**something you can fix**

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# something you can fix

by some1_around

Summary

Maybe if the video ended there, Shane thought, it would be okay. Okayish. Still incriminating. Still a fucking disaster. Still embarrassing, to have his breakup with this beautiful actress filmed and disseminated on Reddit of all fucking places, but not a nail in his coffin, burying him alive. But the video didn't end there.

*"Can I ask if you've ever been with another guy?" she had to ask.*

*And he, tears visible in his eyes, had to nod.*

*Just once. Just a single nod.*

Why did he have to nod?

*"Have you ever told anyone that before?" He shook his head. "Was it different? With a guy?"*

*"Of course."*

Of course.

*"Was it better?"*

*"Yes."*

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Shane's conversation with Rose is secretly recorded. Months later, after the All-Star game and Ilya's confession in Russian, the video gets leaked online. Shane is outed to the world while Ilya is in Russia, and must now finish the 2016-2017 season with the entire world in on his secret.

Notes

I have an endless well of love for the Shane-Rose conversation. I think it's so important. I think it's probably objectively one of the best scenes in the show, and easily the most important turning point for Shane's character. I love it endlessly, and I love that it isn't a moment of pain in canon, just pure acceptance and understanding. But I was so deeply in the mood to write some angst, and I wanted to write this concept! I really wanted to get this up

before ep6 (this was supposed to be 15 thousand words max btw) but actual Christmas got in the way of my Cottage Eve, lol. I'm sorry for any mistakes, this took forever to edit, and I'm worried I missed some stuff, but I can't fucking look at it any longer lol.
Hope you enjoy!

(I got a ton of information and inspiration in this from circ_bamboo's hockey guide here https://archiveofourown.org/works/75618931 ! Thank you so much to them, check it out for a great guide/cool ideas for hockey-inspired stories, though i'm sure i made plenty of mistakes and unrealistic decisions anyway (like for instance how the conference finals work oops can't change it now!))

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 【授权翻译】余温尚可补 by Shiny_Park

Shane stared at his phone. It lay flat on the coffee table before him, the screen facing up. Its base was neatly aligned with the edge of the glass tabletop, perfectly perpendicular. Perfectly straight.

*"You're so cute. Have I told you how cute you are?"*

*"No. I mean, maybe."*

*"Well, you are."*

Shane flinched when the screen lit up. Just an email. He didn't read the subject line or the address. It hung, suspended for a moment on top of dozens, maybe hundreds, of other messages, then the screen went dark. Almost immediately, another notification came in, this time a news alert, tagged with his name. His lock screen was a picture of the cottage lake on a serene day at dawn. Or, Shane was pretty sure it was dawn, but it might have been dusk. He couldn't remember, and he couldn't see the sun in the photo.

*"Miles is extremely jealous."*

*"Of me?"*

*"No, of me."*

*A long pause. "Oh.* Oh. *Oh."*

Before the screen could go dark again, a call came in, buzzing loudly although his ringtone was off. His mom's name lit up the screen. Shane stared at her profile image. It was a picture of her on the day of his draft, almost ten years ago. He should probably update it. He let the call ring out. He got another email, and did not read it either. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and the world seemed blurrier than usual.

*"Did you… not notice that Miles is gay?"*

*"Uh, I guess I hadn't really thought about it."*

*"Well, he is. And he's low key in love with you."*

*Another pause. "Oh."*

*"Does it surprise you that Miles is gay?"*

*"No, I mean, of course not. No."*

*"Well, a lot of actors are, they're just not all out." He nodded along but didn't say anything in response. She continued speaking in the silence. "Are there any… like, gay, hockey players? I mean, yes, obviously there are, but are there any openly gay players?"*

His phone screen went dark. It lit up with a text. Shane made out Hayden's name, but he didn't look at the preview. Then, almost immediately, another text from Hayden. And another. Then, enough time for the screen to dim, and then a fourth.

*"Yeah, uh, no. I mean, yeah, there are probably gay players or whatever, but none that have said it… publicly." He laughed. It sounded awkward. Off-kilter.*

*"Huh." She sounded sad.*

*"What?"*

*She sighed. "Sorry, I don't think I'm going about this the right way. Um…"*

*"Going about what?" His voice was tremulous. There was another long pause. In the video, the camera flashed up just long enough to show her reaching across the table and taking his hand.*

Yuna called again. Shane wasn't counting, but it must have been her twelfth call at least. He should really pick up. She was probably worried. He should also respond to Hayden and check his email for anything urgent. By the time the call went to voicemail, the buzzing had shaken the phone enough that it was no longer perfectly aligned with the table. Shane used the tips of his fingers to nudge it back into place.

*"I really like you, Shane."*

*"I like you, too."*

*"But I have a feeling that… maybe I'm not…* doing *it for you?"*

*More shaky laughter. "Yes, you are."*

*"I know you like talking to me-"*

*"Yeah."*

*"But do you like kissing me?"*

*"Sure." The camera, aimed at the floor and shaking slightly, again flashed up just in time to show him put his hand over his face, covering his eyes. Something was obscuring the lens, a semi-transparent partition of some kind, between the camera and its subjects.*

Shane's Twitter and Instagram notifications had been off for a very long time, which was a small blessing. He really didn't want to know how many tags, DMs, or messages he was receiving. The news alerts were bad enough. He would probably have to turn those off soon. He should probably just do it now.

*"Wow," she murmured, laughing.*

*"No, no, no," he said, stumbling over his hasty denials. "Of course, I do. Sorry." At least he sounded sorry, and looked it. He dropped his hand, and his face was visible in profile for a*

*second, dejected and uncomfortable, before the camera swung back to show the floor and the toes of a pair of nondescript black shoes.*

Hayden called. Shane wondered whether he should pick up. They had a game the next day, didn't they? He should probably pick up. No one else on the team had called yet, although they might have texted him. His coach had called, and for the first time in his career, Shane had intentionally not answered.

He had sat right there, staring at his phone. Letting the call go the voicemail.

*"No, hey, don't apologize." She sounded so sweet, so endearing. So earnest. What had he done to deserve that from her? "I just… I have a feeling, and-and maybe I'm completely off-base here, but I don't know, I feel like maybe you would rather be kissing… Miles?"*

Shane closed his eyes and shuddered.

The television across from him was playing, muted. He had it tuned to one of those channels that played constant programming about sports even when there were no games or interviews to broadcast, and he was waiting. Maybe he would have better luck if he tried TMZ or something on that level, but even now, Shane couldn't bring himself to watch that.

*The camera rose again, moving behind the wooden partition to show his face as he shuddered and pushed back in his chair, breath hitching across the static humming beneath the poor audio. He was glancing about quickly, nervously, but obviously not in the right direction because he never noticed the camera pointed at his blank face and red eyes.*

*Her hand flexed on his wrist as she leaned forward. "Hey, hey, it's—it's really okay."*

*"'S not," he said, and his voice almost cracked. Humiliating. Another pause. The pathetic attempt, not convincing, which followed: "I do like you, I really do. I like talking with you, I like being with you. I like all of it." She didn't respond. She was focused on him and didn't seem to notice the camera either. "I know the-" the audio blurred as he dropped into a whisper "-problem, but-"*

*"It's not a problem," she insisted, gentle. "A problem is something you can fix."*

Jackie called. She had already called Shane once that night. He wondered why they kept calling, and what they thought switching phones was going to accomplish. He had no intention of taking any of their calls. Jackie's profile picture showed herself at Jade and Ruby's second birthday, wearing a party hat and laughing authentically at the camera. Hayden had taken the photo, Shane was pretty sure.

Her call slid away, showing the fuzzy gray screen that meant she was leaving a voicemail. Shane waited for the picture of his cottage to return, the dock, the trees, the peaceful water, and then waited for his screen to go dark. Another text came in before he could, and it was just a string of numbers without a contact name.

*"We're more like a square peg and a round hole. Ew." She put her face in her hands, shaking her head. The heavy breathing of whoever was filming them was distractingly loud. "No. I'm*

*sorry, forget I said that. Um." A sigh. "We're just… we're not meant to fit. And it's really, really fine. I just don't think that we can keep trying."*

*He didn't respond right away. He nodded, slightly, eyes dull as they roamed listlessly over the wall behind her. His voice came out strained and teary. "I get it. I—I just, uh… I think, um." He was fighting tears. In the atmospheric yellow glow of the restaurant, it was clear that his eyes were damp. "I think, uh."*

*"Hey, you don't owe me any explanation."*

*"I feel like I kinda do."*

*"You really don't."*

And maybe if it had ended there, Shane thought, it would be okay. Okayish. Still incriminating. Still a fucking disaster. Still embarrassing, to have his breakup with this beautiful actress filmed and disseminated on Reddit of all fucking places, with the disclaimer "I did not film this and this is not my video," as if it fucking mattered—but not a nail in his coffin, burying him alive.

But the video didn't end there.

*"Can I ask if you've ever been with another guy?" she had to ask.*

*And he, tears so visible and bright in his eyes, had to nod.*

*Just once. Just a single nod.*

Why did he have to nod?

*"Have you ever told anyone that before?" He shook his head. "Was it different? With a guy?"*

*"Of course."*

Of course.

*"Was it better?"*

*"Yeah, it was, uh… Um. It was better." Wiping away tears. "The thing is, I-"*

The video cut abruptly.

Shane wondered if the rest of their conversation was out there, if it was already online, maybe even on the same Reddit page. Maybe someone was texting him about it right now, and he just didn't know it yet. He doubted that whoever had filmed them had actually decided to stop right there and go about their day. It wasn't like he or Rose had caught them, or had any idea that they were being filmed at all.

Unless Rose set him up, of course. But Shane knew she hadn't.

Yuna called. David called. Hayden called. His coach called.

Texts, emails, news alerts from trashy websites he didn't recognize. How long did stuff like this take to make it onto the important channels? He still hadn't seen it on his television. They were still discussing the San Francisco player scripted for the previous All-Star game, because he had just announced his fifth child with a fourth woman. That guy would probably be pretty grateful to Shane, actually, in the morning, when he realized people weren't talking about him anymore. But it also didn't matter if people talked about *him,* not really.

It mattered to Shane, though.

He glanced at his phone as it buzzed.

> **WAG Amelie Miitka (Sorren Miitka)**
>
> Hi Shane, just wanted to reach out and offer our unwavering support. People are pretty concerned and I don't think anyone has been able to get in touch with you? It doesn't have to be us, but please let some…

The preview ended. Shane stared at his screen as two more almost identical texts popped up from other WAGs.

He thought, yet again, about hitting the power button until his phone shut down. Or picking it up and throwing it out the window. He was in Montreal, in his apartment. The phone would never survive a fall from his floor, not even in its sturdy, practical case. He could shove it down his garbage disposal and turn it on until his sink spat fragments of glass and plastic across his counter. He imagined the noise it would make.

Shane wondered where the WAGs were getting their news. Probably Twitter. That was where Shane had seen it.

Well, first he had gotten an email from his management company.

> *Hi Shane,*
>
> *We would like to get in touch regarding the recent rumors circulating online, preferably in a face-to-face meeting, and see how you would like us to handle this situation.*

All Shane had needed to do was open Twitter and check his mentions. There had been… a lot of them. Shane was a celebrity, and he was used to people talking about him online, and he was, in fact, pretty accustomed to his fans and detractors alike screaming into the void of the internet, never really believing he would see the sometimes deranged things they wrote. But there had been way more mentions than usual, so it hadn't taken him long to find the video. *One* of the videos. It had already been re-uploaded dozens of times when Shane found it, halfway through making a post-workout smoothie in his kitchen.

The yogurt and milk were still sitting out on his counter. He would probably have to throw them away. Shane wasn't sure how long he had been sitting here, staring at his phone.

The video he had watched had been uploaded twenty minutes before he found it, and had two hundred thousand views. *"From reddit r/roselandry, someone posted this video of her boyfriend Shane Hollander, NHL player, coming out??? With captions."*

So he watched the video, with captions, leaning against his counter in workout clothes slowly cooling against his skin, damp with sweat, milk spoiling next to his elbow. He had watched it at least four times, then closed Twitter, stumbled to his couch, and sat down.

They had a game tomorrow, didn't they? He should probably respond to his coach.

His phone buzzed. Incoming call from:

**Rose Landry**

Shane reached down and hit accept.

"Oh my god, *Shane,"* she cried, and he hung up.

His hands trembled so badly that he could barely raise them to his face as he sucked in a heaving breath. She called him back immediately, and he hung up, twice, and then she didn't call again.

Shane shook. His legs, feet planted firmly on the ground for an hour or more, curled up instinctually to his chest, and he wrapped his arms around his calves and pulled himself in tighter, trying to make himself as small as possible as he pressed his face against his knees hard enough to hurt. He wanted it to bruise. He dug his nails into his skin, and his fingers felt like ice cubes.

He should shower. Shane hated not showering after exercising, and usually, he wouldn't have even thought about sitting on his couch until he had thoroughly rinsed off. He smelled bad, and he was probably ruining the cushions. He should replace them. The sofa would need to be reupholstered.

He should also claw out his eyes. He should take a shower. He should call his coach back, delete Twitter, and check his emails for anything urgent. They had a game tomorrow. He had to get ready.

Someone knocked on his door. He flinched. He tried to bury himself in the corner of his couch.

"Shane? Shane, buddy? I need you to open up. I'm fucking so—I'm so sorry, but I need you to open up."

"Shane. It's Jackie and Hayden, okay? Just us. We need to check on you, make sure you're alright?"

The door seemed oceans away. Shane didn't want to get up. He didn't want to move. He wished the ground would open up beneath him, and he could fall through fifteen floors of his apartment building and hit the ground beneath.

“Okay. Okay.” Murmurs. Maybe the door was, in fact, in the ocean, and Shane was beneath the waves, because everything sounded like it was echoing, dull and distorted, through water. “Shane, I’m sorry, bud, but I’m using my key, okay? We’re coming in.”

He didn’t hear the door open, but he heard it slam shut, and he heard two frantic sets of overlapping footsteps running down the hallway, rounding the corner.

“Oh my god, Shane,” Jackie murmured, and he shuddered. “Here, here.” She pulled a blanket off the back of his couch (it was mostly decorative, but at least it was soft) and started wrapping it around him, hands touching him all over, fluttering, as she tucked it beneath his thighs and over his feet and around his shoulders, binding his arms to his chest. Shane kept his eyes covered. “Jesus, Shane, you’re freezing,” Jackie said, and her voice was trembling. She sounded as if she had been crying. “Hayden, will you turn up-”

“Yup, got it.” Hayden’s footsteps were loud. Shane wanted to tell him to walk more softly, lest he disturb his neighbors. Then he remembered that he had bought all the adjacent units, and they were all empty. Hollow. “Okay. Okay.”

“Shane,” Jackie said slowly. “Can you hear me?”

He didn’t want to respond. He didn’t think there were any words left in his chest. He couldn’t make himself nod.

“This is important,” Jackie said. “Can you hear me?”

She reached for his face. Shane flinched at the first touch of her fingers, but he didn’t pull away. She did not drag his hands away from his face, but rather set her fingers on top of his. She felt warm—or, he realized, he really was freezing.

“Shane, we love you,” she murmured. “We love you. It’s going to be okay. We are so, so sorry, but this doesn’t change anything, okay?”

“Yeah, buddy,” Hayden said. His voice sounded shaky and tight as well, anxious or uncomfortable, but Shane couldn’t tell. He sat next to Shane on the couch. Shane shied away, shifting until he had wedged himself against the armrest, but Hayden put his arm around his shoulders and pulled him against him. Strong arms wrapped around him and pulled him down, now wrapped in his decorative but soft blanket, against a chest. Shane didn’t resist. Another set of arms, Jackie’s, encircled him from behind. Her soft hands pulled his face into the crook of her neck. “Buddy.” Hayden’s voice broke. “It’s okay. We love you. It’s okay.”

Shane sobbed out the first real breath he had taken in hours.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Hayden said, wrapping his long arms around Shane and Jackie both, “It’s okay, bud, it’s fucking fine, okay? You’re fine, you’re good, you’re gonna be good. I promise. We’ve got you. Your parents are on their way, okay? They’ll be here soon, and-”

“No,” Shane said quickly, gasping through his sobs. “No, no, no. I can’t—I don’t want to see them. No. No fucking way.”

Hayden looked stricken. Jackie responded quickly. “Okay, okay, Shane, I’m sure they’ll understand. They can stay at our house, okay, how about that? They just want to be nearby, in case you need them, but they can stay with us.”

He cried in their arms, clutching them, until he ran out of tears. They never let go. A part of him, still capable of conscious thought, was surprised by that.

