

Bell Ringer

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Bell Ringer

by [fakinbrilliance](#)

Summary

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Shane tosses his own gloves to the ice and reaches forward, lacing their fingers together. “You took a bad hit,” he says, gritting his teeth against the fear clawing at his guts. “Flipped headfirst into the ice. Are you okay?”

Ilya groans in answer and squeezes his hand, though Shane can't tell if he meant to do that or not.

Suddenly, there are people all around them. Shane shifts protectively close before he realizes it's the medical team.

“Hollander, get back to your bench,” someone says, but there's no way Shane's going. Even if he wanted to, Ilya's gripping his hand like a lifeline, eyes finally locked on Shane's face. Shane isn't leaving him.

Notes

Timeline notes: This takes place sometime in the nebulous future after Heated Rivalry, while Shane's playing for Montreal and Ilya's playing for Ottawa. They've taken some steps in their relationship, and a few close friends know, but they're not out to the public and haven't decided if or when they're going to be. There's a few scattered details from The Long Game, but this can be read as canon-divergent after HR.

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Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

“I’m mic’d up,” Shane warns as soon as Ilya slides to a stop near him on the ice during warm ups, “so try not to be any more of an asshole than absolutely necessary.”

It’s a reminder. Shane already texted him before the game, as soon as management let him know he’d be broadcasting live today. Not that Ilya would say anything directly incriminating, of course. Not during the game. But ever since Shane proposed a month ago, it’s been harder and harder to ignore the double meanings in most of Ilya’s chirps. There is something about knowing that Ilya wants to be with him, *permanently*, that makes it nearly impossible for Shane to resist responding with a pointed innuendo or two of his own.

“Me? Asshole? Never.” Ilya smirks. “That’s *your* job.”

Case. In. Point.

Shane bites his tongue and shoots his fiancé an unimpressed glare as Ilya settles in to stretch just across the red line. He continues with his own routine and tries to ignore the frankly pornographic way Ilya moves, legs spread, rolling his hips towards the ice to stretch his groin. Some days, it’s a curse knowing what he looks like under the pads, especially considering their recent run of road trips. They haven’t seen each other in weeks. It’s basically torture, having Ilya so close and not being allowed to touch.

It’s fine, Shane reminds himself. They’ll have tonight, and tomorrow, and maybe even tomorrow night, depending on whether or not Ilya’s willing to do an early drive on Thursday.

But that’s all for later. For now, well. Shane should really have his head in the game, and Ilya is being a bit...distracting.

“You gotta do that right here?” Shane mutters as Ilya gyrates unrepentantly.

“Yes,” Ilya replies. “Is best spot.”

“Why?” Shane demands, then sees the mischievous glint in Ilya’s eyes as he opens his mouth to answer.

“Because—”

“Never mind,” Shane says, hastily cutting him off for the sake of his own sanity. “I don’t want to know.”

Ilya waggles his eyebrows suggestively. “Then I will not tell you. You will just have to guess.”

“You’re such a dick.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. “That *is* my job.”

A huff of laughter escapes before Shane can contain it. He rolls his eyes and pushes himself up off the ice. “You’re ridiculous and I’m leaving.”

“No, come back,” Ilya calls. “I will be good. Promise.”

Shane snorts. “I’m not falling for that.” He glances back in time to see Ilya lying on the ice, smirking at Shane through the V of his splayed legs. The picture is only spoiled by the stupid Ottawa Centaurs logo on his chest. It’s hard to be sexy when your entire brand is an ice-skating horse-man.

“See you after we win!” Ilya calls out with a wink. And damn if he can’t pull off sexy in spite of his mascot-related handicap.

“You wish,” Shane shoots back as he skates away, because honestly, he doesn’t have a better comeback.



Montreal and Ottawa are one-to-one in the second period. Ilya scored in the first two minutes with an assist from Barrett, so Shane, in a fit of pique, scored twelve seconds later. They’ve been deadlocked ever since.

Tension is crackling through the air. As he waits for his next shift, chewing his mouth guard and jiggling his left leg, Shane can’t help but shoot a glance at the Ottawa bench. Ilya’s already looking at him. Their eyes lock and Shane feels electric. On fire. He wants to touch Ilya, to fuck him, to win this *fucking* game.

Less than a minute later, they’re both over the boards and Shane has the puck. Ilya slams into him behind Ottawa’s goal and pins him to the boards. They battle for the puck, adrenaline and sweat and curses flowing freely, and after a brutal eternity which probably lasts no more than ten seconds, Ilya manages to wrench the puck away and pass it to Luca Haas.

Shane curses as Ilya shoves free. His left skate slips and he’s down on one knee as Ilya breaks away, racing back towards the Voyageurs’ goal. Haas sends a pass cross-ice back to Ilya as he flies towards the blue line. Shane wrenches himself up and starts after him, skates digging into the ice, but Ilya’s almost impossible to catch when he’s got a head start. The bastard knows it, too, blazing ahead as he enters the neutral zone. It’s both beautiful to watch and an absolute fucking nightmare, because Miitka’s out with a lower back injury tonight, which means Renaud’s in goal, and he’s not—

Shane's thought derails as Wilson slams into Ilya's path. The hit starts clean, his shoulder coming up in a legal check, then his elbow follows and the butt end of his stick, straight into Ilya's jaw. Ilya's momentum carries him forward, up and over the massive defenseman, and then he's somersaulting through the air, skates above his head. Shane inhales sharply and holds his breath for the agonizingly long second that Ilya's airborne. Then he hits the ice headfirst and crumples in a motionless heap.

