Til They Retire Your Number

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Til They Retire Your Number

by technicallyverycowboy

Summary

They lapse back into a comfortable silence. Shane looks at Ilya as he is and thinks about Ilya as he was at seventeen, smoking in the back of a Saskatchewan parking lot. The image is almost unbearably tender for Shane, where his own seventeen year old thrill at seeing Ilya Rozanov meets all the things Shane knows about that lonely boy now.

Shane thinks: Do you love number 81 more than you love this man?

"Hey," Ilya says, brushing his knuckles over Shane's cheek. "Whatever I do, I will be there when you come home."

Ilya decides to retire. Shane is very normal about it.

Notes

me: gosh, i'm enjoying this show about these two guys falling in love.

also me: i wonder what happens when they have to figure out the rest of their lives?

my thanks to lugarn, chaos0pikachu, and cryptidafter for hand holding, feedback, and general enthusiasm.

the entire thing is written and will be updated every couple of days. this is a mash up of book and show canon and would take place after *the long game*, but i'm told should mostly make sense even if you haven't read the book.

i can also be found on tumblr at technicallyverycowboy.

Chapter 1

The spring they both turn thirty-six, an overzealous rook smashes Ilya into the boards during game five of the quarterfinals and knocks him out cold.

Shane sees the lurid red spatter of blood and experiences a single moment of nauseating clarity: *He's not going to get back up and this is how you lose him.*

Everything after that dissolves into disjointed, overlapping fragments of memory. Meaningless snatches that Shane will remember until he dies (the paramedic's name tag, the single linoleum tile in the ER waiting room that fucked up the pattern) and things with tangible proof of happening that he will never remember (they way he screamed Ilya's name loud enough to be picked up by the cameras, Bood and Hazy pulling him back to make room for medical).

Ilya wakes up bleary and confused and mostly unable to speak English. Shane hits the call button half a dozen times, his own fucking Russian nearly as inaccessible for how lightheaded with relief he is, telling Ilya it's okay, he's okay, everything is okay.

"Bed is for you, Hollander," Ilya says and he wraps his fingers around Shane's wrist. "Your head — you were knocked asleep?"

It takes Shane a second to put it together. "I'm okay. That was a long time ago."

Ilya refuses to let go of Shane's wrist the entire time he's being examined.

**

Ilya has a concussion, bruised ribs, and three stitches on his chin. Shane doesn't lose him and he tries to shake off the thought as the terrified product of a high stress situation and his catastrophizing habit. He's not entirely successful.

It helps that within a couple hours Ilya remembers English and everything that's happened in his life in the years since Cliff Marleau put Shane into the boards.

"Is balanced now," Ilya says cheerfully. "Do not look so worried. I am tougher than you and you lived."

Shane rolls his eyes because his parents are there and Centaurs have been stopping by in twos and threes. Wiebe drops in, too, and tells Ilya the Colorado captain got in touch to make sure Ilya was okay and to convey the rook's apologies. Ilya waves them off.

"Is hockey. Sometimes you will get your bell rang."

Later, when night's fallen and Ilya's tired and they're alone, Shane carefully crawls into the hospital bed with him and murmurs, "You scared the hell out of me, Rozanov," as he cards his fingers through Ilya's hair.

“It will take more than toddler from Finland to take me out, lyubimyy,” Ilya says. Half asleep, he sounds younger. “I am okay, Shane. I know it is hard to watch, I know, but I am okay.”

Shane kisses his forehead. “Sleep.”

**

When they get home, Shane settles Ilya in bed and tries not to think about the plane to Denver he needs to be on in less than twenty-four hours. The wheels of the hockey machine don't stop turning for one player and the Centaurs are trailing Colorado 2-3 and just lost one of their star centers. These are the downsides to playing for the same team that Shane didn't think about when he decided to leave Montreal.

He keeps wandering away from what he's supposed to be doing (packing, coordinating with his parents, avoiding clips of the hit) to crack open the bedroom door and check on Ilya. Shane's brain snags on the thought that Ilya's not breathing, so he keeps having to hover in the doorway watching the rise and fall of Ilya's chest.

He orders dinner from a gyro place Ilya likes and brings it to him on a tray. "So luxurious," Ilya says. "You look like my husband but he would never let me eat food in our bed."

"It was this or throw you over my shoulder and carry you to the kitchen," Shane says.

"That would be hot."

"I think your ribs would disagree."

He watches Ilya pick at his food until he gets half of the gyro down. Ilya keeps getting hit with waves of nausea that drain the color out of his face and only ease up with one of the high octane prescription pills. Shane considers half a meal a win.

After Shane puts away the leftovers, Ilya holds up the blanket and says, "Come to bed?" Shane has planned to sleep in the spare room, but there's a tinge of pleading in Ilya's voice and Shane's exhausted and low on willpower, so he does.

He curls up along Ilya's good side, splays his hand across Ilya's chest.

"I can stay," Shane says quietly. "I should stay."

Ilya grumbles his disagreement. "The team needs you, moy pomidor. You will go to Colorado and beat them in their own house and come back home to me."

"You're more important."

Ilya turns his head to really *look* at Shane. A wistful little smile tugs on the corner of his mouth and he brushes Shane's hair off his face. "I know this. You do not need to stay here and watch me sleep to prove it."

**

Ottawa won game five, but Colorado advances to the semis with game six. It’s the first time in his life Shane is glad to get knocked out.

The flight back to Ottawa is subdued and a little frisson of guilt coils in his stomach every time he says they're disappointed but they did their best, there's always next year.

**

Shane takes a cab home from the airport and it's late when he comes through the front door.

"Welcome home," his mother says in a low voice as she comes out of the living room. "Ilya and your dad are both asleep. How are you?"

Shane toes off his shoes and shrugs. "Not a game for the record books. How is he doing?"

Yuna chuckles. "He's fine, honey. Next time I might just set up a camera so you can watch him nap without having to text me every time. I doubt he'll be that disappointed to head to the cottage a couple days early."

Shane scrubs a hand through his hair and smiles. "I worry. Thank you for staying with him."

"It's not a hardship to spend time with my kids," she says. "Now, go upstairs and check on him like you want to."

**

Shane does the entire drive to the cottage. Ilya bitches about it a little — “It will take three days to get there going your speed” — but it’s mostly for form’s sake.

He ends up sleeping most of the way, tipped sideways in the backseat with his limbs folded up as space allows. The doctors cleared him to go and he is demonstrably feeling better, but head injuries have less predictable healing trajectories and it’s been a long time since Shane was fooled by Ilya downplaying pain.

It’s early evening when Shane makes the final turnoff and the cottage emerges out of the trees, cast in shades of deep gold. Shane cuts the engine and takes a couple minutes to reorient himself into summer. The rhythm of slower days and open hours will take a little time to come back to him, but even so. God, Shane loves this place.

Ilya’s a little groggy when Shane shakes him awake and squinting from a headache, so Shane makes an executive decision and leads him from the car straight to their bedroom. Shane makes a mental note to thank his parents again for coming up early to take care of the basic stuff: sheets on the bed, some groceries in the fridge, toothpaste, that kind of thing.

Ilya stays awake long enough to swallow down some painkillers and falls back asleep with Shane sitting next to him on the edge of the bed. Shane rubs Ilya’s back like his mother did when he was little. Ilya almost looks small and it makes Shane’s chest ache a little.

Shane spends the rest of the evening setting the cottage to rights to be their home for the next several weeks. He enjoys the ritual of it, the uncovering and unpacking and shaking out and

dusting off; a means of telling the cottage he missed it while he was away.

Once everything has been settled in its proper place, Shane strips down to his underwear and crawls into bed with Ilya and sleeps harder than he has in a long time.

**

The first couple days are perfect.

They lounge together on the deck in warm sunshine. Ilya naps and Shane reads, they both leave their phones inside most of the day. It's a habit from the first few summers, when they were both aware of how little time two weeks really is, but it's stuck. Hayden teases him sometimes about unplugging, but for Shane it's less about avoiding the internet for the sake of avoiding it than setting down a persistent distraction.

Ilya's sporadic headaches prevent any truly athletic sex, so instead Shane gives him long, languorous blow jobs while Ilya pets his hair and tells Shane how good he is in the particular tangle of Russian and English Ilya uses when it feels too good for one language. Shane ruts against Ilya's thighs while Ilya urges him on. Their games become ones of how long they can last rather than how fast they can come.

They have Shane's parents over for dinner and Shane gets to sit with his dad and watch his mom and Ilya grill burgers. Yuna Hollander is an exacting teacher, but Ilya is an attentive student. Between instructions she quizzes Ilya on the small collection of Japanese phrases he's picked up.

Shane was young when his grandparents died, but there's something about the even beats of the words and the scent of cooking food that pings a memory of a deep voice teaching him to count -- ichi, ni, san, shi, go -- and his mother's voice in the background. His dad puts a hand on his shoulder and says, "I'm glad they like each other." He, too, was once someone swept into the orbit of a love he did expect.

"Me too," Shane says and his voice catches a little.

**

Ilya’s mood tanks after a week at the cottage. It’s a combination of things. Ilya always has a rough patch when the season’s over and he has time and space to feel anything he’s been ignoring. The concussion compounds it, Ilya’s tired of resting and the restrictions.

Shane sees it coming and makes himself follow Ilya’s lead, ignoring the wound up part of his brain that treats every moment Ilya’s quiet or a little withdrawn as evidence that Shane is fucking up. He fidgets with his wedding ring as a counterweight to invented anger his brain insists is real. Ilya’s sadness isn’t about Shane, Shane just sucks with problems he can’t fix.

So he puts meals in front of Ilya and brings his meds to him and reads books out loud when Ilya can’t read them himself.

One night, Ilya says, “You take the best care of me.”

“I said ‘in sickness and in health’ and I meant it,” Shane says. “I like taking care of you.”

“I know this,” Ilya says. “I still want to tell you I am grateful.”