Eventually, he pushed out of their grasp, feeling suffocated and hot, feeling gross from the sweat sticking to his skin. He needed a fucking shower, but now that they were here, he realized he didn’t want to be alone.

Which was… surprising.

His phone had never gone silent, but it began to buzz persistently anew. Shane glanced at it in horror and again fantasized about throwing it out the window, or down the garbage disposal, or into the shower. Maybe, if he brought it into the shower, he could crouch in the corner with his back pressed up against the tiles and watch his phone slowly die in the drain, drowning, until the screen went dark forever.

The buzzing continued, text after text, layered and overlapping with the occasional chime of a different notification, but consistent, like a steady drumbeat.

“Can I…?” Hayden asked hesitantly. “I’ll just—maybe I’ll turn it off, okay? Would that be better?”

“No,” Shane said. “I can’t—we can’t—there’s a game tomorrow. I have to be available.”

Jackie and Hayden shared a look. “Can I check for you, then?” Hayden asked, and Shane wanted to point out that his phone was right there, the previews visible and flooding in, and he could have just looked.

But he didn’t care, it turned out. Shane jerked his head, not quite a nod so much as a spasm, and a whine tore out of his throat when he tried to say the word, “Sure.”

“Okay, it’s okay,” Hayden said, patting his arm as he leaned away. “It’s just—oh.”

“What?” Jackie asked quietly. “If it’s—don’t say if it’s-”

“It’s Lily,” Hayden said, lingering on the simple, two-syllable name. “That makes sense, I guess.”

Shane sobbed again, pressing his hands back against his eyes. “Oh, fuck,” he cried, like he hadn’t been staring at his phone for two hours, waiting for exactly one person to call him, not brave enough to call first.

(Had it really only been a day since they had talked? Less than that? Shane had been in a different city, crouched in the cold stairwell of a mediocre hotel, this same phone pressed to his face as it served as a bridge between him and the man he—between him and *Ilya,* in a moment when Ilya needed him. It was impossible to conceive that this was the same phone. The same object. That it was his only connection to Ilya, and also ruining his life.)

“She’s,” Hayden said, then shook his head. “Whoa. Okay. That makes a lot of sense.”

“Hayden,” Jackie snapped.

“We were, we had all these theories, dude,” Hayden said. “I thought she was, like, *married,* dude, I was convinced-”

“Hayden!”

“But, no, okay. Okay.” He picked up Shane’s phone and pulled his hand away from his face. He pressed it, still buzzing with a continuous roll of messages, into his palm. “She—sorry, he, *whoa*—he wants you to call him. Shane. You should call him.”

The phone unlocked with the inadvertent press of his thumb, directing to the flood of messages piling in, and Shane stared with one eye at the screen.

**Lily**

Call me

Call me

Call me

Where are you?

Call me

Shane

Call me, please

Shane

Call me

Are you alone?

Call me

Call me

I won’t stop

Call me

Call me

Call me

Read! It says read!

Fucking call me Hollander

It says read

Call me

I'm calling you

Are you alone?

Can I call you

Fucking Shane

"I can't," he choked, eyes welling with fresh tears. He looked helplessly at Jackie and Hayden. "I can't—he—he isn't—he isn't *out, oh my god*-"

Jackie jumped up so abruptly that Shane wobbled and almost fell, but Hayden grabbed his shoulder, steadying him. She darted toward his counter, toward all the ingredients for his smoothie, still neatly lined up next to his blender in the specific order he always added them. Jackie picked up a cable of neatly corded earbuds and held them above her head victoriously, darting back to the couch. "Here," she said, slipping them into Shane's ears so, so gently while he watched her with watery eyes. "We'll clean up the kitchen, okay, Shane? We won't listen in." She took his wrist and steadied his phone as she plugged the earbuds in, then kissed his cheek. "Call him," she said.

Hayden squeezed his shoulder and stood.

Shane watched them walk away, watched the reassuring looks they shot at him, still curled into a ball on his ruined couch.

He hit call.

*"Hollander,"* Ilya gasped. *"Fuck."*

"Fuck," Shane agreed, thick wet tears spilling over his lash line and tumbling down his cheeks. "Fuck."

"I cannot," Ilya said, breathing heavily over the line. "I cannot—is seven in the morning in Moscow now, I did not see—fuck, *Shane."*

Shane wanted to say his name. He wanted to say it so bad, the way Ilya said his name. Shane forced his hand to his mouth and bit down hard on his thumb to stifle the urge. He pressed his forehead to his knees again, folding himself into a tight ball so he couldn't see anything, and all he could hear was Ilya's voice.

"Shane," Ilya said, halting and broken.

"I have a game tomorrow," Shane whined.

“Oh, fuck game!” Ilya yelled. “Fuck the game! Shane, where the fuck are you? Are you—are you-”

“My apartment,” he said. “Montreal.”

“You are—you are not alone?”

“No. No. Hayden and Jackie—they know, oh *god,* everyone *knows.”*

“Is okay, is okay,” Ilya rumbled. Shane could hear the heavy falls of his footsteps as he paced. “They are your friends, da? They are not assholes? They do not care.”

“No,” Shane murmured. “No. They don’t.”

He was still tucked into the hollow created by his knees, and his face finally started to warm up, pressed against the fabric of his blanket. He was sure he looked pathetic, but he also had no urge to move.

Ilya’s breath was heavy and intense over the line. Shane imagined that it was also warm. He wished he could feel it on his skin. “You are—safe?” he asked. “You are in safe place with safe people?”

Shane licked his lips. “Yeah,” he admitted, even though he was having a hard time convincing himself of that. But he knew it was true. “For now.”

“For now.” Ilya laughed hollowly. “Your team—we have not said, do you know if your team…? Any real problems, real assholes? Who have said real bad things, unsafe things?”

“I—I don’t know.” Of course, Shane was acutely aware of every gay joke that had ever been slung around in his presence, anywhere in his vicinity, whether it was directed at him or not, but the vast majority were outwardly playful, even sarcastic. Just in the seven years he had been playing for the NHL, those jokes had changed so much. They became almost self-aware, even when they didn’t disappear. But they were so normalized that it was hard to discern whether any of them held a kernel of truth. Or, rather, they all did, probably. All those jokes, every word, had a core, a casual heart of malice. Othering. Each joke was true, just a little, which made it impossible to tell who felt discomfort, who felt dislike, and who felt hatred. “I have no… no idea. Some of them….”

Yeah. Some of them. His coach, for one. *Ladies. Pansies. Fags,* just the once, Shane’s rookie season, and then someone on the PR team told him not to say it anymore. But Shane remembered. It hadn’t been the only time he heard it in the dressing room or on the ice, anyway, and most of the time, players weren’t reprimanded for it unless there was a camera on them.

“You do not go anywhere alone,” Ilya said, hard and clear. “You keep Pike with you, okay? Always. Anyone you trust. Do not be alone, Hollander, okay? He is not a good player, but he isn’t teeny, is strong enough. Okay?”

That made his heart beat faster. He curled in a little tighter. “Okay,” he agreed weakly.

“Good. Probably nothing, but you must be safe.”

“They’ll probably scratch me,” Shane admitted, voice breaking. “Or—or fucking trade me. I’ll be in fucking Ottawa by next week.”

“Your hometown,” Ilya said. “Close to your parents. Not so bad, no? They love you there.”

Shane wished he had denied it, and he wished Ilya hadn’t mentioned his parents.

Ilya probably heard the hitch in his voice. “Your parents….”

“I haven’t answered their calls,” Shane admitted, his throat squeezing shut again. He had never really stopped crying, and his head ached, and his eyes burned. “I don’t—I don’t want to.”

“It is a good sign that they are calling,” Ilya said quietly. “They would not call if they did not care. You know this.”

Shane glanced up, just a little. Hayden and Jackie were purposefully facing away from him. They had cleaned up the kitchen to Shane’s exacting standards, but if they had put the milk in the fridge, he might need to throw everything out and disinfect it. He was feeling neurotic enough for that at the moment, even though he hadn't succumbed to an urge like that in years. “Or,” he said, hiding his face and trying not to think about it, “they’re mad at me.”

“What, are they Republicans?” Ilya asked dubiously.

He huffed. “No. Obviously not. And in Canada, it’s just… Liberals and Conservatives.”

“Thank you for correcting me on such important matter, Hollander,” Ilya snarked. “So fucking important right now, wow. Glad to be educated. Fine, what did they think of gay marriage? Very exciting, da? Did they jump and tell you they love you no matter what? That would be good clue.”

“Gay marriage has been legal in Canada since two thousand and five,” Shane muttered, hoping Jackie and Hayden couldn’t overhear him. They knew, or he thought they knew, that ‘Lily’ was from Boston, but this conversation felt personal even outside of protecting Ilya’s identity. The flutter in his heart as Ilya swore at him and mocked him felt personal. It was for *him.* Him alone. No one else’s business. “And it was already legal in Quebec and Ontario before that. I was a kid, I don't really remember how they reacted.”

“Oh my god, Hollander, you make this impossible,” Ilya groaned. “I am fucking trying to comfort you, dumbass. Your parents, you would know this, do they hate gay people?”

“No,” Shane admitted, still chewing absently on the skin of his fingers. “But… with your own kids… it’s different. I’m a—I’m a hockey player. I’m an athlete.”

“Yes, yes, try to keep up,” Ilya drawled. “Whatever, so you surprise them. Honestly, Shane, you are not that subtle, people shouldn’t be so surprised.”

“Shut up,” he grumbled.

“No, no, I will not shut up. I think you need to hear me right now.”

Shane couldn’t help but admit, “Yeah. Yeah, that’s… true.” Again, it was a fight not to say the name he had only just earned the right to say a few weeks ago in Tampa, but he bit it back. He needed to protect Ilya now, and this was the only way he could do it. “I need you.”

“Fuck.”

“Hey, Shane?” He jolted a little and looked up, over his knees. Hayden and Jackie were still far away, clearly trying to give him privacy.

“Um, one second,” he murmured into his phone, and forced his body to uncurl. He felt as if he were made of marble, and it hurt to stretch his neck. “What’s—what’s up?”

Hayden was holding his own phone, messages open, and he gave it a hesitant little wave as if Shane could read it from across the room. “Don’t freak out, because you can always say no,” he said, “but Miitka and Boiziau are downstairs. Outside. They want to know if they can come up.” Shane stared at him. He could see Hayden’s throat work on a swallow. “We were all really worried about you, Shane. They just want to….”

“They want to show their support,” Jackie said, and Hayden nodded eagerly. “Because they *support you,* Shane. We’re all here for you. They want to know you’re okay.”

“What is it?” Ilya asked.

Shane blinked at Hayden and Jackie. Miitie and Boiziau were downstairs, waiting for his call. “Really?” he asked, voice cracking.

Hayden nodded fiercely. “Yes, yeah, of course. Shane, you’re our friend, of course.”

Except Shane had never really felt that close with anyone on the Voyageurs other than Hayden. He had never been good at making friends, period. He liked Miitie and Boiziau a lot, and he was definitely closer with them than anyone else on the team, but were they really friends?

*That isn’t fair,* a part of Shane’s mind, and it sounded a little like his mom when he was a kid, coaching him on the playground, trying to convince him to introduce himself to the other kids playing, while Shane fiddled nervously with the hem of his shirt. *If you insist on putting distance between yourself and others, then you cannot blame them for your lack of closeness. They might not even know it’s there. You’re the only one who can see it, because you’re the only one keeping secrets.*

But he didn’t really have secrets anymore.

Well. Ilya. But compared to the leak, that felt like nothing.

He jerked his head in a nod before he could overthink it, and saw both Hayden and Jackie’s shoulders relax. “Sure. Yes. Sure. They can come up.” He scrubbed at his face with the side of the blanket, then quickly stood. His legs almost gave out under his weight. He saw Hayden

jerk forward, as if he could catch him from across the room. He felt stiff and sore and numb, but Shane managed to stay on his feet. “I, uh, I need to wash my face.”

“Okay, okay, man. You alright?”

He nodded but couldn’t answer.

“What is it? What is happening?” Ilya asked insistently as the bathroom door shut behind Shane.

“JJ and Miitie,” Shane said. “They’re… here.”

Ilya sighed. He sounded relieved. “Good,” he said. “Good. I’m glad. Glad for you.”

That accounted for three of his teammates. More than twenty guys were signed to the Voyageurs. Maybe they had sent texts, lingering in Shane’s unchecked messages, so he couldn’t feel too sorry for himself yet, but even still… three was not nothing.

And Boiziau was an enforcer. Shane didn’t really want to need to think about that, but it was nice to know that he was on his side.

He didn’t take the earbuds out as he turned on the water and washed his face, attempting to rub away the evidence of his tears, although that was certainly impossible at this point. He tried to avoid his reflection and wished he had gone to his bedroom’s en suite instead, where he kept his skincare products. They would have felt soothing on his damaged skin. He was sure he looked pale, and his cheeks were probably raw, maybe even spotty, given that he had been pressing his palms to his face for hours, but what could they expect? Surely everyone knew that his world was ending.

“Do you want to stay on the phone?” Ilya asked softly.

Shane forced himself to meet his eyes in the mirror. “I want that,” he said quietly. “But I don’t know if I should. The other guys… they don’t even really know about Lily….”

“You tell them only what you want to,” Ilya said, just as Shane heard his front door open, “but you can tell them about that. If you want.”

Shane shut his eyes. “They’re here.”

“Then don’t be a weirdo, Hollander. Go greet them, say 'thank you, glad you are not homophobic asshole and welcome to my home.' You call me back if you need. It’s not hanging up forever.”

“Really?” Shane asked quietly. “You’ll be here? If I… call?”

“It is seven in the morning,” Ilya said. “I’ll be here all day.”

“And…” Shane cleared his throat. “And things with you, they’re alright? You’re safe?”

“I am safe,” Ilya soothed. “It’s not… great, of course, but no one in Russia cares about Shane Hollander. Except me. And I leave soon.”

“Soon,” Shane whispered. “I wish you were here.”

“I will be. Everything will be alright.”

His breath caught. “Will it?”

“Things will turn out all right,” Ilya said, “or we figure out a way to make it all right.”

Shane was close to tears again, but he tried to choke them back. “We?”

“Yes, fucking ‘we,’ Shane,” he said, insistent, and Shane could imagine him rolling his eyes. “Fucking of course, we are ‘we.’ Why are you so slow about this? Highest IQ in the league, no way, I can’t fucking believe they call you that.”

“You asshole,” Shane muttered. “I’m sort of—I’m sort of going through it, right now, if you couldn’t tell. I’m not exactly at the top of my game.”

“No, you are,” Ilya said. “Prime of your career. You won’t lose it over this.”

Shane nodded, trying to internalize the words even as everything felt like it was slipping away. “Okay. Okay.” He took a deep breath. “I have to go.”

“Call back whenever you want,” Ilya said. “Whenever.”

“I will,” Shane said, knowing how much he meant it. “Good—goodbye, Ilya,” he whispered.

“Bye.”

Ilya waited for Shane to hang up. Shane tucked his phone into his pocket—god, he was still wearing his gym clothes, he needed to fucking change—and carefully wound the wires of his earbuds and slipped them in beside his phone. He took a few steadying breaths, then forced himself out of the bathroom.

Miitka and Boiziau had joined Hayden and Jackie at the counter. Miitka had an almost stunned look on his face. Boiziau was practically vibrating with energy. He leapt out of his stool as soon as Shane appeared. “Capitaine!” he said. “Fucking hell, Capitaine! You know how to make headlines!”

“I didn’t try to make this one,” Shane forced out. He made himself walk to the counter. Hayden shoved a glass of water into his hand.

“Drink,” he ordered. “You’re dehydrated.”

He definitely was. The water felt smooth and cool against his throat. He stared at the granite counter, tracing the veins with his eyes.

“So,” Miitka said. “Can I ask? Is it true?”

Shane scrubbed a hand over his face. He took another sip of water. “Did you see the video?” he asked.

Miitka shifted. “Just parts, I think,” he said. “Mostly just what people were saying.”

“I watched it,” Boiziau said, sounding a little guilty. “Thought it was, what, a deepfake? I don’t know.”

Shane hated that they had seen it. He thought again of the moment the video had cut off, the sentence, the awful, humiliating confession that followed, and wondered if the full-length version had made it onto Twitter yet, but couldn’t bring himself to ask. What would he even say? *Have you seen the part where I tell my ex-girlfriend I prefer taking it up the ass while she is breaking up with me? Do you still respect me, despite that?* “It’s true,” he said. “It’s… I mean, the video is real.”