Shane's mind stops, but his body reacts. He's at Ilya's side before he registers he's moving, knees thudding against hard ice. He's vaguely aware of noise behind him, people yelling, the familiar sounds of a scrum, but Ilya is still. So still. And Shane can't breathe.

"Ilya?" His voice is a wretched thing, the syllables clawing at his throat, and Ilya doesn't move. Is he even breathing? That was a bad hit. Hard enough that his helmet is skewed, and one glove fell off. What if he broke his neck? What if there's brain damage? What if—

Shane reaches towards him, afraid his touch might do damage, but unable to resist. Where is the damn medical team? Why isn't someone helping him?

Before his hand makes contact, there's a groan and Ilya rolls towards him, and thank fucking god he's breathing and blinking his eyes open in a pained squint.

"Shane?" The way Ilya says his name, it's little more than a groan, but Shane's never heard anything more beautiful in his life.

"I'm here," he says, and Ilya angles his head towards Shane's voice, though he seems to be having trouble tracking. There's a small cut on his forehead and bruise swelling under his left eye that's going to be really impressive in an hour or two.

"Shane?" Ilya asks again. "What happened?" His gloveless hand twitches and he lifts it a fraction of an inch towards Shane.

Shane tosses his own gloves to the ice and reaches forward, lacing their fingers together. "You took a bad hit," he says, gritting his teeth against the fear clawing at his guts. "Flipped headfirst into the ice. Are you okay?"

Ilya groans in answer and squeezes his hand, though Shane can't tell if he meant to do that or not.

Suddenly, there are people all around them. Shane shifts protectively close before he realizes it's the medical team.

"Hollander, get back to your bench," someone says, but there's no way Shane's going. Even if he wanted to, Ilya's gripping his hand like a lifeline, eyes finally locked on Shane's face. Shane isn't leaving him. The medics are working around them, and Shane does his best to stay out of their way without letting go.

"Hollander, back off."

Shane looks helplessly at Ilya's face, at their linked hands, and turns towards the voice. "I can't. I..."

It's one of the refs gripping Shane's shoulder, tugging him gently backwards, and for the first time something other than pure panic about Ilya registers.

They're in public.

People will see.

People will *know*.

Still, he doesn't let go of Ilya's hand. The battle between fear and hope that's been raging in his mind for over a decade suddenly crystallizes into a rock hard certainty. He is not leaving Ilya alone.

"You need to go back to your bench, Hollander," the ref says again. "They have to get Rozanov to the hospital."

A stretcher has been brought out onto the ice, and Shane tightens his grip on Ilya's hand. "I have to go with him," Shane hears himself say.

"Go with him?" The ref is understandably confused. It's the middle of a game, and without context, this must seem insane.

"Don't go," Ilya interrupts, words a little slurred. He's still gripping Shane's hand, teeth gritted in pain as the paramedics work around him. Then Ilya mumbles something in Russian. Shane's been studying, but he's nowhere near fluent. The best he can translate is *I want you to meet Shane*, which makes terrifyingly little sense, then he lets out something like a sob, and says, in English again, "Don't go."

"Hollander," the ref says, more insistent this time, the grip on his shoulder turning into a shove. "We've got to get him off the ice. Let the paramedics deal with this."

"I have to go with him," Shane repeats as he shrugs off the ref's hand.

"I'm sorry, sir," a young looking medic says as she grabs a neck brace out of her kit. "You'd have to be family to go with him."

Even in the midst of the chaos, Shane can see the line he's about to cross, the cliff he's about to step off. But he can't leave Ilya's side. He'd promised himself when they really started this thing, *their* thing, that Ilya wouldn't ever be truly alone again.

Shane takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and leaps.

"He's my fiancé."

Someone gives a startled laugh, and the ref's eyebrows pinch together. "That isn't funny," the man says, grabbing Shane's shoulder in a firmer grip. "Back to the bench, or it'll be a misconduct."

The medics are pulling Ilya's jersey out of the way to get the neck brace on, and Ilya's necklace glints in the harsh arena lights. Shane stares at the crucifix, at the ring lying next to it, at the shallow rise and fall of Ilya's chest.

"I'm not joking," he says. "I love him. We're getting married."

The ref looks even more angry until Shane manages to tug his own chain out from under his jersey with his free hand. He holds it up and watches the ref's eyes jump between the two matching black and gold bands. Confusion quickly replaces anger on the man's face.

Helpfully, at that moment, Ilya says "Shane?" again.

Shane leans forward into his line of sight and says, "I'm here."

The ref still looks incredulous, but at least he's not trying to shove Shane away any more.

"We have to get him off the ice," the young paramedic says, clearly done with the drama that's stopping her from doing her job. "If you can let go for just a second..."

It nearly kills Shane, but he releases Ilya's hand long enough that the medics manage to get him onto the backboard. When he's strapped to the stretcher, Shane moves forward to grab Ilya's hand again and the ref doesn't try to stop him. There's noise all around them, voices that might be the crowd, their teammates, their coaches. Shane ignores it all, eyes locked on Ilya's face as they leave the ice.



The trip to the ambulance is a blur of dull lights and back hallways. When they make it to the parking bay, the young medic says, "You'll have to ride up front, Mr. Hollander." Shane nods and reluctantly releases Ilya's hand as the other medics load the stretcher into the back.

