Shane watched as Ilya sat up slowly, before turning his body such that his legs were able to touch the ground. Gripping the edge of the bed, Ilya pushed himself up, standing briefly as the nurse murmured encouragement. Ilya pivoted with the nurse on standby, before slowly lowering himself into the wheelchair. Exhaling hard, Ilya tipped his head back as the nurse got the footsteps down and the wheels unlocked.

“You should sleep in the bed while I’m gone,” Ilya said, jerking his head towards the bed as Shane shook his head.

“No, I wouldn’t want to mess it up, and I can maybe go shopping or—”

“*Ostan’sya, pospi. Priyatno vozvrashchat’sya v krovati s tvoim zapakhom,*” Ilya said sternly.

Heat climbed up Shane’s neck as he nodded. Ilya gave him a smile.

“Okay, I’ll see you after PT,” Shane said weakly, as the nurse pushed Ilya out, chiding him

about flirting. Once Ilya was in the hallway, the nurse closed the door, leaving Shane alone in the quiet, dimly lit room.

Shane stretched, looked around the room before getting up and toeing off his shoes. He pushed the blankets aside and slid into bed, settling onto the firm mattress and adjusting to its creaks.

Once he rested his head on the pillow, he knew he was a goner. It smelled like Ilya, and if he closed his eyes, it was easy to imagine that they were back home.

That image, that hope, was enough for him to relax and fall asleep.

-&-

When Ilya entered the room, the first thing he saw was Shane curled up in his bed. The curtains had been drawn, but light still slipped through the gaps, illuminating parts of Shane. His mouth hung open; a bit of dried drool clung to the corner of it, his freckles scrunched as he breathed deeply.

Ilya rubbed his crucifix, hoping to tame the overflow of emotions in his chest. He was hardly the sentimental type, but he couldn't help thinking Shane looked *beautiful* at that moment.

"I can go wake him up," the nurse said gently, and Ilya grabbed the edge of her shirt, swearing under his breath that he hadn't been fast enough to grab her arm.

"Can we— can we let him sleep? I can sit in the chair?" Ilya asked quietly, keeping his eyes on Shane who stretched out his body. The bags under Shane's eyes were unavoidable.

The nurse pursed her lips, looking between Ilya and Shane.

"Just for... thirty minutes?" Ilya pleaded, as she shook her head.

"We can do fifteen minutes *and* I'm putting a timer, okay? You really need to rest. It was a big day today," she said, as she pushed the wheelchair closer to the armchair next to the bed, careful to lock the wheelchair.

Ilya gripped the arms of the wheelchair, slowly pushing himself up to a standing position. Breathing heavily through his nose, he grabbed onto the nurse's arm, who helped him pivot in the right direction such that he could lower himself into the armchair. His head hit the back of the chair. A bead of sweat collected at his hairline, and he wiped it away.

"Fifteen minutes, okay?" the nurse said, unlocking the chair and quietly wheeling it out of the room.

Ilya cracked open his eyes and shifted his gaze over to Shane's sleeping face. He smiled at Shane, clearly at ease in the room, finally resting. Ilya placed a hand over his crucifix, fiddling it between his fingers.

His mind, on long days like these, was hazy. The thoughts he usually had in English were now in Russian. It was harder to understand conversations— harder to have them. The same insecurity and panic that he had when he first moved to the States resurfaced. It felt like he was eighteen again, at the end of a parking lot, having a beautiful freckled boy tell him to go smoke or move somewhere. Panicking that he wouldn't understand, fearing he'd make a fool out of himself all at once.

At least, this time, he had the freckled boy by his side.

-&-

Shane jolted awake in the dim room, practically panting as he looked around, completely disoriented. He saw the nurse rousing Ilya, who blinked slowly as she shot Shane a reproachful look.

"Is he okay? Did something happen?" Shane asked, tumbling out of bed and nearly dragging half the sheets with him as he crossed to the armchair and dropped to his knees beside it. Shane's hand was on Ilya's forearm, rubbing his thumb over the exposed skin lightly. The walker was placed in front of Ilya.

"Nothing bad happened. We came back from PT. You were sleeping, and Ilya didn't want to wake you up. We made a deal that I'd come back in fifteen minutes to wake you both up so that Ilya can have his bed back. You have impeccable timing," the nurse said, as Ilya hummed slightly.

"*Ty normal'no pospal?*" Ilya asked softly.

"*Da, khorosho proshla terapiya?*" Shane replied, swallowing, as his mind scrambled if he had asked the right thing.

Ilya smiled and replied, "*Da, no mne nuzhna moya krovat', izvini,*" Shane chuckled, his heart rate slowing down.

"Let's get you to bed then," Shane said, stepping back as Ilya scooted himself to the edge of his armchair. Ilya breathed heavily as he placed his hands on the arm rest, waiting a second, before standing, though with less confidence than earlier in the day. His hands went to the walker, the nurse ready by his side.

"Two steps, and we can pivot," she said encouragingly, as Ilya took one deliberate step, hesitating with the second step.

"You're doing good, let's get you to pivot," the nurse said, as Ilya swallowed, and carefully pivoted on the spot before starting to sit down on the bed. His arms trembled on the walker, and the nurse quickly helped him lower onto the bed. Ilya closed his eyes, breathing heavily as he gripped the edge of the bed as the nurse moved the walker out of the way.

"One leg at a time, okay?" the nurse reminded Ilya, as he slowly swung a leg over to the bed. The nurse helped with the other leg, guiding it as he scooted onto the bed.

“Very athletic, you see why they pay me so much?” Ilya joked with the nurse, as she helped with arranging the pillows.

“You’ll be on the ice in no time. Big deal that you stood up so much in Physical Therapy. It’s the hottest gossip around these halls,” the nurse said, throwing a smile at Shane. Shane hovered closer, his body tensing as if he had to catch him. “Seriously, all the physical therapists *rave* about him, he’s doing good work.”

Ilya snorted and settled into the pillows. “They say that about everyone,” he mumbled, adjusting his shoulders.

“I’ll be back later today, get some rest,” the nurse said, leaving the room as Shane resumed his own spot in the armchair.

“You could have woken me up, I don’t want you to over exert yourself,” Shane said, rubbing a hand over his face.

“Yes, but I didn’t *want* to wake you up. You needed the sleep too,” Ilya said, his eyes still closed but his hand reached out to the side, moving around to find where Shane’s hand was resting.

Shane paused, then gave a small nod, taking Ilya’s hand and steadying it in his grip. “Yeah, I think... you’re right,” Shane said softly.

“I am always right,” Ilya said, yawning as Shane squeezed his hand, chuckling.

“Hope your stay in my room was good,” Ilya said, his head tilting over to where Shane was sitting.

“Five out of five stars, I’ll recommend it to everyone,” Shane said, letting his own grin take over his face.

“Hm, wish I could say that about the guest. Four out of five stars for drooling on my pillow,” Ilya teased, causing Shane to quickly wipe at his mouth, horrified that he’d slept deeply enough to *drool*.

Before he could respond, though, Ilya’s breaths had slipped into deep breathing. The kind Shane recognized as him being completely passed out.

Shane slowly pulled his hand out from Ilya’s, before making himself comfortable on the armchair. He pulled out his headphones and phone, scrolling as he flipped between music apps and streaming platforms.

He plugged in his headphones in, looking over at Ilya, and started watching a spy show. His shoulders relaxed as he was able to fully immerse himself in the plot points.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

kvadraty (RU): Squares

Blyat (RU): Fuck/Shit

Ostan'sya, pospi. Prijatno vozvrashchat'sya v krovati s tvoim zapakhom (RU): Stay, sleep. It's nice coming back to a bed that smells like you.

Ty normal'no pospal (RU): Did you sleep well?

Da, khorosho proshla terapiya? (RU): Yes. Did therapy go well?

Da, no mne nuzhna moya krovat', izvini (RU): Yes, but I need my bed, sorry.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Not *entirely* sure what happened but we do have a lot more new readers. Welcome!

Updates for this story are posted place every Sunday and Tuesday. Please make sure to prioritize your self-care above all else.

If you'd like to be friends, you can find me on Tumblr @narglesinroses.

I love reading your comments, they make my day!

And with that, I'll see you on Tuesday 

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

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

After the away game, Shane found it easier to breathe. When he walked into Ilya's room, he no longer had flashes of Georgia but instead saw a place where he could relax with Ilya by his side. It was easier to be in the room with Ilya than anywhere else in his life. The tones of Georgia were *finally* fading.

In the second week, a therapist came into the room with a walker. Shane was sitting by Ilya's bedside, scrolling on his phone.

"Ilya, are you ready for your walk down the hallway? It's good practice," the therapist said confidently, wiggling her eyebrows with a grin.

Shane, who had only seen Ilya with a walker for pivoting or sitting down, slowly started to panic. All the ways it could go wrong physically, or even worse for Ilya's self-confidence, began piling up in his mind. Shane shoved his hands in his hoodie and stared at the whiteboard.

GOALS: Gait prep (parallel bars), transfer independence (chair & bed), speech clarity drills

"Romantic walk? No beach. *Izvini*," Ilya asked, a small smile on his face as Shane huffed out a laugh.

"Yes. Okay, let's go," Shane said as Ilya moved his legs over the bed and slowly stood up. He shuffled toward the walker, gripping it tightly when he reached it. A small exhale of relief passed through the room.

Shane beamed. He didn't want to make a big deal of it, but it *was* a big deal that Ilya reached the walker without assistance.

"No holding hands during the walk. I'll have to chaperone the date, but it'll be good," the physical therapist said brightly, throwing a wink at Shane as Ilya straightened.

When they went out to the hallway, Shane followed Ilya's pace. The walker scraped against the floor as Ilya poured effort into each step. Every step was physically demanding, as Shane could tell by the small sweat drops on Ilya's forehead.

They stopped at different markers in the hallway, pausing beneath the framed portraits of the doctors for several minutes before moving on. They stopped again where the portraits gave way to generic stock artwork.

The therapist reminded Ilya to take a few breaths, then a few steps. Always encouraging breaks. Shane stayed silent throughout the walk, wanting to make sure he was being

supportive rather than a detractor.

His silence could also be attributed to the pride he felt in Ilya's progress. He knew if he thought too long about it, he'd get choked up and do something completely embarrassing like *cry*.

A week ago, he was struggling to stand.

Two weeks ago, in Savannah, even swallowing had been a workout of its own.

How could he *not* be proud?

When they reached the end of the hallway, beneath the glowing exit sign, Ilya panted over his walker. "Okay. I'm tired. Turn around?" Ilya asked the therapist, who nodded.

The three of them made their way back down the hallway. By the time they reached Ilya's room, the full twenty meters had taken twenty minutes there and back.

-&-

GOALS: Gait training (walker, supervised), conversation endurance (20 mins), screen reintroduction

Later in the week, Shane's parents came to visit. His dad was quick to enter the room and give Ilya a hug before pulling a chair to sit next to the bed. His mom entered slowly, clutching a tote bag filled to the top with clothing. She gently placed the bag down before going over to Ilya to give him a hug.

"I, uh, brought you some items," she said quietly before pulling back toward the bag. Ilya gave Shane a confused look. Shane shrugged and looked back at his mom.

She placed a bundle of clothes on top of the dresser, sorting them into neat piles of shirts, pants, and underwear. She carefully placed the clothes into their spots, resting a hand on each one to steady herself. Shane squinted as he noticed the tags hanging from the clothing items.

No one in the room spoke. Shane's dad had shifted his gaze over to the window as Shane and Ilya tilted their heads, watching Yuna organize clothes. Everyone was aware that this was *something*.

Finally, when the tote bag looked like it might fold into itself, Yuna reached down and pulled out a box with a picture of a phone and a matching case. She pressed her lips together as she held the packages to her chest protectively.

"A phone?" Ilya asked, squinting at the box as his mom took tentative steps forward.

"I heard you're able to have one now. And when I first heard about your accident, before flying over, I went to the store and bought extra clothes. And a phone, thinking that you'd lost yours. I've been holding onto it until now," she said quietly.

“I didn’t know you did that, Mom,” Shane said, staring at the phone and the piles of clothes on the dresser. His throat tightened as he imagined his mom driving from store to store, making sure Ilya had clothes he liked and a phone that worked. Shane gripped his forearm to steady himself.

“It never felt like the right time,” she said, pulling the phone out of the box, snapping the large case in place.

“We were able to transfer your number and you’re on our family plan. It was just easier to do it that way.”

“Shouldn’t I be on Shane’s plan?” Ilya asked, swiveling his head between Shane and his mom.

Shane’s mom paused with a confused look as Shane’s cheeks heated up. “Shane *is* on our plan. We still pay his phone bill,” she said slowly, looking over at Shane who ducked his face as Ilya started to laugh.

“Shane, you are a *millionaire* and you are on a family plan?” Ilya said teasingly.

“Well, now you are too. Maybe you can use your injury to get my mom to let us on our *own* plan-”

“No,” Ilya said sharply. The room went silent as he closed his eyes and shook his head. “Sorry. No. This is nice. A family plan,” Ilya said as he took the phone from Shane’s mom. The phone tilted awkwardly in his hand. He struggled to press the button to turn the phone on and swore in Russian before the screen lit up.

The brightness made Ilya wince before he let the phone slip into his lap and squeezed his eyes shut. A second later, he covered his face with his hands and hunched over, rubbing at it.

“Sorry,” Ilya said, breathing heavily. Shane’s mom walked over, placed an arm around his back, and rubbed his shoulders.

“Nothing to be sorry about. It’s very nice to have a son who *wants* to be on the plan,” she said softly, putting her forehead against Ilya’s shoulder as he lowered his hands, eyes still closed but a smile on his face now.

“The nurse has to keep the phone at their station for this week, and over time they’ll let you use it more,” Shane said gently, stepping closer to the bed.

“There’s one other thing,” Shane’s mom started, giving Shane a quick glance before continuing. Shane’s stomach started to twist, knowing that had to come next.

“You’ll be getting emails soon from Farah. It has to do with Crowell. No decisions need to be made soon, but we want you and Shane to be aware of the options,” she said as Shane stared out the window, his hands curled into fists.

“Crowell? What about him?” Ilya tensely asked, looking between Shane and his mom.

“The emails outline options if you want to take legal action. Again, nothing needs to be decided, but Farah and I want you both aware of what’s happening. You have plenty of time to catch up since these legal matters move slowly,” his mom repeated gently.

Shane tore his gaze from the window and looked at Ilya. “I’m on the email threads. We can talk about any questions you have... I haven’t been completely following. I’m waiting until after the playoffs to really read through everything,” Shane said.

“You are waiting to see how the team treats you through the playoffs?” Ilya asked. Shane hitched a breath before nodding.

“Yes. Honestly, *yes*.” Shane said, avoiding both his mom’s and Ilya’s gazes.

“Has the team been—” his mom started before Shane cut her off.

“I *don’t* want to talk about it,” Shane said curtly, trying not to get annoyed at the exchanged glances between Ilya and his mom.

Shane’s mom coughed, “I brought your laptop and thought we could start doing some transfers. Would that be something you want to do?” she asked in an overly chipper voice, still looking at Ilya.

Over the next few hours they slowly downloaded apps and logged Ilya into the accounts. Contact lists were synced, photo albums restored, and some music apps were installed. Shane’s mom had also brought headphones with her, so Ilya could listen to music or podcasts during the downtime.

“One thing before I give the phone away,” Ilya said, after most things had been synced.

Shane had thought Ilya was going to write a message to Svetlana. Instead, he watched as Ilya opened Photos and tapped on “Boring”. On the screen were photos of Ilya and Shane from the night Ilya took a selfie. Ilya made it his lockscreen, his thumb hovered over the photo, a small smile, before he put the phone screen down.

“Where is this photo from?” Shane’s mom asked, picking it up and staring down at the phone. Her lips twitched into a smile. “Oh, Shane, I like your hair short,” she said as she fawned over the picture.

“Las Vegas, awards, 2014,” Ilya said quickly, shutting his eyes and rubbing his fists over them. “I always make sure the photos are there when I get a new phone. And now I can make it the background,” he said simply.

Shane blinked rapidly at the information. “I didn’t know that,” Shane said quietly as Ilya frowned.

“I told you? Right?” Ilya said, looking confused.

Shane shook his head. "I don't think you did. I would remember, or I hope I would," Shane said, taking the phone and staring at the two of them. He thought of how many phones Ilya had owned over the years and how many times those photos had traveled with him.

Shane's chest tightened as a memory surfaced. Earlier in the year, Ilya had sent him the photos, and Shane *foolishly* assumed it was an attempt to start a sexting thread.

It was a punch in the gut to realize Ilya had been reaching for a different kind of intimacy.

-&-

"I'm a terrible boyfriend," Shane mumbled in his next therapy session.

"What makes you say that?" his therapist asked gently, a small look of curiosity on her face as Shane lifted his head out of his hands. She wore an overlarge cardigan, her head tilted to the side. Her pen hovered, ready to take notes.

"I just... because I missed half the signs that my boyfriend loves me and would do anything?" Shane said, cutting himself off as his therapist nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"Because he moved to a different country, a different team, and I've been completely oblivious to all of it?" Shane blurted out.

"Hm, that is a big deal. It seems like you really are noticing it right now," she said, jotting down notes as Shane fiddled with his hands.

Shane nodded, "Yeah, *finally*. It just *sucks* that I didn't pick it up sooner," Shane whined, tilting his head back as he stared at the ceiling, letting his hands drift to the couch.

"What triggered these thoughts? Did something happen recently?"

Shane sighed, still staring up at the ceiling. "It's a stupid reason. Like, *really* dumb," he confessed.

"Why is it dumb?" she asked in a calm tone, one without judgment.

Shane paused as he wrestled with the memory playing on repeat in his mind. He pursed his lips as he tried to explain how stupid he felt. "Ilya and I, years ago, before we were even a couple... had to present at some award show about sportsmanship. Everyone thought we hated each other, so there was a whole bit about taking a selfie and Ilya *actually* took one. I never knew that," Shane said quietly. "But then, months ago, he sent me the photo and I thought... well, it's not uncommon for him to do that." Shane started to stumble over his words, his face flushing as he started to pick at his thumbnail.

"Uncommon for him to do what?" his therapist prodded gently as Shane shifted his gaze over to the artwork on the side of the wall, his face on fire.

“I thought he sent the photos for... sexting purposes,” Shane said in a rush, his therapist leaning forward to catch the words. “But instead, the other day when I was at rehab, he admitted that he saved those photos from the night and transferred them from phone to phone over the years. This was *before* we were a couple. Before... everything! He never let me know he cared about us before we became an *us*, I mean, I suspected it but this just proved it.” Shane said, swallowing hard after everything he’d just poured out.

His therapist jotted something down before looking up, “And he told you this directly?”

Shane shifted in his seat. “Well, no, but sort of?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, watching him carefully.

Shane ran a hand through his hair, “He got a phone. He’s been cleared for minimal screen use, and he said it was tradition for him to transfer the photos there. And then he made it his lockscreen.”

“Did he ever tell you this before the accident?” she asked, cocking her eyebrows up.

Shane shook his head, letting his eyes fall down to the couch. “Never. But I should have *known* when he texted me the first time about this.”

“Why should you have known?”

Shane shrugged, “Shouldn’t I just be able to know? Like... isn’t that the point of relationships?”

Even when Shane said it, it sounded ridiculous.

“Is that something he’s asked of you?” his therapist asked as Shane shifted in his seat.

“No, I mean... I think I should be more aware.”

“Do you think that he expects that from you?”

Shane shrugged. “I... don’t know, actually. I just assumed.”

His words hung in the air as his therapist hummed softly in thought. She gazed at him behind her glasses as Shane shifted in his seat again.

“I guess I should talk to him?” Shane said questioningly as his therapist nodded encouragingly. “But is now a bad time to ask him?”

“Why would now be a bad time?”

Shane’s brows furrowed as he narrowed his eyes at his therapist. “Because he’s in rehab? And he has to deal with more than just our relationship?”

“Based on what you said earlier, the relationship matters to him. Relationships evolve, *especially* during times like these. You won’t know what he needs unless you ask. What’s the worst that can happen if you ask him today what he needs?”

Shane’s mind went blank. “I can’t think of anything,” he said honestly.

“And what’s the best that can happen if you ask him?”

“He tells me how to be a better boyfriend?” Shane said hesitantly.

“That sounds like something worth trying. What do you think?” she asked, tilting her head again before glancing at the clock, a subtle signal that their time was up.

Shane nodded but bit down on his cheeks at the overwhelming task of asking his boyfriend the simplest question.

-&-

Shane arrived later than usual to visit Ilya. Between practice and therapy, he grossly underestimated how much time he needed to get to Ilya. He figured he could sneak in quietly since Ilya was supposed to have physical therapy.

Shane was surprised when he walked in to see Ilya resting on his bed, headphones in.

“Late practice?” Ilya asked, taking off the headphones as Shane shrugged off his coat.

Shane bit his lip and ran a hand through his hair. A slight blush crept on his cheeks.

“Actually, therapy. I don’t know if you remember but—”

“I remember,” Ilya said sharply before taking a deep breath.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that,” Shane said, feeling guilty.

“Why now? Therapy.” Ilya asked, clarifying at Shane’s initial confused face.

“Oh, uh,” Shane mumbled awkwardly as he sat in the chair next to Ilya. His hands rested on his lap. “I mean, people said I should and... while you were in a coma, I realized how shitty I was at being a boyfriend.”

Ilya’s face fell. “Shane, no. *You* weren’t a bad boyfriend.”

Shane clenched his jaw as he shook his head, staring down at the floor and focusing on the tiles. “Ilya, I never *fully* realized the sacrifices you made for us. And I don’t *like* that I didn’t realize it,” Shane said, his anger fully directed at himself, as Ilya sat quietly.

Shane’s voice trembled as he forced himself to look up at Ilya, whose hazel eyes were wide in fear. “When your accident happened, I thought, ‘If he dies, I die. I can’t do this without him’.” Shane said quietly, swallowing the lump in his throat as Ilya took a deep breath. Shane paused as he thought through his next lines, letting the silence grow louder in the room.

“I don’t want to lose you. *Ever*. And I want to be better for you. I want to know what I can do to be a good boyfriend to you. So if there’s something I can do... I want to know. I love you,” Shane said, putting his hand on the bed. Ilya grabbed it, squeezing it as tight as he could as his lip trembled.

Ilya swallowed loudly as he looked up at the ceiling. “Funny,” Ilya said quietly, “is why *I* went to therapy.” Shane looked at him, unsure what he was implying because to him, Ilya was *perfect*.

“What do you mean? You’re the best boyfriend anyone can ask for-”

“I’m not!” Ilya said loudly as he ripped his hand away from Shane to cover his face. Shane stayed still as he watched Ilya try to calm himself down. “Before the accident, I felt like *her*. I wanted to sleep. I felt sad. Heavy. I was numb.”

Shane’s mouth fell open as his stomach lurched. “You’re not saying-” Shane hurriedly asked, wanting to rip Ilya’s hands off his face to see him clearly.

“No. But maybe.” Ilya said quietly, letting his hands fall back onto the bed as Shane wrapped his own around them, his turn to squeeze tightly. “Galina helps,” Ilya said softly, avoiding Shane’s eyes.

Shane pressed his lips together as he stared down at the bed, focusing on the blanket fibers. “I hate that I didn’t know and I’m so sorry Ilya, I should’ve-”

“Sh, Shane, no,” Ilya whispered and Shane shook his head, blinking quickly.

“Just know that you’re never going to scare me off. I’m never giving up on you, or on us. I stay, remember?” Shane said quietly, squeezing their hands tightly and looking up at Ilya.

Ilya gave him a sad look, his lips twitching, “What if you can’t help?”

Shane bit his lip, loosening his grip on Ilya’s hands before tightening them again. “I stay. Until I can. You tell me what you need and I’ll do it. Even if it’s nothing, even if it’s just holding your hand,” Shane said softly.

“Would you tell me? If you were sad?” Ilya asked, shifting his gaze down to the blanket.

Shane hitched his breath, “I... would. I’ve been... not great at that lately. But I don’t want to talk about it, and it’s just my team, and maybe it’s just the playoffs,” Shane tumbled through his words.

“They are not being nice, are they?”

Shane shook his head, “No, no, they are not. But I just... hope things could change after the playoffs. If we make it past the playoffs, things could change, right?” Shane asked, feeling pathetic.

Ilya gave him a sympathetic smile, “Maybe, maybe things can change. But if not... free agent

soon?”

Shane swallowed, “Yeah, free agent.”

Shane hoped it didn’t come to that.

-&-

In the third week, Ilya was granted more independence with his walker. As he proudly told Shane, they were now allowed to have unsupervised hallway dates. Shane grinned as he stared at the whiteboard.

GOALS: Gait symmetry focus, conversation tolerance, dynamic balance, independent walker use (ask Shane for walk – approved)

Shane knew Ilya was trying to make it *look* like it was spontaneous, but Ilya wore pants that were slightly nicer than his tracksuits. He was still wearing one of Shane’s hoodies. Shane was touched and couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

They walked in silence down the hallway. Ilya was much more confident with the walker this week compared to the previous week. The therapists credited the fact that he’d been in excellent shape prior to the accident.

“I am a boring date,” Ilya said quietly, pausing as he huffed in the hallway and looked sideways at Shane.

Shane frowned. “How?”

“Can’t talk and walk. It’s hard to do two things at once,” Ilya sighed, leaning a bit more on the walker. Shane bit his tongue, stopping himself from offering to walk back.

“It’s okay. One day at a time,” he said as Ilya shook his head.

“This *should* be easier. I was *only* sleeping for two weeks,” Ilya said bitterly, rolling his eyes.

Shane frowned, biting back the word “coma”.

“It *will* get easier. You’re putting in the work. Plus, all your PTs rave about you,” Shane said gently, patting Ilya on the shoulder. Ilya nodded, “Can we go back?” Ilya asked, and Shane nodded as they made their way back to Ilya’s room.

Inside, Ilya breathed heavily as he leaned against the walker before making it back to his bed. Shane hovered to the side as Ilya sat down. Ilya was practically panting as he worked on getting a leg onto the bed. Ilya looked over at Shane, “Can you help with this one, please?” he asked quietly, and Shane rushed forward to help Ilya’s other leg on the bed.

“They feel heavy,” Ilya muttered as he leaned back.

“It was a long walk,” Shane said as he lifted the leg onto the bed, “Plus, shorter time. You’re getting faster.”

“Coach Hollander, have you been tracking our walks?” Ilya teased. Shane blushed, and Ilya laughed.

“Want help with the pillows?” Shane asked, and Ilya nodded his head as they started to rearrange the pillows so Ilya could sit up. Once they were done, Shane was about to move away when Ilya grabbed his arm, keeping Shane close, their foreheads nearly touching.

Shane took a quick breath as he stared down at Ilya, his curls had grown enough to cover up his head scar. Ilya lifted his other hand, slowly cupping Shane’s jaw and Shane instinctively closed his eyes and leaned into Ilya’s hand.

Ilya’s hand moved down his jawline and paused at Shane’s chin, holding it steady.

Shane’s mind flashed to all the times Ilya had done this – up against the wall, in their bed, bodies flushed–

“Shane?” Ilya said softly, as Shane opened his eyes to see Ilya’s lips part slightly. “Can I?” Ilya asked, and Shane nodded, unsure what he was agreeing to as Ilya’s thumb slowly traced Shane’s lips once before pausing. Shane let his lips part slightly as he sighed, forcing himself to stay still and be present.

Shane could feel Ilya’s breath on his lips. Ilya angled his face, and Shane, knowing him well enough, leaned in. Their lips met, soft and tentative, and Shane closed his eyes. Ilya deepened the kiss by carefully opening his mouth, as if unsure. Shane followed through before Ilya pulled back quickly; Shane nearly fell forward. A flush spread on Ilya’s face and he was breathing heavily, as if he had completed a lap down the hall. His hand dropped from Shane’s face.

“Is okay?” he asked tentatively, blinking up at Shane.

Shane’s heart was beating so fast, he thought it was going to break out of his chest. He held himself back. If he kissed him again, he wouldn’t stop. But Ilya was gulping air as if they had run, and Shane forced himself to be gentle. All Shane wanted to do was feel Ilya’s lips on his, have his body close to his own, and reaffirm that he was *still* alive.

He hated that he needed reassurance when he could *see* Ilya breathing.

“Yes, more than okay,” Shane said, leaning over to kiss Ilya on the forehead, blinking down rapidly. Surprised by the tears gathered in his eyes, he rubbed at his chest as if he could slow his racing heart.

“Shane,” Ilya said softly, his brows pinched together. Ilya reached out his hand again to cup Shane’s face, there was a slight tremble as his thumb drifted over Shane’s freckles.

Shane shut his eyes, pressure building up behind them, “Sorry, it’s just a lot,” he said shakily.

His pulse was still racing, and Shane was *petrified*. Cursing to himself, he pressed his palm to Ilya's chest, letting his fingers fan out as he felt the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. Gripping Ilya's shirt, he felt his own pulse begin to slow.

Ilya was *alive*.

Shane opened his eyes to match Ilya's hazel eyes, "When you were asleep, I was terrified I'd never be able to kiss you again or talk to you and... I'm so happy you're still alive and awake." Shane choked out as Ilya let out a strangled sob and sat up, wrapping his arms roughly around Shane. Shane returned the embrace, burying his face in the crook of Ilya's neck as he let himself break down.

"I am here. I love you. I am *alive*. I *stay*, remember?" Ilya whispered in Shane's ear, giving open mouth kisses to Shane's neck with every confirmation. When Ilya fatigued, muttering the word "dizzy", the breath on Shane's neck was *still* enough to make his blood rush.

"I stay too," Shane whispered back as the two held on to each other, Ilya stroking Shane's back as Shane did his best to steady his breathing.

"Was the kiss so bad I made you cry?" Ilya teased lightly as Shane let out a laugh, pulling back and resting his forehead against Ilya's.

"No. Probably my favorite kiss so far."

"Good. Would be awkward to ask PT for kissing help," Ilya joked, and Shane let out a laugh.

"I'm the only one who can help you with kissing. And we take this slow. No rushing." Shane said, brushing his thumb across Ilya's cheek. "I remember what it was like to have a concussion, the headaches after this stuff is not fun."

Ilya leaned back, a crooked smile on his face as he bit his bottom lip, "Did Shane Hollander *actually* touch himself after his concussion?"

Shane's face flushed and that was all the answer Ilya needed as he let out a laugh.

"You still want me?" Ilya asked shyly.

"All the damn time." Shane whispered as Ilya grinned.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Something a little sweet here. Hope you enjoyed the hallway date as much as I did writing it. Thank you for reading! As always, comments feed the writer's soul. I'll see

you all on Sunday 

Chapter 22: Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

On the day of the first playoff game, Shane drove to rehab, breaking the oldest rule that he and Ilya had: no talking during playoffs. But Shane figured if there was ever a time to break tradition, it was now.

Shane entered the room to find Ilya getting ready for PT, a nurse standing by as he transferred from bed to walker. Ilya looked up, surprised.

“But today—”

“I just wanted to say hi before I go to the arena,” Shane mumbled, glancing at the schedule and realizing the list was longer than usual.

GOALS: Gait symmetry (walker), dynamic balance, dual-task walking (conversation + gait), screen tolerance 30 mins

It was Ilya’s turn to look embarrassed. “I told them that you would not visit. Tradition. So I asked for more activities.”

“I’ll give you five minutes. I’ll be back soon,” the nurse said, stepping out.

Shane smiled, taking in the longer list again. “I can adhere to the tradition—”

“We can start a new one,” Ilya said softly, reaching out. Shane stepped closer and clasped his hand.

“Good luck on your game today,” Ilya whispered, lifting Shane’s hand to his lips and letting the kiss linger before releasing it.

“Thank you.” Shane leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Don’t want to work you up before PT,” he teased, and Ilya chuckled.

“I am saving my screen time for the game. I will watch,” Ilya said.

“Save the screen time for our texts. I like seeing your name pop up,” Shane said, clasping his hands behind his back. Ilya rolled his eyes, but there was a smile on his face.

“Okay. I will save *some* screen time to text you,” Ilya said, just as the nurse strode in, arms crossed.

Ilya looked toward the door and sighed. “*Udachi, lyubimyy.*”

-&-

The first game against the New York Admirals was a narrow win for the Montreal Voyageurs. To his disbelief, Shane got time on the ice. But the team was fracturing.

Before, Shane trusted his teammates to see him and make the pass. Now he found himself tapping his stick and yelling out, only to be passed over. Sure, he got a puck or two but that was only when there was truly no options left.

The team moved in disjointed units, and it was obvious something was breaking down inside the Montreal Voyageurs team.

-&-

Shane’s parents were there to pick him up after the game.

His mom spent the drive to Shane’s house critiquing everything the Voyageurs had done wrong: how Comeau missed him on clean passes, how the goalie was rattled, and don’t get her started on the defense—

“Yuna, maybe we can give it a rest. We can talk about it tomorrow,” Shane’s dad said, catching Shane’s eye in the rearview mirror as Shane rested his head against the window, watching the city blur past.

-&-

Scott Hunter: *I know we’re in the playoffs, but reach out if you need anything.*

Scott Hunter: *Depending on timing, I’d love to visit you and Ilya.*

Shane: *Let’s chat after playoffs. I’m sure Ilya would like that.*

Scott Hunter: *I’ll tolerate being told I’m ancient for a day. That’s my get-well gift!*

Shane: :)

-&-

When Shane entered the room the next day, his parents were already sitting with Ilya. They spent the morning catching up on his progress in PT.

No one mentioned the game until the nurse came in, brightly congratulating Shane on an *excellent* first game. Shane’s stomach twisted as Ilya shot him a sympathetic look.

-&-

Games 2 and 3 were brutal. Shane still got ice time, but it was clear the team was pushing him out. During the power play, he was rotated off.

He stopped tapping his stick passes and winced at every sloppy play.

“Don’t sweat it Holly! Maybe next time you’ll be in the play!” Comeau shouted. Shane tilted his head, reminding himself the penalty box wouldn’t be his only punishment if he went after a teammate.

-&-

On the drive back, Yuna’s commentary shifted from how the team was playing to how the hockey world was reacting.

“*Everyone* is confused by how the team is playing. It is *absurd* not to rely on you. The pieces coming out from *ESPN*, *Man in the Crease*, and—”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not going to change the coach or the team use me,” Shane muttered, staring straight ahead. .

“They *should* be paying attention. The media is calling it out as mistreatment—”

“*S’il te plait, je ne veux pas en parler,*” Shane said sharply, and the car fell silent. He exhaled. “*Désolé, je suis juste fatigué.*”

“*D’accord,*” his mom said quietly.

Shane shut his eyes and leaned against the window.

-&-

Shane’s parents stayed at their hotel while he went to rehab the next day. Despite the playoffs, he prioritized speech therapy whenever he could, even working with the rehab to structure his schedule around it.

GOALS: Gait symmetry (walker, 100m supervised), controlled turns, dynamic balance, dual-task walking (conversation + head turns), screen tolerance (40 mins)

“Ilya, walk to the second marker and tell me five breakfast items. In English,” the therapist said.

Ilya snorted and rolled his eyes. “Easy. Best meal of the day.”

The therapist smirked, “Great, can’t wait to hear what you have to say. And Shane?”

Shane lifted his head from his chest, “I’m going to need you to let him struggle a bit. Think you can handle it?” the therapist asked.

Shane nodded, his jaw tight, refusing to look at Ilya. He *hated* watching these exercises as

much as Ilya hated doing them.