**

One morning Shane wakes up to Ilya's big hand splayed across his belly and something very hard grinding against his ass and he moans at the pleasure of being wrapped in the arms of a big man who wants him.

"I love your slutty noises," Ilya says in his ear. "I want more."

Shane rolls his hips back and laughs. "You get what you earn, Rozanov."

Afterward, Ilya lays on his side with his head propped up on one hand, trailing his fingers up and down Shane's spine. There's still a slightly drawn cast to his face, but it's like the lingering scent of ozone after the storm finally breaks. It'll pass.

"I am sorry," Ilya says. "Every year I hope it will be different, but--"

"You are never a problem to me," Shane says. "Say it."

Ilya ducks his head and rolls his eyes and Shane waits him out. Sometimes Ilya has to stumble through his deflections first. "I am not a problem to you."

**

There are a couple weeks in July where Shane feels the most like himself he ever does.

Ilya fucks him on the deck in broad daylight, his body haloed in gold by the sun. They strip naked and Ilya throws him into the lake and jumps in after and they kiss under the water until their lungs burn. He wakes Ilya up with blowjobs because he loves the shape of Ilya’s cock in his mouth and he loves Ilya’s half-asleep, lopsided smiles.

They talk, too. A marriage is harder than getting married and the first year of their marriage was rough. Going from snatches of hours together to living and working together was hard, is still sometimes hard.

Kids come up again; they’ve been coming up more and more often and Shane can feel them both working their way from ‘someday’ to ‘soon.’ Hayden and Jackie and the kids visit for a weekend; Jackie catches Shane watching Ilya play and says, “I know what that face means,” with a laugh.

They talk about the upcoming camps and the coaches. Ilya teases, “Ryan Price has already told me his beautiful boyfriend is coming. I know this is very exciting for you,” and Shane blushes despite himself.

They talk about the team and that’s when Ilya goes a little quiet.

**

And then one night they’re in bed and Shane is sated and almost asleep when Ilya presses his hand to Shane’s chest and asks, “Are you still awake?”

Shane hums an affirmative noise. “You okay?”

There’s a beat of silence where Ilya’s thumb rubs a warm arc across Shane’s sternum. And Shane is too warm and contented and well fucked to overthink, and is thus completely unprepared.

“I have been thinking about next season,” Ilya says. “And I think maybe I am done.”

**

Shane hasn't really slept when the first dim morning light comes, so he eases out of bed and quietly pads down the stairs to the main floor. He makes coffee and takes his mug out onto the deck and it's very normal. Most mornings at the cottage go this way because Shane is an early riser and he likes the ritual of it. It gives his day some small amount of structure when all his normal routines are on hold for the summer.

He sits in his deck chair. They always orient themselves the same way. Ilya's right side is Shane's side, it's where he sits, where he sleeps, where he leans into the solid bulwark of Ilya's body. It's funny, the routines people get into when they've been together long enough. Or maybe it's not about time at all. Maybe it's about attention and all the little things that slowly accumulate when you're always aware of another person.

Shane looks out over the lake and drinks his coffee.

He says, "Ilya's going to retire," out loud for the first time.

There's no response, not even from the loons.

Shane doesn't know how he feels. Shane doesn't know how he's supposed to feel.

It would be really easy, Shane knows, to direct his focus toward the practical things. Contacting the Centaurs and Wiebe. Making sure there aren't contract issues that need to be sorted out. (There aren't, Shane and Ilya have both been on one year deals since they turned thirty, which was a change Shane very much did not like.) Figure out how to tell the team. Plan an announcement. Just another checklist of steps and Shane has always excelled at that.

His therapist once told him that being useful is not a feeling.

Shane sighs and pushes his fingers through his hair. The horizon is starting to tint with yellow and orange. Shane could see symbolism in that, if he wanted. The sun rises on a new day as Shane sits on the cusp of change. Maybe a little bit trite, as metaphors go, but still a classic. He's spent a lot of time finding ways to make peace with change, to let things happen as they will. To stop fighting for control when control isn't possible.

He hasn't felt this strangely lonely since -- well. Since Montreal, really. Looking around the locker room and realizing that two cups and ten years and blood and sweat and tears did not matter enough to balance out Shane doing one thing for himself and his own happiness.

Shane wouldn't undo it, exactly. He chose Ilya with full awareness there was a not insignificant chance that he'd never play professional hockey again. But if he could go back? If he could tell his past self one thing? He'd tell his younger self that understanding something could happen is not that same thing as actually being prepared for it to happen. There are a lot more ways to disappoint the hockey machine than to please it.

The older Shane's gotten, the more he's wondered how much is too much to give to an organization for love of the game and the answer has felt less and less clear. And despite that, Shane's dream is still to play.

"Okay," Shane says to the lake and the sky and the dawn. "We can do this."

**

Ilya comes out to the deck with fresh coffee for both of them.

He hasn't dressed so Shane gets to see him cast in rosy morning light. Desire kicks faintly in Shane's chest.

Ilya hands him one of the mugs and sprawls into his own deck chair. His arm splays across both rests so his knuckles brush against Shane's shoulder. It's funny -- in the days before Shane understood that his driving need to pay attention to Ilya was desire, he'd hated how easily Ilya took up space in the world. He relies on it now, on Ilya's hand being there to pull Shane back in.

"So," Ilya says.

"So," Shane agrees.

Ilya chuckles and shakes his head, then shifts to orient himself toward Shane. There's a competitive streak in Shane urging him to turn this into competition; which one of them will break first and say something about this thing they have to talk about. It wouldn't be fair. In the game of keeping his mouth shut, Shane will win.

He doesn't know what to say, is the thing. On one hand, there is what he himself feels. A kind of panicky dread lurching in the pit of his stomach at a future he hasn't planned for and can't picture. On the other is what Ilya needs and deserves to hear from his husband, for whom he sacrificed so much.

So Shane reaches out his hand to smooth down Ilya's hair, which Ilya then takes and brings to his mouth. He kisses Shane's knuckles one by one, then laces their fingers together.

"Why?" Shane asks.

Ilya looks down at their intertwined hands while the wheels turn. Shane can see him translating phrases, discarding ones English will not cooperate with and replacing them. Ilya's big mouth is such an intrinsic part of his reputation, the trash and the goading and the bullshit and the charm. He's more careful with his words than people give him credit for.

"Some reasons are practical and some are just me," Ilya says. "Pick one to start?"

That's easy. "Practical."

Relief passes lightly over Ilya's face. Shane knows him very well. "I think the timing is good for the team. There is the new rook for center, so if I am not there that doesn't make a hole overall. Rook will have you to learn from still for a couple seasons, which is good. Rooks always want to impress you, makes them work harder."

"They want to impress you, too."

Ilya shrugs. "Of course. I am best."

Shane rolls his eyes, but also squeezes Ilya's hand. "Yeah, you are. No one's trying to hurry you out the door. Right?"

"No, no, no." Ilya shakes his head. "There is no one whispering in my ear that I am old fuck and need to get off the ice."

"Okay. So, what are the just you reasons?"

Ilya inhales deeply and glances out over the lake. The cottage is sacred to them both, but for a long time it was the single refuge Ilya had in the world. He has a loon permanently inked into his skin and Shane does not.

"After concussion," Ilya says at length, "I kept thinking that if I was twenty it would not take so long to heal. Not just my head but all over my body. I rest in bed for my head and suddenly my fucking knee hurts from not moving. It used to be that when I am hurt, I heal completely. Not so much, now. When I am hurt, I get better, but I have to be careful. Easy to get hurt again.'

"And also most summers, at some point I start thinking about next season. I obviously am not excited to go back to life where I cannot fuck you all day in every place, but I am ready to play again. I miss it. This year, that did not happen."

Shane understands, logically. But there is no level on which he can imagine that feeling. For him, summer is a break from the apparatus of the MLH. It's time without road trips and games every other night. It's purposeful and necessary recuperation. But at no point does he ever not want to be playing hockey.

"Not at all?" Shane asks.

Ilya smiles at him, but there's a sadness to it that Shane can't quite decipher. "No, not not at all. But not enough, I think. I have done all the things I ever wanted to do. I have all the trophies and the awards. I have put my name in the clouds and I will be remembered. And now I am older than most people when they retire. And I am done."

What can Shane say to that?

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Ilya takes a couple days to sit with his decision. He says, "I am 99% sure, but I also like to change my mind. It would be very embarrassing to go back and say I was just kidding."

Shane knows he isn't going to change his mind. The delay is for him. And he needs it. And that bothers Shane, too.

The most generous interpretation of what Shane is on a foundational level is that he's a planner. His instinct is to break things down until he understands the root, then build back up. When people say he's got the best hockey IQ in the game, Shane understands that as recognition of the effort he puts into understanding every component piece of the things he cares about. The less flattering interpretation is that Shane is a rigid control freak that relies on routine to an obsessive and inconvenient degree.

Ilya is actually not the only person that has ever called Shane boring.

Shane's mind snags on a belief Shane hadn't realized he even had: they came into the MLH together and they'd go out of the MLH together.

Inasmuch as Shane ever bought into the narrative of opposites the world constructed about Ilya and him, he'd always felt their symmetry. In retrospect, Shane can see the small ways he relied on it as a scaffolding with which to approach the relentless attention from the press. He was cast into a role that provided him context without actually having to reveal much about himself.

People assumed that Ilya was Shane's private benchmark, which meant Shane didn't have to pretend he wasn't. Half of his most meaningful accomplishments in Montreal were less about the team than about showing Ilya up.

It's been different in Ottawa, but still it's still a dual narrative. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are a shared story. It's never actually been just Shane. He doesn't know what that looks like.

But Ilya is who Shane takes his fears to and he can't do that here.

Because Ilya -- God, he so obviously feels *better*. He starts cooking lunches using the box of recipes Shane's mother gave him on the first anniversary of the foundation, gathered from the things she cooked Shane as a kid and things she'd translated from her mother's book and from the mothers of other Russian players she'd met over the years. He insists they eat together at the table on the deck and holds out bites for Shane to eat.