“Whoa,” Boiziau said. “Wow, man, I had no idea! I thought you were a terrible liar, actually, but you must not be so bad.”

“JJ,” Jackie said sharply. “Come on. Now is not the time.”

“Anything we can do to help,” Miitka said. He shifted on his stool awkwardly. “Uh, 'cause, my wife’s sister is a lesbian, you know, married and everything. So, you know.” He held up his fist. “Allies.”

Shane stared at him. “Great,” he said. “Thanks.” He finished the glass. Hayden took it from him and refilled it, this time adding a packet of Shane’s electrolytes, which was probably not a bad idea. “Thanks for being here,” Shane said. “This is… rough.”

“I can imagine,” Boiziau said loudly. Shane wondered if his nonchalance was an act or if it was genuine. Boiziau was always so loud and straightforward, sometimes it was hard to tell. “This is nuts! What has management said about it? The owners reach out yet?”

Jackie sighed. “JJ.”

“What? Just asking!”

“I don’t know,” Shane admitted. In his pocket, his phone was still buzzing intermittently, but not at the same frequency as earlier. At least, he didn’t think. He hadn’t exactly been in a clear headspace, though. He had barely noticed the progression of time but hours had passed. “I haven’t… checked my phone.”

“Your mom’s on it,” Hayden said quickly, and Shane glanced at him, wondering if all the blood had drained from his face. “I mean—I don’t even know how she found my number, dude, but she texted me when we were trying to find a sitter for the kids so we could come over.”

“Oh,” was all he could manage.

“Shane,” Jackie said carefully, “they’re driving to Montreal right now. They will probably be here soon.”

“Did they know?” Boiziau asked quickly.

For the third time, Jackie snapped, “JJ! Enough!”

“What?” he asked, raising his hands, eyes comically wide. “I am just asking.”

“No,” Shane said, staring at himself in the glass of water. He wanted to call Ilya again, suddenly, desperately, even though he had just hung up. “No, they didn’t.”

Boiziau whistled. “Oh, that is fucked up, man. Sorry about it.”

Jackie just sighed.

“It’s gonna be fine,” Hayden said. “Obviously, they don’t care, they’re just worried about you. They just want to help. Your mom is dealing with management and stuff, she told me to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“Seriously,” Hayden urged, “it’s totally fine. They are totally fine, dude. They love you, I mean, I don’t know anybody whose parents show up to as many games as they do!”

“This isn’t hockey, though.” Shane shielded his eyes from them, slouching lower to the counter, feeling panic stirring again in him. What had he said in the video? What were his exact words? *Was the full video out yet?* His phone buzzed, and Shane pulled it out of his pocket carelessly, overstimulated by the continuous ringing pressing against his skin by his tight athletic shorts, and dropped it on the counter.

**Rose Landry**

They all stared at her name until it disappeared.

“She probably feels pretty bad,” Jackie said quietly. “And she probably wants to know what your next move is going to be. Her team will probably want to make a statement as well.”

“As well,” Shane echoed dully. He stared at the black screen while his friends shuffled awkwardly around him, then turned it over. He wished he were still alone and could curl up on the couch without interruption. “Did you watch the video?” he asked Hayden, then flicked his eyes to Jackie.

They both paused. “We saw clips of it on Twitter,” Hayden answered. “Not the full thing. We wouldn’t watch the full thing.”

“Was that,” Jackie said hesitantly, “was that really… the first time you… came out, to someone? Oh, Shane.” She must have read the answer on his face immediately because she rounded the counter and wrapped him in another embrace. “I’m so sorry. That’s so unfair.”

“What are-” His voice cracked. He coughed and tried again. “What are people saying?”

“Nothing weird,” Boiziau answered as Hayden opened his mouth, speaking over him. “Expected stuff, I guess. Most people are surprised that you are gay because you don’t look that gay, other people are saying it is fake, other people are saying it is for publicity-”

“JJ,” Hayden sighed. “You are so, so not helping.”

“Yeah, dude,” Miitie muttered. “Just shut up, okay?”

“Most people are concerned,” Jackie said gently. “Anyone with a brain is aware that this is not a pleasant moment for you.”

“Well,” Shane said. His voice wavered so much that he cut himself off and fell silent. Jackie’s hug felt nice, though. He leaned into her and tried to ignore the instinctive desire that wished she were taller, broader, corded with muscles, and scented with expensive cologne. He closed his eyes.

For once, it wasn’t his phone that rang next. Hayden pulled away from the table, glanced at his phone, glanced at Shane, then accepted it. “You’re on speaker,” he said right away, setting the phone on the counter between them so that Shane could see his mother’s name spelled out across the screen.

“Hayden? Shane? Shane, are you there? Shane, baby?”

Shane put a hand over his mouth and closed his eyes.

Hayden answered, “Yes, Mrs. Hollander, we’re both here. It’s me, Jackie, Shane, JJ, and Miitie.”

“Oh.” The connection wasn’t very good. Shane could hear some kind of interference and white noise coming from the tinny speakers. “On behalf of Shane, then, thank you so much, all of you, for supporting him through this. As a…” her voice wavered. She soldiered on. “As a mom, it means the world to me to know that he’s not alone.”

That was embarrassing. Shane thought about squirreling into his room and curling up under his blankets (he’d ruin the bed sheets as well if he didn’t shower first, but it might be worth it, to have Ilya’s voice in his ears even a second sooner).

“Hayden, I think we’re about five minutes away—we’re parking right now.”

“Oh, god,” Shane murmured, slumping out of Jackie’s arms so that his elbows and forearms were pressed to the cool countertop. He wanted to lean his whole body on it, to press his heated face to the marble until he went numb again.

“Shane?” his mom asked urgently. “Shane, Shane? Is that you?”

Hayden reached over and nudged his shoulder.

“Hi,” Shane said. He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Oh my god, baby.” Yuna sounded like she had been crying. It didn’t make Shane feel any better. “Baby, we’re almost there, okay? We’ll be there soon. Everything is going to be alright.” Shane heard his dad’s voice, just a rumble, indistinguishable in the background. “That’s right, of course, that’s right. Shane, could you hear that? We love you very, very much. We love you so much, sweetheart.”

Shane gave up. He slumped onto the counter, pressing his cheek to the stone. “Okay.”

“Let’s go sit in the dining room,” Jackie murmured, ushering his teammates away. “Shane, we’ll be just over here, okay? Come on, go.”

“Shane?” Yuna said, voice trembling. He heard the sound of their car locking and the doors slamming shut, then the noise of a city night filtered in. “Can you hear me?”

He licked his lips, which were chapped despite the water he’d had and the recent warm weather thaw that had hit Montreal. “Yeah.”

“We’re almost at your door, then we’re coming up. We love you so much, you understand that, right? This doesn’t change anything. You’re our baby. You’ll always be our baby. And we’re so, so sorry that this happened.”

She must have kept talking after that, but maybe Shane zoned out again, because the next thing he knew, the phone call had ended and there were real, warm hands on his shoulders and arms, pulling him off the counter and into his dad’s chest. It was instinct, old and childlike, that made him tuck his face into the crook of his dad’s neck, and press in, and breathe.

“I’ve got you,” his dad murmured, cradling the back of his head and swaying like Shane was a baby. “I’ve got you.”

“Honey,” his mom said, and she had definitely been crying. Shane’s eyes were closed, but he thought she might still be crying. She was pressed shoulder to shoulder with his dad, hugging Shane from the side, trying to hold on. “Honey, it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay,” Shane sniffled, and he was pretty sure he’d said the same thing on the video. “It’s not. I’m so—I’m so stupid. I shouldn’t have—I should never have said that out, out in public. Out loud. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, hey, don’t say that,” Yuna said softly. Her fingers tangled with David’s at the base of his skull, tickling the short hairs on his neck. “Don’t say that about my baby.”

“We love you,” David hummed, still rocking him. “It’s gonna be okay. We love you.”

“‘M gonna get kicked off the team,” Shane murmured. “Traded to… Alaska, or something.”

“And then I will sue the NHL in a discrimination lawsuit that will take every last dime from their CEOs,” Yuna said confidently. “Shane, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. You’re the best player Montreal has. Everyone with eyes knows that.”

“We have a game tomorrow,” Shane’s voice hitched. “I’m gonna be scratched. They’re gonna bench me-”

“They’re not,” Yuna said firmly. “Theriault called me when he couldn’t get a hold of you. I told him that unless we gave further notice, you were playing tomorrow.” She pulled back a little and coaxed him to turn his head to the side, her concerned gaze landing on the side of his face. “Was that right? I thought… I wasn’t sure, but I know….”

Shane wasn’t sure what she was trying to say. She knew that hockey was important to him? That he would want to keep up appearances? That it would take his mind off things? Or did she earnestly, truly believe that his most pressing concern was getting the Voyageurs into the playoffs?

He nodded. “That’s right,” he said softly. Whatever the reason was, he did know that he *needed* to play tomorrow. He felt that if he didn’t, he might never play again. “I’m—I’m playing?”

“You’re playing, unless you decide otherwise,” she said. “It’s *your* decision, I promise. Okay?”

“Okay,” he whispered.

She guided them back to the couch. Shane could tell that David didn’t want to let go of him, but he wasn’t about to fucking sit in his dad’s lap, so he sat between them, their arms around his shoulders. He tried not to think about how he was getting hours old sweat on their shirts, probably ruining their clothes as well as the couch.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he whispered, staring at the coffee table.

“No, no, don’t be sorry,” Yuna said gently. “Shane… this should have happened on your own time. We understand that. And… we understand why you might have wanted to keep this a secret. Given your career and given… me.”

He glanced at her, brows lowered.

“I’m your manager,” she said softly. Her eyes looked a lot like his, he knew, in shape and color, and the way they became big and glossy when she teared up. “I’ve talked a lot about your image, and your status as a role model, and your visibility. All of that. More than I should have, I know that now.”

“Mom-”

“It’s okay,” she said, cupping his cheek and shaking her head with a tight, unhappy smile. “It’s really okay. We’re okay, Shane, alright?” She pressed their foreheads together. “I love every inch of you. I always have.”

“Every inch,” David repeated.

His phone buzzed. Shane closed his eyes, then reluctantly pulled away from his parents’ grasp to fish it from his pocket. He set it on the table in front of him, a mirror of his position

earlier, only he wasn't alone anymore. "There's going to be so many messages," he murmured, eyeing the email before it disappeared. "So many calls—fuck, I wasn't picking up Theriault's calls. He's going to crucify me."

"He'll understand, won't he?" David asked, but Shane wasn't sure.

"I'll handle your emails," Yuna said. "I've already started. We're going to see what legal action we can take against the people who uploaded that video-"

"Mom-"

"And I'm hiring someone to look into who filmed it in the first place—*yes,* sweetie, I am, because this is important. Your privacy is important."

"Mom."

"Your brands aren't going to want to pull out, not right away, so you don't have to worry about that at all yet," she said sternly, slipping into business mode. Something about it was strangely relieving. Maybe just the reminder that someone else actually would, and could, take care of all this for him. Or some of it, at least. "And you don't have to make a statement about it—not ever if you don't want to, and certainly not before the game. Let your actions speak for themselves. Okay? I'll draft up some options we can go through later, but none of that has to happen tonight. Nothing else has to happen tonight."

Shane felt a little more of the tension leave his shoulders.

He looked at his phone.

"I, uh." He cleared his throat. "Something does. Something has to happen. I need, uh, I have to…"

"Whatever you need," David said, soft and steady, sure.

"Sit with me?" he asked, and they agreed.

He pulled up his contacts and bent forward over his knees before hitting the call button. It was answered almost immediately.

"Rose," he said.

"Shane." Her voice was thick, throaty. She had obviously been crying, and maybe for a very long time. "Oh my god, Shane."

"Rose," he repeated, leaning forward until his forehead touched the table. His mom's fingers landed light and cool on the back of his neck. "Hi, Rose."

She laughed, high and unhappy. "Hi, Shane."

Their conversation wasn't long, and afterward, in the weeks to come, it would fade from Shane's memory like the hours he had sat in panic would fade, even though he wasn't

panicking while he spoke to her. He kept his forehead on the coffee table, chin between his knees, his mother's gentle fingers on the back of his neck, and his teammates milling about quietly in his kitchen.

They said what they needed to say, though. He knew that. Apologies. Assurances. Forgiveness, so much as it was warranted.

He hung up, so exhausted he thought he might keel over right there, ending up a slumped mass on his carpet.

"Let's get you in the shower," his dad said quietly, hauling him up.

Shane waved a hand at his teammates as he stumbled past them up the stairs. "There's—three guest bedrooms," he said, vision bleary. The adrenaline leaving his system made him feel catatonic. "Other apartments… figure it out. Stay, if you want," he said. "Night."

His dad guided him into the bathroom and stayed until Shane reassured him that he could rinse off by himself, and then went to find him sleep clothes.

Shane showered off what felt like years' worth of stress. It didn't leave him, but the sticky veneer of sweat that made it hard for him to think or move finally washed down the drain, leaving him clean and shivering.

His dad helped him get dressed. Shane was so tired he didn't even object.

David brushed his hair away from his forehead. "You don't have to play tomorrow, Shane. No one would blame you. Take a sick day."

"I want to play," Shane mumbled, crawling under his blankets, phone still clutched in his hand. "I can still play."

"I know you can, buddy," his dad said, kissing his brow. "Get some sleep."

He closed the door. Shane pulled his duvet over his head. He choked on a sob and pressed the smooth, flat screen of his phone to his lips.

It was weird to think about how many people were in his apartment. His parents. Hayden and Jackie. Rose, over the phone, if he needed her. JJ and Miitie, awkward and uncomfortable, but here, showing up despite that.

It was nice. He knew it was nice, logically. He knew he wasn't alone.

But he wanted to be alone more than anything. Alone with just one person.

Shane stared at the black phone screen for a long time. No new messages came in, and it was just his reflection, dark but clear.

Finally, he sighed. He swiped up and opened Ilya's contact. He hit call.

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Shane did something he had never done before in his life.

He skipped morning practice and arrived late for the pre-game call time.

The locker room dripped with heavy silence when Shane walked in, tunnel-vision focused on his cubby, already dressed and just needing to put on his gear. He could tell that Hayden was sticking close to him, posturing, but other than that, Shane wasn't aware of any of it.

They were playing Winnipeg. Their team had had a mediocre season so far, but tonight, Shane intended to win.

He sat down on the bench to lace his skates, eyes locked onto each familiar twist and turn of his fingers through the loops, and he didn't look up until the door slammed open. Even then, he managed not to startle.

Theriault, who had coached the Voyageurs for as long as Shane had been playing for them, slammed into the locker room with a sickened snarl twisting his sunburned face. He started shouting as soon as he was through the door. "Listen up!" he hollered, face already red, as if everyone in the room hadn't been waiting for his arrival, and instantly frozen when he appeared. "I don't want *any. Fucking. Distractions."* He leveled a glare around the room, but he ended it on Shane, his dark eyes staring him down across the locker room while everyone else stared with held breaths. "We're here to play a fucking game tonight!" Theriault barked, still completely focused on Shane. Shane met his eyes without blinking, without standing, without moving at all. He held his breath and remembered Ilya whispering, *"Things turn out all right."*

"Yes, Coach!" someone said, a beat too late, their voice alone.

"We're here to play a fucking game," Theriault repeated. "And we better fucking win. Hollander, if you see a fucking camera, I want you covering your face and ducking away with your tail between your legs. You don't fucking talk to *anyone* until you talk to *us.* Got it?"

"Yes, Coach," Shane said without raising his voice, intonation smooth.

"And you *never,"* he pointed his finger, which had a long white scar down it from where a skate had once cut him, nearly bisecting it, "fucking dodge my calls before a game again, or skip practice, or you're not fucking captain anymore. Understood?"

"Yes, Coach."

He slammed the door as he left. Shane bent over and resumed lacing up his skates, fingers steady, mind faraway.

No one said anything. Not JJ, or Miitie, or even Hayden.

Hayden did, though, put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze.

They got dressed.

Shane stood up. He felt distant from himself. He felt almost half-blind, like he was looking at the world through gauze. He was never very good at energetic speeches that could rile up his teammates or ignite a passion in them. His approach focused more on personal advice, detailed suggestions, and individual attention. He was still a good captain. Today, he put on his helmet as they all watched him and said, “We’re winning this one,” and left the room.

He took Theriault's instructions and studiously shouldered past every camera and microphone thrust in his face. Stepping onto the ice was like emerging from a darkened tunnel into sunlight. There was something metaphorically powerful about the ice beneath his skates—the sudden weightlessness of it. The knowledge that with the slightest push, he would fly.