Ilya gripped the walker and took a deliberate step. “Cereal.”

Two more steps. “Eggs.”

Just before the first marker: “Toast.”

His breathing grew heavier as he passed the marker. His brows furrowed. “Oatmeal?”

Shane folded his arms, knowing he couldn’t intervene.

Before reaching the second marker, Ilya’s stance wobbled. He inhaled sharply and turned to the therapist, eyes wide, “Why can I not find the word for the sandwich? The one from McDonald’s? Shane, you *hate* this sandwich—”

“Ugh, a McGriddle? You count that as a breakfast—”

“*Shane*,” the therapist said sharply.

Shane threw his hands up.

“Ilya, you need to *stop* baiting Shane. Walk back to the start and list the breakfast items again. Give me a new breakfast food other than McGriddle.”

Ilya sighed, readjusting his grip. “Ilya, what are you noticing?” the therapist prompted.

Ilya bit at his bottom lip, “Hard to talk and walk.”

“Should we keep going or do you need a break?”

Ilya swallowed, glancing over to Shane before looking forward again. “Keep going.”

Ilya walked back to the starting point, “Cereal. Eggs. Toast. Oatmeal.” His voice was less certain now. Just before the start, he added, “Fruit.”

Shane allowed himself a small grin.

-&-

Montreal Voyageurs were out of the playoffs after Game 5, losing to the New York Admirals. Shane had played in the last game and tripped at a critical moment, costing them the final goal. Not that it would have mattered, given how they’d been playing.

Shane knew that even though every player had made a thousand small mistakes, no one would remember those. They’d happily place the blame on him and him alone.

Shane took off his gear slowly, staring down at his jersey. He’d worn it for nearly ten years,

won two Cups, and thought he'd lead a dynasty here. The 'C' stitched on the front was practically mocking him.

He tightened his grip and looked around the room as if it were the first time, taking in the siloed groups and averted gazes.

No one bothered lowering their voices.

"If it wasn't for fucking Rozy getting a bit shaken, we'd have *Holly* in the games that mattered," Comeau said, cutting through Shane's thoughts.

Shane shoved the jersey into his bag. He *hated* the nickname.

Hayden caught his eye, dropped his own jersey, and marched toward Comeau.

"Say that again to my *face*," Hayden spat, jabbing a finger at Comeau.

Comeau, ready to take the bait, sauntered over as all the players rushed to separate Hayden and Comeau. J.J. and Shane pulled him back by the arms while others wedged themselves between the two.

The shouting swelled and Coach Theriault came in at the last second when it was clear that he couldn't pretend not to hear anything.

"Hayden, what is this? Starting fights in the locker room? What has gotten into you?" Coach thundered as Hayden shrugged off J.J. and Shane.

"With all due respect, *Comeau* started it—" J.J. said, glaring at him.

"I don't care who started it. The point is that we *lost*. Perhaps if *some of you*," a pointed glare at Shane, "weren't distracted with personal matters, the games would have ended up differently. Even Dallas Kent is able to keep his head in the games despite his personal life exploding." Coach Theriault crossed his arms as murmurs rippled through the room.

Something inside Shane snapped. "I'd rather be distracted by my injured boyfriend than by sexual assault accusations. But hey, if that makes *me* the fucked up one, that's fine by me." Shane spoke evenly, throwing the rest of his things into his bag, sweeping more from his locker than he meant to before striding out. J.J. and Hayden close to his heels as the locker room ruptured in more disagreements.

Shane couldn't help but feel grateful. He knew what he was going to be doing next season.

-&-

The next morning, Shane drove straight to Ilya. Now that the season was over, he'd texted Farah his decision about switching teams and could finally focus on Ilya and himself. He drummed his fingers against the wheel, dreading seeing Ilya today of all days.

He knew Ilya had watched the game. He always did. If his screen time was cut, he'd figured out how to listen to the commentary instead.

Shane clenched his jaw. He *should* tell Ilya what happened in the locker room. But he didn't know how to share that without sharing everything that had led up to it. There were going to be questions as to why he wasn't outraged, and Shane wasn't sure how to communicate how numb he'd become of all it.

He killed the engine but didn't move, giving himself a moment before going inside.

-&-

Shane walked into Ilya's room, saw an empty bed and turned around, his heart picking up until he heard the toilet flush. He huffed quietly, annoyed at his own reaction. He stood off to the side as Ilya opened the door. A small smile curved on Ilya's face as he walked over with his quad cane, kissing Shane's cheek before hugging him.

"New gear?" Shane asked, looking down at the cane, marveling at how much Ilya had improved in such a short time.

"Testing it out. Still need the walker for longer walks," Ilya explained as he walked over to the bed. He carefully sat down, exhaling once he was properly seated before pulling his legs onto the bed.

"Need help with the pillows?" Shane asked and Ilya shook his head, leaning back and closing his eyes. Shane sat down in the chair beside the bed, crossing his legs and fixing his eyes on the floor.

Neither of them spoke. Shane fidgeted with his pants, unwilling to be the first to speak.

Ilya was always the braver between the two of them.

"I watched the game. Then I listened after they took the screen away."

Shane stopped fidgeting, refusing to lift his eyes from the floor, "What did you think?"

Shane heard Ilya rustle in his bed, likely turning to look at him. "Are you okay? *You* tripped."

"I'm fine. It wasn't a bad fall," Shane said quickly, crossing his arms.

Ilya huffed. "And what about your team not passing to you? Not using you on the power play?"

"They aren't *required* to pass to me or use me—"

"Shane, you are the best fucking player on their team. It is an insult that they did not use you. It is *not* fine," Ilya said angrily, while Shane continued to stare at the pattern on the floor, blinking rapidly.

“Well, it’s over now, so I don’t need to deal with the team. And... hopefully I can leave,” Shane said, sneaking a glance at Ilya, who narrowed his gaze.

“What else happened? If the team is playing poorly together, something *else* is happening.”

Shane winced, biting the inside of his cheeks. “It’s... nothing. It’s what you would expect from the team after someone comes out,” Shane stammered.

Ilya shook his head. “Scott Hunter kissed Kip on TV and his team is playing better than ever. They go out for Scott Hunter Pride nights in Las Vegas. I do not know what your team is doing but I do not think it is normal.”

“Everyone is entitled to react a certain way,” Shane mumbled as Ilya threw his hands up.

“Shane, *what* is going on? Are you going to tell me or must I use my screen time to look it up? Would *that* be better?”

Shane sucked a breath in and he closed his eyes, fiddling with his hands in his lap. He let the silence speak.

“Fine,” Ilya muttered, fumbling for his phone on the bedside table and unlocking it. Shane’s hand shot out, pushing the phone into Ilya’s lap.

Ilya glared at him before his face softened at Shane’s grimace, “It’s not been good,” Shane said weakly.

“Shane, please, tell me, what are they doing?” Ilya asked, dropping the phone in his lap.

Shane hesitated for a moment before pulling his arm back, and telling Ilya everything. From the Skype call when Ilya was in a coma, to the locker room nick names, the email being sent, and finally the final comparison of Shane to Dallas. Shane was unable to look up at Ilya during his confession, going off of the gasps and occasional swear words that slipped out as he went through the details.

As predicted, when Shane finished, Ilya’s face was drawn tight, the tendon in his jaw flexing. Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose and drew his legs up closer to his chest.

“I was *sleeping* when they did this to you, and this would not have *fucking* happened if I had just stayed awake—” Ilya’s voice rose. Shane checked over his shoulder at the door before placing his hands on the bed. The last thing either of them needed was additional guests, or worse, eavesdroppers.

“Ilya, stay calm—”

“*Idi na khuy*, do *not* tell me to stay calm,” Ilya growled as Shane jerked his hands back. The last time Ilya was this angry was on Boxing Day.

“If the plane hadn’t gone down, if I had not been napping and drooling, you would not have been iced out. I could have done something!” Ilya said, crossing his arms.

“You were in a fucking coma. You weren’t off sleeping!”

“I basically was,” Ilya scoffed.

Shane heard a faint ringing in his ears, a warning call. Staring down at the ground, he counted the tiles, made it to five before looking back up at Ilya, narrowing his gaze. Shane rolled his shoulders back as if trying to push the anger down.

It was a futile attempt.

“If you fucking saw yourself when you came in, trust me, you wouldn’t say you were sleeping,” Shane said coolly. Ilya stared at him defiantly.

Shane scooted his chair forward, the scraping noise doing nothing to dull the sparks already in the air. Shane placed his hands on the edge of the bed, leaving his fingers fanned out.

“I don’t know *how* you were still breathing when I first saw you. My dad thought they gave him the *wrong body* when he first saw you. If it wasn’t for your cross, my dad wouldn’t have identified you correctly. Did you know your hand was so broken and bandaged that I could only hold a thumb for the first few days? A fucking *thumb*, Ilya.” Shane formed a fist, his thumb still extended. Ilya’s eyes widened, his face paling.

“While you had a breathing tube coming out of you and kept *missing* all the wake-up windows, over and *over* and *over* again.” Shane’s palm hit the bed with each “over”. He registered Ilya’s choked breath, enough for him to still his hands on the mattress. He stared at them in disbelief.

“And then there were the partial wake-ups. Do you think it was *easy* to watch them sedate you when you asked for help? We had *no* idea if you’d fucking wake up or what kind of state you’d be in *if* you did, but yeah—you were *napping*,” Shane said sarcastically, the words dying in his throat at the sight of Ilya. His eyes squeezed shut, one hand over his mouth, while the other clutching at his stomach.

Fuck.

Shane folded in his chair, covering his face with his hands. He trembled as adrenaline swept through him, Ilya’s ragged breathing keeping him glued to the spot, “I didn’t mean it. I shouldn’t have said that,” Shane said hoarsely, looking up to see Ilya frozen in his hunched state. Shane had to look away.

“I just hate when you say you were sleeping as if you weren’t fighting for your life. Hindsight is twenty twenty, but if I had to go back in time... I’d still leave the team and be by your bedside.”

Shane heard a snuffle and he looked up to see Ilya staring up at the ceiling. His hands gripped his arms tightly. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, loosening his grip on his arms. He

lifted one hand to the side of his head, where the curls were shorter, letting his fingers trace to spot where staples once were.

“Was it really that bad?” Ilya asked, turning to look over to Shane. Shane could only nod as Ilya turned his head away from Shane and stared straight ahead. Shane leaned forward, reaching for him before stopping, waiting for Ilya’s grasp.

Ilya kept his hands in his lap, pinching the blanket between his fingers. Shane drew back and let his hands fall.

“But I am awake now. Why did you not tell me what the team did *after* I woke up?” Ilya asked.

Shane snorted. “Isn’t it obvious? I wasn’t about to dump all of this on you while you’re *here*.”

Ilya let out a bitter laugh. “Oh, so you let me lie in bed worrying about you, texting your mom to see if I missed something and my brain just forgot. Yes. This was much better—”

“You texted my mom?” Shane asked, his head snapping up.

Ilya waved his hand as if he was swatting a fly. “I was worried! And we kept trying to get you to talk—”

“I didn’t *want* to talk here. I just wanted to escape!” Shane hissed out.

“This place is an *escape* for you?” Ilya asked, scoffing as he looked around the room.

“Yes! I’m sorry to say it, but it is. I get to hang out with you, hold your hand *in public*, and go on these silly hallway dates without *worrying*. I can actually relax in the room with you.” Shane snapped, causing Ilya to go very still. “So, no, I didn’t want to talk about my shitty team behavior when I could just be here and be... happy. Which I know is fucked up to say, because I know you *hate* it here.”

“I hate it because it means I am still weak!” Ilya hissed, letting his hands drop to his sides. “Everyone makes a *huge* deal when I do something simple like walk or brush my hair on my own. It is humiliating.”

Shane looked away, replaying all the times *he* had made a big deal.

He was *royally* fucking it up.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to make you feel weak. I am just in awe of you. And I know how that must sound. Fuck.” Shane placed his hands behind his neck, trying to ease the anxiety.

“I do not know where I started from. *You* do. I don’t. No one has shown me what I looked like when I came in. Maybe it would help to know,” Ilya said quietly, his hand flexing out on the bed.

Shane's stomach curled, "My dad. He took photos. He meant to send them to my mom before she arrived, to ease her in but she took an earlier flight and he wasn't able to send them in time," Shane said, Ilya staring at him.

"I will talk to Galina and the team here. It might be a good idea. Maybe not." Ilya blinked up at the ceiling. "We are bad at communicating."

Shane sighed, rubbing at his forehead, a dull headache building. "Meera says the same thing. She tells me I should ask you what you need—"

"I need you to be honest. Tell me things even if you think I will be angry or sad or I can not help." Ilya said quickly, almost as if he had rehearsed the line a thousand times before. The hair on Shane's neck stood on end as he took in the words.

Shane squeezed his hand, "Okay. I can do that. I can start. It wasn't on purpose to keep you or my mom out... it was just to protect myself." Shane mumbled.

"I know. Well, now I *really* know. Okay, your turn, what do you need?" Ilya said pointedly.

Shane blinked. "I... don't know. I just need you to come home. I just... need to know you don't think I played awful in the games, that this wasn't my fault?" Shane's voice caught, unaware what tumbled out of his mouth until he did. He had a hard time looking at Ilya.

Ilya released Shane's hand and shifted to the edge of the bed, beckoning Shane closer. Shane leaned forward, his knees bumping up against the bed. Ilya cupped Shane's face as their foreheads touched.

"Shane, listen to me. You are the *best* player in the league. If the Voyageurs are too dumb to use you, you go somewhere else. Every team will be fighting to have you on their line. We will figure it out. But you are *not* staying on that team. I am not losing *you* to a bunch of idiots."

"You're right, I'm not," Shane said, locking his gaze with Ilya's. "I can't play with people like that. I've already texted Farah that I want to go elsewhere... if they'll have me."

Ilya's thumb traveled over Shane's freckles, "I know of one team that'll have you."

"Would they?" Shane asked, hating how *hopeful* he sounded.

"Yes. *We* are not stupid. But if you do not want that or we can't have you, another team will have you. All I ask is that if it is not Centaurs, it is somewhere warm like Florida or California," Ilya said softly. Shane laughed, a tear escaping as Ilya brushed it away.

Shane bit his lip. It was a *nice* thought to be traded to somewhere outside of Canada, but it meant a longer-distance relationship. More traveling and unsure timelines. The worry was all over Ilya's face.

"I am not losing you, Shane Hollander. Not after I cheated death. *We* will figure it out.

Okay?”

“Okay,” Shane said, grabbing Ilya’s hand and kissing the inside of his wrist. Before standing up, hesitated before pulling Ilya into a hug and burying his head in the crook of Ilya’s neck.

It took a second longer than usual for Ilya to return the embrace.

-&-

-&- **TRANSLATIONS** -&-

Udachi, lyubimyy (RU): Good luck my love

S’il te plait, je ne veux pas en parler (FR): Please, I don’t want to talk about it.

D’accord (FR): Okay

Idi na khuy (RU): Go fuck yourself

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This one was hard to write, but necessary. Thank you for trusting me with them, for reading, and for your thoughtful comments. I’ll see you on Tuesday. 

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Late that night, despite the long PT session, Ilya struggled to get his body to relax. He pressed his knuckles into the muscles above his hips, hoping to ease the tightness. After a few minutes, his strength gave out and his fist fell to the mattress. The cane was a gift, but his forearms were sore from it.

Ilya shifted onto his back and stared at the ceiling. His lower back ached, his calves were in knots, and he knew if he rolled onto his side—the way he had slept his entire life—it would only make everything worse. But he couldn't fall asleep.

Absentmindedly, his hand trailed up to his cross, tracing its outline—

If it wasn't for your cross, my dad wouldn't have identified you correctly.

His hand dropped to his side as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the argument from earlier. It wasn't as if he hadn't thought about how he looked when he first arrived. He still had memories from the early days in Savannah—when he looked in the mirror, the staples glinting in the light and bruises that were *so* pronounced, even when everyone insisted they looked “basically healed.”

Of course he had thought of Shane, Yuna, David, Svetlana—the team seeing him in a *coma*. He squirmed in his bed. It was easier to think of himself as *asleep* than in a *coma*.

He was uncomfortable with how many people cared about him. On long days like these, when his thoughts started to twist and turn, the comments from his father were always readily available. It made it impossible to understand why people were still on his side, despite everything he had put them through—even if he *knew*, logically, it wasn't his fault.

How do you thank someone for putting their lives on hold just to watch you sleep? Do they know he would do it for them?

It weighed heavily on his mind, and all he wanted to do was to disappear under it. Shrink himself small so as not to be a burden to all that he loved. A ludicrous, dramatic thought, but it was hard to break old habits.

He hated how familiar and comforting the thought was this late at night.

There was phantom stiffness in his fingers. He *knew* he had broken fingers and a fractured wrist, but he was lucky they had mostly healed before he woke up. It was strange to wake up in a body where he could only trace the origin of half his pain.

A familiar pressure began to build behind his forehead and Ilya closed his eyes, muttering a prayer under his breath. Could his mom hear him?

He *really* didn't want a migraine after today.

-&-

Before Shane could enter Ilya's room in the morning, a nurse stopped him and beckoned him aside. Shane sighed. He already knew what she was going to say.

"Ilya isn't doing well today. Migraine. He may not be up for company. I'm sorry, Shane," she said sympathetically. Shane turned back to the door, his shoulders slumping.

"Can I still go in? I can say hi and then leave."

The nurse smiled at him kindly. "Sure, that's fine. Enter the room quietly, okay?" she said, walking away as Shane stared at the door. When he left yesterday, he'd worried the fight might trigger something physical. He had *hoped* that since it was a cathartic fight for the two of them, that it would do more good than harm.

But it was *also* egotistical to think that he had caused the migraine. Ilya had days like these, even after perfectly quiet evenings or good days. With TBI, as Shane was learning, you never knew what would hit or when.

Shane forced his feet forward, shoving his guilt down as he eased the door open and slipped into the dark room. Shane blinked as his eyes adjusted, making out the outline of the bed and the lump in its center. He tried to find the whiteboard, but even that was hard to find.

There were no goals today for Ilya.

A deep groan sounded, and Shane moved to the bedside. A damp towel slipped from Ilya's face. His jaw was clenched, sheets fisted to his chest.

"Ilya?" Shane whispered, and Ilya stilled for a second before letting out a whimper. Shane reached out for the towel, it was damp and warm. Shane took it off of Ilya, "I'm going to wet this and make it colder, okay?"

Ilya tossed to his side as Shane took long strides to the bathroom. Knowing the room well enough, Shane left the lights off as he ran the faucet, waiting for the water to chill enough for him to dampen the towel. Just as the temperature felt cold enough, Shane heard Ilya's hand hit against the bedside table, knocking over the tissue box. The guttural noise coming from the other room meant one thing.

Shane left the water running and swore as he reached for the basin on the bedside. He squeezed his eyes shut and breathed through his mouth as Ilya heaved into it. Shane placed a hand on Ilya's back, rubbing slow circles. Ilya heaved until there was nothing left but air.

Shane wanted nothing more than to switch places with Ilya, to take the pain for a day – or all of it, if he could. The images flashed through his head – his palm striking against the

mattress, his own voice too loud in the small room. His stomach twisted. He should have been *better*.

Shane swallowed as Ilya heavily breathed over the basin, wiping his mouth with his hand. “*Izvini*,” Ilya whispered, “Gross. *Izvini lyubimyy, Izvini*,” Ilya repeated endlessly as Shane moved the basin to the side and lowered down to meet Ilya’s eyes. Shane stayed there until Ilya’s breathing steadied.

“It’s fine. Not gross. You’d do the same for me. I *know* you would,” Shane said, as Ilya sniffled.

“*Da*, of course,” Ilya said but his voice caught and he wouldn’t look at Shane as he lay back down. He shuddered as he settled back into the mattress.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” Shane said, as he grabbed the basin and walked to the bathroom. This time, he shut the door and turned on the light. Blinking against the brightness, he saw the faucet still running. Flustered, he emptied the basin in the toilet, flushing it quickly before returning to the sink.

He washed his hands, rinsed the basin, and set it aside before wetting two towels for Ilya. Once they were sufficiently wet, he turned off the faucet and the lights. He left the bathroom with the towels in one hand and the basin in the other.

He set the basin beside the bed and brought a towel to Ilya’s face.

“I brought you a towel for your face. I can do it or you can,” Shane said softly. A hand brushed his and he passed the towel to Ilya. Ilya dabbed at his face before trying to press the towel to his forehead.

“Ah, wait, I got a separate towel for that. Give me the dirty one, we can swap,” Shane said quickly, placing the clean towel over Ilya’s forehead the way he preferred on migraine days.

“*Izvini*,” Ilya repeated, and Shane’s guilt tightened in his throat until it was hard to breathe.

“There is *nothing* to apologize for. Do you want me to get a nurse for some anti-nausea meds?” Shane asked.

“Mhm, yes,” Ilya mumbled. Shane had to lean closer to understand.

“Do you want me to stay after I get the nurse?”

There was a pause as Ilya groaned, “*Nyet*, I want sleep. *Izvini*.”

“Ilya, it’s okay. You can kick me out. Just... call or text me, okay?”

“*Da*,” Ilya mumbled, pulling the sheets up to his chin, the white towel trapped over his forehead as he shut his eyes.

“I love you,” Shane whispered.

“*Ya lyublyu tebya,*” Ilya replied.

Shane turned on his heels and strode out of the room. Closing the door gently behind him, he walked to the nurses station blinking under the harsh lights. His phone buzzed once in his pocket, ignoring it. A nurse looked up when Shane approached the counter.

“Hey, can Ilya get some anti-nausea meds?” Shane asked. The nurse turned to the computer, typed in his credentials, and scanned his badge.

“Has he been vomiting?”

“Yeah, just now. I told him I’d check with you,” Shane said as the nurse nodded.

“I’ll need to check him and retake vitals. I know he’s been dealing with a migraine since he woke up, but we *should* be able to give him some Zofran,” the nurse said, getting up with a sigh.

“Thanks,” Shane muttered as the nurse walked down the hallway. Once he disappeared, Shane’s phone vibrated again in his pocket. Pulling out his phone, he saw the notifications and swore. He ran a hand through his hair as he pulled up the messages.

Scott Hunter: *Hey! What time works today to come and visit?*

Shane glanced down the empty hallway before hitting call. Scott picked up at the first ring.

“Hey! What’s up?” Scott answered brightly as Shane moved to the wall, letting his head fall against it.

“Hey, uh, I saw your message,” Shane said quietly, trying to find the right words.

He should have texted Scott. Easier than an awkward phone call.

“Yeah! I can swing anytime, I made sure to keep the day free so it’ll be easy to work around your schedules. I imagine Ilya has PT—”

“I’m so sorry, Scott. Today isn’t going to work,” Shane said in a rush, interrupting Scott’s excited rant. “Ilya woke up with a bad migraine and he’s not doing well. It’s just a—,” Shane pulled the phone from his ear and looked up at the ceiling, biting his lower lip. “It’s a really bad day,” he finished, swallowing as he listened to the noise on Scott’s end.

“Shane, that’s completely fine. Do what you need to do and Ilya needs to do. I’ll try to make a visit later this year or something. Hell, I’ll let him chirp at me as much as he wants,” Scott said. Shane let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

“Thanks for being so understanding.”

“Of course. Can Kip and I send flowers?” Scott said softly.

Shane gripped the front of his T-shirt. It was surreal to have his inbox filled with messages from players who swore they hated Ilya. Hell, half the league had punched Ilya on the ice at some point.

And now those same players were asking for addresses to send flowers, cards, and even donations in his name. It was confusing and overwhelming. It meant more than Shane wanted to admit.

“Yeah, of course. I can text you the addresses and all that. That’s really thoughtful, and not necessary—”

“We *want* to do that,” Scott said firmly. On the other end, Shane could hear him hesitate. “Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something else...”

Shane shifted his weight, pressing his back into the wall.

“Is this about the lawsuit?” Shane asked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“It is. Where’s your head at?”

Shane opened his mouth, then shut it again. He stared hard at the tiles underneath his shoes. “I don’t know. I hate him,” Shane said flatly, scuffing the toe of his shoe against the floor.

There was a pause before Scott spoke again.

“That makes two of us. And a lot more, rightfully so,” Scott said as Shane nodded.

“What are you going to do?” Shane asked.

“Honestly? Not sure. I’m leaning towards testifying, at least for how he impacted me. But that pales in comparison to you and Ilya.” Scott said as Shane rubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

“I’m really sorry, Shane. To you and Ilya. That was a really shitty way to be outed,” Scott said, as Shane looked up at the ceiling.

“It’s not your fault,” Shane said quickly. He never knew *what* was the right response to these types of apologies.

Ilya would know.

“I know. But it still makes me angry,” Scott said quietly.

Shane snorted. “Same.”

“Listen, I’ll let you go, but let’s talk soon. And I’d love Ilya’s number if he’s up for texting.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Thanks Scott.”

-&-

At home, Shane kept his phone on full volume, rarely letting it leave his hand as he read through emails from Farah and his mom. Every few emails, he flipped back to his texts to check for Ilya. When he saw none, he returned back to his inbox until the nagging feeling brought him back to his texts.

Shane didn’t hear from Ilya for the rest of the day.

-&-

When Shane returned to rehab the next day, he was thankful no nurse stopped him in the hallway. His mood lifted when he opened the door to Ilya’s room and saw the curtains pulled back, letting in light.

Like clockwork, Shane’s eyes went to the whiteboard, where he found the day’s lighter schedule.

GOALS: Gait training (short distance, walker only), static balance, conversation endurance (15 mins)

On Ilya’s bedside table sat a vase of large, expensive-looking flowers in every color. Shane only recognized the roses and lilies in the arrangement. It was a beautiful bouquet, no doubt from Scott and Kip, but Shane still frowned at them. They looked nicer than the grocery-store bouquets Shane had been bringing the past few weeks.

“*Dobroye utro moy lyubimyy,*” Ilya said tiredly from his bed. Shane turned toward him, his chest tightening at the sight. The bags under his eyes were pronounced, and his hair was disheveled in a way Shane *knew* Ilya hated. Shane walked closer and Ilya’s lips twitched to a small smile.

“How was the rest of yesterday?” Shane asked. He leaned in to kiss Ilya’s forehead before settling into the chair beside the bed.

Ilya shrugged. “Like all the other migraine days. Bad. I slept a lot,” he sighed as he leaned his head back and took a slow breath through his nose.

“Better today at least?” Shane asked hopefully as Ilya nodded, his eyes still closed.

“I got some flowers. *Think* Kip and Scott sent them?”

Shane frowned. “What do you mean, *think*?”

“Read the card,” Ilya said, moving his arm closer to the bedside table. Shane glanced over to see a small card with a flowery border around it. He reached over, opened it, and laughed.

Ilya, Get better soon! We miss you on the ice and can't wait to see you soon! Drinks at Kingfisher on us when you're in New York! Love, Kip and the Dinosaur

"That is really nice. He mentioned on the phone he'd allow you unlimited chirps next time he sees you," Shane said, grinning as he set the card back on the table.

Ilya frowned and opened one eye, then the other. "I do that *every time* I see him. How is that a gift?"

"He probably won't punch you this time?"

"Pft, that was only once," Ilya said, swatting a hand in the air.

Shane shifted in his chair, biting his bottom lip. Ilya raised his eyebrows at him. "What *else* did he want?"

"He wants to talk to us about the whole Crowell lawsuit," Shane said, running a hand through his hair. Ilya turned his head to look at the whiteboard.

"Not today—"

Shane shook his head. "Oh, no. Not today. But later. He's thinking of testifying."

"Dad wants us to join in?" Ilya said, still staring ahead instead of at Shane.

"Yeah, he asked for your number to text or call you about it." Ilya nodded his head and crossed his arms. He sighed, staring at the whiteboard.

"You can give him my number... but I'd rather talk about it with you there. And not today. My head..." Ilya shook his head solemnly.

Shane scooted his chair closer to the bed, placing a hand on the bed. "We can take it easy today. I downloaded a few more *SmartLess* episodes so we can listen," Shane said.

Ilya turned his head and nodded, a small smile tugging at his lips. Shane pulled out his phone and scrolled through the episodes as Ilya pulled his blanket up. Once Shane settled on an episode, he gave an earbud to Ilya and put the other on his own.

They spent the morning listening, with Ilya dozing in and out of sleep. Shane lowered the volume when he noticed him asleep and raised it again when Ilya blinked blearily at him.

-&-

A few days later, when Shane walked into Ilya's room, he was surprised to see his mom and Farah at Ilya's bedside. The women were talking in low tones, a clear sign that this was a serious conversation. Ilya's head bent low to hear them, gripping Chompy so tightly Shane could see the white of his knuckles.

Shane crossed the room, catching the name “Crowell” as he reached Ilya’s bedside.

“What are we talking about?” Shane asked, giving pointed glances between Farah, his mom, and Ilya.

Ilya readjusted his grip on Chompy while Farah and Shane’s mom exchanged looks with one another, before turning to Shane. Farah looked at Shane with her eyebrows raised and Yuna pressed her lips together tightly. “We’re talking about the class action lawsuit. There’s serious momentum behind it. Counsel believes they can pursue claims against Crowell, and possibly the league, for fostering a hostile environment. It’ll take months before anything happens. But we wanted to talk to you both about where your heads are.”

Shane crossed his arms, huffing. “Would have been *nice* to have gotten a heads up,” he muttered.

“It was in an email, Shane,” Ilya said bluntly. Shane looked at him before turning to Farah whose head was hung.

“He’s right, I did email you both about discussing this live,” Farah said quietly. Shane clamped his jaw tightly, grinding his teeth together.

Shane was still skimming the emails between rehab visits. When he wasn’t there, he was at home rearranging the house for Ilya’s discharge, moving the bedroom downstairs and shifting furniture to make space. At the same time, he was coordinating trade calls with Farah and researching late into the night what was even possible. He did not want to do long distance.

Fuck Crowell, he didn’t have *time* for him.

“Do we have to join this lawsuit?” he asked, causing Farah, Ilya, and his mom to look at him in complete shock. Farah and his mom’s jaws dropped as they looked at each other.

“Crowell can’t go unpunished.” Ilya said quietly. The room went silent and Shane found himself holding his breath. “What he did to us, while I was in a coma...” Ilya trailed off as he stared up at the ceiling, folding his own arms, Chompy dangling off to the side.

“I know. And I fucking hate what he did but—” Shane shifted his weight..

“But *what*? You’re okay with letting him get away with it?” Ilya asked pointedly as Shane closed his eyes, hating what was going to come out next.

“I’m *not* okay with him getting away with it or the league. But I’m *tired*. And I would rather focus on other things right now.” Shane said.

“You can’t pretend he didn’t out us,” Ilya said softly, pinching at Chompy’s arm.

Shane exhaled. “I want our life back. Not... courtrooms. Not months of this.” He paused, shaking his head. “I want summers at the cottage.”

“The one he spied on?” Ilya cut quickly. “I saw the photos,” he said, visibly swallowing as he

stared at Shane. Shane looked down, rubbing a hand behind his neck to soothe his own anxiety.

“I’ve already looked at securing the cottage and our homes.”

Another item on the list.

“Shane, he blew up our lives and others. Did you even read about the other allegations?”

“I *do*, I just don’t want to be the face of this case!”

“What if there is a way for you two to *not* be the faces?” Farah interjected quickly. Both men looked at her, head tilted quizzically.

“The way this lawsuit is being framed, there’s a lot of issues coming to light. What happened to you two was *awful*. There’s no doubt there. But there are other sexual assault charges and unsafe hazing that took place... those are the issues the court will focus on. Your story will corroborate that Crowell supported the hostile work environment.”

Shane nodded his head, looking down at Ilya who had his jaw still clenched.

“What do you think Ilya?” Shane asked.

Ilya took a deep breath as he stared at the ceiling. His hand was still clutching Chompy. “If I want to be more active in the case, what would you say?” he asked Shane.

Shane didn’t hesitate. “Then I’ll support you,” he said stoically.

Ilya lifted a hand to his face and leaned into it. Clearly miserable. Shane inched closer to the bed, he placed his hands softly on the bed as he looked down at Ilya.

“I *hate* him. What he did to me, to us, to *you*.” Ilya said, looking over to Shane, his hand falling into his lap.

Shane sighed, grabbed a chair and put it close to the bed and took Ilya’s hand.

“I hate him too. I think what he to you – to me, to *us* – is fucking despicable. I just *don’t* want to spend my days in courtrooms or with lawyers when I can spend the time with you. Like booking a flight to Fiji. We’ve already wasted so much time, and going after Crowell isn’t on my list of dates to take you on.”

Ilya smiled at the last line, squeezing Shane’s hand. “I want that too. But I need to testify. *We* need to testify. This is so much bigger than us.”

“I know, I know,” Shane said, lowering his head.

“We don’t *need* to be the face,” Ilya reminded him gently as Shane nodded.

“Okay. We testify.” Shane replied, meeting Ilya’s gaze.

-&-

Shane walked Yuna and Farah to the door, hugging them both before closing the door behind them. He sighed and leaned against the door, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. He was exhausted and it was barely mid day. He stood there, forehead against the door for a minute before Ilya broke through his thoughts.

“I should not have said you were pretending this didn’t happen,” Ilya said.

Shane turned around and leaned back against the door, eyeing him.

Ilya looked better than the past few days, but his energy was low, exhaustion still clinging to him. Shane’s shoulders dropped.

“I shouldn’t have snapped. Not today, not the last few days,” Shane said, rubbing his face before sitting in the armchair and reaching for Ilya’s hand.

Ilya linked his hand with Shane’s, “I am glad you snapped. You got some things off your chest.”

“Could’ve been nicer. I wasn’t planning on telling you what happened in Georgia. You never told me what it was like when I was knocked out on the ice. I figured the same rules applied,” Shane said, squeezing his hand.

Ilya inhaled slowly, staring up at the ceiling. “Maybe... we do new rules? Or cottage rules again?”

Shane furrowed his brow, trying to think what cottage rule Ilya meant. “No shoes in the house?”

Ilya shook his head, rolling his eyes, a lopsided grin on his lips. “No. Being honest. Saying what’s on our mind. Like the first time we were alone and together,” Ilya said as Shane smiled back on the memory.

“Yeah, that would be nice,” Shane whispered, glancing down at their entwined fingers and biting back a grin.

“I’d like that,” Ilya said, lifting their hands together and giving a kiss. Ilya turned to the whiteboard, reading the schedule before turning back to Shane. His eyes shone the way they do when he had an idea.

“You need some sleep, want to sleep in my bed when I go to PT? We can listen to some podcasts together before they kick you out.”

Shane smiled, leaning forward as Ilya did the same. Their foreheads were close to touching.

“I thought I only got four stars from drooling on the bed, you sure you want me back in it?” Shane teased.

Ilya hummed. “*Maybe* I don’t mind the drooling that much. Just, don’t drool on Chompy. He may bite you,” Ilya teased, mimicking an overlarge bite and causing Shane to pull back, laughing at the ridiculous impression.

Shane glanced at the board, leaning back in the chair.

GOALS: Gait training (short distance, walker), static balance, cane trial (in-room), conversation endurance (20 mins)

Something steadied in Shane, a sense of hope that was stronger than it had been all week. “I’d like that,” Shane said softly.

They squeezed each other’s hand once, the tension between them loosening.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Cottage rules are officially back in effect, no shoes in the house 😊

In all seriousness though, thank you for letting them argue, apologize, and choose each other (again, again, and again).

If you wanna be friends, find me at @narglesinroses on Tumblr.