He starts towards the cab, but stops when he hears Ilya's voice call out to him.

"Shane? Shane!"

And suddenly there's a loud thrashing inside of the ambulance, and the jumbled voices of several medics all at once.

"He's trying to sit up—"

"—sanov, please hold still."

“Shit, he’s going to pull out his IV—”

“I’m here!” Shane says, turning back and leaning in through the open ambulance doors. “Ilya, I’m here.”

The chaos calms, and Ilya’s voice, plaintive this time, says, “Shane?”

“Alright,” the young medic says. “Looks like you’re riding in the back with me.” She gestures at one of the other EMTs who takes his cue and hops out. The woman glances between Shane’s bulk and the small confines of the ambulance. “Is there any way you could lose the pads?” she asks. “There isn’t a lot of room…”

Before she finishes her sentence, Shane’s pulling his jersey over his head, dropping it on the floor and wrenching off his gear. Unconsciously, he’s counting seconds. Every moment he wastes here is another moment before Ilya gets the help he needs. Finally, he pries off his skates and leaves everything in a pile as he pulls himself into the back of the transport.

“Shane?” Ilya asks again as the young paramedic slides in beside him, slamming the door shut.

“I’m here,” Shane reassures him. “Try to hold still.” Then he glances at the woman. “Can I hold his hand?”

“Yeah,” she says, working efficiently to hook Ilya up to the monitors as the ambulance’s engine rumbles to life. There’s something soft in her voice when she adds, “He seems calmer when you do.”

As the ambulance begins to move, Shane takes Ilya’s hand in both of his own. Some of the tension in Ilya’s face eases, but he still looks so pale, so pained.

Shane exhales a shuddering breath and meets the medic’s eyes. “Is he going to be okay?”

“It was a hard hit. They’ll need to run tests at the hospital to assess his condition.”

Shane closes his eyes and bows forward, clenching Ilya’s hand in a grip that’s probably too tight.

“Hey,” the medic says, laying a hand on Shane’s shoulder. “Listen. I’m not a doctor. I can’t give you a diagnosis, but it’s a good sign that he’s talking, and that he clearly knows who you are.”

“Right,” Shane answers, his eyes still closed. He forces himself to loosen his fingers so at least he’s not crushing Ilya’s hand. “Thanks.”

“Shane?” Ilya asks again, and Shane’s stomach clenches at how unsteady his voice sounds.

“Yeah,” he says, opening his eyes to meet Ilya’s gaze. “I’m here. What do you need?”

Ilya squints at him, his worry clear even through the pain in his expression. “You okay?” he asks, squeezing Shane’s fingers.

It's so utterly ridiculous that his probably concussed, possibly broken boyfriend is asking after *his* wellbeing that Shane barks out a semi-hysterical laugh. "No," he answers honestly. He doesn't know how to be anything else with this man. He sniffs, the tears that have been prickling at the back of his eyes for a while now finally threatening to spill over. "Not unless you are, so get your act together."

"Am trying," Ilya says, sounding almost lucid for a second. Shane thinks he's maybe attempting to smile, but the ambulance hits a bump and it turns into a grimace. "You will stay?" he asks, and he sounds so uncertain.

Shane nods, blinks, and isn't surprised to feel hot tears streak down his cheeks. "Yeah," he says, squeezing Ilya's hand. "I'm not going anywhere."



When they get to the hospital, Ilya's wheeled away for testing, and Shane's left on his own in a disused back waiting room. Fortunately, by that point, whatever drugs they'd given Ilya in the ambulance seem to have kicked in because he's clearly still disoriented, but far less frantic.

Shane, on the other hand, wants to crawl out of his skin. He's still wearing nothing but his sweaty base layers and socks. The harsh fluorescent lights glint off of the shiny vinyl seats and glossy magazine covers. The white walls feel sharp, somehow. Everything's too bright and too close and it feels like an attack. He knows it's not rational, just like he knows pacing won't help, but he can't stop striding from one side of the small room to the other. Seven steps of his socked feet up and back, up and back, past the ten chairs and the small table and the slightly dusty artificial fern.

Maybe the medics should have given *him* some of Ilya's drugs. At least there's no one else in this miserable room, so Shane's free to have his mental breakdown in peace.

His brain keeps replaying the hit, Ilya's still form on the ice, the unfocused drift of his normally sharp gaze. He forces himself to breathe, but there's some sort of vice around his chest that won't let his ribs fully expand.

And then there's the other thing. The thing that makes Shane's stomach twist whenever his thoughts brush it. The part where Shane held Ilya's hand live on national television. Where he told the ref and the medics that he loved Ilya, that they were going to get married. Where Shane decided, on his own, to let their secret out.

Ilya had said, “Don’t go” but what if he’d been warning Shane not to go to the hospital? What if he'd been trying to protect their secret? And even if he hadn't been, he'd been in pain and disoriented. Shane remembers the aftermath of his own concussion well enough to know there was no way Ilya had been in the state of mind to make such a monumental decision.

Shane stops pacing and closes his eyes.

The world knows now, at least part of the truth, and Ilya didn’t have a say.

What if he’s mad?

What if he hates Shane for this?

It was a betrayal of trust, no matter how Shane looks at it. He's given away part of Ilya, a part Ilya's desperately protected for years, without his permission.

And in the end, does it even matter? Despite Shane’s best efforts, Ilya is still alone in this fucking hospital and Shane's stuck in this fucking room with a only a fucking fake fern for fucking company. *Fuck.*

The door to the waiting room opens, and Shane spins towards it, his ragged breathing stopping all together.