The way he touches Shane changes in tenor, a little. It's less like he's leaning on Shane to hold himself up and more just for the joy of it; Shane is there to be touched and Ilya likes touching him. On the couch, Ilya tugs Shane into his lap and pets him like a cat. The worry Shane's carried since the Colorado game that if he isn't there Ilya will fall eases. The headaches recede more.

Ilya is more important than Shane's plans. Fifteen years together have proven that out every single time.

"So," Shane asks one night. "What are you going to do with all your new free time?"

Ilya looks at him and Shane nods: *I'm here and I'm with you*.

Ilya's smile widens into the bright, unfettered one that he only gives to Shane.

"There are so many things," Ilya says. "I am very good looking and much better than you at smiling for a camera, so modeling seems like easy choice. Then you will get to walk around and see my face fucking everywhere like I did, and hear people say 'That is Ilya Rozanov, he is so handsome' and feel very smug that we are married."

"Right, of course."

"When I am not doing that, I might get into racing."

"Absolutely not."

"I could also just be trophy wife," Ilya says with mock sweetness. "Spend your money all day. Go to brunch."

Shane rolls his eyes. "I'm pretty sure other people have to be jealous they aren't married to you to be a trophy wife and I'm the only one who will put up with you."

They lapse back into a comfortable silence. Shane looks at Ilya as he is and thinks about Ilya as he was at seventeen, smoking in the back of a Saskatchewan parking lot. The image is almost unbearably tender for Shane, where his own seventeen year old thrill at seeing *Ilya Rozanov* meets all the things Shane knows about that lonely boy now.

Shane thinks: *Do you love number 81 more than you love this man?*

"Hey," Ilya says, brushing his knuckles over Shane's cheek. "Whatever I do, I will be there when you come home."

Shane kisses him.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

shane is *so* good at change.

Shane makes the damn list. He sits next to Ilya while he makes the calls.

Farah is an easy first, as both a friend and their agent. There is a single pause in the conversation after Ilya says he wants to retire while her professionalism kicks in and then it's practical. Shane takes notes because Ilya's hands are shaking a little. At the end, she says, "This is a big change," with a little huff of laughter. "I thought I had another five years before I had to start client hunting again."

"So did I," Shane says, and it comes out so quiet he doesn't think Farah hears it.

"I will make Shane pay you double, do not worry," Ilya says and his smile is wide and beautiful.

Coach Wiebe is harder, though the call Ilya makes is to ask him if he'd be willing to drive up to the cottage for a day to talk about next season. "Yeah, I can make some time," Wiebe says. "You wouldn't invite me if it wasn't something important."

Two days later he arrives as Ilya is finishing up lunch, so Shane opens the door and invites him in. Ilya's been vibrating with nerves all morning, so Shane's a little worked up, too, and he's grateful for Wiebe's air of unflappable calm. He claps Shane on the shoulder and says, "It's good to see you, Hollander. How are you doing?"

Shane thinks: *he already knows*.

"I'm good," Shane says and there's a pause where he can tell Wiebe is leaving room to say more, if Shane wants to. There's nothing Shane can condense down into minutes. "Follow me. The kitchen's in the back."

When Ilya sees Wiebe, he goes still and for a moment, Shane sees Ilya Rozanov, captain of the Ottawa Centaurs assessing the other team as they warm up. Wiebe looks right back at him.

"I am retiring," Ilya says.

Wiebe nods. "Because *you* want to?"

Ilya nods. "Yes. I will explain."

Shane slips out onto the deck and gives them a minute. The entire time Shane has played for Ottawa, he's felt like he owed Wiebe some kind of thank you for how much he saved both of them. For bringing Ilya to Canada and giving him a place to land and a team of people worth trusting. For taking Shane on when the jig was up and the only way out for Shane was through, even though it was messy and Wiebe caught flak from every direction. It would have been a hell of a lot easier for him to do nothing.

Twenty minutes later, Wiebe and Ilya join him on the deck with their slightly cold food and the conversation is easy.

On his way out the door, Wiebe pauses to look at Shane. "You're still in." It's not a question.

Shane nods.

"Okay," Wiebe says. "It'll be different. But I don't think it'll be bad."

That night, Ilya asks, "Do you want to know what he said?"

"It was for you," Shane says. There are going to be more things now, that aren't for them both.

**

Shane does everything he can to avoid the end of the summer.

The balance of his life feels slightly off-kilter and that makes him hesitant. He's aware of the things he needs to do that he isn't getting done and aware of the things coming that he isn't preparing for but the motivation doesn't come, it just sits as unresolved anxiety thrumming in his chest as the days slip through his fingers too quickly.

He can feel Ilya watching him, too. Not saying anything, not yet. Ilya understands that sometimes Shane just has to brute force his way through the tangles of his mind. Shane knows his observation is without judgement or malice and it's not Ilya's fault that over time, Shane has grown an active dislike of being managed. And it's not like Shane knows how to explain what he's feeling, even if asked.

Still, one night Shane comes upstairs after washing dishes to Ilya packing clean laundry into a suitcase and his stomach bottoms out in dread.

"What are you doing?" Shane asks.

"Packing," Ilya says. He looks up at Shane with an eyebrow raised in question.

"You never pack."

Ilya shrugs. "You usually do not let me."

Which is true, Shane always packs because otherwise Ilya just crams everything into his suitcase however it will fit and calls it a day. And it's true that it's Thursday night and they're leaving the cottage Saturday morning, which means Shane should have started packing two

days ago and has not. Which means that the cottage part of the summer is done and they have to go back to real life and real life now means Ilya will never play another professional hockey game again.

Shane scrubs a hand over his face. "I'm sorry. I just. I'm trying--"

Ilya comes around the end of the bed and pulls Shane into his arms. "I know you are, moy lyubimyy."

Leaning into the stolid, warm bulk of Ilya's body drains some of the tension coiled up inside Shane. He wraps his arms around Ilya's waist and shoves his face into the curve of Ilya's shoulder. He smells a little bit like clean laundry overtop his normal scent; Shane inhales deeply.

"I know I'm acting like a kid--" Shane starts.

"No, no," Ilya says. "I understand. You are nervous. I am nervous."

Nervous doesn't quite feel like the right word, but it's not inaccurate, so Shane nods. "Yeah, I know."

Ilya kisses his temple. "I think it is better if we are nervous together. Also, if I pack your suitcase I think maybe you will murderer me when we get back to Ottawa."

Shane wheezes out a laugh. "You're much smarter than people think you are."

"This is true, but I mostly just know my husband."

So, they pack together and get the cottage squared away for only minimal use for the next nine months. Their last night, they throw open the big windows in their bedroom and Shane rides Ilya looking down as his face cast in the silver glow of the moon and he tells Ilya how beautiful he is, how perfect, how loved.

Still, when it's time to leave the next morning, Shane lingers so long on the deck looking out at the lake that Ilya has to come and find him to say it's time to go.

**

Ilya insists he wants to tell the team in person before the Centaurs make the official announcement, so everyone is called into a meeting weeks earlier than normal.

Ilya's quiet most of the morning before. He's not lost in thought so much as carefully going over his thoughts one last time before he has to say them out loud. Shane knows he's been practicing; he's found more than one crumpled up piece of notebook paper in the trash, covered in Ilya's chickenscratch handwriting. Shane understands the impulse, even if he personally knows Ilya could wing it if he had to. He has an ability to speak to a group that has never come naturally to Shane.

In truth, Shane wishes he could beg off. The camps are extremely soon and there's a ton of shit there he could be doing, even though his mom insists that she has it more than handled.

Shane doesn't doubt her ability, by any means, he just knows how many moving parts there are. But supporting Ilya is more important than that, as Yuna Hollander less than delicately pointed out, so.

Shane puts coffee in Ilya's hand and breakfast in front of him and stands there to make sure he eats. Shane puts on Bad Bunny as he drives to the arena so at least Ilya's leg bounces in rhythm with the music. Once they're parking and Shane cuts the engine, he reaches across the center console and laces their fingers together. Ilya squeezes.

"I am so fucking nervous for no reason," Ilya confesses.

"I wouldn't say no reason."

"I do not want to disappoint them."

Shane lifts their hands and rubs his cheek over the back of Ilya's. "They care about you, Ilya. More than anything else. No one is going to be mad. And even if they are, they know better than to make a big deal and they'll get over it."

Shane is most of the way certain he's telling the truth there. The ten years he spent with Montreal still make it hard for Shane to really believe that a team's respect and approval doesn't always come with deep caveats, but this is Ilya, not Shane. The rest of the Centaurs love Ilya and not just because he was the key to turning the entire organization around. They love him as a person and as a captain and friend, too.

"And aren't you the one who keeps telling me that you retiring doesn't mean you're going anywhere?" Shane asks.

Ilya's face brightens into a real smile and he leans across the console to kiss Shane.

The majority of the team is there when Ilya and Shane walk in and the few that are out of town have called in. People are chatting here and there, talking about vacations and families and any end of summer plans. The mood isn't bad, but there's a tension to it and everyone looks up at Ilya and Shane with obvious questions. Shane steps aside to sit with the rest of the team and can't quite meet the eye of Bood or Hazy.

"Okay," Ilya says. His voice betrays none of the nerves. "So, I have announcement to make."

"Shane knocked you up," Bood says.

The room explodes in laughter that far outsizes how funny the joke actually was, but Shane's laughing just as hard. He hears several other people chime in with, "You knocked Shane up," and Wyatt says, "No, no, you both knocked each other up," and sets everyone off again.

It takes Ilya a couple minutes to get himself back together and when he does, there's an ease to his posture. Then Shane does catch Bood's eye across the room and mouths *thank you* to him. Bood winks.

"Okay, so now I think my announcement will be disappointing. There is no baby. But you are right I will not be here this season. I have decided it is time for me to retire."