People were already in the stands, but Shane couldn’t hear them. He saw some people standing and cheering. He saw others with their hands cupped around their mouths. All he could hear was the roaring rush of blood in his ears.

He made it through warm-ups deafened, vision tightening, head rushing. If any of his teammates said anything to him, he didn’t hear them. He was hardly aware of Hayden, hovering, concern written clearly across his face, or even his own face, already projected above their heads on the Jumbotron.

Shane hadn’t really expected anything else. Probably, most people had assumed he would be benched for this game. Players who had big scandals blow up in the middle of the season usually were.

But was this a scandal? That was probably the exact question the NHL was trying to figure out right now.

And it wasn’t Shane’s fucking business what they decided, not until they told him to get off the fucking ice and never return.

Until then, he could do this. This was maybe the only thing he could do.

The first face-off. Winnipeg’s center was a big dude Shane had met a million times over the years but barely knew anything about. He was fast and ruthless, a strong player but not a very calculated one, and as they bent down into position, legs splayed and skates angled, ready to take off at the drop of the puck, Shane grit his teeth, waiting for the inevitable chirping.

The Winnipeg center coughed. “That was fucked up,” he said, a little lamely, mouth pursed like he knew it. Shane blinked. Those were the first clear words that had reached him since the locker room, and, for a brief moment, they were drowned out by the dull roar of the crowd (was it bigger than usual? Maybe he didn't want to know). “Hope you’re—hope you’re doing well.”

Shane glanced at him. He was still expecting a twist. “Thanks,” he said, returning his eyes to the ice.

“Yup,” the guy said, and coughed again.

The puck dropped. Shane won the face-off.

Shane had dissociated during games before. It had started a long time ago, even before the WJC, during games when he felt more stress. Back then, it usually had something to do with things outside the sport—stress over examinations or who he was taking to prom, or the college placement tests his mom made him sit for just in case, whenever his real life stress compiled with the pressure he felt on the ice. In the past few years, it mostly happened during extremely important games. Playoff games, or games that would make the difference between a wildcard spot in the playoffs or the end of his season. It only happened to him a handful of times over six seasons on the ice, and Shane had learned methods for pushing away that strange, focused fogginess he sometimes felt creeping up his shoulders and neck. He did not allow himself to make a habit of it, because the results fluctuated. Sometimes, when he lost focus so thoroughly, it made him sloppy. He would lose sight of the puck, or his honed instincts would dull a little, make his turns wider and slower, offset his aim, or take away his usual ability to see five steps ahead.

Sometimes, though, Shane's conscious mind checked out, and all that remained was hockey. The game. The stick, the puck, the net—in that order. His body, and years and years of doing nothing else.

That night, Shane did not play like he had something to prove because he couldn't even think that far in advance.

He played like he was one of the best players in the league, because he was.

A franchise player. A generational talent. Shane fucking Hollander. Hockey was not as popular in America as it was in Canada, but if any person in the US was capable of naming two current hockey players, his name would be one.

He knew that.

He let himself forget, though, and he just played the game.

*"Hollander is on fire tonight."*

*"We were all wondering what we could expect from the Voyageurs' Captain."*

*"Yes, this certainly could have gone quite differently for Montreal."*

*"I think I'm seeing some tension on the ice, and certainly on the bench, but it's not coming from Hollander's corner, that's for sure. I mean, look at that goal, that's a thing of beauty right there-"*

He won.

He won like it was easy, and he wasn't a person but just a body—a robot—that was designed to do nothing but put pucks in nets. Around him, his teammates floundered, stalled, and lost the puck. Shane scored three goals. One assist. They won, 4-2, within regulation time.

He might have blacked out on the way back to the dressing room. He knew he didn't participate in whatever paltry celebration his team acted out on the ice, even though they

were desperate for wins this late in the season, with the playoffs looming ever nearer. Later, Shane would only remember being on the ice, gazing up at the scoreboard, and then nothing, then standing in front of his cubby, sweaty and skateless, his back turned to his silent teammates.

Hayden coughed. Shane wondered how long he had been standing there, doing nothing.

He pulled his jersey over his head and stood there, staring at it for a moment longer.

“So.” That was Comeau. Shane looked at him blankly. “We never acknowledge this, or…?”

Shane looked at his jersey. *Hollander. 24. C.* His was the best-selling name on their team. Would that still be true tomorrow? Next month? Next year? Would his name still be on jerseys next year, and would it be a Voyageurs jersey? He just didn’t know. “The video is real,” he said, because there wasn’t much point in denying it anymore. “Rose and I dated for a while. It didn’t work out.”

“Because you’re gay,” Comeau said flatly.

“Hey, man,” Hayden said, launching to his feet. “If you have a fucking problem-”

“If you have a problem,” Shane interrupted, and he didn’t have to shout to shut Hayden up, “you should say it. I’m your captain. What’s your problem? How can we expect it to affect your game?”

Comeau scoffed. “Affect my game? What the fuck, Hollander? My fucking game?”

“Did it affect my game, tonight?” Shane asked him blankly. “Last year? The year before? How many championship rings do you have, and how many did you have before I became your captain?” Comeau launched to his feet, but Shane calmly finished, “I was gay then, too, just to be clear.”

He said it.

He said the words out loud, like they weren’t crushing him.

Boiziau got one large hand on Comeau’s shoulder and pushed him down, hard. “Capitaine,” he said with careful emphasis, “only a fool would give a shit about that. You proved yourself tonight, no?”

Shane didn’t want to have to prove himself. He shrugged.

“We all know you’re a great player,” Miitka said, still boxed up in his goalie gear. He looked a little awkward, but he still spoke up. “No one could doubt that, Shane, and you’re a great fucking captain. No one here has any complaints about your captaincy.”

“Sure, unless you’re bothered about your captain lying through his teeth for years,” Drapeau muttered.

Shane glanced around the dressing room, watching gazes flit about, wary and unwilling, or uncomfortable and anxious. Shoulders squaring. Lines being drawn.

There were twenty guys in the dressing room. Shane had Boiziau, Miittie, and Hayden. He knew Drapeau and Comeau would never be happy about this. The rest were wild cards, and he could imagine a future where a few of them, Koch and Couillard, maybe, came around, but he couldn't rely on that.

But Shane couldn't rely on any of them.

He dropped his helmet on the floor and let it clatter. "I'm gay," he said, and it felt wild and reckless to say it, but he had to. He knew he had to. "I've always been gay, as far as I know." He saw more heads turn, eyes blinking, and Drapeau sneered and looked vindicated. "You're right that I've never said any of that before. I am pretty sure none of you are morons, though, and should be perfectly capable of understanding why I never said it. I think that's obvious, and it's been made more than obvious tonight." He gestured outside the dressing room, alluding to the press and the fans and their coach. He was sure it would get back to Theriault, but Shane couldn't care about that right now. "I've kept a large part of my life a secret from you, and to be honest, I don't know how long I would have continued to keep it a secret if this hadn't happened. I actually don't know. I think this might have been better if I could have controlled it, but I can't. It's completely out of my hands, and I'm not exactly having a good fucking time right now." He closed his eyes. He breathed. "That has nothing to do with hockey, though. You don't have to like me, and you have never been obligated to. I don't care. But I'm a great fucking player, and I am *going* to get this team to the playoffs. If you would like to try to get there without me, I guess that's a conversation you need to have with management. I won't stop you."

He turned his back on them and resumed undressing.

"Maybe he should have his own locker room," someone muttered, and Shane didn't know if it was a real suggestion or a malicious chirp. His shoulders rose to his ears. Hayden snarled something inarticulate and the dressing room descended into tense silence once more, his speech just a ripple in the pond, fading already.

Shane ignored them. He made a promise to himself that he was here to play hockey, and nothing else. Unless they were on the ice, his lips were sealed.

There would be another game, then another, then they would play Boston in their home arena, and then they would be in the playoffs. Of that, he had to make sure.

"Puck bunny," Comeau snarled quietly, checking him hard with his shoulder as he left the room.

Shane ignored that, too.

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His parents had not come to the game at Shane's request. He didn't want the cameras on them or to see them besieged by reporters. Yuna tried to argue, saying that she wanted to make it

absolutely clear that she and David were standing by Shane, but he had put his foot down and told them not to come. “It won’t change anything,” he had said. “And… if anyone says anything, I don’t want you to be there.”

“That is exactly why we want to be there,” Yuna insisted urgently. “Why we *need* to be there. Shane, when you have children of your own, you-” She cut herself off. Shane glanced away, not answering an unspoken question or acknowledging her realization. “Well,” she continued, flustered. “It’s just different for a parent. We need to be there. For you.”

“Not tonight,” Shane said firmly. “Just… not tonight. Please.”

They listened, eventually.

Shane was glad they had not attended. Shane knew that if his parents had been in the audience, he would have been distracted—might have actually spent some game time looking up at the stands, trying to gauge the kinds of signs that fans had brought with them, which ones pertained to him and what direction they trended in, supportive or hateful. Outright hate speech wouldn’t be tolerated in the arena, but there were plenty of insults that would fly under the radar and had in the past.

He didn’t want his parents to see that. And Shane didn’t want to watch his parents be confronted with the reality he was facing down.

At least he played well.

Hayden came back to his apartment with him, although Shane tried to insist he was alright. “No, dude, it’s absolutely chill. Jackie isn’t expecting me—she basically told me to follow you home.” He clapped a hand on his shoulder, brown eyes overly earnest but sincerely warm. “We care about you, dude. I’m just… I’ll just come to dinner, if that’s alright.”

Of course it was. Shane was grateful he had any friends on his team at all, given how fucking awkward and weird he knew he was, but words couldn’t convey how grateful he was to have a friend like Hayden.

They stepped off the elevator, both worn down from an intense game, especially since they had both been required to pick up the slack for their distracted or irritated teammates. As soon as the door slid open, revealing the blank wall across from the elevator bay, they both heard the loud, strict sound of Yuna Hollander’s voice drifting around the corner, but Shane never could have been prepared for the words she said.

“Mr. Rozanov, that’s enough.” For a second, Shane’s breathing and his footsteps stopped. “I’m sure Shane will appreciate this… show of support, but it is completely unacceptable—I don’t even want to know who told you this address, much less the code to the door, but this is really—I’m going to ask you to leave. Again.”

Shane broke into a run.

Ilya responded to her, though Shane barely heard his frustrated, growling Russian accent over the rushing in his ears. “No, I am not making myself clear, I am-” He broke off.

Shane rounded the corner, Hayden at his heels. For a second, they all froze.

Ilya was standing in front of his door. There was a beautiful woman next to him, dressed in chic black clothing, her arms folded across her thin chest—Svetlana, probably, from how Ilya had always described her. Shane's mother was standing in front of the half-closed door, guarding the entrance as if she were a linebacker and not a manager in her fifties. The fierce expression on her face softened as Shane came into view. He could also see his dad over Yuna's shoulder, peeking out curiously.

And Ilya.

He looked tired—actually, he looked exhausted, the lines of his face drawn in stark relief in the antiseptic hallway lighting, bruises beneath his eyes. He was sluggishly dressed, wearing sweats that looked creased with wear. There were bags piled around his and Svetlana's feet, as if they had arrived straight here from the airport.

Here, to Montreal. To Shane's home.

To Shane.

"Ilya," he blurted, and then he was running again.

Ilya ran too. They met in the middle, like always, and Shane was already crying as he threw his arms around Ilya's neck and pulled his head down, and Ilya's hands snapped around his waist and pulled him onto the tips of his toes, and in the middle, like always, their mouths met in a wild, desperate kiss, made wetter by Shane's tears.

"Ilya," he repeated, gasping, feeling Ilya, feeling every inch of his body pressed against Ilya. Present in his body in a way he hadn't been all night, from the moment the first puck dropped.

*"Shane."*

"Oh," he distantly heard Hayden say. "Oh. Wait. What? What the fuck?"

"Wow." That was probably Svetlana, given the accent. "That's hot. Excuse me, Mrs. Hollander, may I use your restroom to freshen up? Long flight from Moscow."

The door creaked open. "Shane?" his mom called.

Shane didn't pull his mouth away from Ilya's. He didn't want to. His hands scrabbled across his neck, his shoulders, into his hair, looking for purchase anywhere he could find it as he felt the ground beneath his feet solidify, *finally,* after spending the longest day of his life airborne, completely adrift.

Ilya's hands were bruisingly tight on his waist. In between frantic kisses, he muttered little snatches of phrases in Russian, indistinguishable to Shane, perhaps totally illegible even to a native speaker. His fingers clenched, seized, spasmed, and Shane shook beneath the pressure, pressing his chest hard into Ilya's as he tried to crawl inside him.

“You’re here,” he whispered, exhilarated, probably ruining the collar of Ilya’s sweatshirt from how hard he was pulling it. “You’re here, you’re here, you’re here-”

“Yes, yes, da, right here,” Ilya promised, turning them suddenly and pressing Shane hard into the wall, making Shane gasp with delirious relief. Ilya’s hand cradled the back of his head so that his skull did not knock against the drywall, but the rest of him was stuck, weighed down and blanketed by the wall of muscle in front of him and the actual wall behind him. Grounded. Grounded. His feet were on the ground and Ilya was here, and kissing him.

“I needed you,” Shane said, feeling more tears escape his eyes. He blinked open, wishing he could see Ilya’s face clearly, without the awful blur. “Oh my god, you’re *here.”*

Ilya’s eyes were open, just a haze of bright color, but so precious and so, so familiar to Shane. He dug his fingers through Shane’s hair and scratched his scalp. “I’m here. Always. Soon as you need me, I come.”

“What the *fuck?”* Hayden repeated.

Shane grasped the front of Ilya’s sweatshirt. He wanted to wipe his tears off his face with Ilya’s fingers and then put them in his mouth.

“Your family is watching,” Ilya whispered.

Shane laughed. “I know.” He kissed him again. “They know, too,” he admitted, feeling the flush creeping up his cheeks.

But it was true.

They already knew.

“Ilya *fucking* Rozanov?” Hayden asked. “Oh my fucking god—Boston *Lily?”*

Svetlana had returned at some point because she chimed in. “Aw, they are so cute! Ilya calls him Jane.”

Shane peered over Ilya’s shoulder. His mom was still standing in the doorway, mouth open. She and Hayden both looked infinitely more shocked about this than learning that he was gay, although Shane supposed he hadn’t seen their initial reactions. Svetlana had her arms crossed over her chest, grinning. Shane’s dad peeked over the shoulders of the two women and gave Shane a little wave.

Shane looked up at Ilya, who was still crowding him against the wall. “You’re here,” he murmured.

Ilya smiled. “Yes. Right here.”

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Their post-game dinner was awkward, but not insufferable. Shane said very little, but Ilya was loud enough for both of them. He blatantly refused to answer anyone’s questions about

their relationship and egged Hayden on until he threw a spoon into the living room, and then had to apologize to Yuna. Shane felt the exhaustion from earlier weighing on him, and he was grateful that no one pressed them for immediate answers about his and Ilya's relationship, or mentioned how they disappeared as soon as the dishes were done, headed for Shane's bedroom.

Shane pulled him inside and locked the door. He shoved all his stupid pillows onto the floor and threw himself onto the bed, lying on his back, head craned in Ilya's direction, one hand held out in invitation.

Ilya crawled on top of him, the heavy weight of his muscular body a comfort. "What do you need?"

"Take me out of my head," Shane said, already panting as Ilya pressed him onto his sheets.

"This, I can do."

Later, after Ilya had cleaned them both up and Shane had changed the sheets, they crawled back into bed together even though it was still far too early for either of them to fall asleep. One of them should have checked in on Svetlana or Shane's parents, but Shane decided he could be selfish. Just this once.

"I can't believe you left Russia," he murmured.

"I only would have been there another three or four days," Ilya said. "But fuck it—I can send my brother paperwork for the apartment through a lawyer, I don't fucking want to be there for that, anyway. I didn't want to be there anymore at all. I wanted to be here."

He said it so sincerely, and it was so unusual for them—so different from how they would have communicated just a month or two ago—that Shane felt his heart flutter. He pressed a kiss to Ilya's shoulder. "Thank you," he murmured. "Even if you didn't want to be in Moscow anymore, thank you. For coming here."

"Yes," Ilya said. "Always. I—I didn't want you to be alone."