“Mr. Hollander?” It’s a short, kind-faced woman in blue scrubs.

“How is he?” Shane demands, before she’s even fully entered the room.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have an update on Mr. Rozanov,” the orderly says, “but you have a phone call.”

Shane pats his thigh, and for the first time realizes he doesn’t have his phone with him. It’s back in his stall at the arena, with his gear. No, wait. His gear’s in a pile in some random back hallway. Nothing’s where it fucking belongs, and Shane can’t fucking *think*.

“Sir?” the orderly asks. “Are you alright?”

What a stupid question. Of course he’s not alright. Nothing is alright. It is entirely possible that nothing will ever be alright again.

Still, Shane’s not enough of an asshole to take out his anxiety on this stranger. He unclenches his fists and exhales shakily. Since he can't answer her question honestly without wanting to rip out his own hair, he says, “Sorry, you said there was a call?”

“Yes.” The woman’s eyes go a little wide. “It’s Rose Landry.”

It takes Shane a moment to process that. When he does, he asks, “Rose?” just to be sure.

“Yes, sir.” The woman holds out a cordless handset. “Would you like to take the call?”

Shane swallows, nods, and extends his arm. As soon as the bulky phone is in hand, he clutches it to his ear and breathes “Rose?”

“Where are you?” she demands.

“Montreal General.”

“Is Ilya okay?”

“I don’t know. They took him away for tests.”

“I’m coming.”

“What?” Shane blinks. “No. You’re in the middle of a shoot.”

“We’re right down the street, and I’m not in this scene. It’s fine.” Her voice goes a little more distant for a second, and Shane hears her call, “It’s fine, right?” Shane can’t hear the reply, but Rose says, “Thanks!” and then she’s talking to him again. “Sit tight. I’ll be there in ten. Do you need anything?”

Yes. He needs to be with Ilya right now, to be in his arms. He needs Ilya to be alright with the fact that Shane as good as outed them on public television. He needs his head to stop spinning and his chest to unclench. And he fucking needs Ilya to be *okay*.

“No,” he says on a tight exhale. “But it would be great if you could come.”

“Already on my way.”



When the door swings open eight minutes later, it’s not Rose, but a tall, beautiful woman with curly hair that Shane immediately recognizes from Ilya’s Instagram photos. He pushes himself up from where he’d been hunched in one of the creaky, vinyl chairs, and forces a smile. “Hi. You must be...”

“Svetlana,” she says, striding into the room. “And you are Ilya’s Jane.”

“Yeah,” Shane agrees, then blinks when he fully processes her words. “Oh, uh, no. It’s Shane, actually.”

“Sure. Whatever.” Svetlana waves that away like it doesn’t matter at all, like she hasn’t just casually mentioned his deepest secret in a public waiting room ten seconds after meeting him

for the first time.

Only it isn't a secret any more, is it?

Shane feels the ground shift under him at that reminder, has to reach out to brace himself against the wall as he watches Svetlana striding towards him. Nothing has felt stable since Ilya hit the ice. Ilya's the one with the head trauma, but it's Shane who can't seem to catch his balance.

He feels even more unsteady when he realizes that Svetlana's still moving forward. She steps in close, too close, right into Shane's personal space, and lays a soft hand on his arm. Shane should feel uncomfortable. He doesn't enjoy casual contact as a rule (with *very* few exceptions). But there's something about this woman's loose stance, the careless tilt of her shoulders and the elegant arch of her neck that echoes Ilya even more than the soft rounding of her vowels. It shouldn't be comforting, but for some reason it is, like a tiny piece of Ilya is here in this room. Shane takes a sharp breath in, fighting the knot forming in his throat.

"How are you?" Svetlana asks.

"What?" Shane blinks. "You mean Ilya? I don't know. They took him back for testing, and no one's come out to—"

"No," she cuts him off. "I mean you. Ilyushka will be fine." She says it with an air of *'or else'* that leaves no room for any other outcome. "His skull is thick. He will be alright. It is you he will be worried about."

"I'm..." Shane searches for words. He can't honestly say he's fine, so he lets the sentence die, then clears his throat and asks. "How did you get here? How did you know where to find us? Uh, him?"

"I was in town visiting some friends. And I am his emergency contact."

"Oh." Of course. It makes sense. It's not like Ilya has any family in the states. Or any family that he's on good terms with at all. It shouldn't matter that Ilya's gorgeous one-time lover is the person who gets this call. And it's completely ridiculous to feel even a hint of jealousy about it when Ilya's somewhere in the bowels of this hospital, hurt and alone and...

Despite the polite smile that Shane is still desperately clinging to, some other emotion must have crossed his face because suddenly Svetlana moves even closer, pulls one of Shane's hands into both of her own, and looks deep into his eyes.

"Jane," she starts.

"Shane," he corrects a little helplessly.

"Shane," she allows. "You must know, Ilya is mine." Shane's stomach drops, but Svetlana's already shaking her head. "No. I am saying this wrong. He is mine. But not like he is yours. He is my friend. My family. And I am his. More than any of those bastards in Russia. We

have known each other forever, and I will always love him. And I know he loves me. But we are not for each other. He is for you. And I think you are for him, too, yes?"

Shane bites his lip, tears stinging at his eyes as he releases a shaky breath. He nods.

"Good. You make him happy. And you drive him crazy. And if you are not okay, he will not be okay. So you have to be okay."