It's too hard to watch Ilya, so Shane focuses the rest of the team to gauge their reactions. Most of the younger players are variations on surprise, like the idea of Ilya retiring has simply never occurred to them as a possibility, which Shane can empathize with. The older ones, the ones that have played with Ilya since he came to Ottawa, are much less surprised than Shane himself was. Bood and Wyatt exchange a glance; they aren't surprised at all.

"We'll miss the hell out of you," Bood says and he stands to yank Ilya into a rough, affectionate hug. "The locker room'll be so much quieter without you there running your mouth."

"Fuck you," Ilya laughs. "It will be silent like a library, it will be terrible for you."

Shane stays in his chair to give everyone else room, until Wiebe catches his eye and nods his head toward his office and Shane follows.

Wiebe closes the door, muffling the conversation and laughter into a low murmur. Shane has been in his office probably hundreds of times over the years and it really hasn't changed much. It's well-organized and tidy, which Shane appreciates. The most significant additions are the two Stanley cup team photos framed on the wall; they have the exact same photos hung up in their trophy room.

Wiebe sits on the edge of his desk and asks, "How are you holding up?"

"I--" Shane begins and -- doesn't know how to continue. "I don't know?"

"That's perfectly fair."

Is it? Is it really?

"I'm getting used to it," Shane tries. "I guess it'll just take some time."

Wiebe nods. "I don't doubt it. It's a lot of change, especially for you."

Shane glances at him. "Are you -- have I done something to -- I don't want you to worry about me."

Wiebe smiles kindly. "I worry about every hockey player that I've ever coached, Hollander. This isn't me trying to tell you I'm doubting you, got that? This is me checking in with a valued member of my team who is dealing with a big change in his life. Just like I would if you were knocked up."

Shane snorts, but the joke does make him feel a little better. "Thank you, I appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I did have one question for you."

"Yes?"

Wiebe grins. "You still gunning for that C?"

**

The official announcement goes out before Shane and Ilya even leave the arena.

None of it is a surprise. They both read over everything and Ilya approved it. There genuinely are no hard feelings, just unambiguous appreciation and good will for everything Captain Ilya Rozanov has given to the Centaurs in the last seven years and how his tenure will endure as a golden period for the organization.

Still, when Shane's phone buzzes with the notification, it's unsettling to see it actually posted. Comments flood in and Shane skims over some of them despite himself. Most are fine, even good: well wishes, congratulations, it won't be the same without him, it's the end of an era. One says to please keep Shane Hollander, first MLH hockey widow in their thoughts, which he likes.

The shitty ones are fewer and predictable. Rozanov has been over the hill since he left Boston. There's one less fag distracting everyone from the actual game. Can't wait to see Hollander fall apart without Rozanov there to protect him. Same shit as it's ever been.

Shane sets his phone on Do Not Disturb and shoves it into his pocket. Once the team has had time amongst themselves, admins start trickling into the room as well. Ilya is well-liked, scrupulously kind to people and always generous. He remembers the names of all the administrative assistants and the equipment people and the cleaning staff. He's jumped in to pay for emergencies people have had more than once. Ilya shakes hands and bends almost in half to hug women a foot and half shorter. Shane watches with a soft smile.

When his phone starts to buzz, Shane knows who it is without having to look. There group of people who can get through his Do Not Disturb is very small; one of them is hugging an intern, one of them is his mom, and the third is--"

"You two were eating my wife's spaghetti like two weeks ago and I very distinctly remember Jackie asking if you had any exciting plans and you both said no," Hayden says. "And now I find out Rozanov is retiring on *Instagram*?"

Shane ducks into the hallway. "We weren't allowed to say."

"You still could have said something!" Hayden shouts. "Jesus Christ. No wonder you were being weird."

"I wasn't being weird."

"You were absolutely being weird."

Shane shakes his head, even though Hayden can't see it. "I'm sorry."

"Damn right you are. So, how are you doing?"

Shane's getting so tired of that question. "I'm fine."

"Jackie's here, I'm putting you on speaker."

"Hi, Jackie," Shane says.

"Hi, honey. How are you doing?"

Shane sighs. "I'm fine."

"Don't know if I believe that one," Jackie says kindly.

"That's what I said."

"Guys!" Shane thunks his head against the cinderblock hallway wall and stifles a wince. "It's a lot, okay? But it's more for Ilya and that's more important right now. I am genuinely doing okay. Please."

In the pause that follows, Shane can so easily picture the look Jackie and Hayden exchange. He saw it so often in those early Montreal years, when Hayden and Jackie were the only friends Shane had that he spent significant time with outside of the team. In retrospect, Shane can see that he was a bit of a project for them, as a talented but awkward kid, who needed a landing pad to help him settle. But Shane is no longer that kid.

"Okay," Jackie says at last. "You're right, I worry too much. Just remember that we're here if you need us, okay?"

"I will, Jackie, thank you."

Hayden switches off the speaker and asks, "For real, though, as your friend who only tolerates Ilya. You good?"

Shane sighs. "I don't love it. But he's ready and that's what matters."

"You matter, too, Hollander."

"I know, Hayden. I got it."

**

By mutual agreement, they keep the TV off that night and ignore their phones.

Ilya makes dinner while Shane sits at the counter and studies him, the way he chops and stirs and adjusts burners, the tune he hums. Shane doesn't know what he's looking for. Some sign of regret, maybe? A tinge of sadness to match Shane's? Part of throbs with guilt, like he's accusing Ilya of lying for no reason.

Ilya opens a bottle of wine and Shane accepts a glass because doing so makes Ilya smile in quietly pleased surprise. It's on the sweeter side and fruity and Shane doesn't actually hate it, which means Ilya chose the bottle thinking of him. They eat sitting catty-corner to each other at the island. It's peaceful and Shane is grateful for that.

"Does it feel different now that it's real?" Shane asks.

Ilya cocks his head. "A little bit? It was not *not* real before, but it is a little weird that everyone knows now, yes? My little secret thing is not a secret."

Shane nods. "That makes sense."

Ilya smiles. "I am so fucking glad you are with me. It is much easier."

"Me too," Shane says and his voice doesn't waver at all.

**

Shane spends the next week getting everything locked down for camp, while Ilya does seven hundred interviews with every even vaguely hockey related website, TV show, magazine, and podcast in the known universe. It's a lot of the same couple questions being asked again and again that Ilya answers the same way again and again.

Shane gets plenty of his own interview requests and he sends everyone the same statement Farah wrote for him. He supports Ilya 100% in his decision and he's looking forward to the start of another successful season with the team. No further comment. No, seriously, no further comment.

Ilya shows up the day before the first camp starts and immediately pulls Shane into their room to mash his face into Shane's shoulder. Shane pets his hair and hums a little nonsense melody until Ilya's shoulders slump down and he exhales hard. "No more interviews for at least ten years."

"No more interviews for you," Shane agrees.

**

Obviously they have to host a retirement party and it makes sense to do it after the camps wrap up, when people will already be in town.

Everything about it sounds exhausting to Shane. A mean part of him says they've dedicated the whole goddamn summer to Ilya retiring, but Shane doesn't like that part of himself, so he ignores it. It's easy for Shane to hide his specific dislike of this party beneath his general lack of enthusiasm for all parties. He tries to orient himself into the warmth of Ilya's excitement.

It's maybe not as effective as usual, but it's been a long summer, Shane thinks. Emotional. It's not unreasonable to be a little -- depleted.

So he spends the second week of camp coaching during the day and handling party logistics in the evening, staying up late until his eyes are gritty. Ilya offers to help and Shane waves him off; he's not going to ask Ilya to plan his own party. Shane reasons that since he's not sleeping particularly well, he might as well do something better with the time than lay awake and stare at the ceiling, trying to ignore a vague anxiety that a time is ticking down to something.

The day of, Shane's mother comes over early and they drink coffee together at the kitchen island in comfortable silence. The quiet is more of a relief than Shane expects.

As Shane is rinsing out their cups, she asks, "So, how are you holding up?"

Shane's shoulders stiffen. "I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just a big change, honey," she says. "When your dad retired, it was a real adjustment for both of us."

Shane sets the mugs on the drying rack and forces himself to take a deep breath. "Sorry. It's just been a long couple weeks. I'm good. Ilya's good. If everyone leaves by nine, I'll be great."

The joke deflects and she smiles. "Good luck with that one, kid."

**

The party is a roaring success.

The house fills with friends and family and teammates; there's food everywhere and the drinks flow. Loud music. Happy people. It's like a victory party after winning the cup except for the ratio of hockey players to non-hockey players.

And at the center of it all is Ilya.

Shane had planned to have a couple minutes with Ilya before everything kicked off. He had a little speech not memorized, but mapped out in his head. He loves Ilya. He's proud of Ilya. The time they've spent on the ice together has been the happiest time of Shane's life. Ilya is the only person Shane wants to spend the rest of his life with, come what may. It's all things Shane has said before, of course, but still. It's fine, though. There's always afterward.

Ilya is in his element and so obviously, genuinely happy that Shane's chest aches a little bit looking at him. He moves between groups with the same grace he does on the ice, accepting toasts and hugs and well wishes. He laughs at stories being told about him and jokes about his next career in modeling or F1 racing or figure skating or or or. Shane keeps to the wall and watches him, because Ilya is the reward for all the work. There is no one else Shane would do any of this for.

But the night keeps going and the party doesn't wind down. Shane drinks a third beer and almost immediately regrets it. He'd hoped for loosened up but he lands on exhausted and a little queasy. People keep coming up to him with compliments about the party, which is nice, and comments about how excited he must be to have Ilya all to himself, which is less nice. He *had* Ilya to himself, exactly where Shane wanted him, and Ilya doesn't want to be there any more.

Bood's wife, Cassie, who Shane knows and likes, says, "I can't lie, I'm a little jealous. I wouldn't mind having my man home with me."