Shane let out a shaky breath. He almost wished that they could just fuck again instead of talking, but that had never really worked out well for them in the past. A part of him was scared about saying anything now, admitting anything vulnerable, when he knew so keenly how it could be used against him. But he knew that wasn't true with Ilya. It had never been true with him. What happened to Shane had nothing to do with him. "I don't want to be alone anymore, either."

"Anymore?"

Shane shrugged.

"What happened?" Ilya asked quietly. "Yesterday night… how did you find out?"

Shane hummed. "I had just finished my workout," he says, recounting the story without intonation. "I got an email from my management team that mentioned 'rumors.' I checked

Twitter, saw the video. Then I sat down and just totally blanked for like two hours until Hayden and Jackie showed up. You called a little after that, and then my parents, and Miittie and Boiziau came over as well. I wasn't… responding to anyone, for a while. I guess they all freaked out."

"No shit," Ilya said. "They see something like that and hear nothing from you? I would be very worried, yes."

Shane winced. "My parents definitely were," he said. "Hayden and Jackie were worried enough that they drove downtown in the middle of the night. Yeah." He stroked his fingers down Ilya's chest. "Almost makes me glad that you were asleep. I don't even think I would have picked up your calls."

"I am not glad," Ilya said firmly. "I would have rather been on the phone with you. And I think you would have answered if I called."

"Yeah," Shane agreed, "probably."

"You really…" Ilya trailed off. "You just… you did not call anyone?"

"No," Shane admitted. His hand flexed on Ilya. He held onto the instinct to be brave, to be honest. "I had some kind of… meltdown. Completely dissociated. It didn't *feel* like two hours. It felt like… time wasn't real. I was just staring at my phone, watching all the messages come in, replaying the conversation over and over in my head. I wasn't doing anything. I was just sitting there."

"I should have been there," Ilya said, voice strained. "Here. I wish I was."

Shane touched him gently, trying to soothe. "It was better when Hayden and Jackie got here," he said. "And when you called. And when everyone showed up. I even called Rose, just to talk about it, you know?"

Ilya sat up slightly, leaning on his elbows so he could peer down at Shane with an incredulous look. "You talk to her? Why?"

"She was upset—probably almost as upset as I was-"

"Who cares?" Ilya said sharply. "Fuck her. She ambushes you in public, makes you confess something you are not ready to say, then calls you blubbering when her mistake gets out and ruins—and makes your life very hard?" he corrected very quickly.

Shane found Ilya's arm in the sheets. He rubbed his thumb in circles on the small bone on the side of his wrist, feeling the solidity and density of Ilya's body, the warmth of his skin. "She didn't ambush me."

He snorted meanly but did not pull away. "Looked like it."

"I thought you said you hadn't seen the video."

Ilya paused. "I saw the beginning."

Shane let it go. If Ilya had lied, it was because he knew Shane wouldn't have wanted him to watch the video. And he was right. If Ilya was offering him the opportunity to live in blissful ignorance for a little longer, Shane would accept that. "It wasn't an ambush," he repeated. "She was… being honest. Being vulnerable, and asking me to be vulnerable."

"She did not seem so vulnerable," Ilya insisted.

"She was. She could have broken up with me over text or something. She knew…" He sighed. "She knew I needed to have that conversation."

"But look what has happened-"

"I know," Shane said sharply. He breathed out. He brought Ilya's hand to his mouth and kissed his palm, unfolding his fingers to cup his cheek. "Trust me, I know. We should have talked in private, obviously. But… I needed to have that conversation. Ilya, if she hadn't—if she hadn't made me… confront my feelings, I probably never would have talked to you in Tampa. I wouldn't—I couldn't have made myself admit anything. I would have kept denying me—denying *you*—everything. I didn't want to be…." He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing that he could go the day without crying. Ilya's thumb stroked his cheek, fingers spanning the width of Shane's face, warm and cocooning. "I needed someone to tell me that it was okay, and hold my hand. I really needed that. I needed her. Or… I would have been—stuck, like that, forever."

"Not forever," Ilya whispered. "I like to think I would have dragged you out, eventually. Could never resist you, Shane."

"Me neither," Shane whispered. "And, for what it's worth… I'm glad we didn't have to wait another eight, nine years. I'm *still* glad, despite… this."

"Okay," Ilya murmured. He kissed his cheek, fingers framing his face. "Okay."

"So don't be mean to Rose, alright?"

"Oh, I already didn't like her before this," he said, and Shane laughed. "What? She is plastered all over magazines, wearing your name at games, of course, I hate her. She will understand, I think."

"I didn't tell her about you," Shane said urgently. "No one knows about you. Well, my parents and Hayden, now, but…"

"I know." He pulled his hand away and kissed Shane's mouth, and Shane arched into the gentle press of his lips. "Is okay. I know you would not say anything. Since you are brave enough to play like you did tonight while outed, I can be out to Hayden Pike. Is okay."

"I'm not brave."

"Yes," Ilya said, leaving it at that.

"Thank you for being here," Shane said, knowing it was for a limited time, and feeling so grateful anyway.

“Nowhere else to be,” Ilya said, like it was so simple.

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Shane always woke up before Ilya. Ilya seemed to operate perfectly in accordance with the sun wherever he was, and therefore acted as though he was entirely immune to jet lag, so when Shane got out of bed at 8:00 am, even though it was mid-afternoon in Moscow, Ilya was still fast asleep.

He tiptoed down the stairs in his socks and found Svetlana and Yuna sharing coffee at the island.

“I didn’t get a chance to say last night,” Svetlana said, “but I am a huge fan, Shane Hollander.”

“Thanks,” he said, blushing, and accepted the mug his mother passed him.

She raised an eyebrow, and he was sure his blush deepened.

“Ilya Rozanov,” she said.

Shane nodded. “Yup.”

“Lily and Jane,” Svetlana cooed.

Yuna sighed. “Does he make you happy?” she asked, a little helplessly.

Shane wrapped both his hands around the mug, feeling the warmth of the hot drink seep into his fingers. There had been times when the answer to that question, unequivocally, would have been ‘no.’ Times when his relationship with Ilya, and even Ilya himself, had made Shane perpetually miserable—times when Ilya had been an asshole, had been dismissive and cruel, or when Shane had been naive and oblivious to Ilya's pain, and times when the weight of their secrets and Shane’s shame felt so heavy that he thought he was being buried alive by it. Thought it might kill him.

But last night, when he heard Ilya’s voice, his first instinct was to run. Toward him.

And the night of the leak, when he had seen *Lily* flash across his screen, it had been like the first breath of air in hours.

“Yes,” he said, and that was enough.

“Right.” Yuna nodded quickly. “And you’ve never thrown a game for him, right? Or him for you? Because that would be just as bad, you know that, right?”

Shane glared at her.

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*“Hollander has been on a tear lately-”*

*“That rounds up Hollander’s streak of goal-scoring games to an even ten-”*

*“Hollander, pushing the struggling Voyageurs through the grueling end of a season-”*

*“Still no word from his team on the allegations leaked earlier this month-"*

*“-play speaks for itself-”*

*“-it’s just not what the fans want to see-”*

*“-distractions, on and off the ice-”*

*“Look at that goal!”*

*“-spent the entire season leading the league in assists, but in Rozanov’s absence, Hollander takes the lead in goals as well-”*

*“-still hasn’t returned to the conference rooms, so it’s radio-silence from-”*

*“-earned his position as captain-”*

*“-needs to lead by example-”*

*“-just saying, countless players have gotten married mid-season, and we never hear-”*

*“Is Hollander the only one on the ice tonight? Where was Drapeau? Where was Comeau?”*

*“From a shaky start to one of the strongest end-of-season rebounds we’ve seen in a long time-”*

*“-few weeks ago, we were desperately hoping for a wildcard spot, but now it’s looking like-”*

*“-a run almost as good as Scott Hunter’s-”*

*“Ilya Rozanov is back in action following the passing of his father.”*

*“Few players respond to adversity like Rozanov, but if these last few games have taught us anything, Hollander is certainly one of them.”*

Shane closed his eyes. He breathed.

The dressing room was still tense. Still mostly silent. They were on a five-game win streak, and everyone in the room knew it was because of Shane. Despite that, nothing much had changed.

He had nothing to prove.

“We’re winning this one, too,” he said, a phrase which had entirely replaced the pre-game speeches he used to give. He didn’t even bother looking at them as he said it.

He hoped they knew it was true.

He put on his helmet.

He met Rozanov on the ice. It had been a week since he had returned to Boston, and already, he was back in Montreal, stretching, watching as Shane purposefully skated up to him. (They had discussed this, and Ilya had been strangely obliging when Shane had asked to rehearse it in full.)

“Condolences,” Shane said, brushing the ice off his stick.

“Accepted,” Ilya said, standing up. He held out his hand, taking off his glove. Shane removed his own and they shook hands under the bright, glaring stadium lights. “And look, now the world sees that I am not actually an asshole,” Ilya said, grinning just a little as he tilted his head so that the lights reflected off his visor.

Shane managed to grin in return. “It’s like I’ve become the homophobe detector,” he said, trying to joke despite the shakiness in his voice. They didn’t let their handshake linger, and they put their gloves back on. “It’s almost funny. Some captains want to make it very obvious what they think—one way or the other.”

“You will tell me which ones go bad way,” Ilya said darkly, but their time was already running out, each of them beginning to turn, ready to glide back to their teams.

“Maybe,” Shane said, “later.”

“Later.”

He skated back to his bench, feeling more aware of his body during a game than he had in weeks. Hayden watched him with wide eyes. “Dude,” he said.

“What?” Shane asked, picking up his water bottle. “I was offering my condolences.”

“Right,” Hayden huffed. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Shane said. He put the bottle down. “We’re going to the playoffs.”

During the All-Star game, Shane had felt so much joy skating with Ilya on his team. It was hard to return to their usual competition, even if the thrill of meeting Ilya on the ice never went away. Shane didn’t feel the fog of dissociation settle over him as they bent down for the first face-off of the game, though. He felt a deep relief in his stomach. He had begun to worry that he would never play hockey the same way and would never be mentally present on the ice again.

He worried that would feel worse than just never playing again at all.

But he met Ilya’s eyes through the visors, and it was almost… normal.

He won the face-off. Ilya didn’t make it easy for him, though. They would never: it simply wasn’t who they were. The game was the game, and they were always going to play as hard as they possibly could, until their shoulders ached from pumping them and their thighs were straining with each long, powerful push.

Shane was laser-focused despite the relief he felt at his own awareness. He sometimes settled into a mindset, during games, where he truly felt like he had 360-degree vision. Like he knew everything about the rink and everyone on it.

He skated into the neutral zone, puck cradled against his stick, aware that he was wide open. His defenseman were fucking around, nowhere near him, but it didn't matter, because he was fucking alone, and he was going to score anyway.

Marlow raced towards him. Shane felt like he was dancing as he pirouetted away, puck bouncing between each side of his stick as he took off at a hard left, avoiding the impact. The Bears' defensemen were in front of him as he raced toward the net, but Shane dove to the side. No one to pass to. He turned hard, skated fast around the net, and shoved the puck over the goal line a second before their goalie dropped on his stick, knocking it out of his hands, but not before the puck was in the net.

"That's one," Shane said to himself.

Two hours later, they won the game.

Shane left the ice with a glance over his shoulder at Ilya. He could still feel a tingling on his palm from the handshake they had exchanged in the lineup. He left panting and bruised from a hard hit he had taken from Marlow—really, where the fuck were his defenseman? It was hard not to take their absence personally, hard not to think that they might actually be willing to see him injured. Shane didn't want to believe that, but game after game, it was the same story. His ribs might have been bruised, but he didn't go to the medic. He went to the dressing room.

"Playoffs," he announced simply, stripping off his gear. His chest was already bruising, but he pressed his fingers into his skin and didn't feel anything shift. He glanced up at his teammates, some of whom glowered at him, some of whom avoided his eye contact altogether. As his play had only improved, a few more of his teammates had started to be friendly with Shane again, but that didn't mean much. Not to him. "Be ready."

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Intermittently, Shane was called into meetings with his coaches, the managers, and, once, the owners of the Montreal Voyageurs. They were desperate for answers that he refused to give them.

He never went into any of the meetings without his newly acquired lawyer. He had agreed to this condition at his mother's urging, but he was grateful for it now.

"Mr. Hollander's contract does not stipulate any disclosure of his sexuality or sexual partners," she said, for maybe a hundredth time. "You would be insane to suggest that it does in any way, or should. He has not broken any clause in his contract. He has not displayed any behavior or performed any actions, illegal or otherwise, which negatively reflect on the NHL. He was illegally recorded, and libel had been continuously spread about him, but without any intervention by Mr. Hollander or his management team. I'm repeating myself, but you clearly are not listening."

“We’re not trying to pick a fight,” the general manager said, voice tight. He wouldn’t even look at Shane. “But we have to acknowledge, as a business, that Shane is not fulfilling his contractual obligations to the team or responding to our PR suggestions-”

“Yes, he is obligated to perform media circuits, but he is currently exempt from those requirements because *you* have banned him from fulfilling those duties. There have been no formal requests for social media engagement, which he has the right to refuse regardless, and which contractually does not cover giving the public access to his personal information. If you would like to alter Mr. Hollander’s contract to include those things, against all standard agreements between the NHL and its players, then this would be a very different conversation, and I would certainly need to get a representative of the CBA involved.”

“Hollander,” Theriault snapped. Shane, who had been studying his sneakers, glanced up at him without moving his face. “You’re just letting her speak for you?” he asked, lip curling up. One of the PR people in the room started to object, but Theriault spoke over them. “You still have fucking nothing to say for yourself?”

Shane blinked. “No.”

“That will be all, I think,” she said, standing. “Good day, gentlemen.”

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“Took too long,” Ilya said, shoving Shane against the door of his bedroom as soon as it shut behind him. Shane’s parents were still staying with him, but they were downstairs in their usual guest bedroom, and he didn’t think they had to worry about being too loud. They knew Ilya was here, anyway. Still, Shane locked the door before he let Ilya pull him across the room.

“Another meeting,” he said. Ilya had his hands on his waist and, when he sat down on the bed, Shane took the grip as a suggestion and clambered onto his lap, suddenly fiercely desperate to be as close as possible to Ilya.

“Anything new?” Ilya asked between fierce, biting kisses that said he wanted the same thing.

“Nothing at all.” Shane didn’t want to talk, but he would. Everyone wanted him to talk more. He knew they were worried about him. He knew why. He was slipping out of moments with them, too, not just on the ice. He kissed Ilya hard. Before, he had asked him to take him out of his head, but tonight he wanted Ilya to put him back in his body. If they had to talk first, then Shane would do his best. “I honestly don’t know what they want. I think they aren’t willing to say because they know my lawyer is itching to launch a discrimination lawsuit against them, but, you know.”

“You don’t want that.”

Shane pulled up with a swear. He kept his hands on Ilya’s shoulders, holding on as Ilya’s hands gripped his upper thighs and dug into his ass, but he tilted his face toward the ceiling, eyes closed in frustration. “I want to play *hockey.* This is my league. I don’t want to sue it.”

Ilya craned his neck up to kiss Shane's throat, though of course he knew better than to do anything that could potentially leave a mark. "Maybe you have to."

Shane sank onto his haunches, putting his weight on Ilya's thighs instead of his own knees. The mattress tipped under their combined weight on the edge and they shuffled further onto it, rebalancing. "If it comes to that… maybe. But it won't. And I don't want to talk about it."

"Then we won't. You played tonight like a dancer. So fucking beautiful on the ice. Your team was useless as always, but you didn't play like it. You are like—what is the machine, where the little ball drops and bounces down all the pins?"

Shane laughed, tucking his face into Ilya's neck. "Pinball."

"Ah, that's a good name. First good English name for anything. You are like that. Your teammates stand around uselessly and you bounce off them, going exactly where you need to go."

"That's an exaggeration," Shane objected, although lately, it was certainly starting to feel like less of one.

Ilya ran his hand up Shane's back. He grabbed the hem of his shirt and stripped it in one efficient move, aided by the practiced undulation of Shane's upper body and arms. For a moment, he was blinded by white cotton, and then his head pulled through the hole, and all he could see was Ilya. "What do you want?" Ilya asked, running his hand down newly naked skin.

Shane kissed him. "Fuck me as hard as you can without bruising me," he said, mouths pressed together and open, speaking against Ilya's tongue. "Don't let me go anywhere else."

"I can do this, too," Ilya promised, and obliged.

It was nice, Shane thought, to be reminded that he had a body. That his soul was still in his body. Ilya could always do that for him.

It was nice to lie next to Ilya, too. Nice to feel the heat of his body, the sweat on his skin, the shifting of his muscles. It felt good. Kind of… normal. At least as normal as things had ever been. Like maybe, in Shane's bed, it was possible to pretend the leak had never happened.