"Okay," Shane echoes, and he finally drops the fake smile and reaches up to rub at his forehead. "Yeah. Okay."

"Come here," she says, and tugs him back to one of the stupid plastic chairs. "Sit down. I will get you a drink. Ginger ale?"

Shane raises an eyebrow. "How did you—"

"Ilya is an idiot in love, and he cannot stop himself from talking about you. Mostly bad things, of course."

Before Shane can splutter a reply, the door opens again, and this time it *is* Rose. She races across the room, drops the bag she's carrying on the floor, and slams into Shane, wrapping him in a tight hug.

"Oh, hon," She breathes into his neck. "This is such utter shit."

"It really, really is," Shane agrees, returning the embrace.

After a long second she pulls back. "You look wrecked."

"Yeah." Shane closes his eyes. "I feel it."

"Any news about Ilya?" she asks.

"Not yet. He was talking in the ambulance, but definitely out of it. They took him back for tests half an hour ago."

"And Hayden?"

Shane blinks. "Hayden?"

"He's here too, right?" She asks.

The heavy weight in Shane's gut suddenly gains another ten pounds. "Why is Hayden at the hospital?"

It's Svetlana that answers. "Because he broke his fist on Wilson's face."

"*What?*" Shane demands.

"Of course," Svetlana nods to herself. "You were focused on our Ilya and did not notice when your tiny friend threw himself at that giant asshole."

“But...” Shane scrambles to make sense of what they’re telling him. “Wilson is on our team. Why did Hayden...”

“It was a dirty hit,” Rose answers this time. “And Wilson said some pretty shitty stuff when he saw how you reacted after Ilya went down.”

“He...what? How do you know what he said?”

“Your mic picked it up,” Svetlana says. “They played it on ESPN. You did not hear him?”

“No,” It sounds more like a gasp than an actual word, because oh god, his *mic*. Another thing he’d dropped in that random back hallway, but not before he’d spilled his heart out on the ice in front of the ref and the medics and—and the entire world on live fucking television apparently. It was bad enough when Shane thought people had just *seen* his reaction. But the fact that they’d heard it, too...He’s never been all that good with words. He tries to remember what he’d said, what the world had heard, but his head is spinning, and he can’t catch his breath. “Oh, God.” Shane sinks into the chair behind him and lets his face fall into his hands. “I really outed us on live TV. Ilya’s going to kill me.”

“He will not.” Svetlana sounds confident. “He will be thrilled. Trust me.”

Shane groans. He really wants to believe her, but he’s viscerally aware of what’s at stake, what he and Ilya have worked so long to protect, what his reckless words might have broken. Just thinking about it makes him feel like throwing up.

Still, he can’t bring himself to regret the words that let him stay with Ilya on the ice. They bought him passage in the ambulance and earned him a spot in this waiting room, however ineffective his presence might feel right now. He can’t regret those words, and he can’t take them back. They’re out there now and Shane can only face the consequences.

“Hayden really punched Wilson?” he asks in a desperate attempt to distract himself.

“Yeah,” Rose confirms. “And so did Troy Barrett and Evan Dykstra. It’s a wonder Wilson isn’t at the hospital, too, honestly.” She takes a step back and reaches down to grab the bag she’d dropped. “Listen, hon. You’re shaking.”

Shane can’t deny it.

“It’s probably the shock, but you’re also still in your sweaty gear, and it’s freezing in here. I figured you’d left the arena in a rush, so I stopped by wardrobe on my way out and grabbed you some sweats and a pair of sneakers.”

“Good thinking,” Svetlana approves, and silently Shane agrees. Thank God for Rose, for her practicality and her huge heart.

Still, “I can’t leave,” Shane says. “They could be back with news any second.”

“Or it might be another hour,” Svetlana points out. “And then you would be freezing and sweaty for no reason.”

“There’s a bathroom right around the corner,” Rose says, “It’ll take two minutes. Go get changed. You don’t want Ilya to smell you before he sees you.” Some part of Shane still wants to protest, but Rose presses the bag into his hands, and shoves him towards the door. “I’ll stay here and let you know right away if anything happens. And I’ll text Jackie to find out what’s going on with Hayden. ”

“I will go and get that ginger ale,” Svetlana says and follows Shane out.

Somehow, Shane manages basic human functions long enough to change out of his dirty clothes, splash water on his face, and pull on the clean sweats Rose had brought him. He does feel a little better once he’s in the fresh clothes, though he winces when he catches sight of his haggard reflection in the bathroom mirror. He’s toeing his way into the sneakers when he realizes he hadn’t even tried to introduce the two women.

It doesn’t seem to matter, though. When he gets back to the waiting room, Rose and Svetlana are sitting side-by-side, apparently deep in conversation. They turn towards him as he walks in and Rose stands, meets him half way, and guides him back to the seat beside Svetlana that she’d just vacated. She takes the one on Shane’s other side and curls up against him, a warm, welcome weight along his arm.

“No news on Ilya yet, but Hayden’s fine,” she reports. “Well, Jackie said he’s getting a cast, so not fine-fine. But it’s just a fracture, so he should be healed and playing again in a few weeks.”

“Oh,” Shane mumbles. “Good.”

“Here you are,” Svetlana says, and holds out the ginger ale.

“Thanks,” Shane says, only managing monosyllables through a throat gone suddenly tight. He tips his head back and rests the cold can against his cheek. Rose is rubbing soothing circles on his back, and she and Svetlana start talking softly again. Shane closes his eyes and lets the sound of their voices wash over him.