"I'm not retiring, so it's not like that at all," Shane snaps. Cassie's eyes go wide and Shane's stomach churns with guilt.

"You're right, I didn't think--"

"No, Cassie, I'm sorry," Shane says. "I'm just really tired. I'm sorry."

Like a coward and an asshole, he doesn't wait for Cassie to respond and instead weaves through the crowd of people on the main floor to the basement door that leads down into their gym.

It is so fucking quiet that Shane could almost cry. He drops down onto one of the padded benches and slumps over, elbows braced on his knees and his head hanging. His head hurts in a band of pain that wraps around his skull and feels like someone's tightening a noose. He's so fucking tired.

He wants -- what does he want? He has no idea.

No, that's a lie. What he wants, he can't have. So what else is there?

He wants to crawl into bed with Ilya curled up along his back, chin tucked into Shane's shoulder and arm draped over his waist. He wants Ilya's hands rubbing slow circles on the muscles at the base of his head, messaging out the tension and anxiety that knots up there when Shane isn't paying attention. He wants a do over of the last game, where Ilya plays to the end and gets to leave the rink while the crowd roars. There goes one of the greats.

He can't have that last one, either.

Shane lifts his head and looks at himself in the mirror. "Don't ruin this for him," he says. "It's not about you."

Ten minutes later, he heads back up the stairs and into the fray and when Ilya makes his big speech, Shane's there to smile when Ilya says that it was all for his husband.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

new season, new shane. he's totally fine.

this is where the explicit rating comes in.

There's a grief to getting on the ice without Ilya.

His absence feels like constantly seeing a flicker on the edge of Shane's vision. He keeps glancing toward the place Ilya has been for the last six years; his stomach jolts every damn time when it's the rook instead. Bood pulls him aside after practice one day and says, "You gotta stop frowning at the kid, Cap, unless you want him to think you hate him and get a complex."

Shane doesn't hate the rook. The rook is a nice kid from Boston who sounds like he's apologizing for that whenever it comes up. He's good and Shane can see a *very* good player beneath the nerves and inexperience. He has two moms. He's staying with Troy and Harris while he acclimates to a new city and the sudden incredible freedom that comes with being an adult.

He's so goddamn young. He looks like he's twelve. Shane says this to Wiebe during a meeting and Wiebe laughs. "You know what they say. We keep getting older and the rooks stay the same age."

Shane doesn't know how to explain to this kid that he doesn't resent him being there, he resents, a very little bit, Ilya *not* being there. There is a deep down part of Shane that learned early he had to be the best to be given a chance at all. And that part of him says quitting before you have to is giving up.

**

There's a weird knot in Shane's stomach the week leading up to their home opener.

He can't figure out why. The preseason games went fine -- good, really. There are always growing pains when the roster changes, but that's normal. After a decade and a half, Shane's used to that. The rough edges that pop up are talked about and dealt with, practiced until the wrinkles smooth out into cohesion. He trusts his team and they trust him.

And the knot still sits in his stomach and the more he tries to shake it, the more tense he feels.

**

Ilya watches Shane get ready to head to the arena sitting on the end of their bed.

His hair is damp from the shower and he's only wearing an old pair of gray sweatpants. Something about his scrutiny makes Shane itchy, which is stupid. It's been years since Shane got real nerves before a game, even if it's a home opener. His job as captain is to be the calm one. And it's *Ilya*, for God's sake, his Ilya, who loves Shane and understands Shane and knows all of Shane's secrets and idiosyncrasies and fears.

Shane changes his shirt twice. His jacket feels like it's sitting oddly on his shoulders no matter how much he shifts around. He's at the same weight he was at the end of last season, so it's probably in his head and that's annoying.

He drops his watch lifting it out of the case and snaps, "Fuck me, come on."

"Hey, sweetheart. Hey." Ilya picks the watch up and slides it onto Shane's wrist, fastens it, and lifts Shane's hand to his mouth to kiss his knuckles. "Why are you worried, huh? What is in your head?"

Shane exhales hard and drops his face into the curve of Ilya's shoulder. He smells good, like the expensive, woodsy shampoo he likes because it reminds him of the cottage. Ilya wraps one arm around his waist and cups the back of Shane's head with the other.

Some of the tension bleeds away, but beneath that is something else. A weird longing? It's a cousin to how he felt every time he had to walk out of Ilya's place in Ottawa to drive back to Montreal. That hour of distance sometimes felt a thousand miles further than Boston ever did.

"It's just weird without you," Shane mumbles. "Dumb, right?"

"No, I think it is normal. Is very sad for all of Ottawa that I will not be there." Shane snorts and Ilya kisses his temple. "And I will *be* there, yes? I will sit with the WAGs and tell them gossip secrets about you. Make little Korea finger hearts at the cameras for you. And you know what else?"

A more genuine laugh dislodges from Shane's chest. "What?"

"When the game is over, I will bring you home and fuck you until you forget your name." Ilya nips at Shane's earlobe. "You like this plan?"

**

In the locker room, Shane's phone lights up with notifications. A selfie of Ilya and several other partners he captions *wags are now whags, i am so honored to be a member*. A video of Ilya laughing at his face on the lookalike Jumbotron next to his own photo. A post from the Cens' official social media accounts of Ilya grinning over his shoulder at the *Hollander* on his jersey.

Shane keeps turning to show his screen to Ilya until he annoys himself and silences his phone. He doesn't see Ilya *good luck, moy lyubimyy, i love you <3* text until after the game.

**

Ilya's on him before the front door closes.

And God but it feels good to have Ilya's hands tangled in his hair and Ilya's tongue down his throat as they stumble toward the stairs. Shane palms Ilya's dick through his jeans and swallows the moan and this, *this* could be the night after any win — fuck, this could be the night after a loss, it doesn't matter. This part always makes sense.

Up the stairs and they both lose their jackets and shoes. At the top, Ilya grabs Shane's ass with both hands and sucks on the pulse in Shane's neck; Shane shoves a thigh between Ilya's legs and claws at the button of his pants.

"You're so fucking hot, Hollander," Ilya groans. "You were so fucking hot tonight."

"Prove it," Shane says. "Show me. You promised."

Ilya propels them through the open door of their bedroom and pushes Shane down onto the bed. He shoves his jeans and underwear off and kicks them aside. His dick is hard and heavy between his legs and Shane's hips hump up from how deep-down bad he wants it.

Ilya undoes Shane's pants and pulls them off, then lunges up onto the bed to range overtop Shane. He's still got his Hollander jersey on and yeah, they've fucked like this before, wearing each other's names, but the change of context does something for Shane he doesn't expect. An entire arena *saw* Ilya wearing Shane's name and number.

Ilya kisses him again, rough and sloppy, and he shoves one hand down to squeeze Shane's dick. Pleasure sparks up Shane's spine and comes out as a noise so raw it sounds wounded. He shoves his hands up the back of Ilya's jersey and digs his nails into the solid muscle of Ilya's back.

"You going to claw me up, Hollander?" Ilya asks. "Tell me how you want me. You want my mouth? You want my cock?"

Shane wants every part of Ilya all the time in every way, but he brings his legs up and locks his ankles in the small of Ilya's back. "Inside me," he pants. "I want you inside me, fuck, Ilya, *fuck me*."

Ilya growls something in Russian that Shane's too worked up to catch and pulls away only long enough to grab lube from his bedside table. Shane whines at the temporary loss of contact. There's wetness pooled on his stomach from his dripping dick. Ilya settles back between Shane's spread thighs and drizzles lube on his first two fingers and works them both in.

"Fuck, fuck," Shane chants, arching up off the bed from the terrible, wonderful stretch of it, the sting and the fullness of Ilya's blunt, talented fingers.

"So perfect for me," Ilya says with a tinge of wonder that's never gone away. "My husband. Mine."

Ilya curls his fingers and Shane almost fucking comes. "*Fuck me*, oh my god—"

Ilya drags the head of his dick along Shane's ass, then pushes in and Shane's not quite ready but god he loves the too-much burn and he arches into it, digging his nails into Ilya's shoulders. When he bottoms out, Shane shudders so hard that Ilya pitches forward and plants one arm on either side of Shane's chest. He kisses Shane's jaw and throat and collarbone as he rocks his hips in shallow, coaxing thrusts.

The beauty of having been together as long as they have is that Ilya can tell when Shane is ready and so doesn't have to ask, he just braces a hand on the headboard and starts fucking.

The rhythm they find is hard and driving; neither of them is gentle after a game, adrenaline and competition close at hand. Shane bucks his hips back to meet Ilya's because the impact of their bodies reverberates back up Shane's spine and makes it even better. He loves feeling Ilya's balls slap against his ass and the wet sound of it. Ilya panting as he looks down at Shane, hunger and wonder in equal measure.

The pressure coiled in Shane's hips starts to spiral up and he moves to wrap a hand around his dick, but Ilya says, "No, let me, let me," and his big palm finds Shane's dick and that's it, that's the game.

**

By truly unfortunate coincidence, the first road trip of the year ends in Boston.

Shane tells Ilya (and the team and Hayden and Wiebe and his parents and Rose) that he's not dreading it. He has no particular grievance with Boston as a physical location, other than the traffic. Yes, of course, they are a particularly tough hometown crowd to deal with. 17,000 Boston fans are both louder than 17,000 normal fans and have significantly more creative insults. And yes, they do still hate Shane specifically. They went from hating him under the broad Montreal brush to hating him for stealing Ilya away to fucking Canada without any sort of pause between the two.

But God, he is wildly unprepared for how much more it sucks without Ilya.

The plan lands in shitty, dreary weather, beneath a heavy gray sky that pisses rain for hours. There's a mixup at the hotel, so the team ends up herded into an unoccupied conference room for forty-five minutes while it's dealt with. Everyone's a little tired as they get back into the rhythm of the season, crossing time zones, sharing hotel rooms, living out of suitcases.