Looking forward to your comments. They do feed the writer's soul!

As always, I'll see you on Sunday with a new chapter 💙

Chapter 24: Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Ilya: *They want you to come to PT tomorrow*

Shane: *Wait, really?*

Ilya: *Noise day. Simulating the outside world.*

Shane: *Should I bring a boom box? I can ask Evan for his playlist.*

Ilya: *You do that and I will tackle you with my walker.*

-&-

“Shane, you know *I’m* the one working out. Not you, right?” Ilya asked, the second Shane walked into the room, dumping his duffle bag on the ground and clutching his water bottle.

Shane did a double take at his outfit, a blush creeping onto his cheeks. He was wearing athletic shorts, running shoes, and a technical Nike t-shirt. He glanced up to see Ilya in nearly the same thing, except for an Ottawa Centaurs sweatshirt. Ilya was clutching his walker, leaning slightly forward as his gaze ran over Shane’s outfit.

Despite visiting the rehab gym plenty of times, Shane always donned his own workout outfit as if *he* was going to be the one training on the treadmills or the low stairs. In reality, he was more of a decoration than anything else. He didn’t even start a workout on his Garmin watch.

Flustered, Shane started to defend his outfit. “Wearing jeans in the gym feels weird. And joggers are weird-”

“It’s like a *uniform* for you or something. You have a stylist,” Ilya teased back, grinning.

“Okay, okay. Are you ready for the gym?” Shane asked, hands on his hips as he stared at Ilya pointedly.

Ilya looked down at his outfit, before looking at his walker and the rest of his room. When he was satisfied with his own checks, he nodded and walked towards the door, Shane falling into step beside him.

-&-

The gym, to Shane's surprise, was a bit busier than usual. He spotted two patients in opposite corners working through gait and balance drills. Ilya had only ever shared the gym with one other patient. This felt like a party.

Shane bit his lip as he surveyed the room, walking in stride with Ilya. Two therapists stood near a set of bright orange cones arranged in a zig-zag formation. One had a cane beside her and was holding a gait belt.

Shane recognized one of the therapists to be Taylor, who wore all black no matter the day, no nonsense. Shane *liked* Taylor, despite how often he got told off by them for "falling" for Ilya's bait. The other therapist was a young woman with blonde hair in a ponytail and multiple choker-like necklaces lacing her neck.

"Do you know her?" Shane asked under his breath. Ilya paused, squinting.

"Cece. You haven't met her. Very quiet. Funny though," Ilya muttered. Taylor's impatient sigh could be heard. Shane and Ilya chuckled before moving forward.

"*Finally*," Taylor said, hand on their hips, staring at the two men.

"It was Shane's fault we're late," Ilya said quickly, ducking his head to hide his grin as Shane spluttered.

"What? *How*—"

"Don't care," Taylor said dismissively, shooting a look at Shane who shut his mouth and crossed his arms. "We should get started. Today is cane *and* noise," Taylor said. Ilya ran a hand through his hair, jaw clenched.

"Let's get the gait on you and then we can swap gear," Cece said, stepping forward to wrap the gait belt around Ilya. Ilya raised his arms slightly as she adjusted the gait belt and tightened it, glancing up at him. He nodded.

"Alright, let's swap," she said, stepping back and grabbing the cane. Ilya eased out of the walker and placed a hand on the cane, his body relaxing at once.

"Here's the drill for the day. You're going to walk from cone to cone," Taylor said, pointing to the cones, "while we play cafe background noise. As you walk, Cece, Shane, and I will call out directions – 'right', 'left', 'over here'. The key? You *only* turn your head when Shane says your name. How does that feel?"

Ilya's shoulders were practically touching his ears.

"Challenging," Ilya admitted as Taylor squinted their eyes at Ilya.

Ilya relented with an eyeroll, "Possible but challenging."

Taylor nodded. "Cece will be close in case of any falls or wobbles. We'll *only* be doing

twenty feet.”

Shane stepped back, not wanting to be in Ilya’s peripheral vision. His palms were starting to sweat, his lips pressed into a hard line. It felt like a lot to ask of someone... But what did he know? He had to give up control and trust the system.

So why was it so hard?

“Ilya, go over to the first cone, I’ll give instructions to Shane,” Taylor said, moving behind him.

“We’ll swap spots each time he turns toward you. Go around the cones, not through them. I don’t need *two* injured hockey players in here,” Taylor said. Shane nodded, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Let’s go,” Taylor said, clapping their hands together as everyone took their place. Taylor pulled a remote from their pocket and jabbed a few buttons. Café ambient noise filled their corner of the room. Shane took a deep breath, hunched over on the balls of his feet like he was about to start sprint drills.

He truly had no idea how to be chill in a gym unless it was yoga.

Ilya took careful steps toward the first cone. He had good control of the cane, his weight balanced with each step. Cece’s hands hovered near the gait belt as he continued forward.

“Over here! To the right!” Taylor shouted. Ilya winced but kept his focus on the cone ahead.

Taylor caught Shane’s eye, nodded once, then jerked their chin toward Ilya.

Shane hesitated, then cupped his hands over his mouth. “Ilya!”

Ilya took a small step, leveled his gaze forward, then slowly turned his head toward Shane. A small smile flickered before he faced front again and stepped forward.

Before Shane could even grin, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Taylor was glaring down at him. Swearing under his breath, Shane ran around the track, and they continued the call-and-repeat.

Ilya turned his head successfully at each call – though Taylor told him to slow down a few times – and not a single fall took place.

Taylor even allowed a small smile. “Next time, we can do noise *and* stairs,” Taylor offered. Ilya groaned but he looked pleased.

As Shane and Ilya walked back to the room, Ilya was back on his walker. Shane had to clasp his hands behind his back; he kept reaching out for a hand only to bump into the metal frame.

The first time, Ilya muttered a “Sorry.”

The second and third time, Ilya caught on and only grinned at the floor.

It had been a good PT session. The only complaint was that Shane hadn't started a workout on his Garmin. He'd still broken a sweat. Ilya completed the "course from hell" – his words.

Shane was bouncing his feet, close enough to skipping if he picked up the pace.

-&-

When they returned to the room, Ilya sighed, studying the board with his head cocked to the side.

"Was a good workout, da?" he asked, slowly turning his head towards Shane.

"Got a few sprints in. Always happy to break a sweat," Shane said as Ilya shook his head playfully.

"You run so *serious*. But your foot strike..." Ilya said gravely, shaking his head like he was delivering bad news.

"What's wrong with my foot strike?" Shane asked, looking down at his shoes before looking up at Ilya, licking his lips.

"No one has told you?"

"Told me what?" Shane asked, staring down at his feet as if the answer would be spelled out.

"*Moy lyubimyy*, you do too much heel-toe. Not enough mid-strike," Ilya said kindly, biting back a grin as Shane glared at him and crossed his arms.

"I do *not*."

"You do! It's okay, we all have weaknesses—" Ilya teased.

"But I was leaning *forward* so I couldn't have been," Shane said, stepping forward and leaning dramatically.

"Shane, do you want me to call Taylor? They *love* telling people what they're doing wrong. Would be nice to see someone else get on their bad side."

Shane stepped closer, wrapped his arms around Ilya's shoulders and looked up at him.

"*Taylor* would hate to settle a lovers' quarrel. And even *they* looked happy with you today."

"They were, weren't they? Making improvements. One step at a time."

"One step at a time," Shane said, leaning their foreheads together before pressing a small kiss to his lips.

-&-

One day, Ilya said he wanted to sit in the armchairs near the window. When Shane asked why, he had said that he was tired of being tied to the bed. Without question, Shane helped him navigate towards the chairs. He should have known that the first break in their routine meant something was up.

A knock sounded at the door. Shane looked at Ilya in confusion. They were sitting in the armchairs, listening to another podcast episode.

“You don’t have PT right now,” Shane said, glancing at the whiteboard.

GOALS: Cane gait (controlled pace), Weight shift control (lateral + forward), Step-up practice (4” platform), Conversation endurance (max 30 mins, breaks as needed)

“Maybe if you get the door, you’ll see who is there,” Ilya said in a sing-song voice, a small smile tugging at his lips. Shane narrowed his eyes at him before glancing at the door and then back to Ilya.

“Will I *like* the surprise?”

Ilya hummed, “Maybe. But there’s only one way to find out,” Ilya said, nodding towards the door. Shane sighed, pulling out the ear bud as he stood up to get the door. He looked back at Ilya, who had a wide grin on his face before he heaved a breath and opened the door.

In the doorway stood Harris, Troy, Coach Wiebe, Bood, and Chiron. The players and their coach grinned, rising onto their toes to see past Shane. Troy gripped Chiron’s leash tightly as the dog fought against his collar to bound into the room. Chiron was wagging his tail excitedly, panting heavily at the door.

Shane grinned as he hugged each player and clapped them on the back before they trickled into the room. They moved straight to Ilya, who had stood to greet them. Shane saved Troy for last. They met each other’s eyes for a beat, their last hospital encounter fresh in their minds, before sharing a one-handed hug and a clap on the back.

Luckily, Troy had the saving grace of having Chiron. Which meant that Shane could immediately go to ignoring Troy and finally meeting the famous Chiron.

“What a surprise.” Shane said, as he bent down to pet Chiron, knowing this would be his only chance to properly meet Chiron before Ilya monopolized the dog.

“Surprise? Harris, didn’t Ilya text you to come by?” Troy asked across the room.

“I didn’t tell Shane, I wanted to surprise him with Chiron,” Ilya said loudly, leaning on his cane as he took a few steps before Coach Wiebe placed a hand on his shoulder to slow him down.

“It’s good to see you standing again.” Coach Wiebe said, tightening his grip on Ilya’s

shoulder.

“I have a cane, like you. We can be twins,” Ilya said, tapping his cane to the ground and causing the group to chuckle. Though, almost immediately, he clenched his jaw and looked up to Coach Wiebe. “Just for now, working on getting rid of it,” Ilya said quickly, slightly embarrassed as Coach Wiebe nodded.

“Considering where you started, I believe it. You’ll be doing laps in no time. I’m not worried,” Coach said, and Shane saw Ilya’s shoulders relax.

Bood and Harris grabbed some chairs that were conveniently stacked in the corner of the room. Shane smiled, running a hand through his hair. He hadn’t noticed the chairs earlier – they weren’t a permanent fixture in Ilya’s room. He’d had to request them from rehab beforehand.

Troy entered tentatively, dragged along by an overly eager Chiron.

“Don’t let Chiron jump on Ilya. Might be better to let him greet him once he’s sitting,” Shane said, grabbing the leash. Troy gave him a curt nod before letting go and pulling Ilya into a hug.

Ilya was nearly knocked over, and Shane almost snapped at Troy *again*. But Ilya returned the hug in full force, letting go of his cane and wrapping both arms around him. Ilya laughed at the mishap, thumping Troy’s back as if he’d been waiting for it.

“Good to see you too, Troy,” Ilya said, pulling away from the hug as Troy gave a small smile, squeezing Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya wobbled before finding his grip on the cane. As the chairs were brought over, he eased himself into his seat, wincing once he was fully settled. At once, Ilya patted his lap, causing Chiron to whine loudly as his nails scratched frantically against the floor to see Ilya.

Shane, surprising himself, let go of the leash, and Chiron *bounded* towards Ilya. Chiron tried to jump onto Ilya’s lap as he reached up to scratch behind the dog’s ears. The rest of the team and Shane seated themselves around Ilya, Coach Wiebe taking the armchair that Shane was in previously before.

“So big and handsome. *Umnitsa, ty skuchal? Ya tak po tebe skuchal!*” Ilya said happily, as Chiron planted his paws on his lap and licked his face, coming dangerously close to his lips.

Shane wondered if it was acceptable to ask whether Ilya washed his face after Chiron left.

“I suspect the only reason he invited us was for Chiron,” Harris said, nudging Shane as they watched Ilya.

Ilya shook his head, breaking his gaze on Chiron and looking over to Harris. “Not true. Want to see more friends and hear more about the team.”

While Ilya pet Chiron, now settled against his legs, the Ottawa team caught up on everyone’s injuries. There were still quite a few in rehab scattered across the country, though everyone

was expecting a clean bill of health around the time season started.

As it always was when a group of hockey players were in the room, the conversation looped back to the games and specifically on how the Admirals were set up to play against the San Francisco Golden Seals. As soon as the conversation turned tactical, Shane heard Ilya shift into a more authoritative, confident tone. He was quick to provide his thoughts on roster changes at the last second, unafraid to interrupt Bood when he was wrong – even by Shane’s standards. Bood and Troy leaned forward in their seats for every word and thought Ilya had to offer.

Shane crossed his arms, smiling to himself as he let the chatter go on around him. He could’ve jumped in, added his own take. But it was nicer to listen.

After about twenty minutes, Ilya sagged against the chair, blinking slowly. His sentences shortened, and he glanced over to Coach Wiebe.

“What does next season for the team look like?” he asked, as Coach Wiebe leaned forward, sighing heavily.

“Looks like nearly everyone will return. The usual few are opting to retire, and some are exploring trades to be closer to family,” Coach Wiebe said. “And given our popularity, we’ll be lucky with who we’re able to add to the roster.”

“There are a lot of free agents,” Ilya said, sneaking a glance over to Shane before returning his attention to Chiron. As soon as Ilya’s attention shifted to Chiron, Coach Wiebe shot Shane a look – eyebrows raised, a small wink.

Shane swallowed, looking down at his lap.

The chatter continued and flowed easily. After thirty minutes, a nurse stepped in and gave Ilya a look. “Ilya, I remember telling you we only allow dogs for *thirty* minutes,” she said sternly, eying Chiron, who was fast asleep at Ilya’s feet.

Ilya feigned a shocked look, “I *swear* you said forty-five minutes. Maybe we should get my hearing checked?” Ilya said, throwing a crooked smile as the nurse rolled her eyes. The team stood and said their goodbyes. Ilya remained seated as they bent to hug their captain. Chiron barked all the way down the hall, leaving Ilya behind.

When the door had closed, Shane leaned back against it, hands shoved in his pockets as he observed Ilya. Ilya was relaxed in the armchair, his head tilted back, eyes closed, a smile on his lips. Sunlight from the window reflected off of his crucifix.

A blink, and sharp images of Savannah flashed in Shane’s mind – the team crowded around Ilya. The worried looks. The clenched fists. The absolute fear radiating from everyone in the room. The unspoken questions of what the future held.

Another blink, and Shane could bask in the day, hell the week. Ilya could tolerate more noise, sustain longer conversations. And though the room felt eerily quiet without Chiron’s shuffling, Shane knew there were more good days ahead.

“Chiron, cute?” Ilya asked, breaking Shane’s thought.

Shane pushed off the door, striding over to Ilya. “Very cute. I see why you’re obsessed with him.”

“Very big. When he was smaller – best size,” Ilya said, cracking one eye open and smiling up at Shane.

Shane walked to the armchair beside Ilya and dropped into it. Once settled, he propped his elbow on the armrest, chin resting in his hand as he looked over to him. “When he was small like a puppy?”

Ilya shook his head, tscking, then slowly turned towards Shane, shifting in his seat. “No, more like medium size. Best size for cuddles,” Ilya said, grinning at the memory.

“So a medium dog is in our future?” Shane asked, his eyebrows raised. He already knew the answer, they’ve had it a thousand times. But he never grew bored of their routine.

Ilya pursed his lips out and brought a hand to his chin as if in serious thought. “Hm, we can have a mix. A big dog, a small dog, a medium dog, and then maybe—”

“A cat. One cat for me.” Shane said, lifting a finger in emphasis.

“Only if it is an orange one, I hear those are menaces,” Ilya grinned, snorting at Shane’s outraged expression.

“Oh, absolutely not. I can’t have all the animals gang up on me! Maybe a tuxedo cat?” Shane mused.

“Hm, yes, a serious one to put the dogs in place and me,” Ilya said before he yawned loudly. He leaned his head back on the armchair, closing his eyes again.

“It was a good surprise,” Shane said quietly.

“Nice visit. The best,” Ilya agreed. He opened his eyes again. “But a lot. Bed?”

Shane nodded, “Bed,” he said, getting up and walking over to Ilya. Ilya slowly stood, gripping his cane tightly. Shane stayed back as they maneuvered back to the bed. Ilya was able to sit on the bed, but asked for help to get his legs up. Shane was more than willing to help.

Once Ilya was under the covers, Shane moved around the room, closing the curtains and dimming the lights.

“I may just sleep till tomorrow,” Ilya said quietly as Shane returned to the bedside.

“That’s okay. I’ll head home and I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Ilya nodded, angling his head up, his eyes closed. Shane smiled and leaned down, loosely holding Ilya's chin as he kissed him softly on the lips. Shane could feel how tired he was in the softness of the kiss, but it was enough. It was *always* enough.

As Shane pulled back, Ilya's head rolled onto the pillow, his breathing deepening almost immediately.

Shane grabbed his coat and headed to the door, pausing for one last look back. Ilya snored softly, hands resting against his chest.

A second longer – then Shane stepped out.

-&-

Shane pulled into his driveway, braking abruptly and parking crooked. His heart was beating fast, and he didn't care that he had done a terrible job. He grabbed his phone, patted his coat pocket for the box, and hopped out of the car. He dialed Svetlana's number, and she picked up just as he walked through the door.

"Hello!" she said brightly as Shane kicked off his shoes.

"Hello! Guess where I came from?" he said breathlessly, dropping his keys into the bowl and shrugging off his jacket. He grabbed the small velvet box from his pocket, tracing finger over the edge.

"Ilya. Duh," she said, and Shane rolled his eyes, biting his bottom lip as the suspense was killing him.

"After Ilya... I went to the *shop*," he said, emphasizing on the last word as he heard her gasp. He grinned – he'd gotten the reaction he wanted.

"Did you get it? The one we picked at the hospital? Wait – no, this needs to be a FaceTime call," Svetlana said breathlessly. Shane laughed and walked over to his kitchen, leaning over the counter as the request came through. He propped his phone against the decorative bowl as he accepted the request.

Svetlana's face filled the screen, she was on the floor of a room. Her hair was in perfect curls, it must have been a hair wash day, and she was gripping a large makeup brush in hand. She leaned in close to the phone.

"Show me!" she demanded as Shane laughed nervously.

"You already know what it looks like!" he said, rotating the box in his left hand as Svetlana rolled her eyes.

"Yes, but a picture online is different than seeing it *live*," she said impatiently as Shane stilled the box. He stepped closer to the phone and, using his other hand, he opened the box to

reveal the ring. It was a simple black band with a gold interior. Svetlana gasped, clapped her hands together excitedly.

“Beautiful. He’s going to *love* it. Did you get two?” she asked, setting her makeup brush down as she scanned the floor, picking up another smaller brush and a compact.

“I got one. I didn’t want to presume—”

Svetlana rolled her eyes, deliberately tapping the brush against the compact. “Oh Hollander, of course he’s going to say yes—”

“I don’t want him to feel pressured. You know?” Shane said quickly, closing the box and setting it on the counter. He leaned forward against the counter, arms stretched wide, as Svetlana paused. She lowered her makeup below the camera and stared at the screen. Like Ilya, she’d learned when to pause and let Shane talk.

“We were always going to get married. My parents think we’re practically married. But what if he thinks I’m only doing it *because* of the accident?” Shane said, finally making eye contact with the camera.

“Well, you said you were already planning this back in Savannah. I think it’s okay if the accident inspired you to change the timeline. You’d be taking the wrong lesson from all of this if you thought, ‘Nothing bad can happen. We can wait ten years.’” Svetlana teased gently, a smile on her face.

“Alright, I guess you’re right. Will you help me?” Shane asked nervously, crossing his arms over his chest.

Svetlana huffed, a scowl on her face as she picked up her makeup brush and started applying it to her eyelids. “I think you should know the answer to *that*.”

Shane grinned to himself, reaching for the velvet box and dragging his thumb slowly over the top.

-&-

-&- **TRANSLATIONS** -&-

Moy lyubimyy (RU): My love

Umnitsa, ty skuchal? Ya tak po tebe skuchal! (RU): Good boy, did you miss me? I missed you so much!

-&-

A/N: Who else stayed up late to watch SNL? I loved it and hope you all were able to catch it! 

Just a note on this chapter — I *know* in the show it was the San Francisco Mission. I *know* in real life it's the San Jose Sharks. I tried desperately to use one of those team names, and I simply could not.

In regards to San Francisco Mission... surely there was a better name proposed. Is it based on the neighborhood? A position? I have a lot of questions that I fear I would just word vomit if I ever get the chance to ask Jacob.

Then there's San Jose Sharks. Listen. I get that it's a decent team (I'm being nice). But *sharks*? In a *landlocked city*? Why? Because some marketing guru thought it sounded cool? Because the fans loved it? I don't get it. If it were the San Francisco Sharks... sure, that makes sense!

So I went back to the roots and picked the San Francisco Seals. I know they were technically the Golden Seals, but I like just the Seals. If you can't tell, I am chill and have not given this a ton of thought. 

As always, let me know what you thought of the chapter in the comments. They're always so nice to read! And I can't wait to see you all on Tuesday 

A/N (Part 2, post AO3 shutdown):
WHAT A DAY.

I have to make a small adjustment to this week's posting schedule. I'm postponing Chapter 25 and skipping the Tuesday update. It turned out to need more editing than I expected, and real life caught up with me. Rather than posting off-schedule, I'm going to use the extra days to get it where I want it and build a little buffer for the upcoming chapters.

Thank you so much for your patience and understanding. If you'd like updates, feel free to follow along at narglesinroses on Tumblr.

I'll see you all on Sunday 

Chapter 25: Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

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

As Shane walked down the hallway the next morning, he saw Cece and Taylor leaving Ilya's room, Cece slowly and carefully inching the door closed as Taylor stood off to the side.

"Already done?" Shane asked, scratching his head as he tried to work out if he had come too early or much later than usual.

He barely slept the night before, his mind racing with all the ways he could do the proposal and when. He kept turning to his side to jot down ideas in the shared Notes app with Svetlana. Every so often he glanced towards the closet door, comforted by the thought that the velvet box was tucked inside his favorite suit pocket.

Cece gave him a smile and waved at Shane, her fingers adorned in rings.

"Couldn't get him to wake up," Taylor said, swinging their arms back and raising their eyebrows. "Which is odd. We tried to get him up for stairs. We know he was really looking forward to it," Taylor said, clasping their hands behind their neck as they stared at the ground and let out a puff of breath.

"Could you come back later?" Shane asked hopefully. He stared at the door, as if *willing* Ilya to come out with his cane and workout clothes.

Ilya had been *so* excited for the stairs routine.

Cece shook her head. "We have other patients today. We'll do stairs tomorrow and let him rest today. I haven't seen him this exhausted before," she said tilting her head at Taylor.

"What about with his migraines?" Shane asked, looking between the two.

"That's different. I tried to wake him and he just covered his head with a pillow. I think he kept asking for five more minutes but in Russian?" Cece said as she looked at Taylor who shrugged.

"*Yeshchyо pyat minut?*" Shane asked.

Cece's eyebrows shot up as she nodded vigorously, smiling wide enough that Shane could see her teeth.

"Yeah! That's so cool you know Russian!"

Shane blushed, "I'm still learning. It's not the easiest language."

"Did you learn it for Ilya?"

“Cece,” Taylor said in a warning tone, stepping closer to the circle.

Cece swiveled her head towards Taylor, giving them a confused look. “What? That’s a reasonable thing to ask!”

“Privacy is also good—”

“It’s okay,” Shane said, putting his hands up as the therapists turned towards him, seeming to forget for a second that he was standing right there. He dropped his hands and gave Cece a smile. “I did. Or really, I’m learning. Still trying to master the language.”

“Cute!” Cece said as Taylor rolled their eyes, though there was a grin playing on their lips.

“Let’s go, Cece. I think we can catch up on some paperwork. See you, Shane!” Taylor said, waving at him before walking down the hall. Shane watched them go, hearing their bickering until they turned the corner.

Shane turned to the door, taking a deep breath before walking into the dimly lit room. Ilya was still under the pillow, the sheets a mess, and Chompy on the ground. Fighting back a smile, Shane bent down and set Chompy on the bedside table. He settled into *his* chair by the bed and started to scroll through his phone.

Ilya slept through the rest of the morning. The Ottawa visit, while good for the spirits, had tired Ilya out greatly. Shane was used to Ilya tossing more in his sleep, shoving sheets and pillows off the bed. But that morning he slept like a log, an occasional snore filling the room.

Shane would glance up to check if he needed to intervene before turning back to his phone. He had spent the past few hours reading through the emails that Farah had forwarded his way about contracts. They had started the quiet process of getting Shane *out* of the Montreal Voyageurs.

There was no way that Shane was going to survive another season with them if he had to endure a silent treatment from over twenty grown men. His lips curled into a grimace as he thought about the team. Everything hurt. It was unbelievable to have some of his happiest memories of his life come from that team, only for the worst to come from them too. All the joy he had with the team was now tinged with bitterness.

Throwing away nearly a decade of friendship was *hard*. There was no way to avoid the pining he felt, and while he knew that if one of them reached out he would be skeptical, he would be open. Shane hated that he still had *hope*.

He sighed, making a mental note to talk to Meera about it later. He ran a hand through his hair as he scrolled through his phone, skimming another email. He missed Ilya’s first small movements as he began to wake. The pillow had been swept off and Ilya was leaning upright in the bed.

“What time is it?” Ilya blearily asked, still sounding exhausted. His hair was a mess, curls tousled and frizzy. He looked around the room, his head turning sluggish, his eyes still drooping.

“It’s close to noon,” Shane said softly.

“I missed PT?” Ilya asked hoarsely, suddenly alert as he focused on the clock, his mouth forming a small ‘O’ as he stared at the time.

“It’s fine, they’ll try tomorrow,” Shane said, turning his phone down to look over at Ilya’s crestfallen face.

“Can they come back? We can do PT now,” Ilya asked, whining and Shane shook his head.

“Ilya, it’s fine, take a rest day. It was a big day yesterday with the team and Chiron-”

“But today is *stairs*,” Ilya repeated, as if that meant everything.

“You can do stairs tomorrow,” Shane said gently as Ilya shook his head, shutting his eyes. He fell back onto the bed, running his hands through his hair as he swore in Russian.

“I didn’t even *play* with Chiron. I just sat down the *whole time*,” Ilya muttered angrily at the ceiling.

“Hey, it’s okay to be upset about missing stairs,” Shane said, putting his hand on the bed and patting the mattress softly. Ilya eyed him, heaving a sigh but refusing to put his hand out.

“I’m still *so* tired.”

“I know. I’m so sorry,” Shane said, leaning forward and resting his chin on the side of the bed as he stared up at Ilya. Ilya was still huffing at the ceiling, still running his hand through his hair, until he paused when his fingers hit the scars on the side of his head.

“Is it always going to be like this?” Ilya asked quietly, blinking at the ceiling.

Shane took a deep breath. Wondering if Ilya during his coma had heard Shane’s own questions.

It wasn’t the first time that Ilya had whispered something that Shane said while he slept.

“I don’t think so. Every day you are doing more. Some days you need to rest more. It’s a balance,” Shane whispered as Ilya nodded, finally lowering his hand to clutch Shane’s. Ilya exhaled quickly, as if pushing out nerves. He sat up quickly, clutching his knees as he stared sadly down at Shane, his lips pouting.

“I miss you,” Ilya said, squeezing Shane’s hand.

“I’m right here,” Shane said, grinning softly as he squeezed Ilya’s hand back.

Ilya turned his head away, a flush rising on his face, as if embarrassed to look at Shane. It took Shane a full second before he realized what Ilya *meant*.

“I miss sleeping in the same bed. I miss holding you on bad days. I miss *us*,” Ilya said quietly, tightening his grip on Shane’s hand before turning his head to gaze down at Shane. Ilya’s thumb rubbed small circles on the back of Shane’s hand. It was all Shane could focus on.

Shane looked back at the closed door. He would be lying if he hadn’t had the same thought every night. Shane had followed *every* single rule the nurses and doctors had given him. He was exhausted from following the rules. And *fuck*, this had been the worst two months of his life.

Shane made his decision. He slipped his hand out of Ilya’s grip, toed off his shoes, and stood over the bed. Ilya’s face broke into a smile, biting down hard on his bottom lip as he watched Shane take off his sweatshirt.

“Scoot over?” Shane asked sheepishly, as Ilya shuffled to the side as much as he could. For a twin size bed and two men their size, it was difficult to make adequate room. Neither cared as Shane squeezed into the bed, throwing an arm around Ilya as Ilya wrapped his arm around Shane’s torso, angling his face into the crook of Shane’s neck and placing a gentle kiss there. Shane felt his pulse quicken. It had been months since he had been able to hold Ilya like this.

As Ilya settled his head on Shane’s chest, Shane tightened his grip around Ilya, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply. Ilya *still* smelled of his Old Spice body wash and all Shane could think about was how this was home. The feeling struck him. For a moment Shane couldn’t breathe.

Shane shifted so he could let his hands trail up and down Ilya’s arm, goosebumps erupting in their wake. Ilya shivered as he placed his own hand on Shane’s chest, spreading his fingers over his heart that was beating faster.

It was overwhelming, and Shane struggled to steady his breathing. Back in the ICU he had barely been allowed to touch Ilya. He could only hear the heartbeat through the monitors and, on a good day, put lip balm on him.

Relief was the closest word Shane could find for the feeling. Ilya’s weight against his body. Alive. The way Ilya burrowed his face into Shane’s neck, dropping slow, sleepy kisses, made it feel like they were home.

Shane blinked back tears, his eyes burning.

“Better?” Shane asked, kissing Ilya on the forehead, hoping his voice was steady.

“Better,” Ilya whispered, closing his eyes.

The next time the nurses checked in on Ilya, they found Shane and Ilya fast asleep. Instead of waking them up, they simply closed the door.

-&-

Shane heard an exhale, a slight shift of the weight on his chest, and his eyes flew open to see Ilya staring at him. Shane clutched Ilya closer, and felt a small kiss on his cheek.

“How long were we out for?” Shane asked, stretching his arm out for his phone.

“Not long, a few hours.” Ilya mumbled.

“Did I wake you up? I’m a bit restless these days-” Shane said, guilt creeping in.

“No. I wake up a lot. This was nice, having you here. Chompy is *not* a good cuddle buddy,” Ilya said, and Shane chuckled.

“You kicked him out of the bed last night. I had to put him on the bedside table,” Shane said, jerking his head back.

“So I can make room for you,” Ilya said, planting his lips on Shane’s neck. Shane felt his eyelids flutter close.

“It’s nice to have you next to me.” Shane said, “I can’t wait for you to be back home.”

“With you, right?” Ilya asked carefully, and Shane took a quick breath and opened his eyes to stare down at Ilya’s hopeful face. He paused, flashing through the past few days. He had started talking to the doctors about a transfer. Ilya had been in the room for some of those conversations, hadn’t he? It was always going home to Montreal.

Had Shane forgotten to ask a basic question?

“Sorry, I assumed you’d be okay with coming home with me. But we can go to my place or we can go to yours. If we go to yours, we may need to look at nurses in Ottawa and I can stay with my parents—”

“No, I want to go home with you. Montreal makes sense. I just... I don’t want to be too much. You’ve already done *so* much. Don’t deny it,” Ilya said sternly. Shane opened his mouth and closed it.

“I *like* doing too much. But,” Shane said carefully, letting his fingers trace up and down Ilya’s arms. “If you ever think I’m doing too much or I’m getting worn thin... we hire help. At the rate you’re going, though, I think you’ll be pretty independent at home. You’re always too much, but I love that about you,” Shane said, kissing Ilya’s forehead.

“The house has *stairs* and the bathrooms don’t have balance bars,” Ilya said worriedly, completely ignoring Shane’s previous comments.

“I, uh, hired movers to move our bedroom down to the guest room on the main floor. And I already started ordering supplies and hiring contractors to make some modifications in the bathroom,” Shane said quickly, leaning back into the pillow as Ilya stared at him in shock.

“Sorry, I should have mentioned it earlier. Like, *weeks* ago. I just made a list when you first

got here and after rehab, start tackling what was on there to make the transition easier,” Shane said guilty as Ilya blinked rapidly at Shane. His face was unreadable as the anxiety in Shane’s head started to get louder.

“I *know* I should have mentioned it. I’ve just been doing small tasks here or there whenever I notice something in the house. It wasn’t a *big* thing to me. Like knocking stuff off of a list. Gave me something to do after rehab,” Shane rambled as Ilya started to slowly grin.

“Is okay. I am not mad. Just surprised. Did the movers struggle with the fifty thousand pillows on our bed?” Ilya teased, nuzzling Shane’s neck as he laughed.

“Fuck *off*, no! But they complained about moving all of our books—”

“*Your* books Shane. I read more interesting books than what you have in that room,” Ilya said and Shane rolled his eyes. Ilya looked up at him, placing a hand on Shane’s chest.

“But please, stock the house with good food, none of the healthy shit,” Ilya grumbled, fisting Shane’s t-shirt.

“Some healthy shit is good-” Shane protested, rubbing Ilya’s back.

“Balance is good, right? So some snickers bars as well,” Ilya said.

“Fair. I’ll get us food we both like.”

Shane flushed. He didn’t *really* want to admit that he had stocked the house several times over with all the sweet treats he thought Ilya would like.

“I can’t wait to be home,” Ilya said quietly.

“Two more weeks,” Shane said, kissing Ilya on the forehead again.

-&-

Ilya: I know you and Yuna are coming tomorrow... do you think it’s possible if we can talk? Just us two without Yuna and Shane in the room?

Ilya: Nothing urgent. Or bad.

David: I think I can get us some time alone.

Ilya: :)

-&-

Miraculously, David was able to shake Yuna and Shane off his tail as he walked through the rehab corridors, pausing to check he was going the right way.

He had initially tried to be vague with Yuna, not lying exactly but omitting that it was Ilya

who wanted the one-on-one time. Of course, Yuna was stubborn and knew David's tells well enough that he had to confess. With a mission in mind, Yuna forced Shane to come with her to the local hardware store. Modifications to Shane's house were going to have to be done, and for the simpler ones she insisted they tackle them themselves. Shane pouted, because of course he would rather hire experts, and shopping at the hardware store with Yuna was never relaxing (she had picked fights with store clerks before).

Still, with a bit of luck, Shane relented and went with Yuna. Yuna gave him a look, a peck on the cheek, and a whispered promise of text ten minutes before they returned to rehab.

Once David had found the door, he knocked gently. He waited until he heard Ilya call, "Come in!" before stepping into the room.

Ilya was sitting in one of the armchairs near the window. His hair was slicked back in a way that told David he had taken a shower and spent the time getting ready. Ilya's hands were resting on the armchair, gripping them tightly. As he stood up, David noted how he was wearing a button-up shirt with some plain, yet nice looking, black joggers.

David gave him a hug and Ilya pulled back, gestured to the second arm chair. David walked over, placed the bag from his shoulder to the ground before settling into the chair. Ilya sat down, biting at his thumbnail. Then, as if realizing he was with David, pulled his thumb out and placed his hands in his lap. He straightened up, putting his shoulders back.

Moments like these hurt David the most, causing him to scowl. Over the years, David and Yuna had done their best to let Ilya know that it was *okay* to relax in their home. They were not the type of parents who expected perfect postures or polite manners in front of them. All they wanted was for him to be happy and *relaxed* around them.

"You don't need proper posture with me. Surely you remember that?" David said, raising an eyebrow as Ilya chuckled, rubbing his face with his hand, and lowering his shoulders.

Better.