He’s pretty sure he’s crashing, but somehow, with these two women by his side, he thinks he might just find a soft landing.



He’s not sure exactly how much time has passed when Rose gently jostles his shoulder. Shane blinks and sits up as a petite, dark-haired woman in scrubs walks into the waiting room, clipboard in hand.

Suddenly, Shane's entirely alert. He inhales sharply and pushes himself out of the chair. Svetlana and Rose stand up a little more slowly, and Rose steps forward to loop a supportive arm through Shane's.

"Svetlana Vetrova?" the woman asks, glancing at all three of them as though it's possible the famous male hockey player or the internationally renowned movie star have a secret Russian alter ego.

Svetlana nods and steps forward. "Yes, that is me."

"I'm Doctor Reyes," the woman says, meeting Svetlana's gaze. "I've been treating Mr. Rozanov this evening. You're his official medical contact, but Mr. Rozanov has given me permission to share his status with..." she hesitates for a moment and her eyes flick briefly towards Shane, "anyone else who happens to be here waiting."

Shane's mind grasps onto the only part of that sentence that really matters. "He's awake?"

Reyes turns to him, takes in his white knuckles, the way he's practically vibrating out of his skin, and gives him a small smile. "Yes, Mr. Hollander. He is. He has been particularly insistent in asking after you."

"Is he," Shane stops, swallows, tries again. "Is he okay?"

"He has a concussion, and he strained his neck and shoulder in the fall, but there are no broken bones, and his scans are clean. If he takes it easy for the next few weeks, he should make a complete recovery."

Shane closes his eyes as a shudder of relief rips through him. Rose squeezes his arm.

"I told you," Svetlana says, raising one eyebrow at Shane. "He's fine. Thick headed idiot." Shane might not know her very well yet, but he can still see a hint of relief in her expression that belies her overconfident words.

"Can we see him?" Shane asks.

"Yes," Reyes agrees. "But let's keep it to one at a time for now. He's on a pretty heavy pain killer and a muscle relaxant, and he shouldn't be overstimulated. He may already be asleep by now, but if someone wants to go sit with him, I'll show you to his room."

Shane glances at Svetlana. "Do you want to..." he starts, then trails off at her narrow-eyed glare.

She turns to Rose and asks, "Why are men such fools?"

"Be nice," Rose protests. "He's had a hard day."

Svetlana turns back to Shane and crosses her arms. She mutters something in Russian too fast for Shane to catch, then switches to English and says, "No, you absolute imbecile. It is not me that he wants to see. It is you. Go to him before I march you there myself."

“Alright,” Shane says earnestly. “Thanks.”

Rose drops his arm and gives him a little shove.

As he follows Doctor Reyes out of the room, he hears Rose whisper, “I said be nice! That wasn’t very nice.”

“For me it was,” Svetlana says darkly.

Shane believes it.



“I’ll be back in half an hour,” Doctor Reyes says, opening the door to Ilya’s room. “Push the call button if you or Mr. Rozanov need anything, and try to keep him calm,” she cautions as she steps aside to let Shane pass.

As soon as he’s through the door, Shane’s gaze locks on Ilya. He’s propped up in the hospital bed, though his eyes are closed. His skin is even paler than usual, a vivid contrast to the massive bruise that’s blooming a deep purple on his left cheek. His right arm is in a sling and his neck is in a brace, and Shane’s gut twists as it hits him that, as bad as this looks, it could have been so much worse. He bites his lip and chokes out a frantic, hiccupping breath.

Ilya’s eyes flutter open at the sound. His face lights up as soon as he spots Shane, his smile made slightly lopsided by the swelling.

“Shane!” he says, reaching out with his good arm.

Shane sniffs and hastily wipes his cheeks with the back of his hand before moving to Ilya’s bedside. “That looks like it hurts.” He reaches out to brush a gentle finger along Ilya’s jaw, below the damaged skin.

“Oh, no. I feel nothing. They gave me the good drugs.” Ilya smiles even wider as though to prove his point.

“Stop that,” Shane admonishes as he sniffs again. “You’ll make it worse.”

Ilya shrugs with his good shoulder, then reaches out to lace his fingers with Shane’s. “I can’t help it. You’re here and I’ve missed you. Why are you crying?”

“Because you’re hurt,” Shane says.

“Exactly,” Ilya agrees. “*I* am hurt. Not you. So you should not cry.”

“I’m worried,” Shane explains. He knows Ilya’s teasing him, but he’s too rung out to be anything but sincere right now. “That hit was...it was a bad one. And I thought, for a second...you were so still, and—”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Ilya tugs him a little closer, squeezes his hand, and gazes straight into Shane’s eyes. “I am fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Shane protests, his words little more than a shaky exhale.

Ilya tries to tilt his head, then winces as the neck brace prevents it. “No,” he agrees grudgingly. “I’m not, but I will be. There is no need to worry. The doctor tells me all I need is a few weeks for recovery, and for my fiancé to wait on me and do my bidding and feed me delicious meals as I heal.”

Shane snorts. “I’m pretty sure that’s not part of your recovery plan.”

“Oh it definitely is,” Ilya insists with a straight face. “The doctor probably just forgot to mention it to you. She is a busy lady.”