Shane knows he should be the person getting the team to gather up and focus. There's a speech he's given a dozen times about how there's just one more game and going home riding the high of win is the best way to go home, but he's not a good enough liar to give it with conviction in the mood he's in. He knows he has to figure out this funk sooner rather than later -- he's already seen Wiebe watching him with a considering expression -- but it's not gonna happen for Boston.

Before the game, he's pulled to talk to the media, which he never loves but isn't hard after the amount of practice he's done. He slaps on a smile. Tells himself this isn't hard.

The first question is, "So, how does it feel to be in Boston without Ilya Rozanov?"

Shane says, "The whole team misses him, of course, but we're seeing great things out of our newer players and we feel good about our chances."

The second question is, "How has the adjustment been for you, Shane, getting back out on the ice without your husband?"

Shane says, "I played without him for a long time and I think it went pretty well. Roster changes are part of the game."

The third question is, "Have you gotten any tips from Rozanov about how to handle the Boston crowd?"

Shane says, "Do any of you have a single fucking question about anyone that actively plays for the Centaurs?"

He regrets it as soon as he says it and is deeply, pathetically relieved when the team PR person jumps in and shoos him away. Shane returns to a quiet locker room that is conspicuously respectful of his personal space. Wiebe pulls him aside and asks frankly, "Do I need to be worried about you, Hollander?"

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm tired," Shane says.

"Okay. I believe you." Wiebe studies him for a moment and Shane feels like a kid caught out in a lie. "But think about what you really mean when you say tired."

Shane doesn't know what to do with that.

**

Shane: *Every nice thing I ever said about Boston was a lie*

Ilya: *you mean you lied when you said i had your favorite dick in the whole world*

Shane: *One, that doesn't sound like something I ever said. Two, that was about you, not Boston*

Shane: *I miss you.*

Ilya: *i miss you too. your parents do not miss you because i am at their house and i am their favorite son*

Ilya: *score so many goals you give all the boston fans aneurysms and hurry back to me*.

Shanes smiles down at his phone and feels a little better. And then they lose the fucking game.

**

Ilya picks Shane up from the airport, takes him home, and takes him to bed.

Shane should insist that he needs to shower off the plane (and the game and the whole season) and he needs to unpack and he needs to start laundry, because he feels fundamentally grimy and who wants to fuck that?

But Ilya strips off his shirt and pushes him down on the bed, yanks his jeans down and tosses them aside. He says, "Let me take care of you," in a voice that isn't asking for Shane's permission so much as his cooperation. Shane's been stuck in his own head for four days, banging around the cage of bone like a panicked animal trying to break loose.

Ilya's hands on his thighs are warm and feel good and Shane hasn't earned this, but he wants it. So he lets Ilya push his knees up to his chest and when Ilya's tongue laves against his hole, Shane whimpers for how fucking good it feels. Being in his body has felt like a fist-fight for weeks but in bed with Ilya is where things fall back into place. Ilys eats him out like there's nowhere else on earth he'd rather be. When he groans, the vibration of it zings up Shane's nerves into his spine and back down into his dick.

Shane fists his hands in the blankets and sheets and completely unmakes the bed. His dick leaves drooled trails over his stomach and somehow it's still an afterthought compared against Ilya's mouth. Shane has no idea how long Ilya spends with his head between Shane's thighs and his tongue lighting up Shane's nerves. She doesn't realize how close he is to coming until he's on the edge of that cliff and falling over without warning, shooting up his stomach and chest so hard his vision goes blurry at the edges.

Ilya crawls up the bed to kneel between Shane's spread legs and looks down at him. He has hectic patches of red on his cheeks and his eyes are deep and dark and Shane says, "I love you, I love you so much," and Ilya bends to kiss him hard. His mouth tastes like salt and musk and it's disgusting, right, it's so gross and Shane would give up the rest of his life without hesitation to keep that taste.

Ilya asks, "Can I?" in his own wrecked groan and Shane nods and reaches down to grab at his hips and pull them in. Ilya says something in Russian and ten seconds later the blunt head of his dick is against Shane's hole and he pushes in and it's an easy slide for them to slot together the way they're meant to be.

Ilya told Shane once that a lot of people don't like getting fucked after they've come because they're too sensitive and it's too much and Shane doesn't doubt his honesty, but he doesn't understand that at all. The technicolor burst of pleasure that overrides all other sensory input is the *point* for Shane. His thoughts are scoured from the eternally too-fast ticking of his brain and he forgets the things he's supposed to be because the thing he's most supposed to be is a home for Ilya.

Ilya fucks him hard with a hand around Shane's dick and when Shane comes for the second time, Ilya buries himself in as deep as he can and comes, too.

Afterward, Ilya puts Shane in the shower and remakes the bed, and when Shane crawls beneath clean sheets and curls up with his head on Ilya's chest, Shane doesn't know how to say thank you. It feels too big in his chest, the way Ilya knows him and sees him and loves and takes care of him. Shane knows that he's a lot of work and Ilya chooses to do it.

So he kisses Ilya's temple and says, "I needed that."

Ilya laughs. "Yes, I know. Sleep now. I love you."

Shane sleeps.

**

It takes time, but Shane finds an equilibrium that allows him to be adequate. Which is less than what the team deserves and not personally good enough for Shane, but it wins games and quiets the worst of the questions. Shane tells himself it doesn't matter if the Man in the Crease wonders if the Centaurs would be better off in the long term getting another center on the team ASAP. Wins are wins.

And if the road trips don't get better, the home games do, and that's something, right? Shane settles into the groove of a new routine where Ilya drives him to the arena and watches the game from the same seat in the stands that Shane can glance to now and then when he needs the anchor. The drive home is almost the same as before, Ilya behind the wheel with a hand on Shane's thigh. It's nice.

Over dinner with Shane's parents one night in mid-November, Yuna says, "By the way, Ilya, the youth programs gala people want to know if you're bringing a plus one."

Shane knows, obviously, that Ilya has been spending some of his free time getting more deeply involved in the day to day of the Foundation. Part of Shane has deeply enjoyed watching Ilya handle the full force of Yuna Hollander deciding that it was time for Ilya to really put his effort into contributing. Ilya's mentioned the gala offhand a couple times as one of those 'rich people getting together in a room to congratulate themselves before cutting a check' things.

Ilya rolls his eyes. "I think they just want to charge us for another ticket. Shameful."

Yuna laughs. "I'll tell them no."

Shane's stomach does something funny. "Am I not invited?"

"No, of course I would bring only you," Ilya says. "But you have game, so cannot."

There is no world in which Shane Hollander would miss a game for something as trivial as attending an event that he isn't directly involved in. That's not who he is. So it makes sense that Ilya wouldn't ask him first, because the answer is a given. Shane picks hockey every time. Acid still bubbles in this pit of his stomach as Ilya and Yuna's conversation moves on.

Shane suddenly wants to be anywhere else but his parents' dining room table, so he stands and gathers up his plate and Ilya's plate and heads toward the kitchen. He scrapes the remaining food into the garbage can. Sets the plates in the sink and turns on the water as hot as it will go. Stands there with fingers digging into the counter's edge.

"It's one game," he says out loud. His voice is a grinding sound.

"Shane?"

He flinches at his dad's voice, the softness and concern in it, and snatches up a sponge from the little wire basket stuck to the side of the sink. "I'm fine, I just thought I'd get started on dishes so you and Mom don't have to."

"That's very thoughtful," David says.

"You cooked, it's the least I can do," Shane says. "I've got it, you can go hang out with Mom and Ilya."

David Hollander doesn't do that, of course. Because Shane is his mother's child in almost every way, but that just means that his dad has always seen the truth of Shane, even when Shane himself could not. He comes up to stand beside Shane and turns off the steaming sink water. He takes the sponge and puts it away. He puts his hands on Shane's shoulders and gently turns him so they're standing face to face.

"I'll be at the game," he says. "I know it's not the same, but it's something."

Shane doesn't burst into tears or anything so dramatic as that. But he does collapse a little into his dad's arms and lets himself be rocked for just a couple minutes, like he's six years old again and his biggest problem is that he doesn't know how to make friends with the other boys on his team.

And two weeks later he is there, sitting where Ilya usually does, in his own Hollander jersey. The Centaur's social media person makes a point of taking a short video introducing the man, the myth, the father of Shane Hollander who met his wife when she saw him play and decided that was the man she wanted and who says he has enjoyed every single minute of time he's spent watching his son become of the best to ever do it.

That night, after the game and the gala, all four of them end up at Ilya and Shane's place with an open bottle of wine and a cobbled together plate of cold cuts and cheese. Ilya, in his suit pants and unbuttoned shirt, leans into Shane's side and murmurs, "It's so fucking boring when I cannot sneak you into a bathroom, moy pomidor. Checking highlights on my phone is not enough."

Shane laughs and kisses him and feels -- something. Better.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

the only way out is through

Chapter Notes

thanks for reading, y'all <3 happy new year

During their last game before Christmas, Shane ends up in the middle of a pileup behind the Tampa goal and feels a visceral *pop* in his groin.

He limps through the rest of the second period, but Wiebe pulls him for the third. The team doctor looks him over and diagnoses a pulled muscle and says no skating at least through the end of the year. Shane's pissed enough that he actually argues against the rest, which he never does and clearly surprises the doctor, too. "What's worse, a week or two out now or a fully torn muscle and the rest of the season?"

Shane's not in the mood for good advice, but he bites his tongue and stiffly agrees. Ice, Advil, rest. The only small saving grace is that it's a home game, so at least he doesn't have to wade through the mire of pre-Christmas travel back to Ottawa. No one asks him to do any post-game press, which is also annoying for some reason he can't really articulate. He's the captain. He can manage a couple soundbites even if he's a little sore.

(A voice in the very back of his head says he doesn't actually like doing press, so why on earth would he be upset to be excused from it for one game? Wiebe is just as capable of saying he's got a minor injury and should only be out for a couple games, just be on the safe side. What does it matter?)