For a little while, anyway.

Shane pushed deeper into Ilya's side, and Ilya wrapped a long, strong arm around his shoulders, trying to pull him ever closer. Shane shuffled a little, careful since both of them had been checked pretty hard during the game, now wearing matching bruises across their chests. "I'm going to get traded at the end of the season," Shane whispered. "They don't want me anymore. Even if I'm their best player-"

"You are," Ilya said, tightening his grip.

"I'm ruining the team dynamics. That's just a fact." He tried to shrug it off, but Ilya was too strong and held him in place. "I wouldn't be able to play an entire season at the pace I'm

going right now, and if I got injured, everything would be fucked for the rest of them."

"And because your defensemen aren't fucking defending you—"

"I'm more likely to get injured, yeah." It had already happened a few times. Nothing serious, but Shane was more sore and bruised than he usually was at this point. He could feel himself tiring out, but there was nothing he could do to slow his racing pace or delegate some of his responsibilities. Montreal, generally speaking, had not been playing well. They were lucky that Miitie and the other goalies were in top form because the skaters had not been able to hold their own in weeks.

Ilya's breathing was still heavy, exerted. "You have any no-trade provisions?" he asked carefully.

Shane shook his head. "I stipulated a list of teams I wouldn't go to—just wanted to make sure I couldn't end up in the American South or Southwest, you know, just in… just in case. I was worried about living there." That felt like a lot to admit, but Ilya just nodded and pressed a kiss to his temple, lips plush and more swollen than usual. "Other than that… no. I guess I should have. I didn't think it would matter, and I wanted to have more freedom if I needed it."

"I get it," he said. "Maybe that freedom is good now. They won't put you on waivers, probably, they would rather get a trade, and there are plenty of less shitty teams who would take you in heartbeat. You know, teams who actually want to win a Stanley Cup."

"Maybe," he said, thinking about Winnipeg's captain, who had gone out of his way to commiserate with Shane's situation in the first game after the news broke. There had been other players like him since. Mostly, their comments were understated, not unlike the handshake he and Ilya had exchanged on the ice earlier that day. Small shows of support, clearly trying to make themselves visible near Shane on the ice before or after games. More of those invisible lines, Shane figured, also having noticed the players who skated away, who sneered and turned around during stretches, who hit a little harder on the ice or chirped with a little more viciousness. No slurs or outright accusations yet, but malice. Common malice.

Hayden tried to have his back. Boiziau seemed a little ambivalent to it all, and mostly depressed that no one on the team was interested in partying with him after their string of victories. Miitie, like Shane, had always been something of an odd one out, but he was still kind. Couillard and Koch had advanced to defending his skills as a player and a captain, and at least they weren't playing like they resented Shane, but it was tense.

Somehow, for some unbelievable reason, Shane's queerness was actually the number one thing holding his team back, while Shane himself was the only thing pushing them forward.

It was exhausting.

"Maybe is good thing," Ilya said quietly. "I am… worried. I am worried about your team."

"They would never do anything-"

“But they would,” Ilya insisted. “If they act like this now, they would. If they were angry, or drunk, or alone, or if they learned about *me:* if they act like this now, they might act worse later.”

“Or they might get used to it,” Shane said, not sure why he was defending them.

“Maybe,” Ilya allowed. “I don’t think so, though,” he said carefully, interlacing their fingers.

Shane stared at their hands, resting on his stomach. “No,” he admitted. “I don’t think so either. God.” He was sick of crying, but around Ilya, sometimes he felt like he couldn’t stop. “This—this fucking sucks. This sucks so fucking much. I don’t—I don’t want it to be like this. It *shouldn’t* be like this.”

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said, pulling him all the way onto his chest, so that Shane’s ear was pressed over his heart, and could hear it pumping warm blood through his body. He heard Ilya take a deep breath. “If I could come out and it would lessen all this pressure on you, I would do it in a second-”

“No, you shouldn’t-”

“I will do what I want, and I want *you-”*

“I get it,” Shane interrupted. “And it’s your decision. Obviously.”

He huffed. “Obviously.”

“I mean.” He closed his eyes. “I don’t want to announce our relationship right now. I don’t want it, you, us, to be connected in any way to… this. I think… I think I might need some time. Where I figure out how I can actually… *be* out, on my own terms, even though I didn’t *come* out on them. I want our relationship to have as little to do with any of this as possible.”

“Yes,” Ilya murmured. “I agree. And I *know* it wouldn’t help, it would only make story bigger, and people would, ah… speculate?” Shane nodded. Ilya’s fingers found their way into his hair again. It went unsaid, but they were both aware that there was already speculation happening about them online. There had been for years—there was a specific subset of hockey fans, and fans of all sports, who seemed to enjoy nothing more than imagining which players were in secret relationships with each other. It was no surprise that now, Shane, as the only out NHL player ever, was the subject of that speculation. He was not supposed to be on social media, but sometimes he re-downloaded Twitter and scrolled when he couldn't help it. People were speculating about him and Hayden, which was gross and unfair, considering Hayden’s hoard of children, and they were speculating about him and Ilya. Obviously, he was aware that it made for a compelling story. The fact that Ilya had kissed him on the cheek only a few weeks before the scandal broke did not help.

And yet, he still loved that Ilya had done that.

It was a beautiful moment, Shane thought, caught on camera and preserved forever. How fast Ilya skated in, but how prepared Shane was to accept him. The way they smiled. It wasn’t subtle, and people had noticed.

But those kinds of fans had been around for years, and nobody really paid attention to them. No one in the business took it seriously. Ilya was safe, for now.

“I do not think I can win playoffs with my ribs like this,” Ilya said after a while.

“I cannot win the playoffs with my team,” Shane admitted.

He could tell Ilya was smiling. He could hear it in his voice. “Ah, so you admit it.”

“We’re a mess right now. We’re doing better in points than we should be, and it won’t keep up forever.”

“You are doing better,” Ilya insisted. “But… yes, I agree. You are tired, sore,” his fingers pressed into Shane’s muscles and he groaned, feeling the tension buried there as Ilya highlighted it. “It will only get worse. So, who wins Cup this year? You are a betting man.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Ugh, hypothetical, Hollander. If you were a betting man, who wins?”

“I still couldn’t bet on another team in the league,” Shane argued. “I would be accused of throwing a game. That’s the last thing I need.”

“Shane,” Ilya said, but his chest rocked with laughter. “Okay, fine, forget bets, you are right. Who do you *think* wins it all this year? Who’s your *guess?”*

Shane didn’t really need to think about it. “The Admirals. Between Hunter, Vaughn, and Wagner, they have the best starting line, and their power play is perfected. I don’t think anyone’s getting past them.”

“Yes, this is my bet, too, but don’t worry, I will not put money on it and get kicked out of the league.”

“Good,” Shane said, pressing a kiss to his pec.

Ilya stroked his fingers through his hair. “Does it bother you?” he asked so quietly. “That you are playing so well and still your team will lose this Cup for you?”

Shane did give that some consideration. Eventually, he shook his head. “Not really. I don’t want to win those assholes another fucking Cup.”

Ilya laughed and craned his neck down, pressing a sloppy kiss to the top of Shane’s head. “Good. I want you always to think highly of yourself and lowly of others.”

Shane wiggled up, moving so that he was lying on Ilya’s body with his chin propped on his collarbone. “I want you, too,” he said, finding his fingers in the sheets and tangling them together.

He thought about adding, *Loving you has made all of this worth it.*

But the moment wasn’t right. He couldn't say that until he was fully, one thousand percent positive, that it was true.

(He was pretty sure already. But it would probably be smart to wait until the end of the season.)

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Shane had not just been acting humble when he told Ilya that he did not believe the Voyageurs would take the Cup again. Three years in a row seemed like too much to ask for, anyway.

But they made it to the fucking finals.

That felt fucking good. For all of it, all the shit he had been through in the past month, that still felt fucking good. Three years in a row after a decade-long dry spell, and no one in the world wasn’t crediting Shane Hollander as the impetus.

In an ideal world, he wouldn’t have needed to prove himself to anyone. He couldn’t help that it felt good to do it, anyway.

Shane didn’t think he was playing the best hockey of his life, although certainly his tear through the playoffs would rank on his list of legendary achievements at the end of his career. But he didn’t necessarily think that he played substantially better than he had in the previous two years’ playoffs. Some games, he even sank into that dissociative headspace again, into the fog, where it was his body and brain working together to play the game, but his mind was checked out. He didn’t hear the chirps or process the looks he got from the opposing teams and his own.

He just played.

They still weren’t letting him do press releases. It was a massive change from before the leak, when general management had dragged their star player before every camera, whenever possible, but Shane didn’t hate it. That had always been one of the worst parts of game day for him, an unwanted disruption to his rhythm. He knew that now it would have felt even worse.

Before the game, as they were stretching on the ice, like always. His team was tense and unhappy, preemptively expecting a loss. Shane didn’t feel like comforting them through it. He didn’t want to point out the obvious, which was that they had won it just last year, and none of them needed to take it this hard. He had a feeling that this perspective would not have been appreciated.

He was stretching, hands balanced on his stick, when Scott Hunter skated up to him.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hello,” Shane said. He was getting used to this routine as well. The random captains and players who made an effort to go out of their way to greet him, and be seen with him. It was

boring, but he didn't mind. He understood, and he somberly wished there were more players on his own team willing to make a similar effort. "Good luck," Shane said, meaning it, even though he and Scott both knew perfectly well that luck was already in the Admirals' favor.

"Thanks," Scott said, rocking on his skates. "Thanks, man. That means… a lot." He turned one toe out, prepared to skate away, but didn't move. Shane preferred to watch his skates rather than his face. "I needed to say," Scott said, staring at a point over Shane's shoulder, "that you're one of the best players I've ever seen. Hands down, that's just a fact."

Shane ducked his head, humbled. "Thanks, Hunter."

A moment of quiet, the stands filling up, their teammates skating circles and watching them. Everybody was watching them. "Our fight, a few years ago," Scott said. "I just—I know what it sounded like. And I'm sorry. But I'm not… like that."

"Okay," Shane said quietly, focused on his stretches. He didn't know how much he could say. He didn't know exactly what Hunter knew, which was why he had mostly tried to avoid the captain of the Admirals over the years. Now, obviously, Hunter knew that his suspicions, which he had spat on the ice, were somewhat true. But did he know about Ilya? Shane couldn't risk exposing him, so he said nothing else.

"No." The vehemence in Scott's voice made Shane look up. Scott was staring off into the stands, brow furrowed. "No, man, I mean… I'm *really* not like that." He looked back at Shane. "I know it wasn't your choice," Scott said, and Shane felt his stomach drop, "and that is the most fucked up thing in the world, but Shane." He skated a foot closer. "Shane, buddy, you are not alone out here, okay?"

Shane nodded dumbly, Scott's meaning clicking into place. "Oh."

"I wanted to reach out earlier," Scott said. "I should have."

The stadium was starting to fill up. Already, there were cameras trained on them. Scott offered Shane his hand anyway. Shane took it and let him pull him to his feet, and they shook hands on the ice before the final game for the Cup.

"It's alright," Shane said. He felt so off-balance from this that he wondered for a second if this was some kind of intimidation or distraction tactic, but he could read the sincerity in Scott's eyes, and he recognized it. "Thanks, that… means a lot."

"Yeah." Scott was looking away from him again. "Yeah, it… meant a lot to me, too."

He skated away. Shane returned to his own team, aware of the conflicted emotions sitting in his heart and his stomach. "All good?" Hayden whispered as he skated up to the bench.

"Yup," Shane said, ignoring the glares his teammates were directing at him for fraternizing with their enemy. "All good. Nice guy."

"Good," Hayden said. "Come on—let's win this thing, okay?" He tried to inject cheer into his voice, but the thing was…

Shane didn't think he really cared.

Not tonight. Not for *this* team.

He didn't really care, but he would never throw a game. He was Shane Hollander, and he was incapable of playing below his ability, no matter what stood in his way.

"Let's play some fucking hockey," he said, and wished that Ilya could be there, watching him in person.

It was a good game. The Voyageurs and the Admirals both had reputations for playing cleanly, so it wasn't the kind of desperate, teeth-out brawl that some playoff games turned into. It was just a good game, but it was obvious from the first face-off that it was Scott's game.

A part of Shane was happy that Hunter didn't go easy on him, any more than Rozanov would have. That proved them all wrong, didn't it? Every snide remark about distractions, about pussyfooting and pansies and limp wrists. They could prove them wrong, even if Shane was the only one who knew it.

Shane was not playing as well as he had been through the playoffs. He was exhausted. He could feel the layers of bruises and strained muscles compiled across his body, a canvas of little hurts. He was tired. He had lost more weight than he should have, even considering that it was late in the season and everyone in the league started to look a little wan by this point, with no way to account for the sheer amount of calories they had to spend on the ice. He wasn't at peak performance, and he tried as hard as he could, but Shane didn't have a team capable of picking up his slack.

He still scored. He could still give the fans something to cheer for.

Shane put his hands on his knees, panting hard enough that the bottom of his visor began to fog. The Admirals raced across the ice as the final buzzer sounded, the entire stadium a roar of noise as their gloves flew through the air and they tackled each other in a massive hug at their goal, all the players flooding over the barriers to join their winners' celebration on the ice.

Hayden skidded to a stop next to Shane and put a gloved hand on his shoulder, thumping him. Neither of them said anything. This hadn't been unexpected.

But Shane felt, calmly, and to himself, that he had done his part.

"I'm fucking tired," he admitted to Hayden, spitting out his mouth guard. "I'm really fucking tired."

"Let's go," Hayden said.

They were ushered silently off the ice and into the tunnels, trudging back to the dressing room. Shane rode the waves of his exhaustion like a high. He would probably be asked to do a press conference tonight, right? It was honestly bizarre that they still had Hayden fielding

all the press as the alternate captain, but then, he was about as bland and scandal-free as a player could be. But tonight, would they expect Hollander to finally break his silence? And what would he say?

There were televisions in the dressing rooms. Some of the guys sat down, morosely staring at the screens as the Admirals celebrated their victory, while others wandered off to find their families. Shane, feeling like his blood had turned to lead, ignored the trembling in his fingers as he slowly undressed.

"Dude." Hayden's hand landed on his forearm in a vice grip, and Shane jolted. *"Dude."*

His mouth was open. Shane followed his gaze to the screen, still broadcasting the ice as the Admirals celebrated their Stanley Cup, as Scott Hunter pulled a man onto the ice with him.

Shane stared at the television. He wondered if anyone was watching him, or if they were all fixated on the live feed. If they had been watching, they would have seen a tear roll down his face before he scrubbed it roughly off and turned away.

*I want that,* Shane thought fiercely, feeling more alone than ever as he heard the echoes of a cheer meant for someone else. *I want that too.*

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Ilya was still at Shane's apartment when he arrived home. He had been at Shane's apartment when he and his parents left for the flight to New York and the final game of the season. Now, Shane's parents were finally heading back to their own home, and Svetlana was back in Boston, and Hayden was with his family, and the rest of the team, still silent and sour toward Shane, were either heading home or scattered across Montreal, but Ilya. Ilya had never left.

Shane wrapped his arms around him and kissed him.

"Now I feel like I am only gay hockey player still in the closet," Ilya complained as soon as their mouths broke apart, slinging his arms around Shane's waist and pulling him into the apartment. "Scott Hunter gets his big moment before I do? Bullshit."

Shane sighed, but he was smiling. His shoulders were relaxed. "Well, I'm sure people would understand if you said you were inspired by him and wanted to come out," he teased.

Ilya's face twisted with disgust. "Me? Me? Inspired by Hunter? Fucking no way." Shane gasped a little when he suddenly gripped his waist, fingers pressing down on the soft muscles. "I am inspired by *you,* Shane Hollander, don't be stupid."

"I didn't exactly come out."

"No," Ilya agreed, "something worse happened to you. You had to be much, much braver. Much braver than Scott Hunter."

Shane felt his heart flutter. He ducked his head even though it was useless to try to hide his smile from Ilya. "He did just kiss his boyfriend on live television, in front of the world,"

Shane said, also trying to fight down a flush. “That is pretty brave, Ilya, even you can admit that.”

“No, I will admit nothing,” he said, stubborn to a fault, but Shane would never hold it against him. He liked how steadfast Ilya was. He loved it, actually.

“I—I love you,” he said. “Thank you for being here. Thank you for waiting.”

Ilya blinked, slowly.