Shane sniffs and squeezes Ilya’s hand. Then he takes a deep breath, steeling himself. “Listen,” he starts. He looks down at their joined hands, not quite able to make himself meet Ilya’s eyes while he says this. “This probably isn’t the time. The doctor said I shouldn’t do anything to aggravate you, but there’s something I have to tell you.”

“What?” Ilya asks.

“I don’t think it’s fair for you to hear it from anyone else,” Shane says, then stops. His jaw works, but the words won’t come out. He swallows, then clears his throat.

“Shane, you’re scaring me. What could possibly be so bad?” Ilya asks, then he narrows his eyes and pushes up off the pillows to glower at Shane. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“What?” Shane sputters. “No. Lay back down before you hurt yourself.”

“Okay,” Ilya says and he sinks back into the pillows, his expression relaxing.

“Why would you even think that?” Shane demands, tightening his grip on Ilya’s hand.

“I don’t know. Maybe is the head injury.”

Shane glares at him. “Not funny.”

“A little funny,” Ilya insists. Shane rolls his eyes. “Well, if you’re not trying to leave—”

“Never,” Shane says. “You know that.”

Ilya gives a tiny head tilt of acknowledgement, the most he can manage with the brace. “If not that, then it does not matter.”

“It does, though.” Shane closes his eyes and lets out a long breath. “Do you remember anything from after you were hit? When you were on the ice?”

“Mmmm,” Ilya hums as his face scrunches in thought. “You were there with me. And my mother...”

“Your mother?” Shane asks.

“Da. I told you I dream of her sometimes. I think I dreamt of her then. Or maybe she was there with me somehow. Like a, what do you call it? Guard angel?”

“Guardian angel,” Shane supplies.

“Yes, that. I felt like she was there with me a little bit. But mostly I was confused, and I wanted you there. You *were* there, I think.”

Shane nods. “I was.”

Ilya hums again, then he blinks, his gaze focusing on Shane’s face. “Wait, how were you there and not with your team?”

“I’m so sorry,” he says, because whatever else Ilya absorbs from this conversation, Shane needs him to know that first. “You were down on the ice and I was so scared. I didn’t really realize what I was doing at first, I was just frantic, and you were so hurt. I mean, that’s not really an excuse, but the ref was trying to pull me away, and I couldn’t, I didn’t want to—” Tears are streaming down his cheeks unchecked, and his voice is coming out in broken gasps.

“Hey,” Ilya says gently. “Shane. Shane? You are okay. We are okay here. Breathe, sweetheart.”

Shane takes another ragged inhale and plows on, needing to get everything out. “I wanted to stay with you, so I told them I love you. I told them we were engaged. The ref and the medics, and...God. I forgot that I was wearing a mic, Ilya. Everyone heard. *Everyone*. Maybe I could have backed off, but you were calling my name, and holding my hand, and I was selfish, and I couldn’t let go.”

Ilya is the one squeezing Shane’s hand now, clenching it tightly as he looks at Shane, mouth pressed in a flat line, and of course he’s angry. Why wouldn’t he be? “I am so, so sorry, Ilya.”

“No,” Ilya tries to shake his head and winces again. His lips are quivering as he pulls Shane’s hand to his chest and gives it another squeeze. “No, not sorry. There is no need for you to be sorry. You say you were selfish? But you stayed with me. You fought to stay by my side. You disobeyed the ref,” Ilya raises one eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Shane nods.

“This must be true love, for Shane Hollander to break a rule.”

“Shut up, asshole,” Shane laughs at the easy familiarity of the teasing. He wishes he could shove Ilya, or bump their shoulders together. Instead he settles for running his thumb along

the back of Ilya's hand.

"You were not selfish, Shane. No," he says when Shane opens his mouth to protest. "Not selfish. You care so much. And I am so lucky that you care about me."

"But I outed us," Shane points out, in case Ilya had somehow missed that fact.

"Hmm, yes," Ilya agrees easily.

"You're not mad?"

"Not even a little bit." Ilya says it with a smile that makes Shane believe him.

"But why? We worked so hard to keep this secret," Shane says, "And I just gave it away."

"True. But I have been thinking for a while that the secret is not worth so much. There may be some problems, yes," Shane snorts at that understatement, but Ilya plows on, "maybe some issues with our teams or the league, but we can face those together."

"Together," Shane repeats.

"Of course. And we are not alone. We have your parents and Svetlana and Rose and Hayden. And I have a good feeling about my team, too."

"I'm not sure about mine," Shane mutters.

Ilya gives a little grimace of acknowledgement. "Yes, so maybe some problems, but I think there will be benefits, too."

"Like what?" Shane asks. He can definitely think of a few, but he wants to hear Ilya's ideas.

"Well, for one, now I can kiss you on the Jumbotron."

Shane laughs. "Like Scott Hunter?"

Ilya scoffs. "No. Better than that boring old man. Best kiss. Everyone will be jealous."

Shane snorts, then swipes at his eyes with his sleeve and takes a deep breath. "You're ridiculous, you know."

"You love me," Ilya says with certainty.

"I really, really do," Shane agrees. He reaches out with one foot to snag the chair by the wall, and tugs it closer to Ilya's bed. Settling into it, he gently braces his elbows on Ilya's mattress, careful not to jostle him too much, then holds Ilya's hand against his own cheek. "You better heal really quick," Shane says. "Not being able to touch you is going to be torture."

"I am telling you, doctor says a few weeks and good service from my fiancé and everything will be perfect."

"Right," Shane laughs. "I'll get right on that. Is there anything you need now, your Majesty?"