(Tomorrow there's going to be a fresh round of headlines speculating on what the fuck is up with Shane Hollander this season and the same answer will be implied in every one of them. He just can't hack it on his own. He lost his edge playing with Ilya and can't seem to get it back. Maybe it's time for *him* to start asking hard questions about the last note he wants on his career. His legacy is assured, but legacies can be tarnished.)

(Shane's starting to wonder the same thing and he hates it.)

Ilya finds him in the locker room after most of the rest of the team has left, eager to get a jump on the short break they get for Christmas.

"How are you feeling?" Ilya asks, his tone quiet.

Shane throws the last few things in his bag and zips it up. "How do you think?" His tone is harsh in his own ears and his stomach churns. He has never before in his life struggled so much to be polite as he has in the first two months of this season and he doesn't like it. He also doesn't know what to do about it. He forces himself to take a breath. "Sorry. I'm sore. It's uncomfortable."

"Is okay," Ilya says, but his face is smoothed in deliberate neutrality. "Home."

He slings Shane's bag over his shoulder before Shane himself can grab it and anger flares in Shane's chest again. He can carry his own damn dufflebag, he doesn't need Ilya doing it for him. But Ilya's already heading toward the door and the last thing Shane wants is to snap over something small and have it become a story that gets passed around the entire facility when they're probably already talking about how lackluster his tenure as captain is shaping up to be. So he swallows the annoyance and follows Ilya out of the arena to their car and climbs into the passenger seat without wincing.

They don't talk on the drive home. The radio's going over the night's highlights from across the league, but when the Centaurs come up Ilya flicks it over to some local easy listening rock station that plays music that neither of them like, but don't actively hate. Shane leans against the door with his forehead against the cold window glass, watching Ottawa blur past in streaks of Christmas lights and dirty snow.

When they get home, Ilya gets his bag out of the trunk and carries it inside while Shane negotiates his way out of the front seat and onto his feet. The painkillers he got from the team doc were just over the counter Advil, but they're starting to wear off and Shane is starting to stiffen up. It's not terrible now, but he knows from experience that he's going to be hobbling in the morning.

There is a little relief in being inside the house. Shane toes off his shoes and kicks them sort of into place on the tray where they leave shoes in winter to catch melting snow caked in the treads. He also manages to step onto a blob of ice in his socked feet, which is so viscerally unpleasant he mutters, "Fuck," under his breath, which makes Ilya turn back toward him. Shane waves him off. "I'm fine."

He leans down to peel off the sock and limps toward the stairs. "I'm going to shower," he calls.

Ilya's sprawled on the couch with the remote in his hand. "Let me help?" He starts to stand.

"I don't need your help," Shane snaps and the harshness of the words echo unpleasantly.

Ilya goes still and it's only then that Shane catches the little tease in his words, changing the tenor of the offer from practical to suggestive. He picks the remote back up and turns the TV on. "Fine, knock yourself out. Yell if you fall on your ass." The words are clipped. He's angry.

His anger makes Shane more angry. It's stupid.

Shane throws himself into the shower in their ensuite and tries to scrub off the game as fast as he can. He crawls into bed and pretends to be asleep when Ilya finally comes up. Ilya pulls the blankets further up over Shane and bends down to kiss his temple and guilt clogs up Shane's chest so thick he almost cries. He doesn't know what's fucking wrong with him.

**

Shanes wakes up late the next morning and finds a glass of water and Advil waiting on his bedside table. He takes the pills and chugs the rest of the water and slowly crawls out of bed and makes his way down to the main floor.

Ilya's on the couch again, sprawled out in a pair of sweats and one of Shane's old team Canada hoodies. His hair is still rumpled from sleep. He looks so good that Shane's chest seizes up for a second and he has to duck into the kitchen to set the glass in the sink and take a couple deep breaths. There's a plate on the counter with bacon and a bagel because Ilya is a better person than Shane. He eats it all and feels better for it.

Shane shuffles out of the kitchen and into the living room and hesitates a little. Ilya pats the couch next to him and says nothing, so Shane doesn't have to speak before he drops down and curls up into Ilya's side. Ilya's arm drapes over his shoulders and Shane closes his eyes.

At some point, Shane murmurs, "Sorry about last night," and Ilya hums a noise of acknowledgement and kisses the top of his head. They don't do anything for the rest of the day, then spend Christmas with Shane's parents and it's good. It's all good. Shane is fine.

**

Shane's benched for the last game of the year because of his fucking groin and he knows he's being an asshole about it to -- to everyone, really. To the team and Wiebe and Harris, to Hayden and Rose who do nothing more than text to ask how he's doing, to Ilya.

He's not trying to be an asshole and he doesn't want to treat people the way he is and the problem is he feels completely helpless to *stop*. He has excuses -- he's in pain, he's tired, it's been a rough season -- but Shane's pretty sure those are a result of him being a dick, not the cause.

At what point does Shane being in a rough patch become Shane is a shittier person than he thought he was?

His brain snags on the thought as the last days of the year die and repeats and repeats and repeats. Because Shane knows, okay? He's spent his entire life being battered by the disconnect between how his mind wants things and how the world actually works. He knows that there is some small but fundamental misalignment between himself and the universe and he's worked really, really fucking hard to override that part of his stupid lizard brain.

And Ilya's the person who Shane talks to about this stuff. Ilya is the one who puts a hand on the back of his neck to cut through the noise, who talks Shane down from the ledge, who takes what Shane can't make sense of and reorganizes it so he can. But they don't talk much during those short days. And why *would* Ilya want to talk to him?

Maybe it isn't fine.

**

Ilya doesn't plan a party for the new year so much as he makes casual offers to come over and ring it in to several people who all say yes and so Shane spends the last day of the year picking up food and drinks for a dozen people.

It's not what he would have chosen to do, if asked, but Ilya's at home doing the actual cooking and Shane likes every single person that's coming over and sometimes adulthood means weaving through throngs of people with a case of beer in one hand and cider in the other. Ilya doesn't ask Shane for that much, in the grand scheme of things. It's fine.

Still, he forgets to grab ginger ale for himself and doesn't realize there's none at the house until he gets home. He could go back out to get more, but Ilya's still in the kitchen and the rest of the house needs to be at least straightened up and Shane will live. He dusts and vacuums and finds the plastic cups and paper plates. He eats bites of still hot food that Ilya offers him, tastes none of it, and says he likes everything.

Ilya's excitement is obvious and Shane appreciates it, of course he does. Ilya has mentioned once or twice that sometimes it's a little lonely when Shane isn't there and he's got hours to fill. Maybe Shane hasn't taken that as seriously as he should have? There's a layer of guilt in the thought that just lands as frustration in Shane's chest. There was a really easy way Ilya could have avoided being bored, but he decided he didn't want it.

Shane ducks into the bathroom and splashes water on his face. He's tired of that thought clawing its way into his brain. It's mean and not something Ilya at all deserves. Shane stares at his face in the mirror, the dark circles beneath his eyes and the tight muscle in his jaw, and shudders. Is that really him? Is he really so greedy?

"Fuck." Shane shoves a hand through his hair. He's just tired.

He hears Wiebe in his head, telling Shane to think about what he really means when he says he's tired. Shane didn't have an answer then and he doesn't have an answer now, so he turns off the tap and dries his face and ducks out of the bathroom just as the first people start to arrive.

**

Shane keeps it together.

He greets people at the door and invites them in, takes coats to lay in one of the spare bedrooms, points people toward the food, finds a corkscrew for the wine. He ignores a headache and tells people it's good to see them, he's glad they could make it. Someone turns on the TV and doesn't turn off the music and even though the competing noise throbs in his head, Shane lets it go because it's not that serious. These people are his teammates and friends, Shane reminds himself. They've been putting up with his bullshit for months.

Ilya keeps trying to catch his eye and Shane avoids him, because Ilya absolutely will not be fooled and Shane doesn't want to fuck up his good time. It's one night, right? Shane can do anything for one night.

So Shane doesn't stop moving because he understands that the easiest way to keep going is to stay in motion and he's always done better when he has something to do with his hands. He accepts the plate of food Harris puts in his hand and picks absently at it. People keep shifting over to make room for him on the couch and he begs them off, he just needs to check on one thing and one more thing and ignore the way Ilya's eyes are tracking him from across the room.

Then it's thirty seconds to midnight, then ten, and then none. People cheer and kiss and Shane exhales hard. He's not sad to see the end of the year. Which doesn't necessarily mean he's excited for the new one. It's different, at least.

And then someone -- Shane doesn't even actually see who, which he finds a little funny in retrospect -- jokes that they should all go hit up a club like they used to do when it was just Ilya back in the day, before Ilya got all domestic and still liked to have fun. They laugh and Ilya laughs and Shane's throat clogs up with his own memories of that time, of being so close to Ilya and still so fucking far apart, scraping every moment they could to be together and it was never enough, not even close. But maybe that was just Shane. Maybe Ilya was actually having fun.

And suddenly Shane can't -- he just can't. So, he cuts through the living room and goes up the stairs and into their room and slams the fucking door so hard it vibrates in the frame.

**

Shane is sitting on the end of the bed, staring into space when Ilya opens the bedroom door. He's not sure how much time has passed, but the rest of the house is quiet behind Ilya, so.

Ilya crosses the room to stand in front of Shane and kneels down. He says, "Please tell me what is wrong. I am so worried about you, Shane."

"Everything's fine. I'm fine. Why do you think something's wrong?" Shane does not sound fine, even in his own ears, and he flinches.

It feels like the worst parts of being twenty-two again, defensive and afraid of his own thoughts, wanting Ilya so fucking bad it felt like he was being eaten alive by his own mind. He'd so desperately wanted to not care as easily as Ilya did, but he's not built like that. He knows now it wasn't that easy for Ilya either, but god, Shane had hated him sometimes. Tried to hate him. That wasn't easy either.