There was a nervous energy around Ilya. While he tried to look relaxed, his jaw tightly clamped. David made a silent bet that if he looked under the table he would see Ilya wringing his hands.

Fortunately for him, David knew just the solution.

"You know, I brought a puzzle," David said, reaching down to the tote bag where the puzzle box was on its side. David's hand hovered over it, his eyes staring at the image on the box. It was the last puzzle they had all been working on before Ilya woke up.

They never did finish it.

"I *think* I told you this, but, while you were in a coma... we did a lot of puzzles together," David said gently. He unpacked the box, pulled out the mat, and rolled it out on the table between them.

“*We?*” Ilya asked as David nodded.

“I always brought the puzzle. Svetlana, Yuna, Shane, even some team members would work on them in your room. I used to narrate some of the pieces and where we were at, it gave me something to do,” David said, fixing his gaze on the puzzle, running his hand over the puzzle, feeling where his fingers dipped in the empty spaces.

“I *think* I heard you. But more than that... I knew you were there. In the room. I don’t remember details like which puzzles were finished though. I knew it was safe,” Ilya said quietly as David looked up. Ilya was staring at the puzzle in front of him, his hands clutched in his lap.

“No need to apologize. I did learn some Russian from the exercise, though” Ilya looked at David, his eyes wide in surprise, a small grin breaking through his nerves.

“*Shto?*”

David laughed, picking up a piece as he scanned the puzzle for its spot. “I said that one *a lot*. I can’t speak in sentences, but I can say, ‘*booryy medvyed*’ and ‘*sineye nebo*’.” David knew he had butchered the accent, maybe even said the wrong thing. But Ilya, his sweet Ilya, grinned widely, staring down at the puzzle with both hands clamped together in a fist over his mouth.

“I know, my accent is bad. But Svetlana is a good teacher. Very patient. Not like Shane,” David said as Ilya beamed at the compliment about Svetlana.

“She is a good person. And Shane...” Ilya trailed off, staring outside the window. The childish grin before had shifted to something more somber. David held his breath.

“You know I *love* Shane, right? I would do *anything* for him.” Ilya said quickly, turning back to David.

“Of course. And you know we love you too, right? Yuna and I?” David said as Ilya nodded his head.

“I know,” he whispered, ducking his head down. “I don’t know how to thank you for everything you did—”

“You don’t need to thank us—”

“But I would like to, if that is okay?” Ilya pleaded, and David dropped the piece where he thought it should go and nodded.

Ilya took a deep breath. “Thank you. You saw me at my worst and stayed with me every day during my... coma,” Ilya said, the last word tasting sour. He swallowed. “I know you were there for Shane when I couldn’t be. You and Yuna stood by my side as if I was your own son. Not many people would do that. I do not think my father would have.” Ilya said quietly. David reached for his hand.

“But your mother would have,” he said softly, rubbing his thumb over Ilya’s knuckles.

Ilya nodded once.

“I don’t know how to repay you. I don’t know how to thank you without making it sound like it wasn’t *everything* to me,” he said, his voice tightening. Ilya took a few rapid breaths before he pressed a fist to his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Ilya,” David said gently, “You know that whatever we’d do for Shane, we’d do for you. You’re *family* to us. We love you, of course we dropped everything to be there. There was no question what to do when we got the call.”

Ilya removed his fist and looked up at the ceiling, his eyes shining as he took in deep breaths and blinked rapidly.

“You *never* need to thank us. We only want the best for you and Shane. To be alive and happy,” David said.

Ilya let out a shaky breath. His hand reached out for the piece that David had abandoned earlier, twirling between his fingers. “Sounds easy, but it’s...”

“Hard,” David finished for him. “I know. But you won’t be doing it alone,” David glanced down at the corner of the puzzle, raised his eyebrows three times, and heard Ilya chuckle. Within a second, he saw Ilya place the puzzle piece.

“My favorite memories always have at least one Hollander. Some of my happiest have been with Shane... but they have also been at your kitchen table or up at the picnic tables at the cottage. I want, I want more of those memories. Perhaps I am greedy,” Ilya said.

David pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth, trying hard to stop his eyes from filling with tears. Yuna was always better with words. And right now, he was struggling to share with Ilya everything in his heart.

How it cracked his heart cleanly in two to see him in the hospital. How he whispered to Yuna at night, when Shane was asleep that he was terrified that he *wouldn’t* wake up. There was nothing missing from their family before Ilya, but there would have been a clear after.

He viewed Ilya as a second son. He and Yuna both did. To lose him would have also meant losing Shane. The two of them were so tightly entwined that one couldn’t survive without the other.

David squeezed Ilya’s hand tightly, noticing the slight tremor.

Ilya stared at the ground, taking rapid breaths before looking up again. “I *know* I don’t need your permission. But I *need* your blessing to marry Shane.” Ilya said, looking petrified but his tone was confident.

David let go of Ilya’s hand, giving Ilya a reassuring smile before moving his hand for another

puzzle piece.

“Is this because you almost died?” he asked thoughtfully, placing the piece down in the center cluster. David glanced up to see him shake his head once. He took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled through his mouth. He looked up to match David’s gaze, blinking once before smiling, sounding more confident than when he had asked.

“No. I’ve wanted to marry Shane for years now. I just thought we had time and we should follow the plan... but the plan seems stupid now that everything is out and we almost ran out of time. If he goes to California or Florida, or whatever team is smart enough to have him... I want the league to know that we are together. No more secrets. I am not perfect and I am selfish, and I want Shane for all my days, for as long as he’ll have me.”

David nodded. “Strong answer. I’d like to think I was just as bright when Yuna’s parents asked me why,” he said, a hopeful look on Ilya’s face.

David wasn’t sure how to tell Ilya that in the hospital room, after surgery, he had been struck by how scared he was that Ilya might never be able to have this conversation. Because David had always known Ilya would ask for a blessing. But as he stared at Ilya, who looked like he was about to break into a sweat, David knew now was not the time to share those fears or talk about Savannah.

His boy needed an answer and to be put out of his misery.

David leaned back, crossing his arms. “Ilya, I thought you should have been married two years ago.”

Ilya let out a laugh, stared up at the ceiling, before a look of confusion crossed his face.

“David, we’ve been together for *three* years.”

“Yes, but no one likes a shotgun wedding,” David said, winking as Ilya grinned down at his lap.

“Have you gotten the ring yet?” David asked, picking up the puzzle piece again. Ilya turned back to the puzzle, noticeably lighter now, slouching over the table as he fidgeted with a puzzle piece.

“Close. Svetlana is helping me,” Ilya said, putting a piece down into the puzzle.

David smirked to himself. “Oh, I’m sure she is having fun with it,”

Ilya grinned. “I think so too.”

They spent the next fifteen minutes with the puzzle, Ilya pointing to different colors and slowly saying the names in Russian. David bumbled through most of the translation, though he found Ilya to be the best at pointing out where to place the tongue, and how to produce the sounds for the trickier words.

Most likely from teaching Shane all these years.

His pocket buzzed with an incoming text from Yuna saying they were mere minutes away. David grinned, as he and Ilya continued to work on the puzzle.

When Yuna and Shane walked through the door, their arms laden with snacks for the game, Shane helped Yuna drop the bags to the floor—but he was already looking past her toward Ilya. As soon as Yuna shooed him away, Shane went straight to Ilya and pulled him into a hug. Shane immediately started teasing him about the slicked-back hair, insisting he didn't need to dress up for his parents while Ilya argued he was being "respectful." A worn routine between the two, neither noticing when David made eye contact with Yuna and nodded once. She smiled coyly and tapped her phone three times.

David pulled out the phone, and bit his bottom lip, resisting the urge to look at Yuna.

Yuna: *He bought the ring. It's stunning!*

David swiped the message away and looked over to see Ilya and Shane surveying the puzzle. Shane reached for a piece, scanned the board, and placed it. Ilya let out a small cheer, patting Shane's arm as Shane beamed down at the board and then at him.

Only then did he look over to Yuna, who had her hand over her mouth, her eyes brimming even as she tried to hide her smile. David stood and walked over behind her, wrapping his arms around her as her hands clutched his forearms and she leaned back into him. Shane quickly took his spot beside Ilya as the two of them became engrossed in the puzzle. Shane leaned over to place a piece and Ilya tsked at him and pointed elsewhere at the board. Shane followed the lead and placed the piece there, rolling his eyes as Ilya muttered, "Told you."

"We did good," David whispered in her ear, kissing the side of her head as he felt her nod against his forearms.

-&-

"Now this, I wish I was sleeping through," Ilya said bitterly, pointing to the TV as Shane and his parents watched the New York Admirals play against the San Francisco Seals.

"Oh, come on, Scott deserves another cup—" Shane's mom said as she popped popcorn into her mouth.

"Yeah, and he's going to get it *easily* because Ottawa had to withdraw and Montreal was *stupid* with their game plans—"

"San Francisco still has a chance!" David argued while Yuna and Ilya gave him a look that *clearly* disagreed.

"This is what you miss when you're not at home," David whispered to Shane, who laughed.

Shane and Ilya were on his bed, the game-day blanket draped across the two of their laps while Yuna sat on Ilya's side and David on Shane's.

Yuna had brought over some homemade popcorn from Shane's house, sprinkling it with nutritional yeast. David had made sure to bring plenty of Coke and ginger ale cans, as the family watched the game from Ilya's room.

"Hey, the last time Scott won the Cup, it worked out in our favor," Shane said, nudging Ilya on the side as Ilya rolled his eyes.

"I can't *believe* I have to credit Scott Hunter for our love story sometimes. We should give more credit to Kip," Ilya said, eating some more popcorn.

Shane rolled his eyes as he watched the game, wincing slightly as the San Francisco Seals continued to miss easy shots and bad passes. Despite the mediocre game, it was the closest Shane had felt to being home in a while. Glancing over to Ilya, Shane noticed his phone lit up with Svetlana's name, no doubt complaining to her about the game.

As predicted, the New York Admirals won the Cup, much to Ilya's displeasure. Shane still saw him send Scott a quick congratulatory text.

Shane leaned on Ilya's shoulder, glancing up at his relaxed face. It was nice to be surrounded by family, stealing popcorn and arguing as if they were all back in the living room.

-&-

-&- **TRANSLATIONS** -&-

Yeshchyо pyat minut? (RU): Just five more minutes?

Shto? (RU): What?

booryy medvyed (RU): Brown bear

sineye nebo (RU): Blue sky

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I would make a joke about what happened last weekend, but I don't want to jinx anything! 😊

Thank you for being understanding about the delay for this chapter, we are back on normal posting schedule this week! As always, comments *make* my day!

See you all on Tuesday 

Chapter 26: Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

“You know who we need to call?” Ilya said, leaning his head on Shane’s shoulder. Shane looked over to him.

It was an early morning for the pair. They sipped their coffee in bed while Ilya’s phone blared the public radio station, headline news filling the air. Shane scrolled through his phone while Ilya rolled his neck and worked through some of his hand physical therapy exercises.

It was almost like they were back home in the kitchen, going through their morning routine.

“Who?” Shane asked distractedly, setting his coffee aside.

“Hayden Pike,” Ilya said, biting his lip to stop the grin as Shane dropped his phone and looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

Ilya raised one in return.

“*You* want to call Hayden Pike?” Shane asked. Ilya shook his head.

“I do not, but *Chompy* does,” Ilya said, lifting Chompy up to Shane’s face.

“Please, Mr. Hollander, call the 20th best hockey player in the league to take me home!” Ilya said in a high-pitched voice as Shane laughed.

“20th best? What changed to make him qualify for the “best” category?” Shane asked, grabbing Chompy from Ilya’s hand.

“Chompy may have pointed out he had some good moves during the playoffs.” Ilya shrugged, averting his gaze as Shane leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“You know, one of these days you’ll need to *actually* admit you like him and he’s a decent hockey player.”

Ilya sighed dramatically, shaking his head toward the ceiling. “Yes, but that’s not today. Perhaps to his face when he comes to visit with his kids and Jackie,” Ilya said, and Shane snorted.

“I can text him. But are you ready for the whole Pike family? They can be a lot, even for me,” Shane said softly. Ilya nodded.

“I will make sure I rest before they visit and after they leave.”

“Okay. I’ll text them.”

-&-

Shane: What are you, Jackie, and the kids doing this weekend?

Hayden: Literally nothing

Hayden: I may need to confirm with Jackie, why?

Shane: Up to visit Ilya in rehab?

Hayden: You mean Chompy?

Shane: Lol, yes

Hayden: Yeah, ofc.

Hayden: Would Saturday work? Is it better in the mornings or afternoons?

Shane: Let’s say early afternoon

Hayden: We’re good to go!

-&-

The day before the Pike visit, Shane walked into Ilya’s room to the strangest scene of his life.

On the table was a scattered bunch of large, brightly colored markers. Some had foam grips to make them easier to hold, while the others were bare. Construction paper lay underneath them, some covered in scribbles while others showed crude green blobs. Ilya hunched over the table, tapping a marker on the table as Cece sat across from him with a pencil in hand. Her hair was up in a ponytail, her tongue poking out as she sketched on the construction paper in front of her.

“Remember, it has to look from me—”

“That’s why I’m sketching and you’re coloring it in. Remember what happened when we did it the other way?”

“Yes, you almost smashed a marker under your foot and said the alligator looked like a *dying rat*.”

“I wasn’t *that* harsh—”

“Russian ballet teachers have been nicer than you,” Ilya said gently. Cece laughed, hugging

the drawing to her chest as Shane walked closer. Ilya turned his head to Shane and smiled wide enough to reach his eyes, “Shane, can you tell Cece that I was an amazing artist before the coma?”

Shane squinted, thinking back to the last card that Ilya had given him for his birthday.

“But you weren’t. I can barely read your handwriting, and everyone assumes your autographs are a scam because they’re *basically* scribbles,” Cece shrieked, kicking her feet. Ilya flicked a hand in the air.

“Okay, but what are you doing— oh, is this for Arthur?” Shane asked, finally able to look over Ilya’s shoulder and see that the green blobs resembled an alligator. Well, once Shane squinted he could see the vision.

“Yes, Cece is helping me. Did you know she is an artist? Show him what you did this weekend!” Ilya demanded. Cece’s cheeks turned pink, catching Shane by surprise. It was difficult to embarrass Cece. Shane wasn’t even sure she *could* blush. She seemed too cool for it.

Cece sighed and pulled out her phone. “It’s something I did for fun with my friends. We just followed a tutorial, it’s honestly not that great,” she rambled, turning the phone towards Shane. His jaw dropped as he leaned closer.

The photo was a painting of some mountains, a lazy lake in front of it. The light refracting from the lake and the colors of the sunset were enough that Shane thought it could be hung in a museum. Or at the very least replace the cringe faux paintings in the rehab hallways.

“Shane, flies are coming,” Ilya said, and Shane shut his mouth, shaking his head.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t be surprised, but that’s *really* good,” Shane said as Cece grinned, tucking her phone back in the pocket. She made two more swipes before passing the sheet to Ilya.

“Okay, I’d use the light green marker and then the darker one for the outline. And I’m going to take away the markers that suck,” she said, pulling a few markers from the pile as Ilya grabbed the lighter one first, squeezing the gripper.

“Thank you, Arthur is going to love it,” Ilya said, as he slowly outlined the alligator, gripping the marker tightly as he carefully filled in the body.

“I have to run before Taylor finds me, but take a photo and show me afterwards, ‘kay?” Cece said, as she pushed back from the table. She waved at the boys before striding out of the room.

Shane took Cece’s spot as he rummaged through the earlier drafts, snorting at some of the rougher versions.

“Oh, as if *you* could draw an alligator?” Ilya said challengingly, lifting his gaze to meet Shane’s.

“I think I could do better than this,” Shane turned one of the sheets over that had a stick drawing of a four legged creature with an oval head, triangles sticking out from one end. Ilya raised his eyebrows.

“Original. You *wish* you could draw like that—”

“Okay, I’m going to show you how to draw an alligator,” Shane said, turning the paper over and grabbing a pencil.

“Wait, before you do, can you add the foam grip to the dark green marker and take the cap off for me?” Ilya asked, rolling over the marker he had with the darker one. After a minute of struggling with the foam grip, Shane swapped them, removed the cap, and rolled the marker back to Ilya.

They spent the afternoon, badly, doodling and creating cards for the Pike kids.

-&-

“Are you ready for this? We can tell them to come another day-”

“Yes, yes. I can handle the Pike family. Besides, I’m very late giving Chompy back. Would be unfair to Arthur,” Ilya said as he walked over to the armchair near the window. His cane was abandoned by the bed, and Shane frowned. Short distances were fine, but it still worried Shane when he saw Ilya without an aid.

“Alright, but say the word—”

“Go get them. It’ll be nice to have screaming kids in this room. Is too quiet sometimes,” Ilya said, waving Shane away.

Shane opened the door to find the entire Pike family there with a nurse. Jackie held flowers while the kids argued over who got the balloons and who had the cards. Hayden was holding Arthur, who craned his neck into the room and brightened the moment he saw Ilya waving.

“Sorry, the kids tried to run to Ilya, so we ended up getting escorted up here,” Jackie said, wincing slightly as Shane grinned, giving her and Hayden a hug. Before Shane could bend down to greet the kids, the girls ran to the back of the room, shouting with joy for their uncle Ilya. The Balloons were abandoned at the doorway, Jackie having to quickly snatch them.

“You’re awake!”

“At last!”

“Did you miss us?” Amber said as they all clamored onto the armchair. Ilya, though surprised, laughed and hugged them.

“Yes! Of course! You’ve all grown so much while I was sleeping!” Ilya said, grinning as the girls quickly climbed off the chair to show how much taller they’d grown and which teeth

they'd lost. Ilya gasped dramatically at every gap and wiggle of a tooth.

"I want to say hi," Arthur protested from Hayden's arms, squirming enough that Hayden nearly dropped him. After a few calming words, Hayden gently set Arthur on the ground. As soon as Arthur's feet hit the floor, he sprinted towards Ilya. Ilya slid off the chair and onto the floor, a little awkwardly, bracing one hand against the armrest. He hugged Arthur tightly, murmuring something in Russian into his hair as Arthur grinned into Ilya's sweatshirt.

Shane felt a mild panic spasm in his chest as Ilya hit the floor, but it eased quickly when he saw Ilya comfortable sitting there, engaging with the kids that felt so much like *before*.

"You're awake," Arthur mumbled, pulling back. "Dad! He's awake!" Arthur yelled a little too close to Ilya, who winced and tilted his head away.

"Yeah, I can see that buddy. Why don't you come and hold Uncle Shane's hand while we say hi to Uncle Ilya?" Hayden said quietly as Arthur scampered over to Shane, clutching his hand as Ilya stood up slowly to hug Jackie and Hayden.

"Is so good to see you two," Ilya said, pulling back and placing a hand over his heart. "I finally read the letters and the posts. Shane and I are *very* lucky to have you two," Ilya said, as Hayden wrapped an arm around Jackie's shoulders while she sniffled.

"We're *really* happy to see you awake and standing," Jackie said, her voice catching.

"Jackie, it's only a matter of time before you are cursing me for annoying your husband or kidnapping your kids to the candy store," Ilya said teasingly, blinking rapidly as Jackie laughed though a hiccup.

"Well, please, sit," Shane said, gesturing to the chairs he'd pulled out for the visit.

"Before I forget, I have to give Chompy back," Ilya said, settling into his chair and pulling Chompy from the side table. Ilya stared down at Chompy, running a thumb over his leg before reaching out. Attached to Chompy was a homemade card, the art from Ilya and Cece with a bit of Shane's handwriting.

Arthur let go of Shane's hand and took Chompy from Ilya. He stared down at Chompy for a second before crushing the stuffed animal to his chest, rocking it against his body.

"Chompy was good?" Arthur asked, and Ilya hummed in appreciation.

"Chompy was very good. Held my hand during the scary stuff and guarded my bed. But he's been stealing my cookies, so I think he should go home." Ilya said, winking at Arthur. Arthur grinned before trotting back to his parents, trying to climb onto his mom's lap.

"Do you remember what you dreamed about when you were sleeping?" Ruby asked boldly as Hayden covered his face with his hands, groaning.

"*Ruby*, what did we *just* say in the car—" Hayden asked in a strangled voice.

Ruby's eyes grew wide in indignation. "You said not to talk about the airplane crash!"

"Oh my God," Jackie said, horrified, her face paling as she shot a frightened look at Shane.

Shane gritted his teeth, unsure *exactly* the right response. Kids would be kids, and Ruby... well, Ruby was a class of her own. Tactfulness was not a characteristic the kid possessed. Shane looked over to Ilya, who, though surprised, wore a lopsided smile at the awkwardness of having the Pike kids in the room.

"Oh my God, Ilya, I'm so sorry—" Hayden said, his face splotted with blush. The blush was enough to make Ilya crack and laugh loudly.

"Is fine. I mean, no airplane talk today." Ilya said as Jackie vigorously nodded. "But as far as when I was sleeping... no dreams. I could *hear* voices. And sometimes I could tell when there was light versus dark... but it was very confusing." Ilya said, gesturing with his hands.

Ruby nodded and turned over to Amber. "Do you remember waking up?"

Ilya smiled. "I remember seeing Shane's face when I woke up," he said softly, and Shane felt his heart melt, wishing the memory had been happier than the frightened one that still lingered in his dreams.

"Did he wake you up with a true love's kiss?" Jade interjected.

"No kisses like that are allowed in the ICU," Shane said quickly, not wanting to tell Jade there had been a ventilator in the way.

"Anyways, did you watch the game?" Hayden cut in loudly, clearly uncomfortable with how his daughters were handling the visit.

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Yes. Joke. I got in trouble for yelling at the TV. San Francisco Seals should not have been in the playoffs—"

"Our dad said the Admirals took candy from a baby with that game," Ruby said, and before Hayden could defend himself, Ilya responded, "He's right." A small smile passed between the men as they began discussing the game.

-&-

Shane: You know where my spare key is, right?

Hayden: I literally have a copy at my house. Remember when I used it to stock your place?

Shane: Great. Where is it then?

Hayden: I'll text you when I find it. I'll work with Svetlana on the plan to decorate the house.

Jackie: Hayden means I'll be working with Svetlana on this.

-&-

Shane was lying in bed with Ilya, his head resting on Shane's shoulder as he absentmindedly played with Shane's hand. Shane liked how Ilya traced lazy shapes. The touch alone was enough, as chaste as hand-holding.

It took Shane a moment to realize Ilya kept tracing his ring finger. Shane did his best to keep his voice even, though his pulse was racing.

"What are you thinking?" Shane asked, clearing his throat.

Ilya shrugged, pouting slightly. "Nothing really."

"Sure," Shane said as Ilya continued tracing his ring finger, letting his fingers drift slowly up and down.

"No hospital proposals," Shane blurted, staring down at the blanket as he felt Ilya lift his head.

"What?"

"I'll say yes anywhere and at any time. Just no hospitals. Please," Shane said, sneaking a glance at Ilya, his face burning.

Ilya smirked at Shane, leaning in close. "You are cute when you blush, you know that?" he said, lifting a hand to trace Shane's freckles.

"I don't *feel* cute," Shane grumbled, but couldn't stay annoyed for long as Ilya kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Shame. I've been working *very* hard in speech therapy to make you a ring while I talk about my day," Ilya said casually.

"You made me a paper ring?" Shane asked. The thought was cute—but if Ilya messed up *his* plans...

Ilya snorted. "Please. I have been making rings with my tongue and cherry stems—"

"No you have not!" Shane said, throwing his head back and laughing.

"You don't know what happens in speech therapy, I have to work with the tongue—"

Shane leaned forward to give Ilya a kiss on the cheek. "You're *such* a flirt," Shane said teasingly. When he pulled back, Ilya's eyes were fixed on him, his pupils dilated.

Oh.

Ilya inched closer to Shane, one hand coming up to hold Shane's face. Then he pressed his lips to Shane's. Shane hesitated for half a second before he kissed Ilya back, tentatively and softly. One arm stayed around Ilya's shoulder while the other hovered awkwardly at his side.

Ilya sighed and opened his mouth. When Ilya's tongue pressed against his, heat swept through Shane's body, eliciting a moan from him before he could stop it. Without realizing it, Shane tightened his grip on Ilya, dragging him closer.

Ilya pulled back from the kiss to murmur, "Okay?" Ilya's eyes were heavily lidded, and Shane opened his a little wider, reminding himself they were in *rehab* and not at home. Focusing on the plain walls behind Ilya's bed, he swallowed, begging his body to calm down.

Shane rested his forehead on Ilya's, relaxing his grip slightly. "We can stop—"

"No." Ilya said, leaning back in, sliding his hand through Shane's hair. Shane's heart jumped to his throat at the urgency of Ilya's kiss. He let out a breathy sigh when Ilya tugged lightly on his hair. Shane's hand came up to Ilya's jaw to steady him, stroking his cheek gently. They had time—and it wasn't their first time—so Shane kissed him back slowly.

It lasted only a moment before Ilya pulled back, resting his forehead against Shane's; both men breathing hard.

"Dizzy," he muttered, smiling brightly, letting his hand trail down to Shane's neck, running his thumb slowly over Shane's pulse point. Shane chuckled, a little dizzy himself at the thought that he'd made the famous Ilya Rozanov weak in the knees with a kiss. The sensation never grew old and he hoped it never would.

At that moment, the door opened and Taylor walked in, reminding Ilya of his session. They stopped dead in their tracks, mouth open, as the two men scrambled to put distance between them on what was possibly the smallest bed.

Shane couldn't look anywhere but the ceiling, biting his bottom lip as his face burned bright red. It was a small mercy that it wasn't Shane's parents who had walked into the room, though Taylor was a very close second.

"Do I need to leave this door open?" Taylor said sternly, pointing to the door. Shane quickly shook his head, but Ilya decided to run his mouth.

"Only if you want to watch. We are good-looking." Ilya said smugly.

"Not helping," Shane muttered, mortified as he looked from the shocked, sputtering Taylor to Ilya. Ilya lay there with his arms crossed over his chest, *fucking* smirking. Ilya's confidence on the ice often landed him with a black eye, so Shane held his breath until he heard the laughter.

Taylor laughed, doubling over as they shook their head. Shane and Ilya exchanged bewildered looks, it was the first *either* of them had heard Taylor laugh. "Oh Ilya, I will *miss* you when you go home."

“I will miss you too. I’m leaving tickets for games here once the season starts!” Ilya said happily, nudging Shane on the side. Shane, understanding the subtext of “Taylor is going to miss *me*,” nudged back quickly.

“I look forward to supporting Ottawa next season,” they said warmly, “Now, come on, you do have therapy.” Ilya sighed, giving a quick kiss on Shane’s cheek before getting out of bed and steadying himself on the bedside.

“*Poka, moy pomidorchik*” Ilya said brightly as Shane pulled up his hoodie and slid down the bed.

“I know what that one means.” Shane muttered, as Ilya laughed.

“He does look like a tomato, no?” he asked conversationally to Taylor who rolled their eyes.

“Be *nice* to Shane,” they chided, shutting the door behind them.

Leaving Shane to mercifully wither in embarrassment like he was back in his teenage years.

-&-

During the last week of rehab, Svetlana bought a ticket to come visit. Shane had insisted she come and even upgraded her flight after she booked the ticket.

Shane didn’t *need* Svetlana to run errands or help with translations, but part of him wanted her there when Ilya came home. It felt wrong for her to be in Boston with the last image of Ilya still being bedridden. Shane wanted to show off Ilya because none of this would have been possible without her in that ICU.

Though Ilya did his best to sweet-talk the nurses into letting him accompany Shane, he was denied and even threatened with being cuffed to the bed. Of course, Ilya made a few flirtatious remarks that did not go *well*.

A few minutes before arriving at the airport, Shane got a call from Ilya.

“Did you remember the flowers?” he asked quickly, and Shane rolled his eyes.

“*Yes*. They are in the backseat. I *literally* FaceTimed you at the store as you picked out the bouquet. Now rest, try not to get yourself banned from having visitors—”

“Is bullshit. I will be leaving, hopefully, in a few days—”

“I know. I know,” Shane said, slowing to a crawl as he approached the Arrivals section at the airport.

“But soon you’ll be home, and you’ll be so sad not to have all the nurses to flirt with.”

“I will have you. Should I order a nurse outfit for you?”

“*Goodbye, Ilya,*” Shane said sternly, biting back a laugh as he ended the call. It only took a minute before he finally spotted Svetlana. She whipped her head around, searching for him. Shane put the car in park, turned his emergency lights on, and ran out.

Svetlana saw him, and ran into his arms as Shane lifted her off the ground and twirled her around. He felt lighter when he heard her squeal with happiness. He set her down and pulled back to take in her stylish outfit and immaculate curls.

“Better pick up than last time, no?” she asked. Shane and her doubled over laughing at their dark humor, the kind only two people who’ve been through hell and back could share.

-&-

When Svetlana walked into Ilya’s room, clutching the bouquet, she gasped. Ilya stood leaning against his bed, his arms open for her. Svetlana ran into his arms, shoving the flowers at Shane as she rushed to Ilya.

“*Ty zdes’!*” she exclaimed over and over in Ilya’s arms as he rocked her.

“*Ya zdes’. Ya zhivoy.*” Ilya whispered, as he kissed the top of her head. They stood there in their embrace while Shane pulled in Svetlana’s luggage and shut the door.

“Did Shane give you the flowers?” Ilya asked, pulling back to look down at Svetlana. Tears filled her eyes as she nodded.

“They’re beautiful. Not necessary.”

“Oh, no. Very necessary. I think we owe you all the flowers,” Ilya said as Svetlana laughed.

“I won’t say no then,” she said, and they all moved over to the armchairs making the usual small talk about flights and life back in Boston. Ilya even shared a few stories from rehab, causing Svetlana to shriek with laughter at the trouble he caused.

-&-

The real reunion came the next afternoon.

The three of them sat around the table, Svetlana sipping her coffee while Settled into his seat after physical therapy. Shane stood off to the side pulling out extra chairs for the room. Shane walked towards Ilya when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

A soft knock sounded and Shane’s parents poked their heads through the door, scanning the room eagerly. Svetlana squealed, hauled herself out of the chair, and threw herself into David’s arms.

Ilya looked at Shane in confusion before turning back to the overly warm greeting between Svetlana and Shane’s parents. David clapped her back the same way he did with Ilya. Yuna brushed some curls out of Svetlana’s face, showering compliments and mentioning how nice it would be to see her face more if she tied it up. Svetlana laughed as she shook her curls

more in her face, causing Yuna to roll her eyes.

“This is... so weird,” Ilya said, looking at Shane before grabbing his hand and continuing to watch the reunion.

“Why?” Shane asked, sitting next to Ilya.

“Is like I missed a season of a tv show, or woke up at the end of the movie... I didn’t realize how close Svetlana is to everyone now,” Ilya said, leaning forward as if to take in the scene, pulling his hand out of Shane’s grip.

“But it’s not bad, right?”

Ilya shook his head and turned to Shane, “No, not at all. To see everyone together like this... is a lot. But nice, just confusing. Maybe overwhelming?” Ilya said, closing his eyes and resting his forehead against his fists.

Shane placed a hand on Ilya’s back, rubbing small circles. The offer to kick everyone out was on the tip of his tongue.

“Jealous and sad,” Ilya said suddenly, looking over to Shane.

“What?”

“Jealous that I wasn’t here to see all of this... and sad I wasn’t there to get the jokes,” Ilya continued and Shane furrowed his brow.

“Galina wants me to identify feelings more. I can’t say ‘is a lot’ to her anymore,” Ilya explained.

“Well, we can easily make new memories together. And we can fill you in on everything that happened—the good, the bad, and everything else—when you’re ready,” Shane said, reaching for Ilya’s hand and squeezing it.

Ilya smiled at him. “I’d like that.”

“Ilya, Shane, look what Svetlana got us!” David said excitedly, proudly holding up a navy blue box with a vaguely famous painting on the cover.

“A puzzle?” Shane asked as his dad shook his head, as if he was completely off the mark.

“It’s a wooden jigsaw, and the pieces are cut into really interesting shapes. Look,” David said, hurriedly setting the box on the table and pulling out a few pieces cut into unique shapes: dancing men, instruments, even a chair cutout.

“Whoa,” Ilya said breathlessly, as he shuffled through the box with Shane’s dad, pulling out his own favorite shapes to show David.

“I guess we’re doing a puzzle,” Yuna said, pulling a chair next to Shane.

“Jigsaw, but together now,” Shane said, grinning at his mom as Ilya, his dad, and Svetlana quickly set up the table, the mat, and the small sorting bowls. It was as if they’d been doing puzzles for ages.

-&-

“Uh-oh, am I in trouble?” Ilya asked as Taylor walked into the room. Taylor rolled their eyes and held the door open for several other staff members filing into the room. Shane recognized the speech therapist and the doctor, but the other two were strangers to him. His confusion must have been obvious because Ilya leaned sideways and started to whisper.

“Stacy, that’s my—”

“OT, right?” Shane whispered back behind his hand. Ilya hummed in approval.

“Good morning, I promise to keep this quick,” the doctor said brightly, surveying the room. Ilya was in bed while Shane sat in the chair beside him.

“Ilya has made tremendous progress during his time here,” the doctor said, glancing down at his tablet. “When he was first admitted, he was unable to stand and could only manage short conversations. Today he’s able to walk independently with a cane, complete stairs with supervision, and maintain longer conversations. Because of his progress, if all goes as expected, we’re planning on discharging Ilya later this week.”

There was a brief silence as Shane and Ilya looked at each other. Shane reached out a hand, and Ilya gripped it weakly. His jaw was clamped tight as they both looked back at the staff.

“Discharge? For real?” Ilya asked softly as the doctor nodded.

Shane took a deep breath, hope flooding his system. For once, something was going right, just as predicted. His mind flashed through the countless machines and worried whispers back in Savannah, even the literal dark days in rehab. Somehow they made it here, on the brink of going home.

He squeezed Ilya’s hand and pulled his shoulders back.

“Yes, unless something changes, you’re perfectly safe to return home. With me, I have Betsy, one of our discharge coordinators, who will walk you through the next steps,” the doctor said, gesturing to the woman at the end of the line.

She stepped forward, a tablet in hand, scrolling through it with a stylus. “We’ll be setting up outpatient therapy, this includes both physical and speech therapy. Physical therapy will be three times a week for mobility, and speech therapy twice a week to continue building endurance work,” she said as she squinted down on the screen.

“We’ll be sending you a list of recommended equipment for the home, along with suggested modifications. I know there have been previous discussions with Shane about this.”

“Is it the same as the one you sent last week?” Shane asked and he pulled out his phone, quickly opening his email.

“It is! Ah, so you’ve been working on it already?” Betsy asked cheerily, lowering her tablet as Shane nodded.

“Some of it, yes. I’ll be doing the final walkthrough and adjustments later this week with my parents.”

“It’s not a lot, right? You are not installing anything permanent in the house, right?” Ilya asked anxiously, squeezing Shane’s hand for his attention. Shane looked over and shook his head.

“It’s just installing shower bars and removing some rugs. Everything can be undone or rearranged back to normal,” Shane said reassuringly.

“Ilya, now is the time to put something on the list that Shane would *never* allow. Like a never-ending supply of candy or maybe some McGriddles once a day...” Taylor teased softly as Ilya let out a bark of laughter and Shane rolled his eyes.

“What should we be watching for when Ilya gets home? Is travel allowed right now?” Shane asked, pivoting the conversation.