“You don’t have to say it back,” Shane said, a little mortified, because he was perpetually embarrassed by himself, but honestly not as terrified as he should have been. Because, for the first time, he didn’t think Ilya was about to leave. Shane didn’t really believe there was anything he could say that would drive him out the door forever. “I needed you to know, though. And… I needed you to *hear* it, okay? But that’s all.”

Ilya’s calloused hand cupped his face. His thumb stroked the thin skin beneath his eyes. His next words were in Russian.

Shane frowned. “What?”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “Come on, Mr. Highest-IQ,” he teased. “Figure it out. *Ya,”* he pointed at his chest, then turned his finger around and poked Shane between his pecs (and, feeling silly, Shane actually looked down to see what he was pointing at). Ilya laughed through the next word. *“Tebya,”* he said, tapping his finger firmly on Shane’s sternum. “Now, listen closely, because this is the important part—*lyublyu*. Okay? All together now. *Ya… tebya… lyublyu.”*

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Shane repeated quietly.

Ilya groaned. “Ugh, I knew it, I knew you would have no accent, is so unfair-”

Shane kissed him. “I love you,” he said, and again, desperate to fast-forward to the day when the words would feel familiar on his tongue, *“Ya tebya lyublyu.* So fucking much. I love you so fucking much.”

“Same,” Ilya said, preening. Then he grabbed Shane by his thighs and hoisted him into the air, walking them easily into the kitchen. “You’ve lost too much weight,” he pouted. “I want to struggle a little, really sweat when I fuck you like this—don’t make it too easy.”

Shane rolled his eyes and kissed him again. “It’s the end of the season,” he said. “We all lose weight.”

“Yes, but you do it too much,” Ilya said, depositing him gently on the counter. Shane, for once taller, couldn’t help the goofy smile he directed down at him. “And you suck at bulking, Hollander. It’s all this… macro-whatever bullshit. You need McDonald’s.”

“No one needs McDonald’s,” Shane said, draping his arms over his shoulders and winding his fingers through his curls. “I love you.”

“So you keep saying,” Ilya said, rucking Shane’s shirt up so that he could touch his sides and stomach. “Sounds nice, though, so go ahead. Keep repeating yourself. I will listen.”

Shane pressed their cheeks together. “I know that this is going to be hard. And I don’t even know where I’m going to live next year—I could be in the Western Conference, for all I know. But I want… I want to make this work, Ilya. I need you. I *want* you. You’re all I want, sometimes. All I feel capable of wanting, sometimes, even when everything else is… dark. I know it’s hard, and I know I am asking you to risk giving up so much more than me, especially since I’ve already been outed and just… any attention you get from me is going to be dangerous for you, and make it hard for you to go back to Russia-”

“Stop,” Ilya said, halting the acceleration of Shane’s rambling. “No, is enough. Shh.” He rocked them slightly, pulling his head back far enough that he could grip Shane’s chin between his forefinger and thumb, holding him in place. “Shane,” Ilya said quietly. Shane held his gaze, keeping his mouth shut. “Is wrong to say that,” he said, and Shane was already nodding. “Russia is—I love Russia, is my home, is my country. I have very little there, though. I know this. And I know… I cannot give up Russia for you. I maybe have to leave Russia behind for myself.”

“Of course,” Shane whispered.

“I love men,” Ilya said. “Some men. But I love *fucking* men. I have done it, I have fucked Russian men. And I am celebrity, which is dangerous, it is very dangerous.” He looked over Shane’s shoulder at the wall. “I think it will only get worse there,” he confessed. “I have the… sense. Things are not improving in Russia like they sometimes improve here and in America. So, if I have to leave Russia, I leave it so *I* can be safe, and happy, and who I am. Is wrong to say that because I could, maybe, marry a woman and be happy, that I could stay in Russia forever and be happy. I couldn’t do that.”

He breathed. “Alright. Yes.”

“I know I suggested Svetlana,” Ilya said, glancing at him and then away. “That’s why you say that, I know. Because you think I could have an easier life with someone else. But it is not true. I have to be clear. I am not *giving up* anything for you. I do it for myself.”

Shane put his hand on his face, cupping Ilya’s jaw like Ilya usually touched him. He wished they were sitting on the couch so he could crawl into Ilya’s lap and hold him like they had held each other in Tampa. “I’m glad,” he said, “that you’re brave enough to do that. Because you deserve it. You deserve everything. I love you.”

“I love you lots and lots,” Ilya said happily. “I do not care that you only have two measly Stanley Cups. I will look past this.”

“Hey, asshole, that’s twice as many as you-”

“Bah-bah-bah, I do not hear this,” Ilya interrupted loudly, “you fucking asshole. And they say I am the bad winner?”

“Yes, you are,” Shane said, shoving his shoulder away but not actually moving out of his grip. “Have you… have you thought about coming to my cottage? I meant that, you know. When I offered it,” in bed, in a quiet moment, weeks ago. Ilya had never really responded, but he was here now, and that gave Shane enough hope to ask again.

“Now?” Ilya asked suddenly. “We go now?”

Shane blinked. “I don’t know,” he said. “I might—I mean, I might have team responsibilities in Montreal-”

“Fuck team,” Ilya said. “If Scott Hunter can kiss his boyfriend on the TV, then I can at least spend the weekend at my boyfriend’s fancy lake mansion.” Shane’s breath hitched at the word, and Ilya grinned. “I packed my bag already,” he admitted.

“I can be ready in an hour,” Shane said.

“Half.”

“No, an hour.”

“Twenty minutes.”

“That’s not how bargaining works. An hour.”

“An hour and a half. I’ll take a shower and jerk off.”

Shane laughed. “Fine, yes, deal. Ninety minutes.” He held his hand out between them, and Ilya grinned at him as he shook it officiously.

They scrambled around the apartment, and it didn’t take Shane ninety minutes or even sixty until he met Ilya at the door with his suitcase packed and his fridge emptied of perishables.

He turned off the lights. He and Ilya stood a foot apart, grinning at each other in the dark.

“Come on,” Ilya said, tugging him out the door and down the hall, racing him down the stairs until they emerged with a bang through the door into the night. It was summer, and the air was warm but not humid. They slipped through a darkened parking garage, not entirely alone, but unnoticed. Ilya led him to his least flashy car (his attempt at covertness), and Shane smiled at him over the roof before they both slid inside, folding their legs in the limited space. Ilya almost immediately retook his hand over the console. “I love you,” he said. “It will be alright. Fuck the Voyageurs, and good for Scott Hunter.”

“Are you trying out new mottos?” Shane asked, heart fluttering.

“Eh.” Ilya shrugged. He turned the engine on and it purred to life. “I don’t need a motto. I only need you.”

“I love you, too,” Shane said.

“Let’s go,” Ilya said, pulling out of his spot with a quick, graceful swerve. “And when we get home, I will fuck you like you won, and you will see stars.”

They drove off, Shane’s laughter audible through the closed windows.

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In the aftermath of everything, the cottage was still peaceful.

They headed out the day after the final, knowing that it was only a matter of time before Shane got the news that he was going to be traded. It was an open secret in their world, and the reason was pretty notoriously obvious.

The full video had never leaked. The internet didn’t know that, but Shane was painfully aware. The video was pathetic enough, given his tears, his inability to speak as he went nonverbal under the strain, and Rose’s gentle but firm breakup. But, for the last shreds of Shane’s dignity, at least the video hadn’t picked up on his muttered comment about the sex being bad, though plenty of people had figured it out from Rose’s comments about their incompatibility, and the video cut before Shane could admit on camera that he was a bottom. (Although the internet had no problems speculating about that, and neither did other players in the league, based on some of the chirps he had received.)

Shane was aware that the video was probably out there. Somewhere. Yuna had hired a personal detective to trace down the origins like a bloodhound, but there was no news yet. Shane doubted there ever would be. If he had to guess, and he had spent many dark evenings thinking about the possibilities, then Shane would say, most likely, the original video had been taken by a fan of Rose, maybe someone who didn’t even recognize Shane. He assumed that it had been shared amongst friends first and then disseminated more widely between people, before eventually it made its way onto Rose’s subreddit, where the poster (of a now deleted account) had claimed that they had not filmed the video and had not even named Shane. Just a random video of Rose Landry coaxing a gay confession out of the teary-eyed loser she was dating. A nobody.

Shane wondered about them, the person who had filmed one of the greatest turning points in his life. He doubted he would ever get answers or closure on any of his questions, and the rest of the video would either resurface or it wouldn’t, but there wasn’t anything he could do either way.

He tried not to dwell. He tried to focus on the cottage, and Ilya.

Usually, he would be busier, but some of the brands he was signed to had not requested ad shoots this summer, and others had requested explicitly pride-themed commercials and appearances that he had not agreed to yet (again, Shane was trying *desperately* not to dwell), so he was completely free. Two weeks, maybe more. Just him and Ilya.

It was nice. Even with everything going on, everything weighing on him so heavily, it was nice.

“You are too skinny, must bulk up,” Ilya said, shifting through Shane’s freezer in a quest to make dinner.

“I’m trying,” Shane laughed. “I’m so sick of protein powder, though.”

“Is our curse,” Ilya said, faux-sympathetically. “You own three apartments in beautiful Montreal high rises and a private cabin on private lake with your own practice rink, but boo-hoo, must eat protein powder to bulk.”

“Shut up,” Shane laughed. “I know you know what I mean. It’s a lot!”

“Yes, I do know,” Ilya said, standing up, holding a tray of frozen lasagna. “Yes?”

Shane laughed at him. “Let’s order in, okay?”

Ilya gleefully tossed the lasagna back into the freezer and slammed it shut. “Yes, love that, go right ahead, Hollander.” He winked. “I am not picky.”

“I know,” Shane lamented, and Ilya caught him in a kiss.

It was easy, really. Sometimes, Shane forgot the rest of the world even existed. Between the pool, the gym, the lake, and the empty woods surrounding them, there were plenty of distractions. Shane had asked his parents to give him a few weeks alone; they probably knew it had something to do with Ilya, but he was infinitely grateful that they let him get away with it. So it was just him and Ilya, sleeping together in every room of the cabin, working out together in the gym, not really training but just for fun, swimming in the lake, kayaking, taking the jet skis out, practicing their dives, catching up on the television and movies they had missed during the season, and-

Being… normal.

“I love you,” Shane said, lying on the couch, one hand on Ilya’s face. “I love being with you.”

“Yes, I am so lovable,” Ilya cooed, and Shane scoffed, but he was smiling. He had smiled more in the past forty-eight hours than he had all season.

“How are you doing?” Shane asked him quietly. “I know… I know it’s mostly been about me recently. But… you’ve had an insane year too, Ilya. How are you doing?”

Ilya did him the favor of waiting a moment before he responded, treating his answer like it mattered. “I am sad, sometimes,” he said.

“Why are you sad?” Shane asked softly. “Your dad? Your brother? Your niece?”

“All of them, yes,” Ilya murmured. “They make me… very sad. Thinking of how we all could have been different. I can imagine it so easy sometimes, how simple it could have been. But it wasn’t, and it’s not.”

“Someday,” Shane said, “it could be.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, but there was something throaty in his voice.

“What else?” Shane asked.

“My mom,” Ilya said. Shane touched the corner of his eye and felt the wetness gather on the tip of his finger. It wasn’t the first time they had talked about Ilya’s mom, but every time it felt raw. Shane wondered how many years Ilya had gone without mentioning her, and he was beyond grateful that Ilya trusted him with Irina’s story. “I am thinking about her a lot. I think she would have been happy to see me here, with a person like you. Someone who makes me so happy. Being happy makes me think of her, and sometimes… that makes me sad again. But is worth it, always, of course,” he said, squeezing Shane’s waist.

“I wish I could have met her,” Shane murmured, thinking about the charity he had been wanting to start, and deciding that he could bring up his ideas later. “I wish—I hope that, somehow, she knows how hard I’m trying to make you happy.”

“You do it easily,” Ilya said. “As easy as you do everything, Mr. Perfect.”

“Hey, no mocking,” Shane said, nudging his stomach. “I’m trying to… I don’t know, I’m trying to be melancholy. Be sad with me,” he said, a request. He wanted to sit with Ilya in their shared fear, and sadness, and grief, and not be able to solve everything, but also not be alone.

“Okay,” Ilya said. “We can be melon-collie together. I’m happy with that.”

“Are you?” Shane asked, needing to make sure.

“So happy,” Ilya said, kissing Shane quickly. “I am always less sad when I am with you. And I am happy to not be in Russia, though I wish I did not feel that way.” He shrugged. “And I am still worried about you, but I know that isn’t what you want to hear.”

“Hey,” Shane said quietly. “I just want you to be honest. That’s it. Thank you for being honest. I know….”

“Not our strongest skill, no?” Ilya asked.

“I’m trying,” Shane admitted.

“Me too,” Ilya said.

Shane pulled him in, reveling in the feeling of his calloused hands against the smooth skin on Ilya’s face. “I’m so glad you’re here. If all of this had happened and I hadn’t had you, I don’t know what I would have done. Really, Ilya. I don’t know what I would have done. Even if you just weren’t here right now, I don’t know what on earth I would be doing. Thank you for being here.”

“I love being here. I don’t—I have no idea who the fuck I would be without you either,” Ilya murmured, stroking his hair back from his ears. “You are being very honest,” he commented quietly.

“I want,” Shane murmured, “I *want* to be honest, I want to be vulnerable. Even when it’s hard, when it—when it fucking freaks me out, I want that, with you.”

“Is okay to be vulnerable here, with me,” Ilya whispered, over-pronouncing the word. “I know… I know you were… vulnerable before, with Rose, and it was not… it was not good-” He cut himself off, growling in a way that Shane recognized; it meant that Ilya was frustrated that he was not able to express himself in English.

Shane hummed, wishing for the thousandth time that he knew Russian. He would have to start learning soon. “Did you ever watch it?” he asked quietly. “The video. The whole video. I know you said you hadn’t, but I figured… maybe you were trying to protect my feelings.”

Ilya’s hand stroked over his shoulders, tracing his freckles before lingering on an old scar. “Yes,” he said. “Was tagged on Instagram. Confused me at first. I didn’t understand *when* the video was from for a moment. I thought it was recent.”

“Oh,” Shane said. “But you and I-”

“I know,” Ilya said, kissing him quickly. “I figured it out. Then my stomach—I don’t know a good English explanation. It went cold. Like I had eaten too much snow, given myself a stomachache and a headache at the same time.”

Shane nodded quickly. “That’s exactly how I felt,” he admitted. “I–It’s not just being gay, you know? I mean, being outed. It’s… I hate that that fucking video exists. I hate that anyone, anyone can just go watch that moment. It meant so fucking much to me and it means nothing to them.”

“Yes, is worst thing in the world,” Ilya said darkly. “Those fucking assholes-”

“No,” Shane said. His fingers spread, covering Ilya’s cheek, reaching from his temple to his jaw. “Hey, no. I don’t want to talk about that, okay? I don’t… I just want to be here. I’ve always loved this place, but I love it more, being here with you.”

“You are stealing my words,” Ilya said. “Copy-cat.”

“We can share,” Shane said, pulling him into a kiss.

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There were two weeks between the last game of the playoffs and July 1, which was when Shane would know with almost complete certainty if the Voyageurs were going to trade him. He already knew, of course, everyone knew. There were rumors about a dozen teams, a dozen possible trades, some more flattering than others, but the Voyageurs had made it about as clear as they could without outright slandering him: they did not want Shane Hollander on their roster any longer.

That hurt. Of course it fucking hurt. But Shane had known it for months, and as the voice of the Voyageur fans rose in outrage, the hurt began to soothe, just slightly.

“We’ll have to see,” he told Rose, standing on the patio next to the pool. Ilya was swimming laps, ostensibly ignoring Shane because he hadn’t wanted him to call Rose in the first place. “I think most likely it will be Winnipeg. They’re star-center used to play right-wing and he was better in that position anyway, and they could afford me if they traded him to Montreal. I don’t think I’ll be traded out of the Eastern Conference, and I’m hoping to stay in the Atlantic Division—but yeah, we’ll just have to see.”

“They’re idiots,” Rose said, her voice thick. “You brought them to the finals three years in a row, and you just turned twenty-six! They’re idiots to trade you, Shane.” She didn’t apologize. Shane had told her not to anymore.

He indulged himself in following the lines of Ilya’s flexing laterals with each lap he took in the small pool. This conversation was difficult, but at least the accompanying visual was nice. “It’s not just… the gay thing,” he said. “I mean, obviously that’s a part of it. But at the management level, even if my play was up to par, it was pretty clear that our team had fallen apart. I couldn’t captain those guys anymore. And that *is* because of the gay thing, which fucking sucks, but it’s still not something management can ignore. Easier to replace a captain than to replace the entire team.”