Ilya looks up at him and his gaze steady. With a gun to his head, Shane couldn't describe it to someone else, but it's the 'I know you and you can't hide from me' face. "Something has been banging around in your head for a while. I thought if I give you space, you would come to talk to me about it. But it has been two months, maybe, and you don't say anything so I am asking."

Shane looks down. "It's stupid and unfair and my bullshit, okay?"

Ilya cocks his head. "Your bullshit is my bullshit, Shane."

This is the hardest part of marriage, for Shane. Wanting to tell Ilya everything and wanting to shield him from everything at the same time. They've been married for six fucking years and Shane still sometimes chokes on the fear that Ilya's going to wake up and realize Shane's not worth the struggle.

"I'm not mad at you," Shane says quietly.

"Then tell me what you are. Don't run from me. Please."

Ilya holds out a hand. Shane takes it.

**

"There's this voice in my head saying that I did something. I made you not want to play any more. I made you not want to play with *me* any more. And all I'm good at is hockey. I don't have anything else to offer. How long will it take for you to realize there are so many other people out there that are easier than me?'

"And you promised you would be there and you are, I know you are, but you're also not and that makes every practice, every game a little bit worse than it was before. You're not even on the other team, you're just not there. I miss you, but it's different than just missing you. It feels *wrong*.

And if you're not there, should I be there? I'm not ready to be done but maybe that means I'm kidding myself and you're stuck with someone too stupid to admit the game's over."

**

"In Russia, when I was young, I did not think about life after hockey. I think I did not believe I would live to see it? When I could not keep playing, I would stop existing. When you happened to me, I even less wanted to think about it because hockey was the only way I saw you and it was the reason you looked at me. This I could not bear to lose.'

"After concussion -- my concussion -- I did not tell you because I did not want you to worry, but I talked to the doctor about how each time my head is rattled, there is a greater chance I will not get better. I already have sad times and that makes a bigger risk I will end up sad and angry every day. Maybe with dementia, also.'

"I ask myself what I want for me, for you, for us. I do not want only dark days forever. I think I will be a little sad to lose hockey, but I would be so much sadder to lose my future with you. The choice was very easy. I did not tell you because I did not want you to feel guilty, but that was a mistake."

**

An hour later they're both stretched out along the length of the bed, Ilya on his back and Shane's head on his chest. He can hear the thump of Ilya's heart beneath his ear and there's a kind of calm in the steadiness of it. Ilya's brushing his nose against the crown of Shane's head and playing with his hair.

Shane stumbled and tripped his way through all of it, everything that's slowly accumulated since the night at the cottage when Ilya told him he was done. It surprises Shane every time how much weight things lose when he dislodges them from his thoughts and says them out loud.

Shane feels lighter, if not precisely better.

"None of it is something I really believe," he says. "I'd rather you choose to walk away on your terms than have you blow out your knee and be forced out."

"Thank you, I appreciate that. Is very comforting that you do not secretly dream of me falling apart into pieces." Ilya smacks a kiss to Shane's forehead.

"I have better uses for your knees."

Ilya laughs and the sound rumbles in Shane's ear. It's harder to believe his worst fears when he's bulwarked by the reality of Ilya's body. Comfort is one of the rewards of marriage Shane doesn't always feel like he's earned, even when Ilya so badly wants to provide it.

"I think it makes sense, a little bit," Ilya says eventually. "To feel like you are abandoned. You are not so good when things change, moy lyubimyy. I know this about you. I love this about you. If I am honest back, it's also not always so easy for me."

"Yeah?"

Ilya shrugs. "For a long time my whole world is hockey and you and both I have to work so hard to keep. There was always something I wanted to do. I wanted to win cup in Boston. I wanted to fuck you. I wanted to be near you. I wanted to make Ottawa into a great team. I wanted to stop hiding. I wanted to win one hundred cups with you to tell Boston and Montreal to go fuck themselves.'

"There is still you, now. But I do not know what to do with where hockey used to be. Yes, sometimes it is nice to do nothing. But sometimes there are all these hours that are empty and I think maybe the best time of my life is done. I am lucky that my good times were so good. But I will never for the rest of my life be so happy again..”

Shane sees the underlying logic, but hesitates for a moment. Ilya’s dark days aren’t most of his days, but they are a reoccurring pattern in the rhythm of his life. With time, Shane has gotten less afraid of those lows, even accepted that there’s not a way to fix it. What Ilya needs and struggles to ask for is just Shane’s presence.

“You’re afraid of ending up like your mom?” Shane asks.

Ilya sighs. “My life is very different from her life. But, you know. Maybe.”

”It’s a possibility.”

”Da.”

The softness of the single syllable could break Shane’s heart.

He shifts over onto his stomach, so he can see Ilya’s face and reaches up to cup Ilya’s jaw in his hand. “If that does happen, you won’t be alone. You know that, right?”

Ilya’s mouth crooks in half a smile. “In my head I know. Not always in my heart.”

Shane kisses him. “That’s okay. I’m not going to stop telling you it’s true.”

“I love you,” Ilya says. “And you know that I did not retire to get away from you, right?”

Shane flinches. “I. Yeah. I know that. In my head.”

“And you know that even if I am not on ice I am still with you, yes?”

Shane’s eyes are prickling. “I know. I just. I miss it. I miss you.”

”Of course you miss it. We were the best together. We were — what is it? Magic in bottle?”

“Lightning in a bottle.”

“Da, that.” Ilya pushes Shane’s hair off his face and pats his cheek. “I think your brain whispers that if you play alone then you are going back to before and you will only see me every few months. All the things we have done are undone. You are back where you started.”

Shane thinks: *this is why it had to be you and no one else.*

”I got everything I ever wanted, Ilya,” Shane says. “There’s supposed to be a catch. That’s how it works.”

”Fuck that, Shane. Fuck that. You fought for every single inch of your life. Only catch is that it cannot be the same forever, but maybe that isn't a catch. Maybe there will be even better things that come. You did not steal your life, moy lyubimyy. There is nothing to punish.”

Shane opens his mouth to say something and all that comes out is a little gasp of a sob. He pushes his face into Ilya’s neck and Ilya does the same. They always find each other, in the end.

Chapter 5: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

please enjoy this mood playlist my wife made <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's been a hard fought road to tonight for the Ottawa Centaurs. They started the year with a major roster shakeup with Ilya Rozanov's retirement and a lackluster first half of the season for the whole team, but especially Captain Shane Hollander, had fans wondering if they were going to make it to the playoffs at all. Luckily for Ottawa, the new year brought new energy and a return to form for the Centaurs. They've turned a wildcard playoff spot into a truly impressive run for the cup and tonight's game six in Ottawa versus San Francisco--"

Shane's phone beeps as he's pulling on his jersey and the rest of the locker room breaks into hooting and laughter.

"Tell Rozy we don't miss him at all!"

"Rozy? Oh, right, I forgot all about that guy--"

"Do you think he knows how far up he married? A two cup winner snagging a four cup winner? Wild--"

Shane flips them all off to another round of laughter as he unlocks his phone for the last time before they hit the ice. It's a selfie from Ilya of himself and Shane's parents, half of Hayden's face, all of Jacki and the twins, and a bunch of other partners and kids and parents all trying to scrunch in as close as possible.

Ilya: *good luck! tell the team only winners get laid! i love you in english and russian and every language!*

Shane: *The vows say for better or worse, asshole.*

Ilya: *yes, for better or worse as in you better win, i want to be smug whag all summer.*

Shane: *I'll do my best. :P i love you, too.*

Shane stows his phone away and turns to the rest of the locker room and the thrumming energy and barely leashed excitement. The rook -- Josh, his name is Josh and the team has christened him Boston Josh, which Shane mostly remembers to call him -- is listening intently to Bood's description of their first cup win, Troy is kissing Harris for good luck,

Wyatt and Haas are doing a handshake thing Wyatt slowly bullied Haas into enjoying over the course of the playoffs.

Shane's not one for speeches. He's never felt good at them. But the cup is in the arena tonight and the Centaurs are here at all and Shane's got the C on his jersey.

"Okay, listen up!" he says, loud enough to cut over the din. Everyone turns to him, hungry and ready. "We know what we need to do tonight and we're ready to do it." Ilya would tell him that he loves them all and Shane knows he doesn't have to be Ilya, but. "I love you. We've got this. Let's go."

The team whoops and that energy carries them down the tunnel and onto the ice, surrounded by an adoring crowd of hometown fans. It never gets old, this feeling of cold air in his lungs, his skates slicing through fresh ice. He spots Ilya in the crowd and when Ilya blows him a kiss, Shane blows one back, because Ilya made a promise to keep showing up and he has, in so many ways.

The game itself is a blur. The Centaurs are good, but so is San Francisco and it's one of those magical games where everyone is at their best and it neither slows down nor gets ugly. Shane scores, Boston Josh scores twice, San Francisco meets them goal for goal and they're tied in the last couple minutes of the third period. The crowd is screaming and the sound almost vibrates in Shane's chest.

Wyatt blocks a shot and then Shane has the puck and he has a moment where everything goes so still and he thinks, *we win*. And then he makes the shot and he scores and 90 seconds later the Centaurs are MLH season winners and the team converges on Shane, raucous with madcap joy. Not bad for the worst season start of Shane Hollander's career.

Shane hoists the cup -- and that never gets old either -- and passes it off to Boston Josh, who is so bug eyed with shock Shane almost laughs at him.

And then, *finally*, friends and family start spilling onto the ice and Ilya's hands are cupped around Shane's jaw pulling him into a kiss. And it's different from last time, absolutely. Ilya kissed him before the blare of the final bell finished, hoisted the cup and passed it off to Shane. But God, it's so much better than either of Shane's Montreal cups, texting Lily and trying to ignore the ache in his chest. It's so fucking good.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," Ilya says. "That was the hottest fucking thing you've ever done. Fuck. How soon can I take you home?"

Shane laughs. "I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

and that's all, folks! i have a sequel of sorts kicking around, so with any luck that'll make an appearance.

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