“Major things to watch are increased headaches, dizziness, confusion, or sudden fatigue. These are usually signs that Ilya is pushing himself too much, but it looks like he’s improved at recognizing that on his own,” the doctor said, raising an eyebrow at Ilya, who smiled.

“As for travel, short ones eventually. You’ll discuss travel clearance with your neurologist follow-up. You’ll have that appointment in two weeks according to our charts,”

“When can I get back to skating and playing hockey?” Ilya asked bluntly. Shane squeezed his hand. Shane felt his breath stop as he stared at the doctor, who gave a slow smile.

“If recovery continues the way it has been, skating drills can start in the summer,”

“Summer? Does that mean I could return to practice—”

“We are still a ways from full contact hockey. Recovery is non-linear, but Ilya, I wouldn’t be surprised if I see you on the ice next season.”

For the first time in the meeting, Ilya had a full smile on his face that reached his eyes as he turned to Shane excitedly, squeezing his hands multiple times like a morse code.

“Any questions?”

“Yeah, who are you supporting next season?” Ilya asked and Shane groaned.

The doctor took a look around the rest of the staff before facing Ilya.

“Well, I have been a Voyageurs fan for as long as I can remember... but given recent treatments,” a pointed glance at Shane, who shifted in his seat before he caught the rainbow face on the doctor’s watch, “I am going to be rooting for the Centaurs this upcoming season. I suspect that this entire rehab will be joining me,” as the rest of the staff chuckled and nodded.

“Any other questions?” the doctor asked, Ilya and Shane shook their heads.

“Alright, we’ll leave you two be,” the doctors said, the staff made their way out of the room.

Shane and Ilya turned to each other.

“Home?” Ilya asked.

“Home,” Shane said joyfully. Standing up, he climbed onto the bed without kicking off his shoes. Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane as they both started laughing, delirious with shock. Shane buried his face in Ilya’s neck, hiding his grin as Ilya stroked his hair, muttering “home” under his breath.

-&-

-&- *Translations* -&-

Ty zdes'! (RU): You're here!

Ya zdes'. Ya zhivoy. (RU): I'm here. I'm alive.

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: We are on our way home  Thank you all for the wonderful comments from the last chapter! Know for commenting, you can easily leave an emoji and it's enough for me.

I'll see you on Sunday with a new chapter!

Chapter 27: Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

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

Shane thought hell was Savannah and ICU rooms with blaring machines. Or maybe it was the dark days in rehab, the silent treatment and the complete blowout fights. It turned out Shane was wrong on all accounts.

Hell was Home Depot with his mom and Svetlana, the two of them wanting to repaint Shane's house and change out his lighting while simultaneously scolding him for not having more equipment ready for Ilya's arrival. The hypocrisy of telling him to hurry up with the house while also debating new wall colors nearly drove Shane to pull his hair out.

In an effort to preserve his sanity, he told them to grab every night light and floor light they thought he needed. Rehab strongly recommended floor lighting so Ilya could navigate the house at night and reduce the risk of falling.

When he wandered into the Bathroom Safety aisle, he paused and leaned back to see how high the shelves of adaptive tools went. There were mats, toilet seat accessories, and all types of bars. The range from functional tooling to stylish adaptive was staggering. Shane was immediately overwhelmed by the options.

Walking down the aisle, he already knew what grab bars he wanted for the showers. Based on what he'd read online, he opted to get the drill-in black balance bars for the tiled section of the bathroom. For the glass wall, he grabbed a no-drill bar despite his absolute fear that it would slip off and Ilya—

Well, he'd read enough reviews to tell himself it wouldn't happen. He stuffed the bar into the cart, figuring that he could decide on installing it later that day. Before leaving the aisle, he grabbed a few more no-drill bars for the bathtub. Just in case.

Pushing the cart, the squeaking wheels filling his head, he walked down the aisle and consulted his phone. He walked until he found the bathroom mats, grabbing a few that were at least within the color palette of his bathroom. He leaned against the cart, ticking items off his list. Just as he checked the last one, his phone lit up with Svetlana's face. Sighing, he picked up the phone.

"Svetlana?" he asked, turning around to see if he could find the familiar curls.

"Where are you?" she asked, huffing while his mom talked in the background.

"Bathroom Safety aisle. Where are you?"

"I have no idea. I forget how much I hate Home Depot," Svetlana whined as Shane rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Should we meet at the checkout?”

“Sounds good, bye!” Svetlana said hurriedly as the line went dead. Shane exhaled and shoved his phone in his back pocket as he pushed the cart out of the aisle. After getting lost in the refrigerator aisle, he found Svetlana scrolling on her phone while his mom looked anxiously around for Shane.

As he approached them, he couldn’t help but notice that their cart was filled with night lights, fake candles, a new lamp, and two large leafy plants. Shane gripped his cart handle and pushed it a little aggressively as he approached them. Something told him the plants were not for his parents’ house. His mom turned in time to catch Shane’s eye, one hand on her hip.

“There you are! Shane, look what we found,” his mom said excitedly, pointing to the lights, and lifting two up to show off to Shane.

“And the candles, well, we *all* know what that’s for,” his mom said, winking at Shane and he groaned. He deeply regretted telling his parents about his planning.

“Okay, but what about the plants?”

“You need some life in that house, some green would really balance it out,” Svetlana said bluntly, matching Shane’s gaze before looking down at them.

“I’m pretty sure I only know how to kill plants. Same with Ilya,” Shane argued and Svetlana shrugged her shoulders.

“Sure, but if you kill it, you throw it out. But it may be nice to have a plant to water and look after, no?” she said, and his mom nodded in agreement.

Shane knew that two against one was a losing battle and decided to bite his tongue. He ushered them to the checkout line, readjusting his grip on the cart.

-&-

When they got back to his house, they hauled the purchases inside. It took a few trips, and the bags littered the entryway. Shane did his best to shove his discomfort aside as he grabbed the safety bars to bring to the bathroom.

“Shane, what time is the handyman coming over?” Svetlana yelled, slamming cabinets in the kitchen. Shane dropped the bags in the bathroom and pinched the bridge of his nose, inhaling deeply.

“He should be here in two hours. Why?” he shouted back, walking out of the bathroom and down the hallway to find Svetlana sitting at the counter, a bag of gummy worms open in front of her while his mom filled the kettle.

“Just asking. What can we do to help?” Svetlana asked, leaning back and popping a red-and-

gold worm into her mouth.

Shane pulled out his phone and opened his list. He checked off a few tasks and scanned the list, trying to find something his mom and Svetlana would want to tackle next:

1. ~~Move bedroom downstairs~~
2. ~~Schedule movers~~
3. ~~New mattress? (Firmer?)~~—actually fine for now
4. ~~Buy blackout curtains for all rooms~~
5. ~~Schedule curtain installations~~
6. Remove rugs on ground floor
7. ~~New floor plan (GDrive)~~
8. ~~Rearrange living room (cane friendly)~~
9. Rearrange kitchen (make plates/cups/mugs easier to reach)
10. Clear hallway path from front door → kitchen → living room → dining room → bathroom → bedroom
11. ~~Buy safety bars for shower (glass + tile)~~
12. ~~Schedule safety bar installation~~ (3 PM, Wednesday)
13. ~~Bathroom mats for the shower~~
14. Confirm shower chair delivery with insurance/rehab
15. Hang up whiteboard calendar
16. ~~Buy bigger utensils~~ (nevermind, Ilya said not needed)
17. Meal prep (recipes in GDrive)
18. ~~Buy night lights~~
19. Install night lights
20. Pick up medication (day before discharge)
21. Organize meds (day before discharge)
22. ~~Buy ice packs for migraines~~
23. ~~Schedule house cleaners~~
24. Clear drawers/closet space for Ilya
25. Put his clothes in closet/drawers

Shane kept rereading the list. It must have been longer than he thought, because his mom was suddenly standing beside him, clutching two steaming mugs of tea as she read over his shoulder.

“What if Svetlana and I do the night lights first, and you can tackle the closet and drawers?” she said gently as Shane nodded, sliding his phone into his back pocket.

“I left the suitcase of clothes from his house in the guest bedroom, or your bedroom now, so it should be easy to put away,” his mom said, jutting her chin out in the direction of their new bedroom.

“Do you think we should wash them or anything?”

His mom chuckled. “I already washed them and everything that was in his hamper. Figured it would be easier to throw it all in before driving down here.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Shane said, taking a mug from her. He blew on the tea, inhaling the chamomile.

“Why don’t you sit down for a bit? Svetlana and I can start with the night lights easily. It might be good for you to have a snack,” his mom said, wrapping an arm around him as she walked him over to the counter chairs.

Shane wrinkled his nose. “I don’t want candy though.”

“While I did see you bought half the sweet store and then some... I also saw some carrots and celery in the fridge. I made some snack packs for you earlier so you can grab something quickly.”

Shane felt immense relief. “Thank you, that’s... really appreciated,” he said, pulling out a chair next to Svetlana. Half the bag of candy was already gone, and she was scrolling on her phone.

His mom placed her mug down and turned to the fridge. Shane noted that she did more than make snack packs as there were a few meals with her Post-it notes on them. She grabbed one of the smaller containers with cut-up veggies, and slid it over to Shane.

“Svetlana, ready to put some lights in?” his mom asked, hands on hips, eyebrows raised as Svetlana flashed a thumbs up before wiping her hands on her pants. Shane munched on a carrot as he watched them walk over to the bag that contained the lights and started pulling them out.

As they plugged in the first light and tossed the cardboard into an extra bag, Shane’s shoulders relaxed.

-&-

Rather than unload the clothes while his mom and Svetlana set up the lights, Shane went to work on removing the rugs on the ground floor. Fortunately for him, there were only a few rugs since he had opted to highlight the hardwood floors in the house. After he rolled up the last rug and hauled it to the garage, he found Svetlana and his mom already reorganizing the kitchen.

His mom had already pulled down every plate, bowl, cup, and mug. Svetlana stood on a step stool, close enough to Ilya’s height to map out where everything should go for maximum ease. Shane’s mom kept pointing out different spots, but often got distracted by a shelf that needed wiping. Shane had a feeling that every item in the cabinet was going to get rearranged.

Shane pulled out his phone, snapped a quick photo, and sent it to Ilya. Shane had barely put his phone away before it buzzed again. When he pulled it out, he saw that Ilya had reacted to the picture with a heart. Followed by questions asking if Shane had fed them. Shane rolled his eyes and responded with a quick “yes”, before finally shoving his phone away.

Only then, with his mom and Svetlana fully engrossed in their task did he feel like he could

sneak into the bedroom. As promised, the extra battered suitcase was in the doorway, an obnoxious yellow scarf tied to the black suitcase. Shane grabbed it and rolled it fully into the room.

The curtains were open wide, sunlight filtering into the room. On Shane's side of the bed sat a picture of him and Ilya at the cottage, a book he'd tried to read many times but had never made it past page thirty, and his glasses folded up. On Ilya's side, Shane had left it mostly bare except for a few charging cables for his devices. There were extra pillows on Ilya's side of the bed at the recommendation of rehab; though Shane fully expected to be teased by Ilya at the sheer amount.

Shane moved to the chest of drawers where he started to methodically remove all of the clothing out of the first two drawers. For some of the items, he placed them in the pile he mentally labeled for donation while the others were set closer for keeping.

After emptying the drawer, he wandered into the kitchen to get some cleaning supplies and paper towels. True to his prediction, his entire counter was covered with every single kitchen utensil hidden in the cabinets as his mom and Svetlana started to do their own cleaning. Shane snorted and shook his head as he walked back to the bedroom. As if he and Ilya could tell the difference between a clean cabinet.

Back in the bedroom, Shane wiped down the drawers. He tugged the suitcase closer and opened it, starting to organize Ilya's clothes. Some he refolded before gently placing them in the drawers.

It was strange doing something so simple and domestic in this home. While Shane and Ilya had spent days here experimenting with recipes in the kitchen and watching countless games on TV, no one would have known Shane had a boyfriend. Ilya had been here so infrequently it never made sense to give him drawers. They lived out of suitcases when they stayed at each other's homes. And of course, Ilya had his own closet space at the cottage, but the cottage was always an escape – a vacation spot. It wasn't the banal everyday life the way Shane's home in Montreal was, or Ilya's home in Ottawa.

It felt like a milestone in their relationship, and Shane couldn't help feeling excited at the thought of them truly living together. To have photos of themselves all over the place, Christmas cards addressed to them on the fridge, and two toothbrushes at the bathroom sink in plain sight.

Shane leaned back against the bed, pulled out his phone, and snapped a picture of Ilya's clothes in the drawers. He sent it to Ilya, and within a minute, his phone was ringing. Shane quickly popped his headphones in before answering the call.

"A whole drawer? What did I do to get so lucky?" Ilya teased on the other side as Shane grinned down at the drawer.

"Wrong, you have *two* drawers."

"Well, I'll give you *three* drawers in Ottawa," Ilya said and Shane rolled his eyes, placing another shirt in the drawer.

“Your drawers are smaller than mine, so it’s actually even—”

“Did you forget to count? Three is more than two.”

“But if you calculate the area of the drawer—”

“Ugh, Hollander, we are not measuring the drawers when I come home.”

“No, we won’t,” Shane agreed, pausing as he put the last T-shirt into the drawer, resting his hand on top of the pile.

“How was your day, *moy lyubimyy*?” Ilya breathed into the phone as Shane sat down on the floor, leaning back against the drawers.

“Good. Ran some errands with mom and Svetlana. They’re currently rearranging the kitchen to make sure you can reach everything.”

“I didn’t shrink. I can reach things fine,” Ilya huffed.

“Yeah, but it was something rehab mentioned. Plus, my mom and Svetlana are deep cleaning our cabinets. We’re getting a steal from their services. And we can switch everything back if we hate how they did it,” Shane said, and he could practically hear Ilya roll his eyes on the other end of the phone.

“We’re almost ready to have you home. Just a few things here and there. Night lights installed, rugs put away, and restocked the house with all our favorite snacks,” Shane said, hearing Ilya shuffle on the other end of the line.

“How was your day, *moy lyubimyy*?” Shane asked, looking over to the door to make sure it was still closed.

“Good. Did a lot of stairs today. Taylor and Cece were happy. Stacy had me go through a kitchen simulation where I had to make toast and coffee. Then walk the snack and drink to the table while talking,” Ilya said restlessly on the phone.

“How did it go?” Shane asked cautiously.

“No spills, no burnt toast, and I managed to have a nice conversation with Stacy about the weather while walking with my breakfast,” Ilya said sheepishly.

“Can I expect breakfast in bed then?” Shane asked, whispering in the phone.

Ilya hummed. “As long as you like simple snacks and meals, yes.”

“My favorites,” Shane said, clutching his stomach and closing his eyes, a smile spreading across his face.

-&-

At Shane's next session with Meera, he plopped on the armchair, rolling out his shoulders as she looked on expectantly. The light from her window caught the blue in her hair, brighter than the last few weeks. Shane leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

"Ilya is officially being discharged at the end of this week," Shane said, glancing up as Meera tilted her head.

"How are you feeling about it?" she asked calmly.

Shane shrugged and leaned back, "Honestly, I'm stressed. I mean, I am really excited he's coming home and I think everything is in order at home but..." Shane bit his lip before blurting out, "What happens if something bad happens at home?"

"Like what?" Meera prompted.

"He falls, hurts himself, and I'm not there to help. Or I hover too much and he gets mad because I can't stop worrying all the fucking time. At least at the hospital and in rehab, there are nurses and therapists who know what the hell they're doing. I don't have that training to be a nurse. I'm just his boyfriend."

"Has rehab covered with you what *their* expectations would be from a partner or caretaker during this transition period?"

"Yeah, and it's minimal. Driving him around to appointments, making sure medications are taken on time, cooking, cleaning the house... and making sure he doesn't exert himself too much," Shane said, ticking off the tasks on his fingers.

Meera nodded. "How do those responsibilities feel to you?"

"Manageable. Straightforward. But that part... feels easy."

"How so?"

"It's easy to create a schedule. I already got a whiteboard for the kitchen so we can track his appointments and exercises. Meds can go on an alarm and even a check list on the whiteboard. Everything logistical can be controlled. Plus, I like cooking and... I have cleaners anyways, so it's not as if I'd be taking on extra chores there." Shane said.

"What part feels overwhelming?" Meera pressed gently.

Shane paused, tilting his head as he thought about it. "I'm just worried he'll come home and *something* bad will happen. And that I won't be able to fix it and we're back in the hospital. And maybe it's not Ilya, what happens if we find out something about our hockey careers? I feel like I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's stupid."

Meera folded her hands in her lap. "I don't think that's stupid." Shane reeled his head back as if he had been hit.

“For the past two and a half months you’ve had to live in a constant vigilant state. You’ve endured a significant trauma with a loved one. It’s expected you’d feel on edge, but we would want to minimize the impact of this anxiety and give you ways to practice emotional regulation.”

“Isn’t talking about this here supposed to do that? And the exercises?” Shane asked, raising an eyebrow.

A warm smile passed on Meera’s face, “Yes, all of that is part of the process. And I think you’re going to dislike what I’m about to suggest...” Meera trailed off, eyeing Shane.

Shane groaned, putting his hands over his face. He hated when it was the most obvious solution yet the hardest of them all.

“I have to talk to him about his expectations of me as a caregiver and a partner, aren’t I?”

“I’m afraid so,” Meera confirmed.

-&-

The day before discharge, Shane was lying in Ilya’s bed, Ilya tangled up in his limbs. Shane let his fingers drift over Ilya’s arms, his eyes wandering to the window where the plain curtains were partially drawn, as the final rays of the afternoon shone into the room.

If it was any other day, Ilya would only be half awake. But ever since the news of his discharge, Ilya was practically buzzing with excitement to get out of rehab. There was an endless supply of energy, and while Shane *knew* he should tell him to go to bed early or to stop rushing through steps... he figured he’d bask in it and leave Taylor to lecture Ilya.

“What are you thinking?” Ilya asked, opening his eyes and staring at Shane.

Shane grinned, lifting an arm and putting it behind his head.

“Thinking about what I have to do tonight for tomorrow,” Shane said, and he felt Ilya stiffen underneath him.

“Is a lot?”

“No. Just picking up your meds. I need to organize them into the pill organizer. Hang the whiteboard. Easy stuff.”

“Hm, okay,” Ilya said. He paused before pushing himself off of Shane and positioning himself so he matched Shane’s posture, arm behind his head staring at him intently.

Shane leaned forward, knowing something was on the tip of Ilya’s tongue.

“I don’t want you to do too much,” Ilya blurted.

“What does that mean?” Shane asked carefully.

Ilya bit his lip as he stared at the ceiling. “I don’t want you to hover too much. Or take on too much at home. I can help, and I can take Ubers to my appointments,” Ilya insisted as Shane sighed, readjusting his position.

“You know I hire cleaners, right? And yeah, you can definitely help at home with cooking. I hear you make great toast,” Shane teased as Ilya pursed his lips.

“Shane, I’m serious. I don’t want to feel like a patient at home. I want to be your boyfriend.”

“I want that too. I just... I think I need your help to call me out if I hover too much. Otherwise, I’ll be stuck in my head about what to do,” Shane said slowly, constantly checking Ilya’s face to see if any of his words caused Ilya’s nostrils to flare or a bitter turn of the head to the window.

Ilya nodded, mulling the words. “I can do that,” Ilya said softly.

“Are you nervous about home?” Shane asked, and Ilya shook his head.

“Not about home. More worried about the future,” Ilya said, sighing as he averted his gaze.

“What about the future?” Shane asked.

Ilya ran a hand through his curls. “Worry about hockey. If I can play again. How that would impact *us*,” Ilya said.

“I think you’ll play hockey again,” Shane said simply as Ilya gave him a look.

“Shane, players with less severe injuries than me don’t return to the ice. Look at how many get concussions and can’t come back to the game. I was in a *coma*.”

“Yeah, but when you woke up, you recognized people. You were standing within your first few weeks here, and now you’re doing stairs,” Shane rattled off, only to meet Ilya’s concerned look.

Shane rolled his eyes, “*Taylor* is impressed with your progress. Remember how they said you were making great strides? And how some patients leave here not being able to do *half* the things you do? Already making a bet you’ll be on the ice later this year. You think Taylor ever *gambles*?” Shane pressed, raising his eyebrows, and finally he got a smile from Ilya.

“Yeah, that’s true,” he said quietly, his eyes still fixated on his sleeves. Mid conversation, Ilya had started pinching at the frayed edges of his sleeves. A thought occurred to Shane, and he sat up straighter.

“Hey, you know if your doctors come back and tell you that you have to retire, I’d still be with you. Right?”

Ilya stayed silent, his fingers repeatedly pinching the sleeves.

“Ilya, I love you. I’d rather have you alive and healthy than on the ice. Hockey was never going to last forever for either of us. One day we’ll have to retire. And we’ll still have our life together. With all the dogs and cats we end up with. Maybe a kid or two. Either way, I stay.”

Ilya lifted his gaze to Shane, smiling softly. He leaned forward and kissed Shane, then drew back and rested his forehead against his.

“I stay, but you – you’ll get kicked out soon,” Ilya whispered and Shane groaned, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Tomorrow night, I’ll be in bed with you,” Ilya whispered.

“I can’t fucking wait,” Shane said, and Ilya shook with laughter.

-&-

On discharge day, Shane woke two hours before his alarm. He stared at the ceiling, hands folded over his chest as he ran through his list. He glanced at Ilya’s side of the bed, a smile tugging at his lips. Tonight, Ilya would be sleeping there again.

Giddy with the thought, Shane stumbled out of bed and pulled open the blackout curtains. Early sunlight spilled into the room. After a moment, he headed to the bathroom and started his morning routine.

He smiled at the two toothbrush holders by the sink.

In the shower, the chair waited in the corner, and Ilya’s preferred body wash and shampoo sat on the shelf.

Shane felt drunk on anticipation, practically humming as he dressed in the outfit he’d picked out the night before: dark jeans, a plain white shirt he liked, and a sweatshirt for his morning chores.

Tiptoeing through the house, the hallway lights flicked on as he passed. He closed the cabinet doors carefully. Svetlana was asleep, dead to the world, but he still wanted to be quiet.

He started the coffee and glanced at the whiteboard on the fridge.

Ilya’s next few weeks of appointments were mapped out on the board, his medication schedule squeezed into the notes section.

Svetlana had spent the night doodling stars, hearts, and tiny flowers around the calendar. Shane had rolled his eyes then.

Now, as the coffee brewed, he found himself staring at the small red hearts and smiling. Shane leaned against the counter and checked the time.

Just a few more hours.

-&-

When it was finally an acceptable time to leave, Shane hugged Svetlana, whispered that he'd be back in a few hours, and promised to text.

Driving to rehab for the last time, he drummed his fingers on the wheel, the radio blasting a pop song. Luck seemed to be on his side when he snagged a parking spot close to the doors.

Shane rolled his shoulders, grabbed his keys, bag, and an extra pair of sunglasses, and stepped out of the car. He had to stop himself from running inside.

He knew he was early—Ilya was likely finishing his last therapy sessions—but Shane was more than happy to wait in his room.

When he stepped into the room, he saw that Ilya had already started to pack. The kids' artwork was stacked on the table, the picture frames piled beside it, leaving only the photo of Shane and Ilya by the bed. Some clothes had been pulled from the dresser and piled on top, but Shane could tell it wasn't everything. Of course, the bed was a mess—tangled sheets and the blanket crumpled at the end. Typical Ilya.

Shane looked around before sitting in the chair beside Ilya's bed. As always, his eyes landed on the whiteboard.

GOALS: Discharge day! PT: Final cane check OT: Final room safety review Speech: Strategies for fatigue. Final meeting w/Shane.

Shane grinned, his heart skipping a beat. His name was on the board—not “Jane”, not “caregiver”. Shane. He rubbed his chest as he looked around the room again. It felt bittersweet to leave the place that had given them their first taste of being out, and something like a normal domestic life.

But Shane was also ready for his own couch and a bigger bed where Ilya could sprawl out again. The door opened and Ilya walked in, cane in hand. He spotted Shane and a grin threatened to split his face as Shane stood to kiss him.

Ilya leaned into his cane but reached up, gripping the hair at the nape of Shane's neck. Shane sighed into the kiss before pulling back, resting his forehead against Ilya's. Ilya hummed, sliding his hand to Shane's cheek, his fingers tracing slowly across the freckles.

“Dobroye utro, moy lyubimyy,” Ilya whispered.

“Morning. How were the last sessions?” Shane asked, stepping out of Ilya's embrace as they walked back to the chairs by the window.

“Good. Everyone was nice. Taylor said they might follow me on Instagram. Cece said they should because she already does. Stacy reminded me not to push it too hard. And speech was just speech,” Ilya said, running through the list with a shrug. He sat in the chair, leaning the

cane beside it. Shane plopped down next to him.

“Is weird. No more hospital,” Ilya said, glancing at Shane.

“We still have all the doctors. But now we get to be at home,” Shane said, reaching out his hand. Ilya grabbed it, squeezing tightly as his eyes swept the room.

“Will be nice to sleep in a bigger bed,” Ilya murmured, rubbing at his nose. He exhaled, leaning back in the chair.

Shane rubbed his thumb over Ilya’s knuckles. “I redecorated,” he said, unable to help himself as Ilya gave him a surprised look.

“Not much. I pulled out all the old photos we gave each other and hung them around the house. I think it’s subtle-”

“Do you want me to sign them?” Ilya asked, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. Shane rolled his eyes, shaking his head at him playfully.

“Fuck *off*. I’m in them too!” Shane said, trying to pull his hand free, but Ilya tugged it back, squeezing it softly.

“I can't wait to see,” Ilya said, staring at Shane. Shane felt his heart skip a beat.

Home. Home. Home.

“Did they say what time the discharge meeting is?” Shane asked. Ilya looked down at his watch.

“They said the team will come by in half an hour. Maybe forty-five minutes,” Ilya said.

“I’m going to finish packing up the room. I don’t think we want to linger once we’re officially signed off,” Shane said. Ilya laughed. Shane wandered over to the drawers, pulling out the clothes.

“Thanks for starting the packing, by the way. It helps,” Shane said, glancing over his shoulder. Ilya grinned, letting his head fall to the side. Shane returned to the task of putting in the clothes in the duffle bag.

“Should I put on another episode of SmartLess? For old time’s sake?” Ilya asked. Shane laughed.

“Let’s do it,” Shane said as he moved around the room, folding the blanket and spare sweatshirts. Ilya loaded a new episode, turned the volume up, and dozed lightly in the chair while Shane packed the last of the room.

-&-

“This is incredibly stupid. Why did I bother with PT if I can’t walk out of here?” Ilya moaned in his usual dramatic way as he sat down in the wheelchair. He already had his sunglasses on and a baseball cap pulled low over his head.

“It’s policy,” the nurse reminded him, fiddling with the brakes on the chair.

“Want me to hold your cane? Or would you rather?” Shane asked over his shoulder, adjusting the backpack. The backpack held a binder of exercises Ilya needed to follow, along with a list of symptoms to watch for and numbers to call. It was the last bag to leave the room. The whiteboard had been wiped clean only minutes earlier.

“Actually, Shane, if you could pull the car around front, that would be great. Ilya can hold his cane,” the nurse said.

“Sounds good. See you in a second,” Shane said, swooping down to kiss Ilya on the forehead. Ilya mumbled something back at him.

Grinning, Shane left the room without looking back. He speed-walked down the hallway, past the familiar paintings, and out through the automatic doors. The moment he hit the sidewalk, he sprinted to the car. He tossed the backpack into the backseat, jumped behind the wheel, and pulled the car around to the front of rehab.

As soon as Shane parked and flipped on the hazard lights, Ilya was wheeled out of rehab, clutching his cane. Shane jumped out of the car and opened the passenger door just as Ilya stood from the wheelchair. Ilya glanced back at the building once before turning his gaze onto Shane. He started walking toward the car with hurried steps.

“*Slowly*, Ilya. Don’t make me tell Taylor!” the nurse called teasingly. Ilya laughed and stopped midway. He looked up and stared at Shane.

“You ready to go home?” Shane said, raising his eyebrows, one hand still on the door. Ilya nodded.

“I’m ready.”

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Blown away by all the sweet comments on the last chapter!

Thank you so much for them. Please know you can always leave an emoji if you’re ever not sure what to write.

As a heads up, I'll most likely be posting the next chapter on **Wednesday** this week. I'm still holding out hope I can get edits done for Tuesday, but my calendar is telling me that's probably not realistic 😊

See you all soon!

Chapter 28: Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

Ilya gingerly got into the car, using the grab handle to lower himself into the seat. Once he was settled, Shane shut the door and walked around to the driver's side. He snapped his seatbelt in just as Ilya clipped his into place.

"*On y va?*" Shane asked, raising his eyebrows. Ilya nodded. Before Shane could turn his head, he heard Ilya swear as he started to pat down his pockets.

"One second. I need to text Svetlana," Ilya said, pulling out his phone. The screen lit up as Ilya navigated to his texts. He bit his lip in concentration as he quickly typed out a message.

"Oh, that reminds me, she messaged me something," Shane said, holding back his own swear as he pulled out his phone, angling the screen away from Ilya, as he texted Hayden, Jackie, and Svetlana to let them know that he and Ilya were on their way home.

They both set their phones down at the same time, screens facedown, and looked at each other.

"Okay. Ready." Ilya said, grabbing the roof handle as he adjusted in his seat.

"You know, my driving isn't that bad," Shane teased as he started the car. Ilya shrugged sheepishly.

"Good to hold on to something. Not used to being the passenger princess," he said, looking over at Shane who rolled his eyes.

"Having a personal chauffeur isn't too bad." Shane said, letting his hand rest on the center console.

"Hm, should we get you a driving cap? Maybe some leather gloves?" Ilya said, capturing Shane's hands and intertwining their fingers. Shane smiled, a blush rising on his cheeks, and Ilya laughed.

Shane took in Ilya, relaxed against the car seat, laughing more easily than he ever did in rehab.

His heart lurched. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed this laugh.

They spent the car ride in silence, sneaking glances and shifting their grip on each other's hands. Shane didn't want to let go of Ilya's hand to turn on the radio, and Ilya eventually let

go of the grab handle, bringing his other hand over Shane's. His hands were more fidgety than Shane remembered.

"We're almost home," Shane said. Ilya nodded, lips pursed.

-&-

Once they pulled into the driveway, Shane's heart started to beat faster. He'd been quiet on the drive, more than happy to sit in silence with Ilya as they made their way home. Their home.

Here goes nothing.

"I'll grab your stuff, do you have the keys?" Shane said, as Ilya, looking slightly pale, patted his pockets.

"I do." Ilya said slightly hoarsely, coughing lightly.

"I'll meet you inside." Shane said, kissing Ilya quickly on the lips before moving out of the car to the trunk. He could hear the faint tap of Ilya's cane against the driveway. Shane shook out his hands, trying to get rid of the nerves and pent-up energy.

Shane grabbed the suitcase and backpack, then slammed the trunk closed. His hands trembled as he found the lock button on his keys.

What if this was the worst idea?

He moved up the driveway, noticing Ilya struggling with the keys—jangling loudly, nearly dropping them. Shane paused, watching him catch the keys and finally find the right one. He exhaled and continued up the driveway, breathing deeply through his nose.

Suddenly, there was a shout that was definitely Ilya. Shane adjusted his grip on the backpack and duffle and ran through the open front door. He nearly collided with Ilya, who was standing in the hallway.

"Shane. I think I'm still in a coma. Why is Hayden Pike in your house with all these candles?" Ilya asked, tilting his head at the shocked Hayden. Who was indeed holding a mangled lily in one hand and his phone in the other.

Shane dropped the duffle and shrugged off the backpack. He shut the door behind him and walked fully into the foyer, past Hayden and Ilya.

The living room was lit with electric candles. Dark red rose petals lined the floor from the foyer to the living room. Around Hayden, though, a few torn lily petals were scattered across the ground. Shane scanned the room, relieved to see there were no stray lily petals leading to the living room.

At the center of the living room stood Jackie and Svetlana. Jackie had her hands on her hips, shaking her head at the ceiling, while Svetlana had her hands in her curls, glaring at Hayden.

A rose petal had found its way into her hair, threatening to fall out. Candles at varying heights surrounded them, and the blinds were drawn closed.

“Hayden! You were supposed to keep an eye on ‘FindMyFriends’ and warn us! Also, *why* are you ripping up the lilies?” Jackie wailed as Hayden looked down at his phone, then the lily.

“FindMyFriends says they’re still at rehab!” Hayden said, lifting his phone near his head and giving it a small shake before lowering it again. Then his phone lit up, and Shane could clearly see his location had been updated to the house minutes ago. Shane shot Hayden a look. Hayden met his eyes briefly, grimacing.

“Okay, it just updated! I swear, two minutes ago they were still at rehab!” Hayden lamely defended himself as both Jackie and Svetlana let out loud groans of annoyance. “Also, wasn’t I supposed to get more petals? I thought I’d make it more interesting with lilies,” he added, puffing out his chest.

“We meant *rose* petals, not lilies! Oh, fuck, Hayden, the pollen!” Jackie lamented, and Hayden quickly placed the lily on the nearest flat surface, guilt all over his face.

“I’ll pay you back for whatever it ruined,” Hayden whispered to Shane, who nodded.

Shane’s heart rate picked up – this was not going to plan. Ilya was still looking around the room in shock, his sunglasses still on.

Almost as if he heard Shane’s thoughts, Ilya took off the baseball cap and the sunglasses. He set them on the table beside the lily and walked toward the women, his cane hitting the wood loudly.

“I texted you Svetlana! Why did you reach out to Hayden for help? I would have texted Bood to help if I knew you needed it,” Ilya said, gesturing towards Hayden and then Svetlana. “*I kak ty voobshche znayesh Hayden? Tolko ne govori mne, chto ty s nim podruzhilas,*” Ilya said, clearly annoyed as Svetlana reached into her back jeans pocket to grab her phone.

Shane furrowed his brow and shot a look over to Ilya.

Why did he think Svetlana had asked Hayden for help?

“I left my phone on silent!” Svetlana moaned, as she swiped through her phone, the petal slipping from her hair. She stared down at the screen before looking up at Ilya.

“*Oy, izvini,*” Svetlana said sheepishly, letting out a small laugh as she awkwardly looked around the room. Jackie shrugged at her. Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head.

“Why were you texting Svetlana?” Shane asked, stepping forward beside Ilya.

“Shane, isn’t it obvious? I set all of this up for us. Asked Svetlana to organize it,” he said, gesturing to the room.

At this point, Jackie and Svetlana had shit-eating grins on their faces. Both with their hands behind their backs, sharing knowing looks as they swayed. Even Hayden had brought a fist up to his mouth, but it did little to hide the smile behind it.

“No, I asked her for that,” Shane responded, jabbing a finger at his chest. Realization hit them at the same time, and they both grinned like complete idiots.

“*Syurpriz!* You *both* asked me to do this,” Svetlana said, throwing rose petals in the air, Jackie performing jazz hands, and Hayden started laughing.

Shane and Ilya exchanged glances, stunned, as they started to laugh nervously.

“Okay, but who asked you for help first?” Ilya asked, leaning into his cane.

Svetlana bit her lip, flicking her gaze between Shane and Ilya. After a prolonged silence, Ilya arched a brow and turned to Shane, a smile playing at his lips. Shane shrugged, trying to communicate a silent *sorry*.

“*On prosil o pomoshchi, kogda ty byl v kome,*” Svetlana said, wincing and Ilya groaned, but he was already smiling.

“Technicality. Barely beat me,” Ilya said, winking at Shane.