“They should get rid of the homophobes, anyway!”

“It’s the NHL, Rose,” he said dryly. “I think the league is satisfied by having Scott Hunter as their new pride mascot—his coming out was cuter than mine. If I had to guess, I would bet that his kiss made them feel even better about trading me. If the league can make a show of accepting one of us, giving him the MVP and everything, then the other, you know… I can be shunned, and it doesn’t make them look as bad.”

He watched Ilya’s arms move over his head, cutting through the water, watching the flex of his legs each time he pushed off the wall. He probably wouldn’t have admitted that if he had thought Ilya could hear him. He knew what seeing Scott Hunter on the television had meant to Ilya, and it had been a very different experience from Shane’s. Maybe, someday, he would tell Ilya about it, but for now, he wanted his boyfriend to hold on to the feeling of being seen and represented for the first time.

“Shane. I can’t… I know you don’t need to keep hearing this, but it’s really going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I am so, so-”

“Rose,” he interrupted. Ilya swam up to the side of the pool and propped his elbows on the edge of the pool, pulling himself half out, water sluicing off him. He leaned forward and kissed Shane’s ankle. “You have to understand—you probably saved my life that night.”

Ilya glanced up at him. Shane met his eyes and smiled.

“What?” Rose asked softly.

“Not in a dramatic, terrible way,” Shane explained. “Just… I think you probably underestimate how much—how much I hated myself before that. I hated myself, Rose. I… I couldn’t be myself ever, with anyone, or even alone, and I was always wearing this mask, and I hated the mask as much as I hated what was underneath it. I *needed* someone to

acknowledge who I really was and to say it without cringing away or dodging the question. And no one else was doing that, Rose, no one but you. So, if you hadn't said anything, I really might have spent the rest of my life hating myself. And this, this whole thing, has obviously been fucking terrible, but *that* would have been worse."

"Oh, god, Shane."

"I just love you," Shane said. "For that. For doing that for me, and I need you to understand how important it was before you think about anything else."

"I love you, too." She was crying again. Shane hoped for, and had faith in, a future where they could be easy with one another again. Right now, there was perhaps too much between them for a casual, long-distance friendship, but he believed they would find each other again, in a few months or a year. He really believed it, and that kind of hope was unfamiliar to Shane. "I hope you get traded to a team that knows just how fucking great you are."

"Yeah… yeah, you know what? That would be nice." A chance to start over, with fewer lies.

Ilya wrapped his hand around his ankle. Despite being in the pool, his palm was still warm. "Hang up," he said.

"Bye, Rose. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Bye. Good luck. I'll be here if you need it."

Shane tossed his phone onto the chaise and sat down on the edge of the pool, submerging his calves in the water. Ilya laid his head on his inner thigh, his plush lips, and that impossibly defined cupid's bow pushing out to brush a kiss against the fabric of Shane's swim shorts. "Okay?"

Shane breathed deeply and held it for a moment, his lungs full. He tilted his face back to feel the sunlight. It was late afternoon, but in Canada, in the summer, the days were long and bright. "Yeah, I guess," he said. "I think so. I'm working on it."

Ilya shimmied a little more out of the water, setting his elbows on either side of Shane's thighs. "Things only get better from here."

Shane blinked and smiled at him. "Sappy," he accused.

"Only for you," Ilya said, pressing a finger to his lips. "Don't tell anyone."

"They wouldn't believe me, anyway." Shane tugged on his arm. "Get out of the pool, come on."

They ended up side by side on two chaise lounges, sunbathing in the last light of the day. "I want to be okay," Shane confessed, staring at the sky. "I feel like I should be okay. I've obviously shown everyone that I can still play this game, in this league. And now I'm not even the only out player anymore, but… I don't know."

“It’s impossible to do overnight,” Ilya said, “but really, the only answer is that you must not care what other people think. Other people are idiots. They will always be concerned with the wrong things.”

“Some of them, yeah,” Shane said. Last night, he stumbled across a video of someone burning a collection of his jerseys.

Ilya reached across the few inches of space between their hands and took his. “Some people are idiots,” he said. “But not all.”

And he was right, because Shane had also seen videos of kids with rainbow face paint cheering exuberantly from the stands of the Bell Centre, and fans holding signs with slogans like *#StandWithHollander* and *Love the Game! Love the Player!*

He had finally approved his first formal statement since the leak. He hadn’t written it himself, but it had taken weeks before he could even begin sifting through the options his mom and his team had created for him. His mom was going to post it to his Instagram in two days, hopefully once they knew where Shane was going to end up next year, although they had planned for all eventualities.

The basic message was short and to the point, confirming that the video was real while condemning its existence, and affirming, once and for all, that Shane Hollander, (former) Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs, Second Overall Draft Pick in 2009, and two-time Stanley Cup winner, was gay.

It hurt to read. Shane didn’t like the bullet points of his achievements printed neatly next to his sexuality, like he needed them there as a justification. But that was how it was. That was how it was always going to be. Even Scott Hunter, who had made his choice willingly and knowing the consequences, had waited until he won the Stanley Cup before he pulled his boyfriend onto the ice.

That was how things were. They could be the best players in the league—they were, in fact—and people still cared more about who they had sex with.

“Hey,” Ilya murmured, but he was cut off by the familiar, somewhat sickening buzzing of Shane’s phone.

They both looked at it and recognized the name emblazoned on the screen at the same time.

Shane’s agent.

Shane glanced at Ilya. Ilya nodded. They both knew this moment was coming. “Want me to stay, or go?” he asked simply.

Shane only had until the call rang out to decide, but it was a surprisingly easy decision. “Stay,” he said, and answered.

Shane mostly listened. His agent had handled the entire disaster with a calm aplomb that Shane had appreciated right from the very beginning, always advocating for him without

being loud or dramatic. He and Shane had already communicated about the likelihood of a trade and the many, many rumors swirling about possible teams. This was just a formality, really. A formality and his new address.

Shane blinked. Ilya squeezed his hand. A loon wailed soulfully somewhere near the dock. Across the lake, another responded. Shane glanced up in time to see the loon take flight, soaring out over the water to find its mate.

He squeezed Ilya's hand again, so tightly that it was good they weren't in the middle of the season, because he nearly broke his fingers.

"What?" he asked his agent, dazed. "Really?"

Ilya was looking intently at the side of Shane's face, holding him back just as hard.

"No, no, I—that's… okay. Okay. Yes, I understand. I will get in contact with—okay, that works. Thank you. No, seriously, thank you."

The phone call ended. Shane once again found himself staring at the black screen, seeing only his own face reflected on its surface.

"What?" Ilya asked after a moment. "God, Shane, am I supposed to be patient about this? Right now? I don't fucking want to be patient, fucking tell me!"

"Boston," Shane said, watching himself mouth the words in his reflection. "Three-way trade. Gregors and Wimbledon are going to Pittsburgh, Bridgnorth and Abbot are going to Montreal, and I'm… going to Boston."

He looked away from himself and met Ilya's eyes, seeing the light of the sunset reflected in them.

"I'm going to Boston," he repeated.

Ilya's voice cracked. His tongue creaked over the rumbled *r* as he asked, "Really?"

Shane dropped his phone, for once in his life completely uncaring about cracks and scratches —actually, fuck it, he still wished the thing would break—and seized Ilya's face. "Boston," he repeated. *"Really."*

Ilya kissed him so hard he knocked Shane off his chair, and they both tumbled to the ground.

"Boston," Ilya said into his mouth, words slurring because his tongue was rather preoccupied. *"Boston.* Fucking Boston? The fucking Bears?"

"The fucking Bears," Shane gasped, grabbing his hair and pulling.

"The fucking Bears!" Ilya yelled, pushing up, a wild look in his eyes. "My fucking team! You are playing in Boston, on the Bears, for my fucking team?"

“Our team,” Shane said, and Ilya lunged down and kissed him again hard enough to knock Shane’s skull into the brick patio. “Ow, ow, ow-”

“Sorry, sorry,” Ilya said immediately, hauling him up. “Sorry, fuck, sorry. The fucking Bears?”

Shane was sure his smile was blinding, edged with hysteria, but joyous and crazed and utterly ruinous. “The *Bears.”*

“Hollander and Rozanov on the starting line, the fucking *power play,* Hollander and Rozanov —we are going to fucking win the Stanley Cup!” Ilya yelled so loudly that his voice echoed all the way across the lake and back to them, and Shane was laughing just as hard. “Fucking fuck, we are winning the Stanley Cup! Fuck Scott Hunter and his boyfriend, we are fucking power couple!” He launched to his feet and dragged Shane up with him by the wrists, spinning him around wildly.

Shane cackled even as he objected, “Ilya, we’re going to fall into the pool-!”

“We are going to win the Cup!” Ilya crowed. “Fucking winners, baby! What fucking morons! Who the fuck put us on the same team, what the *fuck!”*

“I know, I know,” Shane laughed, was helpless to do anything but laugh.

“Same fucking team,” Ilya said, slowing down as awe replaced the elation in his voice. “Hollander, *same fucking team.”*

“I know,” Shane said, forcing him to stop spinning so he could kiss him again.

Ilya took the opportunity to haul him into the air, and Shane went easily with a little jump, predicting the move, and wrapped his legs around Ilya’s waist. “I will see you every day,” Ilya said, eyes wide. “You can sleep in my bed every night.”

“Well,” Shane said hesitantly. “It’s, um, it’s going to be more complicated than that.”

“Fuck complicated,” Ilya declared. “You, Shane Hollander, are *easy*. This just makes you easier.”

“Hey! I am not-”

“Yes, you are, and I fucking love you,” Ilya said, holding Shane’s weight in one arm so that he could grab the back of his neck and pull him into another kiss. “Same team. Same city,” he breathed.

“We—we should still keep it a secret,” Shane said. “For a while, at least. I still… it’s still not good for me, Ilya. You shouldn’t—I know it’s your choice, but I think you should wait a while.”

“A while, a year, ten years,” Ilya said. “Who fucking cares? Teammates, Shane, fucking teammates. Like the All-Star game every other day. I get to play with you.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, knowing that a dopey grin had spread across his own face. He tapped Ilya’s shoulder and started wiggling until he was let down, their toes touching as they pressed in close. “Um, but, really. This is—this is going to be a lot, you know that, right, Ilya?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. One of his hands was tangled together with Shane’s, and the other was still on his neck, curving beneath his jaw. “Yes, I know. Bigger deal for you, but yes, big deal for us.”

“And how-” Shane tried to catch his breath. “How do you want to do this? We really need, like, a game plan.”

“I know you love your plans,” Ilya said, smiling so broadly that all Shane could do was stare and blink. He worried he would get sunspots in his eyes, it was that broad. “Okay, plan, game plan. Step One: we cannot be enemies anymore, not even rivals. Probably Coach will call us both in before pre-season to talk about this, and we will tell him we were never really rivals, yes? Just young and competitive and, how would you say-?”

“We were pitted against each other,” Shane said, picking up his train of thought. “It was a media spin that the NHL wanted to sell. We’re fierce competitors, and we started at the same time, but there was never anything approaching personal dislike.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed. “We tell everyone this, maybe give a press conference, too, just you and me—like the old days.” He smiled, and Shane knew he was remembering that conference where they had played footsie under the table, communicating without words better than they had been capable of speaking back then. “We say, we respect each other, we get along well off the ice, but of course, we would never compromise a game by going easy. That’s why we always played harder: because each of us knew the other was better.”

“The best,” Shane murmured.

“Well,” Ilya tilted his head, “second best.”

“You asshole.”

“Step Two,” Ilya said. “You become proper Bear. We’ll make you mean and scary, put you through chirping-bootcamp, yes? My team, they’re better than yours.” His expression darkened a little. “I made it very, very clear when news broke and I came back—I said I wouldn’t fucking hear any of it in my fucking dressing room, my fucking arena. I said I was willing to break teeth over it. But it was no big deal, no one had a problem, and they won’t now.”

“Well,” Shane said, voice a little shaky, “there’s a difference between playing against a gay dude and sharing the showers with one-”

“No,” Ilya interrupted. “No fucking difference. They know that, and I am captain, and I will make them know that.”

“Okay,” Shane said, because with the level of conviction in his voice, he found himself believing Ilya.

“Yes, okay. Step Three: you learn to play left-wing-”

“Fuck you! I could totally center you-”

“And then we become greatest fucking duo league has ever seen. Step Four: win Stanley Cup, that’s easiest step on the list. Step Five-”

“I think you’re skipping over some stuff-”

“Our contracts both end after next season,” Ilya said, squeezing Shane’s hand tightly. “We become free agents, together. Free, really free. We are free together, and we decide, together, where we want to be. If you like Boston, good, we stay in Boston. Maybe then we negotiate short contracts in Boston, they will let us because they are not fucking idiots like Montreal who would just let you go. If you want to be closer to home, okay, we find Canadian team who will be gagging for our champion dicks. But we will be free, together, fucking winners —we can go wherever we want.”

“Free,” Shane repeated, and tears started falling down his cheeks. “Wherever we want.”

“Step Six,” Ilya said, interrupting himself to kiss the tears off Shane’s face, over his freckles, “we tell the world that these fucking winners are *winners fucking,* you know?”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“Maybe it’s long time away,” Ilya said easily. “Maybe many years. But eventually, yeah, there is Step Six: I tell the world how much I love you. We get married, and I get Canadian citizenship, and maybe I propose to you over there on the dock with a million candles-”

“That’s a fire hazard-”

“And then I dunk you in pool or lake, whichever works, when you catch on fire.” Ilya rolled his eyes and Shane was caught between sobbing and laughing. “Who cares? Then I get you pregnant, and we have a whole team of little hockey prodigies who take over the league.”

“Is that Step Seven?”

“Hmm, nine or ten,” Ilya corrected. “I need to win at least two more Stanley Cups with you after the first, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane said. “I want that. I want it all.”

“I give it all to you,” Ilya said. “One step at a time, until it is the greatest fucking story ever told. We get to have it all, in Boston, in Canada, in fucking Ottawa, I don’t care, because wherever we go, we will make it happen, Hollander. We will. That is what we do.”

“I love you,” Shane cried. “I love you. I fucking love you, I love you-”

Ilya pulled him into another kiss. “One day,” he said against his mouth, “that cute little peck on the cheek Scott Hunter gave his boyfriend—I am going to kiss you so hard that it makes that look like a business handshake.”

“And it’s going to happen in your own time,” Shane insisted, pushing in. “When you feel ready. When we feel ready. We still have to be careful until then, Ilya.”

“I can be careful. I can be careful when I know what I have is this fucking precious.”

Shane kissed his cheek, the corner of his jaw, the lobe of his ear, a frantic row, desperate to reach every inch of him. “Circumstances might change,” Shane said between each press of his lips to sun-warmed skin, the sky pink and purple, turning the water of the lake into a lush indigo. “We’ll have to be adaptable-”

Ilya yanked Shane onto his chair, the frame creaking beneath their combined weight. “I can be adaptable,” Ilya growled. *“Shane.* Same team. Same city.”

“Maybe not forever,” Shane admitted, because if the past few months had taught him anything, it was that he didn’t know what was coming down the road for them. But, despite that, for the first time in his life—he could see the path forward. He didn’t know what was at the end of it, but he knew it was there. He knew he was driving it, and he knew he was in control, and he knew Ilya was in the passenger seat, laughing with his curls blowing in the breeze, always ready to grab the wheel and hold it steady if Shane ever needed a break. “But for now—yeah. Same team. Same city.”

“This is the universe doing us a favor after the shit hand we have been dealt,” Ilya insisted. “I am going to make the fucking most of it, Shane Hollander. I fucking love you.”

“I love you, too,” he said. “I’m going to fucking hold on to you, Ilya, do you get that? I’m not fucking letting go.”

“Me neither,” he said, and they stayed wrapped around each other until long after the sun set and the stars came out.

End Notes

Now that the show is done airing (for now) and the holidays are over, I will almost certainly be posting way less. I'm planning to read the Long Game soon and it might inspire me to continue this story, i don't know, we'll see! Subscribe if you want to see that and I will post an update if that happens.

Thank you for reading!

selbindery (on ao3 and instagram!) has bound this entire series and it is so, so wonderful, please go check out their beautiful work of art here and the rest of their account: https://www.instagram.com/p/DWhgjfuFsVr/?igsh=MTlmbDBvbDBmMG55bQ==

Works inspired by this one

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