“What did she say?” Hayden asked and Shane shrugged.

“No idea, but I think I won,” Shane said, and Hayden held out a fist. Shane grinned and bumped his fist against Hayden’s.

“Well, we were pretty much done. Just adding finishing touches so we can leave you two alone. Come on,” Jackie said, bending and collecting her purse and jacket. Svetlana patted her pockets as she walked over to Shane and Ilya.

“I’m staying at a hotel tonight,” Svetlana said, winking at the two. Shane, as usual, could feel his face turn scarlet as Ilya howled with laughter. As Ilya kept laughing, Shane hugged Svetlana and whispered in her ear, “I thought you were on my side.”

“I’m on both of your sides. You know that,” Svetlana said, pulling back and giving Shane a quick peck on the cheek before turning to Ilya. His eyes were bright as he hugged Svetlana with one arm, whispering something quickly in Russian. As he released her, he kissed Svetlana on the cheek and she headed towards the door.

Jackie was on Svetlana’s heels and she hugged Shane tightly, rocking him. Shane patted her on the back. “Good luck,” she whispered. Then she moved over to Ilya.

“Wait, we don’t even get to watch?” Hayden protested as Jackie moved to his side. He threw an arm casually over her shoulder, and Jackie looked up, giving him a warning glance.

“I’m going to murder you,” she threatened, jabbing a finger to his chest. She slipped out of his grip, and moved to the doorway, standing next to Svetlana as Hayden turned over to Ilya

and Shane.

“Thanks, man,” Shane said, shaking Hayden’s hand before pulling him into a hug.

“You got the ring?” Hayden asked in his ear.

“Got it,” Shane said, chuckling as Hayden clapped him on the back before stepping away.

Hayden stepped over to Ilya, his shoulders pulled back, and held out his hand stiffly. Ilya looked down with a look of disgust. “No,” Ilya said simply.

Before Hayden could react or protest, Ilya threw his arm around Hayden, pulling him in close. Hayden let out a surprised laugh. It was a quick hug, and both men broke apart within seconds.

“Thank you for fucking up our proposal,” Ilya said, deadpan, patting Hayden on the shoulder.

Hayden rolled his eyes, brushing off the hand. “Okay, it’s not *that* bad—”

“No, it makes for a funny story. I like it,” Ilya said sincerely, placing his hand over his heart. Hayden grinned, looking down as he stepped towards the door, where Jackie and Svetlana stood. Svetlana opened the door and stepped out, Jackie following behind her.

“Good luck! Let us know!” Hayden shouted, and Jackie stepped back in and dragged him out the door by the arm, before she loudly slammed the door shut.

Shane and Ilya looked at each other, both grinning nervously and breaking into laughter. Shane rubbed the back of his neck, adrenaline kicking in as all sensible words left his brain.

“I, uh, asked for them to put a chair at the center in case you wanted to sit,” Shane said, grabbing Ilya’s hand and walking them over to the center of the room, where the rose petals formed a heart around a chair. Shane’s heart melted at the sight of red gauze draped over the back of his plain kitchen chair.

Ilya looked at the chair, the petals, and finally at Shane. He licked his lips and leaned on his cane, his face close to Shane’s, nearly touching.

“You beat me to asking Svetlana, and I do want to stand for this. If I sit or kneel first, it’ll take a while to transition. It makes sense for you to go first,” he said softly. Shane swallowed, suddenly aware of how hard his heart was pounding, certain he might drop the ring if he wasn’t careful.

Ilya placed his cane by the chair, looking down at Shane, his brows pinched as his eyes brimmed with tears. Shane sank down to one knee, clearing his throat, as if that would help with the nerves. He took a few deep breaths before he could speak.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. We’ve wasted so much time hiding what we were and how we felt about each other, and I don’t want to do that anymore. I love you. I promise to always

choose you. No matter what happens.”

Shane realized he didn’t have the ring in his hand. He let go of Ilya’s hand to grab the ring, then took his hand again. There was a small chuckle from Ilya.

“This is a lot harder than it looks,” Shane said, exasperated as Ilya hummed.

“I am taking notes. You are doing great,” Ilya said hoarsely, and Shane felt his heart pounding in his ears.

“I love you *so* much. I want to be your husband, I want to be your emergency contact, and I want to always be with you. I don’t know what the future holds with our teams and hockey, but I do know that I want you by my side. Sleeping or awake. I stay, I’ll always fucking stay,” Shane said and Ilya’s breath hitched.

Shane’s mind went blank. He hadn’t planned to mention the coma. But the second his knee hit the ground, the half-written speech in his head disappeared.

He should have written it down.

“I just—I would have stayed by your bedside until you woke up. There’s no one else for me, Ilya. It’s *always* been you,” Shane let out a shaky breath, “I should have realized that a long time ago – like when I bought an entire building for us to meet or how I lived for the games against Boston even though I had this problem, this hot Russian player chirping in my ear and I never wanted it to go away.” Shane said softly, Ilya let out a choked laugh. Shane cleared his throat *again* as he continued, babbling. “I love you, and I want to spend the rest of our lives together. Ilya Rozanov, will you marry me?” Shane asked, his hands trembling as he held out the ring.

A tear slipped down Ilya’s face, his lips twitching as he stared down at Shane. He slowly nodded, a smile blooming on his face.

“I’m going to need one word, Ilya,” Shane said quietly, not letting himself relax until he heard *the* word. Ilya let out a laugh, slightly wet.

“Yes. I say yes,” Ilya said, his voice trembling. Shane let out a breath he’d been holding, folding in on himself, shaking slightly. After a few breaths, Shane pushed to his feet and grabbed Ilya’s face, kissing him, gripping Ilya’s waist to steady himself. Ilya softened against him, and Shane pulled back, resting his forehead against Ilya’s.

“Too much?” Shane asked.

“Perfect,” Ilya said, closing his eyes slightly.

“So, um, the ring?” Shane said, as Ilya pulled back to look at it. The light reflected off of the black band with the gold interior.

“It should fit and if you don’t like it-” Shane said, pushing the ring on Ilya’s finger where it

fit perfectly.

“I love it,” Ilya said, marveling at the ring on his hand as he gave Shane a kiss. A thrill went through Shane as he pulled Ilya closer. Wanting to deepen the kiss, his hands threaded into Ilya’s hair but Ilya turned his face, his breathing ragged.

“My turn?” he asked sheepishly as Shane nodded quickly, pressing his lips together. Ilya, holding onto Shane’s hand, slowly lowered himself to one knee. He used the chair to balance, and Shane almost dropped to his knees but Ilya shot him a look. Shane stood straight as he stared down at Ilya.

He had many memories of Ilya on his knees in front of him, but this was one Shane would remember forever.

Ilya looked up at Shane, grabbing his hand, and blinked rapidly. “Fuck, Shane, how did you do this without crying?” Ilya asked, wiping at his cheeks and Shane had to resist the urge to wipe them away.

“It was *really* fucking hard,” he said, and Ilya snorted, pulling out the ring. It was identical to the one Shane had bought.

“I’d argue you have it easier since you *know* my answer,” Shane teased, and Ilya scoffed.

“Okay. I’ve also been doing some thinking,” Ilya said, and Shane chuckled, unable to calm his nerves. Ilya breathed quickly, rubbing his chest. “I don’t remember the plane crash. I couldn’t tell you what I was doing minutes before or the movie I was watching. But I do remember thinking of you,” Ilya said quietly, looking up at Shane, his voice steady.

Shane had to bite hard on his lip, already feeling a tear streak down his face. Ilya’s own brows were furrowed, as he squeezed his eyes shut, breathing deeply before opening them again. “I should have known I was fucked the moment you scolded me for smoking and all I could think was how *stunning* you were, talking to me. And somehow it only got worse – with every game against you, every stolen moment,” Shane’s own tears fell, and he thought back to their teenage years.

They were truly, irrevocable, fucked from that first meeting. How dumb they’d been.

Ilya hesitated, his breath hitching. Shane noticed the tremble in Ilya’s hand, and did his best to squeeze it.

“You’re doing great. I’m taking notes,” Shane parroted back, Ilya gave him a grateful smile before continuing.

“There is a saying in Russian that I always thought was dumb and that you’d think was idiotic too. *Lyubov’ sil’nee smerti*, love is stronger than death, but since the accident...” Ilya trailed off, and Shane had to look up at the ceiling, doing his best to swallow the lump in his throat.

Because, *fuck*—

He closed his eyes, squeezing Ilya's hand tightly, forcing himself to breathe through his mouth. Shane only opened his eyes when Ilya pulled lightly at his hand.

Opening his eyes, he saw Ilya's hazel eyes wide. Blinking rapidly as one, two, three tears streaked down Ilya's face. Ilya opened his mouth, his next words coming out hoarse.

"Maybe, maybe there's some truth in it. At least, I think so now," Ilya said softly, looking away for a second. Shane squeezed Ilya's hand, his grip tightening.

Shane's breath caught as Ilya turned to face him again.

"Shane Hollander, will you marry me?" Ilya asked, as Shane felt his own tears slip.

Shane gulped for air, not caring that his tears were falling faster than Ilya's. He hoped only a few seconds had passed, but based on how Ilya was squeezing his hand... he knew he had to say his answer.

Even if it was obvious.

"Yes," Shane said as Ilya placed the ring onto his finger. The ring was a carbon copy of the one Shane had placed on Ilya's fingers minutes before. Ilya tugged on Shane's hand, and Shane, finally, dropped to his knees and pulled him in for a kiss. They were both crying as they kissed, Ilya cradling Shane's face between his hands.

Foreheads resting together, Ilya lowered his other knee so they were both kneeling face to face. They gulped for air, crying, hiccupping awkwardly, hands all over each other's faces. Candlelight caught in Ilya's curls, his hazel eyes bright.

"We're engaged," Shane whispered, in absolute awe.

Ilya grinned, "You're mine and I'm yours."

Shane was unbelievably happy, practically drunk. He was a fiancé. And he *had* a fiancé.

"Okay? Not dizzy?" Shane asked, feeling his breathing shift into panting.

It took him a second to realize that he was mimicking Ilya.

"More than okay," Ilya said, pulling in Shane with his sweater as he kissed him again with an edge of desperation. Shane threaded his hands through Ilya's curls as Ilya placed his hands under Shane's shirt, sliding up his back.

Shane stilled for a second, waiting for Ilya to stop—before giving in. Suddenly, Shane was shoving his hands under Ilya's shirt, a moan escaped from Ilya as Shane brushed over his chest.

“Sensitive?” Shane asked, as Ilya worked on trying to remove Shane’s t-shirt.

“It’s been a while since we’ve done this,” Ilya said breathlessly, as Shane pulled off his own shirt before helping Ilya out of his.

“Is it okay? We can stop-” Shane said before Ilya growled, pulling Shane closer such that their chests were pressed together. Ilya over estimated the action, as they toppled over, such that Shane was on top of Ilya, both landing on the ground.

“I can do stairs, so I can do sex,” Ilya said simply, smirking at Shane.

“Was *that* why you were so upset about missing stairs?” Shane asked, taking the opportunity to kiss down Ilya’s throat.

“Hm, partly,” Ilya said, exposing his neck more as Shane nipped at it. Before returning to Ilya’s mouth.

“I’ve missed this.” Shane sighed as Ilya wrapped his arms around his back. Shane could feel Ilya’s heartbeat beneath him, and he relished that he wasn’t hearing it through machines. Ilya’s hands traveled down Shane’s back. When they reached his waist, he slipped his fingers under the waistband.

Shane froze, opening his eyes as Ilya’s hands paused before sliding to the front of his pants. Shane’s mind flashed to Ilya doing the stairs in rehab, and he forced himself to trust.

“We should go to the bedroom. I had movers come and put our bed in the guest bedroom here—”

“I like *our* bed,” Ilya muttered against Shane’s neck.

“Let’s go,” Shane said, detangling himself from Ilya and standing up. He held out a hand, and Ilya took it, pushing himself up. He grabbed his cane as they laughed their way to the guest bedroom, or their bedroom now.

“I might be quick, I haven’t—” Shane muttered as Ilya chuckled.

“Shane, even I touched myself recently—”

“Where? When?” Shane panted, staring at Ilya in shock.

“The showers. At night.” Ilya grinned. “Should I show you?”

-&-

Shane and Ilya lounged in bed, both wearing sweatpants. Water still dripped from Ilya’s curls as Shane’s hair had already dried. Ilya had his phone out, scrolling through his photos with Shane. He wanted to make a post about the relationship now that he was out of rehab. He already had the statement from Farah—now all that was left was choosing the photos.

“I can’t *believe* you kept so many,” Shane muttered as Ilya skimmed through the rows.

“Well, I look good in most of these,” Ilya said, a slight flush to his cheeks.

“So, what are your top five?” Shane asked, scooting closer to him. Ilya paused on the screen.

“Well, the one we took in Las Vegas in 2014,” he said, starring it on his phone. “And then, I do like this one from the Irina Foundation Gala.” He pulled up one of him, Shane, and Svetlana.

“That’s a good tux, what happened to it?” Shane asked, squinting at the phone.

Ilya smiled. “Put on your glasses, old man. And *you* don’t remember what happened that night?” he teased.

Shane reached for his glasses, frowning as he tried to sort through the memories. “That night? Oh—” Shane said, realizing there’d been an incident with ripped pants and lube spilled on the jacket.

The tux simply had to be thrown out.

“Okay. What’s the third one?” Shane asked as Ilya scrolled through until he found one from the summer. He and Shane were showing off their latest meal, with Shane presenting the burger while Ilya showed off his plate of grilled vegetables. It was probably their second summer together, when they’d really started getting into cooking. They each had silly faces on, and Shane *vaguely* remembered his mom laughing as she snapped the photos; something with “smizing”?

“Oh, I like this one, postable?” Ilya asked, showing one of Ilya by the water in his swimsuit. Water falling from his curls while he smiled widely. Shane was hunched over, mid-sneeze, his neck disappearing at an unflattering angle.

“You kept *this* one?” Shane asked, zooming in on himself. Ilya smirked, “*I* look nice.”

Shane slapped Ilya lightly on the chest as Ilya kept on scrolling. He found another from the photoshoot they did their first Christmas in the snow.

“Alright, and for the fifth one?” Shane asked, and Ilya reached over and handed Shane a t-shirt. Taking the hint, Shane put his on as Ilya did the same. Ilya lifted his phone at an angle, turned to Shane, and kissed him on the cheek. He lowered the phone, and they both stared at the photo.

Shane was grinning widely as Ilya kissed him on the cheek. Both were clearly relaxed and at ease. They looked completely, and stupidly in love.

“This one,” Ilya said brightly, zooming in on Shane’s face.

“Can you text those to me?” Shane asked quietly, a ping followed on his phone.

“Alright, what do you think?” Ilya asked, passing over his phone as Shane looked through the photos again and reread the statement.

“Looks good,” Shane said, passing the phone back and taking Ilya’s hand on his own.

“Are you ready to post?” Shane asked as Ilya nodded. His thumb hovered over the button. He breathed deeply before giving Shane a look.

“I can’t believe you did this on your own,” Ilya said in disbelief, and Shane leaned his head on Ilya’s shoulder.

“I did it with you, this was back in the hospital, you were just...” Shane hesitated.

“You were going to say ‘asleep,’ right?” Ilya teased as Shane rolled his eyes.

“My parents were there with Svetlana. As soon as I posted, Svetlana started serving your favorite vodka.”

Ilya swore, his eyebrows rose playfully. “You drank in my hospital room while I was in a coma?”

Shane blinked. “That sounds bad. But I swear, it was tame. We had dixie cups, it’s not like we watered it down with cranberry juice.”

“I would have woken up if you mixed juice with my favorite vodka like it was cheap American vodka,” Ilya said dryly, and Shane laughed.

“We didn’t. We took like you taught us. Very respectful. Very tasteful,” he said, reassuring Ilya. Shane looked down at the phone, watching as Ilya’s thumb hovered over the ‘Post’ button. With a quick breath, Ilya tapped the button and looked over at Shane, a smile on his face.

“Posted,” he said, setting his phone aside as he leaned over to kiss Shane.

-&-

-&- TRANSLATIONS -&-

On y va? (FR): Should we go?

I kak ty voobshche znayesh Hayden? Tolko ne govori mne, chto ty s nim podruzhilas (RU): And how do you even know Hayden? Just don’t tell me you became friends with him.

Oy, izvini (RU): Oops, sorry.

On prosil o pomoshchi, kogda ty byl v kome (RU): He asked for help when you were in a coma.

Lyubov' sil'nee smerti (RU): Love is stronger than death

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

So, was it worth the wait? 😊

In all seriousness, this was one of the earlier scenes I wrote for this fic (back when I thought it was going to be a one-shot, HA!). I'm really glad I finally get to share it with you all.

Thank you so much for all the kind comments over the last few chapters - they've meant a lot! And please know you can always leave an emoji if you're not sure what to write.

Let me know in the comments if you had a favorite proposal, I'm very curious!

I'm going to take a short posting break (no update this Sunday or Tuesday) while I get a bit ahead on writing/editing. Updates will resume the last week of March. If you want slightly chaotic updates, feel free to check out my [Tumblr](#).

See you all soon 💙

Chapter 29: Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

It had always been the plan to have a celebratory dinner at the house the next day.

Back in rehab, Shane had tried to act casual while scrolling on his phone (there wasn't even an app open, just his lock screen), mentioning that his parents wanted to come the night after Ilya came home. He was so focused on keeping his face neutral and moving his thumbs on the screen properly, like he was juggling two things at once. No big deal. Just his parents coming over. Just some Reddit posts.

If Shane had taken a second to look up, he would have noticed that Ilya was doing the exact same thing. It was only when Ilya agreed that Shane realized that his phone wasn't even on a screen—and he spiraled that maybe, just maybe, Ilya was onto him.

“Did you notice? I thought I was fucked when the screen lit up with a text from Hayden,” Shane said, tilting his head against Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya just shook his head, a soft look on his face.

“I thought I was so lucky that everything was falling into place. I was worried that if I did something, you’d invite them that first night or later so I just said yes. I took it as a sign,” Ilya said, pressing a kiss on the top of Shane’s head.

-&-

The next day, Shane’s parents arrived early in the afternoon, Svetlana on their heels as they burst through the doors with grocery bags and flowers.

Shane’s parents went straight into the kitchen, unpacking bags and pulling out everything they needed for the meal. They refused help from Shane and Ilya, leaving the two of them at the counter with their ginger ale and Coke.

“I feel like a kid again,” Shane whispered, eyeing Svetlana as she stood with a glass of wine, deep in conversation with his mom.

“Is fun. The best,” Ilya whispered back, bumping the back of his hand against Shane’s. Shane, without looking, bumped his hand back, and they kept going until one of them sloshed their drink onto the counter.

“You boys,” Shane’s mom muttered fondly, leaning over with a paper towel to clean up the mess.

“Sorry, Mom,” Shane grimaced, and Ilya chuckled.

As soon as she finished cleaning the counter, she picked up her own wine glass and went over to Svetlana. Svetlana launched back into the story about the proposal setup, gesturing wildly to the living room. Shane's dad kept pausing his chopping to ask questions, and Shane swore Svetlana's voice got louder with every comment.

Shane shot Ilya a worried glance, suddenly aware of how noisy everything was with—the sizzling pans, the slamming drawers, the never-ending set of questions. He leaned in towards Ilya.

“Is it okay? I can tell them to shut up,” he asked. Ilya shook his head, his eyes never leaving the scene in front of him.

“Is perfect,” Ilya said a little breathlessly.

-&-

The chicken parmesan was so good that Ilya claimed that he'd want it as his last meal if he were ever on death row. Shane rolled his eyes, but his dad's chest puffed out, a grin spreading across his face as he looked at Ilya. With all the empty plates and lingering conversation, Shane took it as his cue.

“Here, I can help clean up,” he said, starting to get up—only for his mom's hand to land on his shoulder and push him back into his seat.

“This is your celebratory dinner too. We'll clean up. You boys just rest,” she said, leaning in to kiss his temple.

“Mom,” Shane said, flustered, giving Ilya a look. Ilya shook his head. He mouthed the words, ‘let her,’ and Shane rolled his eyes.

“Fine. Thanks, Mom,” he said, sighing. He leaned back in his chair as his mom stood up to collect plates with Svetlana. His dad was already in the kitchen, running water to rinse the plates off.

As the last of the plates were cleared, Svetlana bringing the dish from one room to the kitchen, Shane's parents started to bicker about who was drying and who was washing. Ilya made eye contact with Shane and leaned forward.

“Think we should tell her now?” Ilya whispered, his eyes darting toward the kitchen. Shane nodded, putting his hands behind his head.

“Why not?”

Ilya gave a curt nod, cleared his throat, and called out, “Svetlana, where are you?”

“Right here,” Svetlana shouted, her footsteps echoing down the hallway as she turned into the dining room. She caught the doorway and leaned in.

“Come. Sit,” Ilya said, nodding to the empty chair between him and Shane.

Svetlana paused, narrowing her eyes at Ilya before walking over. She pulled out the chair and sat, folding her hands on the table, her gaze flicking between Shane and Ilya.

Shane ducked his head, staring resolutely at the table, memorizing the grain. He clenched his jaw shut. Ilya had it in his head this had to go a certain way, and Shane wasn’t about to mess it up for him.

He was so excited about it last night.

“I have some bad news,” Ilya said quietly, leaving his hand out on the table, palm up. Svetlana immediately took it. Ilya guiltily looked up at Svetlana and she tightened her grip. Her breathing picked up as she glanced over her shoulder towards the doorway.

“What is it? Should I get Yuna and David-”

“No, not necessary,” Shane said quickly. She snapped her gaze back to Ilya.

“Well, what is it?” she pressed. Ilya inhaled deeply, slowly letting the breath out, buying himself time. He looked up, a flash of a smirk.

“Shane should share the first part,” Ilya said, jutting his chin toward him.

Shane crossed his arms over his chest, rolling his neck as he searched for the right words. He flinched when Svetlana looked at him, her eyes wide, brows raised.

“You’re not going to be part of my groomsmates,” Shane said, biting his lip as Svetlana’s face lit up with a smile. She let out a squeal, piling her other hand over Ilya’s.

“I can’t wait, Ilya. I’ll work with whoever to plan the best Bachelor party. What should I wear? A suit? A dress?” Svetlana asked eagerly, leaning forward as Ilya grimaced, already shaking his head.

Svetlana’s face fell. She leaned back, pulling her hands away, then crossed her arms with a sharp huff.

“Is this a joke? You’re going to tell me I get to be part of both of your grooms parties, right?” she snapped, her gaze bouncing between them like a tennis match.

Shane stared down at the table, knowing that if he looked up, he’d absolutely cave. Across from him, Ilya started tapping his fingers against the table.

“Not a joke. You’re not going to be in either of our groomsmates,” Ilya said, holding out his hand for Svetlana.

She pushed her chair back, putting more distance between them.

“Eto bred, Ilya,” Svetlana said. Ilya’s eyebrows shot up. Shane curled his fingers into his arms, flexing them. Anxious didn’t even begin to cover it, but he knew how important this was to Ilya. So he kept his mouth shut, his expression locked into a straight line.

“Svetlana-” Ilya tried, scooting closer.

“Nyet! After everything? I’m—what—a guest at this wedding?” she scoffed, her nostrils flaring as her gaze clicked towards the doorway, like she was already planning an escape. Shane took a sharp breath, the hit landed, and he really just wanted to fast forward. Like, right now.

“Ilya, maybe we should—” Shane started, but Ilya threw up a hand to cut him off, flashing him a quick smile before turning back to Svetlana.

“Svetlana, do you want to hear the good news, or do you want to sulk like a child?” Ilya asked, a smirk on his face.

Svetlana paused, slowly dragging her gaze back to him. She glared at him as she uncrossed her arms.

“There’s good news?” she asked skeptically, glancing over to Shane and he took the honorable approach—staring up at the ceiling and completely avoiding her piercing look.

“Shane?” Svetlana pressed, and Shane winced. He always knew he was going to be the weaker of the two in this scenario.

“We want you to officiate our wedding,” Shane said quickly, his face flaming. Ilya leaned back, arms crossed, still smirking as Svetlana just stared, completely gobsmacked.

“We argued a lot last night on whose side you should stand on, and even though I won—”

“Anyone can win at a coin flip! There’s no skill,” Shane argued and Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Even though I won, my fiancé had the brilliant idea that you marry us instead of some weirdo stranger from the internet,” Ilya said, grinning extra wide at fiancé as Shane scoffed.

Svetlana brought her hands to her chest, her lower lip trembled as she tucked her chin down.

Her breathing turned shaky, the silence stretching too long.

Ilya frowned and reached for her arm.

“If you don’t want to do it, we’ll ask someone—”

“Shut up, that’s my role. They’ll have to fight me for it,” Svetlana said quickly. Ilya let out a relieved laugh.

“Can I still be part of the bachelor parties you two throw?” Svetlana asked hopefully.

At that, it was the first time Ilya actually looked sad. He started fidgeting with his fingers. “Svetlana... I can’t handle going to a club right now, and I can’t even drink. It’ll be a boring bachelor party. If I even have one.”

Svetlana gave him a small smile. “We can do something tame. Steak dinner, throw Shane in a cake with whipped cream,” she teased.

Ilya perked up, and raised his eyebrows excitedly over at Shane. Shane scoffed, shaking his head. Ilya pouted, which only made Svetlana laugh.

“I’m *not* getting into a cake and being your stripper!” Shane whispered, nodding his head towards the kitchen where his parents were still cleaning up from dinner.

“Fine, I’ll be the stripper. Everyone knows I have better dance moves—”

“You have one and it’s not that impressive.”

“That’s not what you said—”

“We can get another stripper,” Svetlana cut in calmly, raising her hands between them. Ilya smirked as he leaned back in his chair.

“Does that mean you say yes?” Ilya asked.

Svetlana sighed. “After everything... I think you both know that I’m a yes.”

Ilya and Shane grinned at each other, bumping fists. Svetlana rolled her eyes but there was a smile on her lips.

-&-

Within a week of being engaged, Shane was fully reminded why no one should cross Yuna Hollander when she had a vision. It started out innocently. She’d made the drive from Ottawa to Montreal under the guise that she’d just happened to make Ilya’s favorite dessert and Shane’s favorite meal for the freezer. She walked through the house, arms heavy with bags, as Shane and Ilya exchanged a look.

Ilya tilted his head, eyes shifting. Shane just shrugged. They cautiously followed her into the kitchen. She already had half the fridge on the counter, reorganizing everything and muttering to herself how they’d stored it wrong.

“You know, Mom, you didn’t need to drive all the way over for the meals. We do have delivery here,” Shane said, leaning back against the counter.

His mom shot him a sharp look.

“The cookies, yes. Much appreciated, thank you,” Ilya said, stepping in beside Shane and offering a small smile as she went back to the fridge.

“Is there any other reason why you’re here? Seems like a lot just to drive down for food...” Shane trailed off as his mom shut the fridge, dusting her hands before putting them on her hips.

“I was going to talk to you two about the wedding. Can we sit at the dining room table?” she asked, nodding towards the dining room. Before getting an answer, she walked out of the kitchen. Shane and Ilya immediately scrambled, grabbing cups, turning on the kettle, and pulling out tea.

“You got two cups? You good to walk them?” Shane asked Ilya offhandedly as he searched through their tea collection. He glanced up and caught a flash of fear on Ilya’s face before it shifted into determination. He reached for the cups and slowly started to walk them over to the dining room. It took Shane a second to remember that walking, talking, and carrying full glasses of water was something that Ilya practiced in rehab and Shane had just shoved him into the deep end.

Shane’s hand hovered over the tea, straining to hear anything like a stumble or the sound of breaking glass. All he heard was the soft placement of glass on wood, a joyful voice from his mom, and the excited footsteps of Ilya returning to the kitchen, flashing a thumbs up.

Shane grinned as he turned to the kettle, steam flowing out. Ilya returned to the kitchen and grabbed the last water glass. Shane filled a mug with hot water and slid it over to Ilya, making sure that the handle faced him.

“*Spasibo*,” Ilya said as he took the mug in his hand before making his slow pace back to the dining room.

Shane continued filling up the mugs, only half paying attention to the murmurs in the dining room. When he was finally done, he grabbed the last two mugs and carried them into the dining room.

Ilya was clutching the water glass close to his chest, while his mom took a slow sip from her mug.

Shane placed a mug for Ilya, and then his own down before taking a seat. He looked between his mom and Ilya, then decided to break the ice.

“So, wedding stuff? What did you want to talk about?” Shane asked and his mom leaned forward, elbows on the table.

“Well, you want to get married in the summer, right?”

“Yeah, you know, before the season starts,” Shane mumbled, his eyes fixed on his tea, not daring to glance at Ilya.

“That only gives us, what, four months to plan?” she pressed.

“Yeah, sounds about right. Hoping for July or August,” Shane said. He watched the lines his mom hated start to form between her brows.

“So, have you two planned anything?” she asked gently but the hairs on Shane’s neck stood. He snuck a glance over to Ilya, who was biting his lip. He’d caught it too, the trap in the question.

“We were thinking at the cottage,” Ilya said, turning to Shane.

“Svetlana is going to officiate. And we’d want our friends and family there,” Shane said, gesturing towards his mom.

“Okay. So cottage, Svetlana officiating. Sometime in July or August. Have you two thought about food?”

“Well, Bood is good on the grill, so we thought we’d ask him to handle that? I’m sure the other guys on the team would help out,” Shane said casually. Upon seeing his mom’s eyes widen, ready to pop, Shane quickly backpedaled into what he *thought* she would want to hear. “I mean, we could just order a bunch of pizzas day of. That way we’re not asking our guests to cook, and that’s the whole meal.”

Shane’s mom opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her grip tightened around her mug, and Shane realized he’d walked straight into the trap. Ilya tried to salvage it.

“Ridiculous, Shane,” Ilya muttered. Shane’s mom let out a relieved sigh.

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear you say that, Ilya—”

“We need a cake with the pizza. We have to cut into it, and it would be fun to go cake tasting,” Ilya said, slipping his hand under the table to squeeze Shane’s knee.

“Please tell me that you’re both joking,” Shane’s mom said quietly.

They both snapped their gaze to her. She was breathing heavily through her nose. “Do you two have any idea of how much planning goes into a wedding? We’re going to have to get tents, we’ll need plans if there is a thunderstorm, and you two need to get our outfits. Not to mention a DJ, a caterer, and—”

Ilya reached for her hand. That was enough to stop her rant.

“We need help then. I can barely do two things at once, and Shane... well you raised a hockey player, not a wedding planner,” Shane’s mom laughed and Shane crossed his arms with a huff.

“Will you help us plan the wedding? It’s a lot—”

“Of course I’d do it. I was already planning on doing it anyways,” she said, grinning at them. They relaxed back into their seats.

“You already have a binder, don’t you?” Shane asked and she reached down into her bag to pull out a baby blue binder.

“You see, you would’ve picked a sad color like black or brown,” Ilya said, pointing to the binder. Shane rolled his eyes.

Black was a classy color, after all.

-&-

Shane and Ilya settled into a routine easily within the first few months back at home. It felt silly that Shane had agonized over what it would be like to live with Ilya after everything they had gone through. In a lot of ways, their lives remained unchanged.

The whiteboard in the kitchen still ruled their lives, tracking schedules, medications, and symptoms.

But the goals were often silly, usually falling into food or sex. Most of the time, both. Ilya would tease Shane about working on his hand coordination, drawing the most ridiculous eggplants in the goal section. Shane would answer with a bumpy peach.

The mornings still determined what kind of day Shane and Ilya would have. The migraines were a persistent evil in their lives, but were slowly becoming less frequent, at least according to the whiteboard. If it was one of those days, the blinds stayed down, and Shane would only slip into the bedroom to see if Ilya wanted a new ice pack.

On days with PT, the pattern showed up differently. Ilya would switch between calling an Uber and letting Shane drive. Like any workout, some days he came back exhilarated, high on endorphins, pinning Shane against the wall drenched in sweat. On others, he’d take a long shower and curl up with Shane on the couch.

The afternoons, though, were what Shane looked forward to the most.

In previous years, dates with Ilya meant hiding in the living room. The closest they got to a scenic walk in the park was putting on Planet Earth. Shane liked the mountains. Ilya liked the beach. It was bleak, but they always worked with what they had. But now?

Now they were out. Now they could take walks around the neighborhood, no longer relying on video games or a hallway just to hold hands. Some walks were shorter than others, but Ilya always managed to spot a dog and befriend it on the spot. He even got a treat pouch to hand out to dogs on their walks while Shane made awkward small talk with the owners. Ilya knew all the dogs’ names, and Shane knew the owners. It was a win-win situation.

Their lives, in some ways, had completely changed while not at all.

-&-

The first new, yet familiar, habit they brought back into their lives was cooking.

In the first two weeks, Ilya was in charge of finding recipes for the two of them to cook together. On the days when the screens were too bright or too overwhelming, he’d pull out the cookbooks Shane kept on display in his kitchen, all gifts from his parents when he first

lived on his own. Ilya folded down pages for meals he thought they'd like, and when Shane scrunched his nose at the dog-eared pages, Ilya switched to using bookmarks.

Once they agreed on the recipe, Ilya would keep Shane company at the counter. On good days, he'd help with prep, measuring out oils and spices. Gradually, over the weeks, he started using more knives and taking on more complex tasks. He always stayed seated, though, and fatigued quickly enough that Shane had to finish the chopping.

In those moments, Shane tried to convince himself that playing hockey was easier than cooking.

It worked half of the time.

-&-

At the end of the first month, Shane nervously walked into the living room, where Ilya was lounging on the couch. A mindless tv show blasted in the background. Shane thought it was reality TV, but he could never tell unless there was a confessional.

"Shane. I can hear you thinking from here," Ilya said, twisting around on the couch as Shane came closer. Ilya's eyebrows rose, and he quickly turned off the TV. Shane dropped onto the couch beside him, exhaling heavily as he started to fidget with his hands.

"Shane?" Ilya prodded, his brows drawn in concern as Shane rubbed the same spot on the back of his hand over and over. He only stopped when Ilya covered his hand with his own.

"Farah came back with options," Shane said slowly, flicking a gaze up at Ilya. Ilya tightened his grip on Shane's hand and scooted closer.

"And?" he pressed, biting his own bottom lip.

"I have two serious options. San Francisco Golden Seals and Ottawa Centaurs," Shane continued. Ilya nodded.

"Which are you leaning towards?" Ilya asked carefully.

Shane sighed, "Ottawa is offering less money than San Francisco, and it's still unclear what the team is going to look like given everything."

Shane winced, swearing to himself. He'd already fucked up the conversation.

Ilya looked away, and Shane plowed on, "San Francisco is offering the most money and has a strong shot at the Cup. If I join with Patterson, they get the center they need."

"They needed that two seasons ago," Ilya said, running a hand through his hair. "I have heard good things about the team and locker room. I can text Ryan, see who he knows," Ilya said, his gaze moving to the blank TV.

"But the team is in San Francisco," Shane said slowly, drawing it out.

Ilya raised an eyebrow.

“Yes. The team name literally has the city in it. Are you sure you’re not the one who got hit in the head?”

“It’s in California. And you’re in Canada. In Ottawa,” Shane said, fidgeting.

Ilya gave Shane a soft look, letting his thumb drag across Shane’s knuckles. “Cottage rules?” he proposed and Shane nodded, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

“I want to play for Ottawa. With you. It’s less money—like a lot less—and I’m not sure how much that should matter once we’re married,” Ilya scoffed as if he were offended and Shane rolled his eyes, “Okay, good to know. But I only want to join if you’re okay with me on the team.” Shane said, lacing his other hand over Ilya’s.

“You have a wealthy husband. You can be a trophy husband on the ice next to me. Prettier than the Cup,” Ilya said.

“Ilya, I’m being serious. I need to know if you’re okay with me joining.”

Ilya groaned. “I’m also being serious. We don’t need the money, and with you on the roster, we’ll have the center depth we need. And if I don’t get cleared—”

“You’re going to get cleared,” Shane said too quickly.

“If I don’t get cleared, the team will be in a good spot,” Ilya said over him, louder this time. Shane shut his mouth.

Ilya had still not been cleared to return to the ice, even for basic skating. While the doctors assured Shane and Ilya that this was expected, Ilya had taken the news badly. He’d gone completely silent on the ride back from the appointment and kept himself locked in the bedroom while Shane made dinner on his own. Ilya pretended not to be hungry and pretended to be asleep when Shane would check in on him.

But the reality was, there were still too many good and bad days mixed together. The inconsistency was giving the doctors and physical therapists whiplash. Too many migraine days mixed with days where his walking was nearly perfect. And too many days where Ilya had pushed himself until he was dragging his feet, literally, instead of walking properly.

Shane had started to get used to the non-linear patterns of healing. Though he only admitted it to Meera, he felt on edge whenever things were going too well. Too many checkpoints cleared without a trap around the corner.

Ilya, on the other hand, loathed the cycle.

“I can hear you thinking now,” Shane said quietly.

“I am worried,” Ilya said, staring at Shane as he took a shaky breath.

“What about?”

“If I don’t get cleared, would you hate being a Centaur? You already said it’s less money. The team isn’t popular. We may have found our groove this year, but playing for a losing team to an empty arena...” Ilya sighed.

“I don’t want you to hate me if you pick to be a Centaur and I’m not skating next to you. I think you should consider San Francisco a bit more,” Ilya said carefully, swallowing hard.

Shane’s heart cracked, stuttering to a stop.

“If you aren’t cleared to skate, that means more appointments, more treatments. I want to be there for those. Moving right now would be a lot,” Shane said.

“But I don’t want to hold you back. You have three Cups. And your goal is seven. Seven, Hollander,” Ilya repeated, more forceful now. “Do you think you can get there with Ottawa or San Francisco?” Ilya asked coolly.

“You remember my secret goal?” Shane asked hoarsely, trying to even remember when he told Ilya his secret goal. Most likely when he was tipsy, after the third cup win, whispering to him in bed.

Ilya threw his hands up, shaking his head. “Of course I remember. I told you that if you got seven, I’d get eight and then you... well. We tried to hit one of those numbers that night,” Ilya said, smirking at the memory while Shane blushed.

“So, I’ll ask again. Do you think Ottawa or San Francisco will get you your seventh Cup?”

There was a beat of silence. Ilya grimaced, as if he thought the silence was the answer, turning his head away.

Instead, Shane let out a laugh. Ilya scrunched his brows.

“I don’t care about that goal anymore. It was stupid. Back when I was a kid,” Shane whispered. Ilya shook his head, muttering under his breath.

“No, listen.” Shane grabbed Ilya’s hands.

“That would be great. Seven Cups. Our trophy room would be obnoxious,” Ilya narrowed his eyes at him.

Shane took a new breath, exhaling. “But, I have new goals.”

“What are they?” Ilya asked cautiously.

Shane sighed, “If there’s even a chance, the smallest chance, that I can play with you on the same team... That’s the goal. I play great against you but better with you. If we’re on the same team, we’ll be unstoppable. If we can’t have that, I’ll take the other goals. Being your emergency contact. That’s one. Starting a family with you? That’s the dream. I don’t want to

do another long distance relationship, especially when we're married. I want to get started on our life, with our dogs—"

"Don't forget the cat."

"Yes, and the cat. That's the goal. Seven Cups is nice, but it's not better than the life we could have if we just let ourselves be together," Shane said, a little winded.

Ilya brought his hand to his hair, ruffling it. He always let it linger over the scar hidden beneath the curls. The silence stretched out as he kept messing his hair, shaking his head. He let his hand drop to his lap.

"You really mean that? All of that?" Ilya asked hopefully.

"You want me to put it in our vows? I'll do it. We can have our own ceremony here—"

"No, I believe you. No need to put it in the vows," Ilya whispered, hesitating like he was on the edge of something.

Cottage rules, after all.

"I want to be positive. Easy to put on a face for the team, say I'll be back and checking dinosaur Hunter into the boards. But after today..." Ilya exhaled slowly, running a hand through his hair, a scowl settling in.

"I can be the positive one, would that help?" Shane asked tentatively. Ilya nodded slowly, pulling Shane to rest against him.

"You've been cleared for more aggressive gym workouts. That's something," Shane said and Ilya hummed.

"You've had fewer migraines the past two weeks than before. And yeah, today sucked, but this past week PT hasn't written anything major. It feels like we're stabilizing in a good place," Shane listed out.

"And I can do stairs without supervision," Ilya added and Shane smiled. Shane adjusted his head against Ilya's chest, finding the spot where he could hear his steady heartbeat.

"And you can do stairs without supervision. We're back to our regular room," Shane said.

"I will feel better when I can skate. And having you on the team would be good motivation..." Ilya trailed, playing with Shane's hair.

"It'll be fun to play with you. It'll be like All-Stars," Shane said hopefully.

"Do you think they'll let us be roommates if you sign?" Ilya teased lightly.

"So, you'd be okay if I signed with the Centaurs?" Shane asked, pushing himself up to face Ilya properly.

Ilya smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"I think, you should sleep on it," Ilya said softly, running his thumb across Shane's freckles.

-&-

Shane thought sleeping on it was stupid, but agreed if it meant easing the worry on Ilya's face. Even then, he knew he wouldn't change his mind. Not on something as important as their future.

The next morning, Ilya stretched out in bed, arms extended. Shane shifted to lie on top of him, his hand resting over Ilya's heart.

"I still want to sign with Ottawa."

Ilya groaned, dropping his limbs and slinging an arm around Shane, absentmindedly letting his hand trail down his back.

"*Shane*, it's too early for this conversation."

"No, you said to sleep on it. I slept on it. Tell me you haven't thought about playing on the same team," Shane pressed.

Ilya cracked an eye open, "You know the answer to that. I want nothing more than to play with you—"

"So then I'll sign."

Ilya opened his other eye, giving Shane a look. "But the Cups. I don't want to hold you back."

Shane shook his head. "I don't care, and you're not holding me back. I just want to live with you. I promise I won't hate you if Ottawa doesn't win games or bring home the Cup. I get to have you as a husband, whatever family we build. We were always playing for the long game—being together," Shane said as Ilya hummed.

"I won't sign if you'd be jealous or uncomfortable or anything. I mean it. But I'm not hearing that so unless I need my ears cleaned—"

"You don't," Ilya said quietly, his hand stopping at Shane's neck.

"You really mean it, don't you? You're really willing to take the chance to join the team, just to maybe play alongside me?" Ilya asked quickly.

"Of course," Shane said.

“If you sign, then we could win a Cup together,” Ilya said, his hand threading in Shane’s hair.

“We could win a Cup together,” Shane whispered.

“Okay. Yes.” Ilya said, Shane lifted himself up.

“You mean it? I can sign?”

Finally, Shane got a smile he knew all too well from Ilya.

“You can sign.”

-&-

Shortly after Shane signed with the Centaurs, the trainers cleared Ilya for skating. Shane thought this would be a celebratory moment for their household. Instead, quiet tension settled in the house.

Each of them skirting the issue. Shane was nervous to ask, spiraling over whether he was pressuring Ilya too much if he asked, “How was the ice?” He knew how to read Ilya, and God, he hoped he was reading him right—that Ilya didn’t want to talk about it.

The silence at home was Shane’s answer.

Shane would never admit it, but he had spied on Ilya’s first session. He could claim that it was an accident, that he’d just happened to arrive late and wanted to make sure that Ilya hadn’t left.

As if Shane didn’t have his location. As if he was ever late when Ilya wasn’t there to distract him.

When Shane walked into the rink and spotted the session, he already knew it was going to be a rough night.

Ilya was stiff on the ice. His shoulders were up near his ears, his strides cautious. He had his hands out for balance, grazing the boards. There was hesitation in his turns, and his therapists were encouraging him—overly bright and over the top.

Shane shut his eyes as he stepped back into the doorway. His stomach twisted as the familiar dread settled in. Feeling suddenly sick, Shane moved out of the doorway and into the hallway. He leaned back against the wall, took a few steady breaths, then pushed himself towards the exit and to the car.

Vowing to pretend he hadn’t seen the session. When Ilya came to the car, silent, Shane tried to make small talk. Ilya only grunted, leaning his head against the window as they drove home.

-&-

The next week, Shane found himself back in the rink parking lot. His head rested against the seat as a podcast played in the background. Not really listening, Shane glanced down at his watch, flinched at the time, and knocked his head back against the seat. They had to make it to the bakery for the final cake tasting. They'd thought cake and meal tastings would be the best part, but after the first two, everything started to blend together. Shane was dangerously close to suggesting a grocery store sheet cake.

The binders his mom carried were enough to keep that suggestion to himself. Plus, Ilya had so much fun at the bakeries, charming everyone while Shane mumbled through a mouthful of cake.

Shane checked his watch again. The second hand had barely moved, but his jaw was clenched tightly. He pushed the door open, locked the car, and speed-walked into the rink.

When he reached the door to the rink, he hesitated. Another glance at his watch was enough to push past the worry of being over bearing. He stepped through.

He immediately spotted Ilya skating close to the boards. One therapist stayed close behind him, barking at him to slow down. A second therapist walked along the outside, keeping a hawk's eye on him.

But Ilya's skating made Shane stop in his tracks.

He was much more relaxed in this session than the first one. There was an ease to him on the ice. He looked like himself. Ilya was even grinning, and the way the therapists were barking from the side... Shane had a hunch they were starting to learn how much chirping his fiancé could get through in a short amount of time.

Shane inched closer, still unsure if he should be here, but he simply couldn't resist. It was ridiculous, but every new milestone unlocked something in Shane. As if he was waiting for *this* moment. No, wait, *this* moment was going to fix everything.

It was confusing how often the goalposts shifted, and how happy he was every time Ilya hit one. Shane let out a strangled laugh as he watched Ilya move on the ice.

He was fucking perfect.

As Shane got closer to the ice, Ilya looked up and threw him a grin. He pushed off towards Shane, skating faster. The therapists shouted at him to *slow the fuck down*. Ilya did what he did best and ignored them.

"What are you doing here?" Ilya asked, leaning against the boards, wiping sweat from his forehead. Shane shoved his hands in his pockets.

"We have cake tasting soon. I wanted to make sure we're on time," Shane said as the therapists crowded around Ilya.

Ilya looked back out at the ice, staring longingly. His breathing returned to a steady rhythm.

“I still have one more lap—”

“Ilya, we can end here. It’s good not to push it,” one of the therapists said gently.

“Not pushing. Just one more. Shane can babysit me if you two need to get ready for your next sessions,” Ilya said quickly. The therapist closest to him, the one with pigtails, narrowed her gaze.

“You swear it’s one lap?”

“We have cake tasting soon. We can only do one lap,” Ilya said, gesturing to Shane.

“Shane goes on the ice with his shoes. Absolutely no skates on him. And Shane walks—no running,” the therapist said, pointing at him.

“Deal,” Ilya said, grinning, as Shane walked over to the gate and stepped onto the ice.

It was weird to be on the ice with no skates. Even weirder to shuffle alongside Ilya as he skated slowly, Shane on one side and the boards on the other.

“I should have brought my skates,” Shane said, looking over his shoulder as if his bag would appear.

Ilya snorted, “They would not let us on the ice together with both of us in skates. We have a reputation.”

Shane frowned, “That’s dumb. I wouldn’t race you.”

“Why? Because you know I’d beat you? Is okay to be the slowest skater in the league. I’m sure Hayden has lots of tips on how to deal with that—”

“Fuck off. Hayden skates *fine* and I was faster than you last season.”

“You sure? Who beat you last year at All-Stars? Was it Scott Hunter?”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“It wasn’t Hayden...”

“Well I’m going to beat you next season—” Shane cut himself off, the words already out.

Ilya barked out a laugh. “Maybe. But you’d have to keep up with my PT routine. Taylor has already emailed me a million things I was doing wrong that I can fix to be even faster this season,” Ilya said and Shane laughed.

They settled into silence.

“I would have raced you today if I had skates. Or done something stupid to impress you,” Shane confessed. Ilya ducked his head and lifted his hand out for Shane.

“You know, we can still race,” Ilya said, looking over at Shane with a smirk. Shane shook his head.

“Nuh-uh. I know you, and I know me. One of us is getting injured if we cave and race right now.” Ilya groaned, letting his head fall back. Then, he perked up with a lopsided smile.

“You can still try to impress me,” he said, making Shane laugh and blush at the same time. “I’m not sure I can do much without skates on.”

“You can practice your Magic Mike moves,” Ilya whispered and Shane had to stop himself from shoving him into the boards.

“Speech therapy is working too well on you. Your chirping’s getting strong.”

“Thank you. It was the only goal. I need to be in shape for when I see Scott Hunter. I still have his gift of letting me make fun of him. I can’t waste that on basic dinosaur jokes,” Ilya said as Shane rolled his eyes.

As they neared the gate, Ilya paused and gave Shane a shy look. “This is nice. Is this what practice will look like for us?” Ilya asked, turning his gaze out on the rink.

Shane closed his eyes. Because God, did he want that.

“I hope so,” Shane whispered.

-&-

-&- *TRANSLATIONS* -&-

Eto bred, Ilya (RU): This is bullshit Ilya

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

Well, I've updated the chapter counter.

This was something I was holding off for a while since I had originally outlined this story to only have something-teen chapters and that was ... so wrong. So, took the week to outline the remaining beats I wanted for this story and realized I only needed two more chapters.

Well, I guess one more with the posting of this one.

Aiming for Tuesday, but it may slip depending on how final scenes/feedback come together.

Thank you all for your sweet comments, I'm really lucky to have kind readers here. Eager to hear what you think of this chapter in the comments (even if you can only spare an emoji).

Happy Sunday and see you soon 

A/N pt 2 30-Mar:

I *really* need to stop predicting the dates of my chapter drops. Next chapter won't drop tomorrow, but later this week. Not going to jinx myself. But working to get edits in and get feedback in time. Thank you for your patience!

Chapter 30: Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

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

-&-

It blew Shane's mind how optimistic he had become for Ilya's recovery. Long gone were the days he moped in the hallways of rehab or sought refuge in the chapel in Savannah. He was no longer counting tiles to avoid breakdowns. It felt like a steady beat in his head, the hope for their future and Ilya's health.

It was infuriating that he had easily shifted from a cynic to an optimist overnight. He woke up in the middle of the night to check on Ilya. He stopped thinking twenty steps ahead when Ilya wanted to do something on his own, even relaxing on the "are you sure?" whenever Ilya pushed himself.

Ilya's confidence, both on the ice and navigating through life with all the noise and lights, grew exponentially. Minor setbacks occurred, but they were few and far in between. Only small "X's" on the white boards with quick notes.

They were cleared to head to the cottage earlier than expected. They held their breaths at every doctor appointment. Ilya tried to charm his way to a "Yes" while Shane pulled out the notes on his phone to sway the answer. Every "No" should have been a blow, but it only made their antics worse.

The doctors always reminded them how much worse this could have been. How pushing too hard and fast could have *dire* consequences. That always shut the two of them up, their hands reaching for each other, brushing against the tissue paper until they finally found each other. Shane always took a shuddering breath, and Ilya squeezed his hand tight.

It was easy to remember when Ilya couldn't grip Shane's hand at all.

When they finally got the "Yes", Ilya hopped off the stool to leave and made a move to the door. Shane was dangerously close to following him, if not for the scolding doctor telling Ilya to sit down.

Afterwards, it was a mad dash to the Montreal house to throw everything they needed and wanted into duffle bags. It took longer because they kept grabbing each other and leaving a kiss on the lips, the wrist, and even the arms. It was ridiculous how they kept giving in to each other until one of them would tap the other and say, "Okay, okay, but we have to hurry!"

The wedding was around the corner and they had hoped to steal a bit of time for themselves before Yuna and her wedding plans descended.

They left in such a haste, so last minute, that it was only when they were half way to the cottage that Ilya realized he forgot his charger and Shane left a pile of socks on the bed.

Before Shane would have spiraled and Ilya would sulked in silence on the car, the two took it as a sign to have an adventure to stop at the nearest Walmart and buy whatever caught their interest. Filling their cart with candies, video games, and outdoor toys like squirt guns.

It was only once they were back in the car that they realized they'd forgotten what they came for and laughed their asses off.

Summer was finally here.

-&-

"There you are," Shane said, padding across the cottage porch where Ilya was lounging on the ground, watching the sunrise. He tipped his chin up at Shane, his crooked smile tugging at one corner of his mouth, before shifting his gaze back to the sunrise.

"I brought us some coffee and an extra blanket," Shane said, lifting up his arms to show off the goods. Ilya pushed up quickly and claimed his mug, blowing on it gently before taking a sip. His eyes fluttered closed as Shane spread out the blanket beside him.

"Best coffee ever," he said, sitting down next to Shane on the blanket as he stared at the sunrise. Shane rolled his mug slowly against the wood, watching the coffee lap against the side of the mug.

"You didn't sleep much. Yesterday didn't trigger anything, right?" Shane blurted out, stealing a glance at Ilya, who huffed a quiet laugh and shook his head.

"No, I just had a hard time falling asleep," Ilya said carefully as Shane kept his jaw clenched, his mouth set in a hard line. He scanned Ilya's features, noting the bleary eyes and messy curls. Nothing pointed to a migraine coming.

"It was such a perfect day, wasn't it?" Ilya said, shifting toward Shane, tucking a leg under himself and pulling the mug close to his chest. Shane finally felt the knot in his chest loosen, as he turned to face Ilya, his *husband*. A warm glow over his chest as he held onto the word husband. He let his thumb run over the ring, and let himself sit in the moment of joy.

"It was. I always thought Hayden was full of shit when he said the wedding day was the happiest day," Shane confessed quietly, watching Ilya cover his own grin with his fist.

"I thought the same. But it was so fun to have our family there. And everyone looked so beautiful," Ilya said, smiling into his mug.

"Did you see how much fun people were having? I thought the Centaurs were going to keep your dad out till early morning with the afterparty," Ilya said gleefully as Shane snorted.

"My dad knows when to pull it out—"

“Especially when he reveals his secret vodka stash,” Ilya said, miming a chef’s kiss.

“It was really nice to see Boston come out. I always forget how loud Cliff is though,” Shane said, rubbing at his eye with one hand as Ilya snorted.

“Please, last night was nothing. He was only quieter because he was nervous about triggering a headache. But I’ve never seen him so speechless as when he met Rose—”

“Oh Rose had a *blast* being surrounded by all the hockey players. She and Svetlana had all of them at their beck and call,” Shane said, and Ilya tipped his head back, then snapped his gaze back to Shane.

“You think anyone hooked up at our wedding?” Ilya asked excitedly as Shane let the night flash back in pieces, but what kept surfacing was Ilya, always him, and the way they found their way back to each other.

Romantic, but unhelpful from a gossip perspective.

“*Maybe* Rose. I think she left early. But I don’t know if she actually hooked up with someone or just went back to the hotel since she has to fly out today. What about Svetlana?” Shane asked and Ilya squinted, as if working through his own memories.

“She definitely left later, but she was staring at her phone a lot. But who knows? At that point of the night, I think I lost track of who had left and who was still there.”

“Svetlana did an amazing job as an officiant,” Shane said, and Ilya hummed in approval.

“Can you imagine if we hired a stranger? Blagh,” Ilya said, making a face. Shane laughed, letting his head roll to the side.

“It wouldn’t have been bad. Just... better that someone we know married us. Makes it more special,” Shane said.

They fell into comfortable silence, the lake gleaming as the sun continued to rise.

“I told Ruby that this was just a decoy wedding, the real one was when the girls married us,” Ilya said suddenly, and Shane smirked, staring down into his coffee mug.

“I think I lost the rings we exchanged back then.”

“No, I have it in my drawers back in Ottawa.” Shane gave Ilya a surprised look as he shrugged. “I was thinking of doing something *mush* and using it to propose one day.”

“Thank God I had Svetlana’s help. I would have botched up the proposal if I had to do it by myself,” Shane muttered, and Ilya laughed, leaning over and giving a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

“I would have said yes, however you decided to propose. But I do like how it ended up for

us. And how our wedding went,” Ilya said, leaning back on his hands.

“I loved it,” Shane said, fidgeting with his wedding ring, still in mild disbelief that he got to call Ilya his husband. He was so goddamn lucky.

“When do we get the photos back?” Ilya asked, and Shane bit his lip, trying to stop himself from grinning. He loved how excited Ilya was over photos of them and he loved that Ilya was just as eager as he was.

“Should be getting sneak peeks in a few weeks. And the full set in a month or so. I’d have to check the email about it.”

“I think we should get a few framed. Hang them around the hallway or something. I already know I want one of us together in the trophy room,” Ilya said.

Ilya had practically planned out the house to have one photo of them in nearly every room. Shane thought it was a bit overboard, and he knew his interior designer would agree, but he also knew how long Ilya had waited to have even one photo of them out for a guest to admire.

There was a moment where Shane caught him carefully wrapping the pictures that followed him from the hospital to rehab to the Montreal house that Shane found touching. Especially since the frames cost only a few dollars, but Ilya wrapped them as if they were priceless and fragile.

They were set to move back to Ottawa at the end of the summer. They’d move into Ilya’s house, their house now as he liked to remind Shane. The movers had already started packing up Shane’s house prior to the wedding and Shane was glad to see the grab bars and shower chair to be left behind.

They were spending two weeks at the cottage. Though Ilya was technically cleared to fly, he still had days where he needed a ton of rest. He occasionally got headaches, but the migraines had eased off months ago. A promising sign, as everyone told them a *million* times.

And while Ilya still had to do PT at the gym, they were at least able to maintain their favorite summer tradition, which was just *being* at the cottage with no practices or restrictions on them. They could spend the day perfecting a recipe one of them found on social media. Or they could lounge by the lake, Shane reading the ‘boring’ hockey book of the month while Ilya lounged in the sun with magazines Shane’s dad had given them.

They had two weeks of normalcy before going back to Ottawa to finish the move.

-&-

For the first time in his career, Shane dreaded going to main training camp. Usually, it felt like a reunion after the summer. Everyone catching up while rookies stood stiffly off to the side or tried, boldly, to integrate with the veterans. It was usually a fun anticipation of what the season could be with everyone in one place.

Except this time, Shane was walking onto a new team. Ilya wasn't fully cleared to join, and the Centaurs were doing their best to limit media coverage. Shane was going to have to answer with PR hovering around him, like everyone else.

As Shane walked into the locker room, he had prepared himself to endure another round of silent treatment. Side-eyes and muttered whispers. The same way he left Montreal, he expected to walk into the Centaurs' locker room.

Instead, Bood came up and pulled him into a hug. Wyatt came over with a joke and some comics for Ilya. Even Luca came over for a handshake. Troy gave him a nod and whispered, "Trust me, this isn't like other places." Shane blinked, looking around like he'd walked into the wrong room.

The friendliness of the team threw him off balance. He knew that if he texted Ilya in disbelief, he'd get something like, "Shane, all teams should be like that. Montreal sucked."

Shane smiled around the locker room, hoping that one day he'd actually feel like he fit in. He dumped his gear in his stall, running through his answers for the media.

He already had his lines memorized, had practiced the obvious questions regarding being married ("thanks"), when Ilya was coming back ("you'll have to ask him"), would it be weird to play with your husband ("we've done it before at All-Stars"), can he share anything about married life ("I'm here to talk about hockey").

Ilya had too much fun at the dining room table the night before, throwing in real questions and mixing in his own: what's it like to be married to the sexiest man ("Cosmo actually ranked me sexier, so you need to fact check"), what's it like to be married to the best hockey player of all time ("I'm not married to Gretzky"), who do you think will score more this season ("me but I'm not a selfish lover").

-&-

At the first real practice on the ice, everyone seemed a bit lost. While some had been playing with each other for years, many had gone through injury recoveries and were essentially different players than last season. Some had gotten notably stronger in certain areas while others had gaps.

It was a bit of a mess at first.

-&-

By the third practice, they were starting to work together. Players were adjusting to each other's strengths and Shane found himself comfortably on a line with Troy, surprised at how easy it was to play with him despite everything.

Even in how Troy played, Shane could see Ilya's influence, and vice versa. And God, in those moments, Shane wanted to look over at Ilya and share a look. Communicate with him through a raised eyebrow, a tilt of a smile, ending with a wink.

But Ilya wasn't next to him and he had to bite down harder on his mouthguard and keep playing.

-&-

Towards the end of training camp, Shane caught Ilya near the boards. Nearly missing him. He had his Centaurs hoodie up, but his curls still tumbled around his face. Ilya was chewing on the pullstring of the sweatshirt as his eyes tracked the team's progression on the ice.

As if sensing him, Ilya shifted his gaze. The second it landed on Shane, he broke into a wide smile, dropping the pullstring from his mouth. Shane instinctively pushed towards the boards.

"Thought you were coming tomorrow!" Shane shouted and Ilya shrugged.

"Thought I'd surprise the team... and my husband," he said, dragging out the last word until Shane blushed.

"Shocked you didn't mention Chiron."

Ilya huffed, "Chiron is at Harris' place. He doesn't come out for training camps. Maybe for practice."

At that moment, the rest of the Centaurs realized who Shane was talking to and skated over.

"Rozanov! You made it!" Bood called out.

"Who else is going to tell you that the last play was lazy? Troy wouldn't dare—"

"Oh, he's gone soft since getting with Harris. Leave him be, he'll be back soon enough," Wyatt chipped in, causing Troy to snort.

"So, are you coming on the ice?" Luca asked shyly. Everyone went quiet, holding their breath.

Everyone, except Shane.

Ilya grimaced and shook his head. "On the ice and working back into drill shape. Hoping to be in an orange jersey soon."

"Anything we can do to help?" Wyatt asked, tilting his head. Ilya ducked his head, kicking at the ground, a small smile on his face.

"Nothing yet. But when I'm back... I'm sure that will change. Make sure to save me a spot on the line," Ilya said. The whistle blew and the team turned their attention to one end of the rink.

"Better get going, don't want to get yelled at by Coach," Ilya said and the team laughed as they skated off, waving back at Ilya. Shane lingered behind.

“Glad you decided to come out, I know some of the rookies were dying to meet you,” Shane said.

Ilya let out a groan, “Hollander, you’re making me feel old.”

“Hardly. The best years are yet to come.”

“I think you’re right about that. Now get back on the ice. I don’t want you late for dinner tonight,” Ilya said, jerking his head towards the far end of the rink. Shane grinned and pushed off.

-&-

It felt like only yesterday that Ilya had complained about how tiring it was to measure out ingredients. And now, in a blink, he was taking over the kitchen, moving easily between the stove and the counter. Quickly chopping vegetables to sauté and tossing them into the pan.

Shane sat at the counter, an ice pack pressed to his shoulder, grinning as Ilya prepared his favorite post-practice meal.

-&-

“Ilya, we’re going to be late,” Shane groaned, tapping his fingers against the counter and staring at the kettle as if it would boil faster.

“Relax, it takes ten minutes to drive,” Ilya said, taking a bite out of the breakfast sandwich he made, pacing around the kitchen to see if he’d left something that he needed.

“That’s when you drive though. I go the speed limit.”

“Shane, it’s Ottawa. You can go two kilometers over the speed limit. You will survive,” Ilya said, raising his eyebrows as he stood next to Shane. Ilya offered his half-eaten sandwich to Shane for a bite, Shane shook his head and sighed with relief as the kettle boiled.

“Finally. We need to replace this kettle. It’s so slow. Where did you even buy it?” Shane said, scrunching his nose. He poured the hot water into the tumbler, opting for instant coffee.

“I don’t know, I think I picked it up at Walmart after my other one broke. I can order a new one while you drive,” Ilya said, kissing Shane on the cheek before moving to the fridge to grab the milk for his own coffee.

“I can’t believe we’re going to be late,” Shane grumbled, tightening the lids for the mugs. He passed one to Ilya, who hummed in appreciation.

“Relax. I guarantee you that Evan’s is going to be late. He loves going to Starbucks before practice and he never orders ahead. The man’s an idiot,” Ilya assured Shane.

“Is that why he’s always late? Should we make him coffee?” Shane asked, moving to the foyer and grabbing the keys.

“No. I think he has a crush on one of the baristas. He’d have no excuse,” Ilya said, following Shane into the garage. They tossed their bags into the backseat. Shane moved to the driver’s side as Ilya slid into the passenger seat.

Shane started the car and pulled out.

“I can’t wait to drive again,” Ilya muttered, taking a sip of his coffee.

Shane glanced over at Ilya and knew that today was not the day to tease about him having a hot driver. Instead, he held his hand out in the center console for Ilya to take.

“I know *moy utyonok*,” Shane said quietly as he stopped at a red light. Ilya sighed, shifting in his seat.

Ilya was always chatty in the mornings. He had fun teasing Shane as they got ready for the day or showing off a new breakfast sandwich recipe he’d found the night before. But as soon as he got into the car, a switch flipped and he went quiet.

“Know what you’re doing with the trainers today?” Shane asked, focusing on turning his turn signal. Ilya didn’t point out that the turn signal was unnecessary.

Ilya shrugged, “Same as yesterday. Go on the treadmill or stationary bike. Do some stickhandling. Skate when you guys are off.”

“You said the drills have been going well, right?”

“Yeah. Trainers have been happy about it. Skating’s getting easier. Not getting tired as much anymore. Everyone says it’s going well,” Ilya said glumly.

“But they aren’t giving you a timeline for when you can get back on the ice?”

“Right. Has to be cleared by fifty thousand doctors and maybe even a blood sacrifice to the Centaur mascot to see if I’m okay to go back.”

“Jesus, Ilya—”

“Is true. Very annoying,” Ilya said, sighing as he leaned his head against the window.

“One day at a time,” Shane said, squeezing Ilya’s hand.

-&-

Ilya wasn’t cleared for official practice and the first game was only a few days away. Shane had hoped, secretly praying that Ilya would be cleared for practice and be able to step out onto the ice for the first game. Even for a few minutes.

He only told this to Meera. She hummed, said it was nice, but to be realistic and to prepare for what would happen if it didn’t happen. One of those things was to be “kind” to himself and make himself tea.

Shane knew he wasn't the only one with this dream. He knew Ilya had been pushing himself harder each day, being vague about *why*, even though everyone kept eyeing the game calendar. Bood and Troy were antsy, texting Ilya to see if he wanted any extra practices.

Shane had to encourage Ilya to respond to them. They meant well.

So here he was, sipping tea, being kind to himself. He heard the familiar slap of Ilya's slippers against the hardwood floors. Shane hastily turned away from the calendar and looked at the sink. Ilya walked into the kitchen and gave Shane a smile.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked, wrapping his arms around Shane and pulling him into his chest. Shane leaned his head back against Ilya's chest.

"Just some tea. Feeling anxious," he muttered.

Ilya hummed into his hair. "Is this about the game?"

Shane sighed, gripping Ilya's forearms. "Yeah, it is."

"I'll be with your parents. Will be nice. I can eat all the terrible food without my husband telling me, "Ilya, no, the cheese is so fake,"" Ilya said in mocking, high-pitched tone that sounded nothing like Shane. Still, Shane laughed.

"My dad would share nachos with you. He loves that shit," Shane said.

"And we'll do your opening game routine with lunch with your parents. You'll drive to Willa and Andrew's where you'll get a very stern pep talk from them—"

"They're like Ruby's age, aren't they?"

"Don't underestimate them. Big mistake. Then you'll drive to the arena and win your game. It'll be good," Ilya said.

Shane nodded, clenching his jaw. Ilya sighed, turning Shane around until their foreheads touched. Ilya raised his eyebrows, and Shane shook his head. He could feel a blush on his cheeks.

"It's silly," he murmured.

"Not to me. Tell me, what is it? Are you worried about Troy? He can get in his head but he's able to snap out of it for the games—"

"It's not Troy, but that's good to know," Shane said, relieved to check one thing off. "I just... I wish you were starting in this game. And I know it's bad of me to complain that I'm sad that you're not on the ice—" Shane was cut off with a kiss, Ilya gripping the sides of his head.

Shane set his mug in the sink and wrapped his own arms around Ilya's waist, pulling him close. Ilya threaded his hands through Shane's hair, sighing softly against his mouth. He broke away from the kiss, rubbing his nose lightly against Shane's.

“Is nice to share. I was worried it was just me who felt like that,” Ilya said, a sad smile tugging at his mouth as Shane scoffed.

“I just didn’t want to put pressure. But God, Ilya—” Shane croaked out, feeling a burn behind his eyes.

“I know, I know, *moy lyubimyy*,” Ilya whispered, kissing Shane on the forehead. Shane steadied his breathing.

“I’m getting better. Any day now, I’ll be back.”

“You’ll be back,” Shane whispered.

-&-

In the locker room, Shane dressed. He rolled out his neck as he started to pulling on his gear, only to hear the familiar buzz of his phone.

Old habits die hard. He looked around to make sure no one was paying attention before pulling out his phone.

Ilya (Lily): Good luck! Here with your parents!

Ilya (Lily): [image attached]

Shane smiled at the photo. Ilya had taken a selfie with Shane’s parents in their seats, all three of them decked out in Centaurs gear. Shane was in the mid-reply when the phone vibrated again.

Ilya (Lily): Your dad and I are sharing nachos!!

Ilya (Lily): Yuna says no nachos for her

Ilya (Lily): But she is 🥺🥺

Ilya (Lily): Your dad is going to give her some?

Ilya (Lily): right?

Shane (Jane): She always says that

Shane (Jane): She will take some

Shane (Jane): Maybe get two if you’re worried

Ilya (Lily): [image attached]

Ilya (Lily): I was worried, so I bought two

Ilya (Lily): Your dad said he wouldn’t share with Yuna

Ilya (Lily): But I knew he would

Ilya (Lily): He is mush like you

Shane (Jane): ❤️

Shane (Jane): And like you!

Ilya (Lily): No one knows that

Shane (Jane): 😏

Ilya (Lily): Go win the game

Ilya (Lily): Plz make it exciting

Ilya (Lily): Score a goal for me

Shane (Jane): Always 🙄

-&-

Shane sighed as he started packing his bag, a basket of clean clothes beside him on the bed. He had already laid out all of his toiletries, his extra chargers packed, and a book he probably wouldn't start. He scratched his head as he tried to figure out what was missing, his eyes hovering over each item until he realized he was missing the tripod.

He headed downstairs and found Ilya lounging on the sofa. He was in his sweats, his hoodie pulled up, and completely zoned out despite the episode playing on the TV. Shane hesitated before going into the office, shuffling through the electronic bin, and pulling out his tripod. He stared down at it, wondering if he should really bring it, the image of Ilya on the sofa coming to mind.

It was the same Ilya that Shane had gotten used to last year. The same Ilya who would shut down, go quiet, barely smile or laugh. He was used to seeing this side of Ilya, but he had come back with such a force in the past few weeks that Shane was clueless on how to handle this version of him. His old techniques weren't going to work. Shane adjusted his grip on the tripod and walked out of the office, back to the living room.

Ilya didn't even look over at him. Instead, he picked up the remote and increased the volume. Shane rolled his eyes, his hand curled into a fist as he went up the stairs to their bedroom.

Shane shoved his clothes, his toiletries, and tripod into the suitcase. He didn't bother to pull out the packing cubes, and let everything mix together. He would have to deal with it later. Once everything was in, he zipped it up, realizing that he could no longer hear the TV.

He turned his head to see Ilya walk into the room, his hand fumbling with his phone. Shane watched as Ilya flopped on the bed, immediately pulling out his phone and scrolling through some app.

Shane frowned, looking between his suitcase and to Ilya. Shane pushed his suitcase aside and crawled onto the bed, looking expectantly at Ilya. Ilya gave him the side eye and scoffed, “You don’t need to worry. Will be fine. Is just a few days.”

“Of course I’m going to worry. That’s my job,” Shane said gently.

Ilya sighed, dropping his phone to his chest and rubbing his face. Shane felt his heart tug, Ilya looked so tired. Exhausted, really. He had been pushing it hard at practice recently, with no real gains other than to be told again and again and again that he simply wasn’t ready to join the team for practice.

Shane knew that if it was him, he would be clawing out of his skin, punching walls, and potentially damaging a few of their very expensive appliances. But it wasn’t him, it was Ilya, and Ilya was slipping into a place Shane couldn’t quite reach.

“I packed the tripod. I know it’s only a few days, but it would be nice to be able to FaceTime you properly. Even if it’s while I’m brushing my teeth or falling asleep,” Shane said quietly. Ilya snorted, lowering his hands and turning onto his side to stare at Shane.

“I thought it would be easier now. We have done this before. A million times,” Ilya bitterly said, his eyes closing shut.

“Yeah, but we’re out of practice. We’ve been spoiled, seeing each other practically everyday since February. Now I have to go on the road and be away from you,” Shane said, turning to his side to face Ilya.

“At least you have hockey,” Ilya snapped and Shane winced. He wasn’t going to argue with Ilya on that point.

“It’s not fair. You’re putting in the work, and it’s showing—”

“I’m not even at the practice with you guys. Everyday they keep telling me to be patient and everything will come together. But this? This fucking sucks,” Ilya said, turning onto his back as he stared up at the ceiling, breathing heavily through his nose.

Shane swallowed, watching Ilya blink rapidly. The question was at the tip of his tongue, and he wanted to ask so badly, but he was absolutely terrified that Ilya would scoff or shut down.

But Shane had to ask.

“Is there—Is there anything I can do to help? I can listen, I can hold you, I can go grab your favorite McDonalds meal tonight,” he asked, his face flushing as Ilya snorted.

He watched as Ilya made a fist, flexed it out, then did it again before he turned to Shane and buried his face into the crook of Shane’s neck, throwing a leg over Shane’s hip. Shane pulled him close, breathing in the sweatshirt, fisting the fabric in his hands.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut as he held Ilya close, focusing on the steady breathing on his neck, the feel of Ilya’s weight on his chest. All painful reminders of what exactly he was

leaving behind.

Suddenly, panic hit. His heartrate racing. It was illogical, made no sense, but he had to fucking say it.

“You know I’m going to miss you like crazy, right? You know I love you? No matter what, I love you,” Shane whispered, his breath catching while stroking the back of Ilya’s sweatshirt.

Ilya just breathed into his skin for a second, then another, until Shane felt Ilya’s shift against him, the murmur of “I love you too” against his neck. A soft kiss was placed there and Shane wondered if there was a way to pack it away for the road.

-&-

Ilya promised Shane that he’d see Galina while he was gone. Shane had already checked with his parents that they would have Ilya over at their house to watch the games together. And still, Shane worried.

Shane double-checked the fridge the night before to make sure the meal prep would be enough while he was away. He checked the pantry to make sure there were easy snacks for Ilya to pull in case he didn’t have the energy. When he found that they’d eaten the last of the popcorn, he pulled out his phone and placed a quick grocery delivery with popcorn, protein powder, granola bars, and a bag of gummy bears. He even threw in some travel toothpaste to make it look like it was just for something else.

Shane did his best not to think about Ilya, alone in the house, watching reruns of terrible TV shows. He knew he could count on his parents. He knew Ilya would never say no to a puzzle and his mom would find some chore that she ‘absolutely’ needed Ilya’s help on. Still, it didn’t feel enough.

As Shane accepted the grocery order, pulling the bag into the entryway, he heard Ilya shuffle down the stairs, his eyebrows raised at the grocery bag.

“Forgot something,” Shane said, sheepishly pulling out the toothpaste. Ilya frowned at him, glancing up the stairs. He opened his mouth, then shook his head.

“Come down for something?” Shane asked as he carried the bag into the kitchen and Ilya followed him.

“Harris texted me and asked if I could help with Chiron. His regular dogsitter bailed last second,” Ilya said, biting his lip.

Shane’s eyebrows went up. He tried to hide his suspicions as he unloaded the last of the items.

“Are you going to say no to Chiron?” Shane asked and Ilya smiled.

“I wanted to make sure it was okay with you before I said yes. I’ll make sure to clean his paws before he goes on the furniture—”

“Wait, don’t let him on our bed,” Shane protested, suddenly feeling jealous that a dog could be sleeping in his spot.

Ilya was quiet a beat too long before saying, “I promise to change the sheets before you come back.”

Shane snorted, shaking his head. “Text Harris, let him know Chiron is welcome here.”

Ilya grinned, hunched over his phone as he texted back Harris. His phone buzzing like mad in his hands, Ilya stood and walked out of the kitchen. Notably lighter than before.

-&-

Shane (Jane): *Has Chiron taken over the couch?*

Ilya (Lily): *[Image Attached]*

Ilya (Lily): *He needed to get a better view of the TV*

Ilya (Lily): *Have to catch him up*

Ilya (Lily): *New season coming soon!!*

Shane (Jane): *He looks zonked out! What did you do to him?*

Ilya (Lily): *Long walk*

Ilya (Lily): *Willa and Andrew played fetch with him in their yard*

Ilya (Lily): *Do no worry*

Ilya (Lily): *I will make sure he is awake for the game*

Shane (Jane): 

-&-

It became a trend. As Shane went away for games, Ilya ended up dogsitting Chiron. The original dogsitter was suddenly unavailable with how often Troy and Harris were on the road.

Either way, neither Shane nor Ilya questioned it too much. With every arrival home, Shane noticed new dog toys and accessories. Shane didn’t even mind finding dog hair in the bed, it was a small price to pay for the grin on Ilya’s face, snuggled against his chest when Shane finally came home.

-&-

“We should do Halloween costumes,” Ilya said, his head on Shane’s lap as Shane half-paid attention to the screen in front of him. Shane’s hand absentmindedly twirling a curl of Ilya’s

hair.

“You want to go to a party?”

“No. I mean, yes, if we are invited. But for the trick-or-treaters, we should have a couples costume,” Ilya repeated, and Shane looked down trying to see if he could guess what was the next line out of Ilya’s mouth.

“And nothing boring.”

“Great, so I won’t dress up as you then,” Shane said, smirking to himself, quietly proud of himself for that line. Ilya gasped dramatically, sitting up and slinging an arm around Shane’s shoulder. Ilya rested his head against Shane’s temple, breathing softly into his neck.

Shane’s eyes fluttered closed.

“Fine. I’ll throw out the gladiator costume. You thought it was boring, right?” Ilya teased, pressing a kiss to Shane’s neck, nipping at the skin.

Shane groaned, “You can be a Gladiator. I can be dressed up in a toga or something. Is that exciting enough for you?” Shane asked, turning to Ilya, steadying his jaw before kissing him lightly.

“As long as the toga is short, it’ll be perfect,” Ilya said softly, before pulling Shane onto his lap, kissing him hungrily.

-&-

Shane wasn’t an idiot. He knew Halloween was just a distraction for the fact that Ilya was still working with the trainers rather than with the team. Players started the season asking Shane daily when Ilya would return on the ice, and it was annoying as fuck.

But it cut more when they stopped asking Shane.

So, Shane pulled out all the Halloween decorations that Ilya had stashed in the garage. He offered to go to Walmart to clear out their decoration section. Even scrolling through Pinterest with Ilya to find ways to decorate the house, Ilya got excited about a smoke machine and Shane tried to Google reasons not to buy one.

Ilya won the argument. His migraines had all but disappeared, only being triggered in extreme situations. Ilya was handling the cycles of healing and was more patient with himself. Shane had to thank Galina for that, as he was sure Ilya was thankful to Meera for not letting Shane become an overbearing helicopter caregiver.

Ilya suggested that they host a small Halloween gathering. He came into the team’s locker room the next day to invite the players, encouraged them to bring their kids to go trick-or-treating in the neighborhood. Halloween was on a weekday, so there was more of an expectation of a relaxed party versus a raging house party.

Shane smiled to himself as he got ready for practice. Once Ilya was done inviting people, he waved goodbye and threw a wink at Shane as he left the locker room.

“God, it’s taking a million years for the trainers to clear him,” Bood complained to Shane, keeping his voice low as he threw a look at the entryway.

“They just want to make sure he’s safe, but he’s skating well and improving on the drills…” Shane trailed off, looking behind him.

“Whatever. It’s fucking dumb—Ilya, did you forget something?” Bood asked, turning around and Ilya had a smirk on his face, something hidden behind his back.

Shane looked around them, trying to see if he could find Ilya’s phone or AirPods case. He was always misplacing them all over the place at home, it was a miracle that they weren’t constantly replacing these two items.

“Is only for a few minutes, but…” Ilya pulled out the orange jersey from behind his back, smiling.

Shane and Bood looked at each other in shock before turning to Ilya. Shane’s heart was beating fast and he wanted to do something ridiculous like kiss the living shit out of his husband for getting cleared. But he also wanted to make this not a big deal, even though it was a big deal for Ilya to be joining practice. Even if it was in an orange jersey.

“Well what are you waiting for, suit up,” Shane said, grinning as Ilya stepped forward, throwing his gear down to get changed. Bood going around the locker room, quickly spreading the news as if no one there had eyes.

-&-

Each practice, Ilya spent more and more time on the ice with the team. While he was still wearing the bright orange jersey, he kept up with the team, participating in drills until he was pulled out for additional conditioning.

There were close calls on the ice, like the time Nic and Evan seemed to have gone blind and nearly checked Ilya once, then twice. The third time, Shane *lost* his shit on them. Only coming to when he heard Ilya laughing, who was doubled over. Shane blinked at the petrified faces of Nic and Evan.

“Told you. My husband, he has teeth,” Ilya yelled at the two, miming a bite. Shane huffed, skating away.

“Hey, you should talk like that to Hunter! He would be proud!” Ilya shouted at Shane. Shane pulled off a glove and gave Ilya a middle finger.

Eventually, Nic and Evan pulled it together. But Ilya kept chirping at the team. There were times even Shane wanted to body slam him into the boards. Usually, at that point, the trainers pulled him off. Coach told him to knock it off, and Ilya would laugh his way off of the ice.

-&-

“We need a rugrat or a dog for this to be cute,” Ilya said, burying his face in his hands as he looked at the computer screen where he and Shane were figuring out how to design a Christmas card.

“We don’t need either of those things. We get cards all the time from friends where it’s just them and their partner,” Shane muttered, scrolling through their photo library.

“Or we can be like Marlow and put a thirst trap. Memorable card if it’s the two of us...” Ilya wiggled his eyebrows and Shane rolled his eyes.

“Come on, we can use some of the wedding photos,” Shane said, double-clicking into the folder, scrolling down to the first dance photos. He felt Ilya rest his chin on Shane’s shoulder and kept scrolling.

“That one. I like the one where you can see both of our faces,” Ilya said, pointing to the photo where Shane and Ilya were walking out to the dance floor, both staring at each other with looks of adoration.

Shane smiled. It was a good photo. They both looked handsome in their outfits, with Ilya’s clean-shaven face and Shane’s hair just the right length.

“Done,” Shane said, double-clicking on it to import it into the Christmas Card.

“But we should get a dog, for the Christmas card next year. We can’t be those people who always use their wedding photos,” Ilya said, pushing up from his seat. He grabbed the empty mugs beside them.

“No, next year, we’ll have a photo of us and the Cup,” Shane said, leaning back and staring at Ilya.

“You a psychic? Can you tell the future?” Ilya teased. He walked off for a moment before returning to the dining room with a Coke and a ginger ale. He passed the ginger ale to Shane before sitting back down.

“I just have a feeling. A good one,” Shane said, glancing back at the card.

Ilya said nothing. He cracked open his can and took a long sip.

“You know who we should send a card to?” Ilya asked and Shane looked over to him. Ilya had a smirk on his face.

“Crowell. We can put a little note saying we’ll see him in depositions—”

“Oh my God, no—”

“We can sign it from the Hollanovs,” Ilya continued and Shane snorted.

“Awful name. And I’m not wasting a stamp on that guy.”

“Fine, I guess this will only go to our family and friends. Can we still sign it from the Hollanovs?”

“Absolutely not!”

Ilya huffed, “You never let me have fun,” and swooped down to kiss Shane’s cheek.

-&-

At the next practice, Ilya went through his usual routine, checking in with the trainers before going into the locker room to change. Most of the time, he came in frustrated, throwing the orange jersey onto the bench while muttering in Russian.

Except for the day he came in with no orange jersey in hand. Shane made eye contact with Bood. Bood looked ecstatic, a grin that looked like it might split in two. But in an effort not to make it a big deal, he quickly clenched his jaw tight.

Shane, on the other hand, broke into a sweat as he shoved on the remaining parts of his gear. The coffee he’d had that morning sent his adrenaline into overdrive.

He knew this day would come. He talked at length with Meera about it. He thought he would be happy, excited that Ilya would be back on the ice as normal.

He was not prepared for the images of the hospital to come back in high-definition, with all the fear and sadness. He wasn’t prepared to hear the droning of nameless doctors or see Ilya—sleeping, bloodied, with wires everywhere. He clenched his fists shut and walked over to the restroom, brushing against Ilya lightly.

As soon as he went into the bathroom, he checked the stalls before leaning against the wall, trying to steady his breathing. They were coming in fast and he had to find a way to relax. He went over to the sink and turned on the cold water, splashing his face.

Meera had mentioned something about cold water and shocking your systems.

At that moment, the door opened and Shane saw Troy shuffled into the room. There was a tense moment as the water ran and Shane just stared at Troy.

Troy gave a small smile, “You going to turn it off?” he asked, gesturing to the running water. Shane looked at it blankly, taking a second before turning off the faucet. Listening to the drips of water.

“He’s not coming in, right?” Shane asked, looking over his shoulder as Troy shook his head.

“Bood is distracting him. Wyatt and I saw you, figured you could use a friendly face that isn’t Ilya’s right now,” Troy said, walking over next to Shane.

Shane pressed his face into his hands. “It’s so stupid, I shouldn’t be thinking the absolute worst—”

“It’s kinda hard not to do that when he was in a literal coma for two weeks. It’s scary for all of us,” Troy said gently, and Shane grimaced.

“Sorry, I’m being selfish—”

“Shane, you’re fine. I’m trying to tell you, you’re not alone. We’re all a little freaked out. I mean, fuck, Doyle had to retire early because of his TBI. And he wasn’t in a coma, just fucking unlucky. No one wants us to see Ilya get hurt. Again,” Troy rambled and Shane nodded.

“The trainers, they’re not the type to push, right?” he asked, annoyed at how scared he sounded.

“No, Wiebe is really strict about that shit. And so are the trainers. If they say he’s ready, he’s more than ready,” Troy said, glancing behind his shoulder.

“They’re not like Montreal. And they sure as hell aren’t like Toronto. You gotta trust me, this team is good,” Troy said gently and Shane had to turn away.

“I know. I know, it’s just, I’m not used to a team where the team doctor wouldn’t give you shit for taking anti-depressants or trainers that don’t tell you to suck it up,” Shane said, clenching his teeth.

“It takes a while. But you’ll get there,” Troy said encouragingly.

“It’ll be fine. I mean, Ilya would stop if he wasn’t feeling well. His symptoms are all but gone,” Shane said to himself and Troy hummed in agreement.

“I think we need to trust him. Besides, we’re not Evan or Nick. It’s not like we have to be the ones checking him,” Troy said and Shane had to chuckle at that one.

“I feel bad for them, he’s going to be pulling all the tricks to get them to check him,” Shane said, walking towards the door with Troy besides him.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. Ready for a free show?” Troy asked as he opened the door for Shane. They were both laughing on the way out.

-&-

“You *have* to body check me. You think any team is going to go easy on me?” Ilya shouted in exasperation at Evan and Nic, both exchanging guilty looks.

“Give us a break, it’s been a while since we’ve been allowed to hit you,” Evan mumbled. Ilya rolled his eyes, skating away before turning back to them. He towered over Evan before turning to Shane.

“Who sings that song?” Ilya asked sharply.

“Bad Bunny,” Shane instinctively answered. Because Bad Bunny was always the right answer in their household.

Ilya’s lips curled and he shook his head, “Not that one. Who sings that song? You know, the one that goes,” and he starts humming a tune that Shane *knows* he’s heard on the radio a hundred times. Evan had blasted it in the locker room before games, and the artist was right at the tip of Shane’s tongue. She was blonde and—

“*All Too Well*? Taylor Swift? What does that have to do with anything?” Evan asked, skating towards Ilya.

Ilya had a grin on his face, his hands behind his back. Shane had to hide his face behind his gloves, he knew what was around the corner.

“I don’t think she writes her own songs. I think she’s... boring. She only writes about breakups and boys. Not fun,” Ilya taunted.

Evan’s face turned a deep shade of red, his jaw set tight, and Shane could see his eye twitch. Even Nic started backing up.

“You’re just saying that to get me to check you,” Evan said quietly.

“Is it working? I can keep going. Should we talk about how all she does is cry and cry?” Ilya asked, miming tears falling down his face.

At that, Evan turned on his heels and followed Nic to the start of the play. Shane skated closer to Ilya.

“You may have unlocked a monster,” he whispered.

Ilya scoffed, “Good. About time. I can’t help with the Cup if you all act fragile around me. That goes to you too, *da*?” Ilya said, raising his eyebrows as Shane rolled his eyes.

“Can’t wait to tell you I told you so,” Shane muttered as he went back to his mark.

This time, Evan body checked Ilya hard into the boards. The crash echoed through the rink and everyone held their breath.

Ilya grinned widely, throwing up a thumbs up, clapping a hand on Evan’s back.

“It’ll get easier,” Troy whispered next to him.

Shane swallowed, trying to tamp down the worry.

-&-

Somehow, miraculously, illogically, Shane's worry about Ilya taking a bad hit eased with every check into the boards. The first week, Shane had to physically stop himself from checking on Ilya after every hit. Practically wearing through his mouthguard.

Over the month, his shoulders dropped from his ears, he stopped gasping, and he barely turned his head when his husband said something stupid and got smashed into the boards.

-&-

When Shane brought up the clean laundry to the bedroom, he was happy to see that Ilya had his suitcase next his, Ilya's hand was on his chin as he stared down at it. Since Ilya was cleared for contact practice, it meant that he was back to traveling with the team. He looked up and walked over, pulling the basket from Shane's hands.

"Thank you," Ilya said, pressing a kiss to Shane's cheek before wandering back to the bed and dropping the basket. He sighed as he started rifling through the laundry basket, clearly looking for something.

Shane walked over, peering over and noting all of the rejected items that Ilya was passing over: favorite white shirt, not so favorite black shorts, a pair of briefs that have seen better days. Ilya suddenly grinned as he pulled out his lucky socks.

He glanced shyly at Shane, "Just in case," he said as he folded them into each other and put them in his suitcase.

"Don't forget the—"

"Got it," Ilya said, grabbing the lucky briefs and folding them into the suitcase.

"What did Coach have to say?" Shane asked, as he rifled through the basket to pull out a sleep shirt.

"Potentially in the game against Toronto. Just for a few minutes. But he's happy. The trainers are happy. The doctors are happy about the progress. I think even the mascot approved," Ilya said, chucking another pair of socks into the bag.

Shane paused, a pair of socks in one hand and athletic shorts in another. He looked over at Ilya, who gave him a puzzled look.

"I'm so happy you get to come with us. And we can be roommates," Shane said, grinning as he threw the clothes in his bag.

Ilya grinned, biting his bottom lip. "Just roommates? Separate beds? No hanky-panky—"

"Ew. Gross. You've been hanging out with my parents too much if you use the word 'hanky-panky,'" Shane said with airquotes.

"No. Never too much time with your parents," Ilya said, tsking at Shane as he zipped up his own bag.

“Well, they’ll be watching us. I’m sure my mom will send us a million photos of her, my dad, and Chiron watching us play,” Shane said, pulling his bag off of the bed before collapsing on top of it.

“Very nice of your parents to watch Chiron. I feel bad that I had to bail last second,” Ilya said, tugging his suitcase and laundry basket off the bed before letting himself fall back onto it.

“My parents love that dog. They may love him more than us,” Shane said, staring at the ceiling with his hands on his chest. Ilya laughed.

“We have more photos in the house than Chiron. It’ll take a while before he catches up,” Ilya said, crawling further up on the bed to rest against the pillows.

“When do we find out if you’re playing?” Shane asked, sitting up as Ilya shrugged his shoulders. His fingers picked at his thumbnail.

“Tomorrow. Before the game. They have to get the lineup out.”

“Toronto would be a safe game to do it. They aren’t exactly known to be aggressive—”

“You can say boring. Is okay to say that about another Canadian team.”

“Asshole,” Shane said, grabbing a pillow and chucking it at Ilya. Ilya swatted the pillow away, laughing at Shane’s amused expression. Shane crawled up the bed until he was next to Ilya. He leaned back, resting his head against Ilya’s shoulders. He let his hand wander up Ilya’s thigh until he found Ilya’s hand and gripped it tightly in his.

“I hope you get to play.”

“Will be our first game together. The first game where *married* players take the ice,” Ilya said suggestively, and Shane’s mouth went dry.

Fuck.

“Shane?”

Shane let out a strangled laugh, looking up at Ilya.

“I kinda forgot we’re the first married players playing hockey on the ice. You think the media will make a big deal?”

Shane watched as Ilya’s face shifted from concern to incredulous disbelief, his mouth hanging open as he let out a few huffed out a laugh. Shane bit his lip, nodding faintly.

“It’s kinda terrifying, isn’t?”

Ilya snorted, shaking his head, “You kidding? I can’t fucking wait,” he leaned over, grabbed Shane’s face, and kissed him fiercely. He pulled back, his forehead resting against Shane’s as

he stroked his cheek.

“Hollander?”

“Rozanov?”

“I love you, and I can’t believe you thought the media would be chill about our first game together,” Ilya said, pressing a quick kiss to Shane’s lips, cutting off whatever protest Shane had.

-&-

Svetlana: I’m nervous

Yuna: Me too

David: They wouldn’t put him in unless he was ready

Svetlana: He’s a liar though

Yuna: Not about his health

David: I think he knows we’d all murder him if he took an unnecessary risk

Svetlana: I know

Yuna: Shane says he’s been doing well in practice

Svetlana: I heard that too

David: Are you watching with friends?

Svetlana: No, just by myself

David: We can FaceTime you when he starts playing? I think I know how to do it.

David: But I may need your help

Yuna: Oh, Ilya showed me! Let me get the iPad

Svetlana: Oh, you don’t have to, I’ll be fine

David: She’s already getting the iPad

David: It’s too late, Svetlana

Svetlana: ❤️

-&-

Ilya was absolutely right. The second the lineup for the Toronto game was released, paired with the one-year anniversary, the media had an absolute fucking field day.

Shane's inbox was filled with inquiries and requests. Shane had peeked over Ilya's shoulder and his stomach dropped when he saw that he had more than double Shane's requests. Shane let out a low whistle and looked away from the screen as Ilya ran a hand through his own hair.

Farah was already on it. She texted them to stay out of the inbox for now. She was also coordinating with the Centaurs PR to ensure that neither of them were mobbed by the media. Shane expected he'd have to answer some softball questions before and after the game. That he could handle.

The concern was making sure that Ilya wasn't absolutely drowning in pointless media questions. Or worse, the insensitive ones. All the players had received media training on how to answer about the accident, how to politely deflect and move on.

There had already been an incident where someone pressed Nic too closely on his shoulder injuries. Nic had to replace the camera, but said it was worth it.

Everyone was on high alert, making sure Ilya's return to the ice went smoothly. No one wanted a repeat of the Sochi Olympics. Even if it wasn't his fault, it still followed him. This was supposed to be an easy game, but the locker room buzz said otherwise. The only person who seemed unfazed was the star player himself.

"Shane, how the fuck do you make the mascot look good?" Ilya complained, gesturing toward him.

Shane looked down, frowning at the stupid mascot. The half-man, half-horse was truly awful. He looked up to Ilya's pouting face, the rest of the room oblivious.

"Ilya, we said no... comments in the locker room," Shane hissed, turning to his stall as Ilya dramatically groaned.

"Is not my fault," Ilya grumbled, winking and grabbing his phone.

Shane eyed his phone, then glanced over at Ilya, watching him type quickly. As soon as he was done, he raised his eyebrows once, placing his phone squarely on the bench. The familiar buzz sounded from Shane's stall and he blushed but still grabbed his phone.

Ilya (Lily): Why do you look so sexy?

Shane (Jane): 😏

Ilya (Lily): ...

Ilya (Lily): Nothing for me? 🙄

Shane (Jane): omg

Shane (Jane): *Ilya. We have a game soon!*

Ilya (Lily): *But this is fun? Yes?*

Shane (Jane): *Yes*

Ilya (Lily): *I could be meaner*

Ilya (Lily): *Tell you all the things I want to do to you when we're back in the hotel room*

Shane (Jane): *I'm going to block you*

Ilya (Lily): *No hanky-panky? 🤔*

Shane (Jane): *MOIST*

Shane (Jane): *M O I S T*

Ilya (Lily): 🤔

“What the fuck are you two doing?” Bood asked loudly and Shane snapped his head up to see Bood glancing between Ilya and Shane.

Shane stuttered, glancing down to see if Ilya had texted him an excuse—anything to get him out of this stupid moment.

“Relax, Bood. We were facing off on Mini Crossword. I won. Obviously,” Ilya said, winking at Bood who let out a small laugh.

“Whatever floats your boat, are you ready?” Bood asked, clapping on Ilya’s shoulder and he nodded.

“Let’s fucking go.”

-&-

Ilya only played for ten minutes.

But it was a fucking success. He played at wing, slipping easily into the role. He took no unnecessary risks, kept up with the puck, and even disrupted a play, forcing a turnover for the Centaurs.

There were quick support passes between him and the rest of the team. It felt like Shane didn’t need to think when playing alongside Ilya, the puck ended up exactly where it needed it and he trusted Ilya with the play.

When Ilya was pulled off the ice, the crowd was going wild. Shane swore he felt the place vibrate under his skates. He had never heard the crowd get like this, not in any game he’d played.

Shane could practically hear the commentators, and could already imagine what the hockey world was writing about Ilya.

He was *fucking* back.

-&-

Yuna: *Ilya - you did AMAZING! How are you feeling? No headaches?*

David: *Incredible. Well done. We're so proud of you!!*

Ilya: *Thank you! Feels good. Nice to play with Shane ☺*

Yuna: *We'll meet you two at the airport tomorrow! I can't wait to hear about the game!*

David: *We need a toast!*

Ilya: *I can drink again, so yes!*

David: *I have just the drink*

-&-

Hayden: *Watched the game. Fucking unbelievable.*

Shane: *I know, right?*

Hayden: *I remember FaceTiming you two a year ago*

Hayden: *I didn't think he would be able to walk again*

Hayden: *Let alone play hockey*

Shane: *I'm glad we're no longer there*

Hayden: *I could cry*

Hayden: *Jackie is crying*

Hayden: *Don't you fucking dare screenshot this and send it to him!!*

Shane: *Never!*

Shane: *How is Chompy holding up?*

Hayden: *Excellent. He stayed up with Arthur to watch the game*

Hayden: *[Image Attached]*

Shane:  

-&-

Taylor: *For once - you didn't overdo it*

Ilya: *Is that a compliment?*

Taylor: *Don't flatter yourself*

Taylor: *Your posture still sucked*

Ilya: 😊

Taylor: *I'll give you better notes at your next home game. Cece is excited for her first hockey game. Stacy to teach her the hockey basics.*

Ilya: *Is Stacy coming?*

Taylor: *She's coming. Thank God.*

Taylor: *I already told her she has to answer Cece's questions during the game.*

Ilya: *How is Cece Canadian and I'm not?*

Taylor: *I don't get it either*

-&-

When they landed, Shane's parents were at arrivals with a sign and a bouquet of pink and yellow flowers for Ilya. Ilya blinked rapidly down at the bouquet, rubbing below his eyes, as he mouthed a "Thank you" to Yuna before collapsing into her arms, holding on tight as she rubbed his back.

Shane's dad pulled him into a side hug, and Shane leaned against his dad's shoulders as they watched her whisper how proud she was of Ilya. Ilya nodded against her shoulder.

Shane took a deep breath, shakily letting it out.

"How was the flight? Any issues?" his dad asked. Shane shook his head.

"Did you two clap?"

"We always do that now," Shane whispered. Ilya pulled away from his mom, clutching the flowers to his chest. He wiped at his eyes again, giving Shane a watery smile.

"So, does this mean you're back in rotation?" Shane's dad asked, pulling away from Shane and switching places with his mom.

"I'm back. Hopefully getting more time in a few games," Ilya said, sniffing again, louder this time. Shane's dad gave him a fond smile, wrapping an arm around him and walking towards the exit with him.

“Well, we have a very excited Chiron waiting at home with some chicken parmesan.”

“And some cookies and cream ice cream,” Shane’s mom added. Her arm was wrapped around Shane’s as they followed Ilya.

“I can’t wait,” Ilya said, letting out a strangled laugh.

-&-

Back at home, there was a noticeable change on the whiteboard after Ilya’s first few games. Once the new month started, one day on the calendar was filled in red. It was even circled a few times in blue marker. Around the month’s name, there were some, badly drawn dinosaurs.

Shane smirked every time he saw it. It never failed to make him smile.

It was even better when Ilya stood in front of it, munching on a piece of toast or candy, and flicking the date with his middle finger. Shaking his head, muttering under his breath.

He did it every time he saw the whiteboard.

-&-

The day finally arrived, and it was Ilya who drove them to the arena. He insisted they arrive fifteen minutes early, scolding Shane for wanting to clean up the counter after he’d spilled coffee. Shane bit his tongue and went along with it.

In the car, Ilya rested his hand on the center console, and Shane reached for the hand. He tightened his grip, ducked his head, and hid his grin as his fingers brushed the ring on Ilya’s hand.

Of course, Ilya was driving, which meant that they went faster than they should have. And arrived twenty minutes early. As they exited the car and started walking to the entrance, Ilya paused and held his hand out. Shane reached out and grabbed it. They walked hand in hand down the hallway.

Their footsteps echoed as they walked down the hallway. Cameras snapped, but photos of them walking hand in hand were nothing new. It was hardly the money shot that it once was. Sure, in the first few games, everyone couldn’t get enough.

But after the same shot of Ilya dragging Shane down the hallway or Shane dragging Ilya—it got repetitive. Frankly, boring. Ilya always teased that one of these days he’d throw him against the wall and make out with him to give the cameras a show.

Shane rolled his eyes, but he never pushed back.

Once they hit the locker rooms, they changed quickly, did their obligatory sound bites, and got on the ice to warm up.

The locker room was always buzzing, but today it felt louder.

It was the first game Ilya would take a faceoff.

And what better game to do that than against the New York Admirals?

-&-

Ilya skated up to center ice, positively buzzing with the cheers of a home game. A quick look at the crowd. Even if he couldn't see them, he knew that Svetlana, Yuna, and David were in the stands. Hell, even Taylor had made the drive with Cece and Stacy.

It was the most family and friends he'd ever had in the stands. He felt rich having so many there, for him, for this game. For once, he felt nervous about performing well for them.

Well, mostly for Taylor. That fucker was going to text him something stupid later.

He shook his head and looked around as his team fell in around him. He winked at Shane, who grinned back. Ilya's heart could burst.

How the fuck did he get so lucky—to have Shane, and family and friends who showed up for him like this? He could think something stupid like, "I could die today and be happy," but that simply wasn't true.

He was selfish and wanted so many more days with them. And he couldn't fucking wait for ten more years of these moments.

"Rozanov. Good to have you here," Hunter said, skating up to the circle and gliding into place.

Ilya grinned, matching Hunter's posture. He made a show of looking over his shoulder at Shane who looked completely oblivious before turning back to Hunter.

"Hunter, don't get distracted by my husband tonight. I know, I know, he's hot—"

"Jesus, Rozanov, I'm married!" Hunter hissed, his eyes going wide. Ilya gasped, shifting in his spot.

"I didn't realize it was so bad," Ilya whispered as Hunter frowned, confused.

"What is so bad?"

"Your eyesight. You need bifocals? You need them if you can't see Shane is very, very—"

"*Rozanov.*"

"I know. It happens with age. A blink of the eye and you're a million years old—"

"Rozanov! It's early to start this," a linesman cut in as Hunter looked like he could take a swing at him.

"Yes, but it's Hunter's gift. I get to chirp at you as many times as I want. Remember?"

Hunter's jaw dropped as he looked around in disbelief. He always looked so stupid when he was shocked, "I wrote that to you in a fucking text while you were in rehab—"

"You never put an expiration date!"

"You should have done this at the wedding!"

"I think is better here. Much more exciting. Plus better when I win the game and do something obnoxious like kiss my *husband* on the ice in front of all these people. Way better than kissing my boyfriend—"

"Enough!" the linesman cut in, as Hunter advanced to Ilya, the linesman's arm was out between them

"Let's go. Set," the linesman barked and both Hunter and Ilya crouched low. Ilya winked at Hunter and he practically snarled.

God, he missed these moments.

Ilya blocked out the noise from the arena, his eyes glued to the puck in the linesman's hand. He dropped lower, knowing it gave him the advantage over Hunter.

The puck dropped.

And do we really need to say who won the face off?

-&-

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

I am in shock that this is the final chapter of this work! When I first started writing this, I was convinced the only people who would read it were my beta readers and a handful of others. It's been overwhelming (in the best way) to see all the support and love you've shown this story.

To Splintered_star415 & Literary_nonhottie (my beta readers) — thank you for pushing me to write this. Thank you for rereading multiple chapters and providing edits. This fic would *literally* not exist without you two. Back in my teens on LiveJournal, I thought it would be so cool to have friends I could text and talk fanfic with... and it's wild that I get to live that dream all these years later. I love you both so much, and thank you for everything.

To [CrazyJ](#) — thank you so much for the last-minute help on the hockey! I'm really lucky to have crossed paths with you my friend!

To the readers — thank you for coming along for this ride. It's been an absolute pleasure getting to know you through the comments, and I'm really going to miss seeing you all on Sundays and Tuesdays 😭

What's next: I have a few one-shots that need some love before posting (maybe one on Sunday?), and a few WIPs I want to outline and draft before I start sharing them. I hope to see you there.

If you'd like to keep in touch, feel free to follow me here:

[Tumblr](#) & Threads (notquietafterdusk - sorry you'll need to manually look me up! I keep getting suspended, so trying something different for now).

Let me know in the comments if you had a favorite moment or character or relationship - would love to hear who/what was everyone's favorite.

Thank you 💙

Works inspired by this one

[cover for clap when you land](#) by [gravollet](#)

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