“You,” Ilya replies instantly. “Just you. Stay.”

“I’m here,” Shane says. “I will.”

“Perfect,” Ilya says, and his eyes begin to drift closed.

“Oh yeah,” Shane says after a minute of peaceful silence. “I met Svetlana today. She came to the hospital. Did you know that she’s in town?”

“I did,” Ilya says without opening his eyes. “She is visiting Nikita, an old friend from Russia. She is amazing, yes?”

“Yeah. She and Rose are both in the waiting room right now. I think they might be plotting world domination.”

“Good,” Ilya declares. “They will be better than anyone in power now.”

“True. Also, apparently Hayden broke his hand defending your honor.”

That makes Ilya open his eyes wide. “What?”

Shane smirks. “Yeah, apparently he broke his hand punching Wilson in the face after he sacked you.”

“Uhg.” Ilya sounds utterly appalled. “Hayden is my knight in shining jock strap?”

“Gross,” Shane protests, laughing.

“Noooo.” Ilya moans in mock despair. “I cannot deal with this and a concussion. Is not true.”

“It is,” Shane insists. “Ruby made him get a bright pink cast, and Jade said you have to sign it.”

Ilya heaves a resigned sigh. “Well, if Jade and Ruby want, then I must do it.”

There’s another short stretch of silence. Ilya’s eyes slide closed again, and his breathing slows.

Shane stares at his beloved, bruised face, and is suddenly so painfully grateful that Ilya’s still here, still breathing and smirking and giving Shane shit, that he feels full to bursting with it.

“Shane,” Ilya says a few minutes later, startling him out of his quiet meditation.

“Yeah?”

“Did you really tell the whole world we are together?”

Shane kisses Ilya’s knuckles. “Yes. Svetlana said they showed clips of it on ESPN.”

“Good. There will be many news stories. Shane Hollander is helplessly in love with his archrival. What a fool he is. I will watch them all.”

Shane shakes his head. “Not until you’re approved for screen time.”

“Spoilsport.” Ilya sighs. Then he smiles his lopsided smile, and blinks his eyes open to meet Shane’s gaze. “You told the world about us. Now everyone knows. You are stuck with me forever.”

Shane leans forward and kisses Ilya’s non-bruised cheek. “Perfect,” he says, and means it.

Chapter End Notes

Let’s just pretend I didn’t spend most of the holidays writing this in airports and on airplanes and at my very religious family’s house, stealing moments after Christmas dinner to frantically pound out a few more sentences before episode 6 aired. I swear, there was a time when I was a normal human. Now is clearly not that time.

I am sure the Ilya getting injured trope has been done a bunch already, but the idea for this fic came about after the seventh time I watched Shane neatly fold his clothes as soon as he took them off, and wondered what it would take to make him not do that.

These characters are so amazing. Both the books and the show have fed my soul in the best possible way. Writing this got me out of a creative rut, so maybe there will be more fic in the future. Thanks for reading! I hope everyone’s having an amazing holiday.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Please note that there is a trigger warning for homophobic language in this chapter. Please let me know if you think I should add any other tags.

“Shit, mom, I don't know. Do they really expect me to be thinking about this right now?”

Ilya blinks awake, and squints as bright lights from above stab into his eyes. The hospital is cold and sterile, the bed sheets are scratchy and white, and the only thing that makes it even a little bit bearable is the fact that Shane hasn't left his side.

It's Shane's soft voice spilling from the corner of the room now. “I know...I know. I get that but...ugh, yeah.”

He sounds so tired, so frustrated. Ilya wants so badly to go to him, to hold his hand, to pull him into his arms.

According to the last nurse that stopped by to adjust Ilya's IV and take his vitals, it's already been a full day since he was brought in. The small part of his damaged brain that's thinking rationally knows it's time for Shane to go home, take a shower, and get some sleep, but he honestly doesn't know what he'd do if he woke up to find Shane gone.

Selfish, a voice in his mind scolds, and Ilya knows that it's true.

Ilya has been sleeping. Maybe it's the concussion, maybe it's the pain meds. Either way, the world keeps drifting in and out of focus like a radio station on a country road. Things go soft and fuzzy without his permission, and every time the world solidifies again, Shane looks more ragged, the circles under his eyes darker, his cheeks hollower, his mouth tighter.

Other people have dropped in. Svetlana and Rose. Some of his teammates. Coach Wiebe. All of them chatted for a few minutes to offer comfort and well wishes before they ducked back out the door.

Shane has been there through it all, a steady presence, a port in the storm. But how long can that port last if no one takes care of it?

“Yeah, okay,” Shane says now, still talking in that pinched, quiet voice. “I'll ask him when he's awake, but only if he's feeling good enough. Alright. And thanks for...for everything. For doing all of this.” He's quiet for a moment, and Ilya hears him take a few long, steadying breaths. “Yeah. I love you. Tell dad I love him, too. Alright. Bye.”

“Shane?” Ilya says, as soon as Shane ends the call.

Shane strides over to the bed and takes Ilya's hand. "Hey," he says, leaning in close. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was hit by a truck named Chad Wilson," Ilya jokes.

Shane doesn't smile. "Do you need more pain meds?" he asks, reaching for the call button.

"No, no." Ilya pulls him back. "I am okay. How are you?"

Shane snorts. "Fine. I'm not the one with the concussion."

"Have you slept?" Ilya asks.

Shane winces. "I'm fine," he says again rather than answering. That's a no, then.

Ilya should really tell Shane to go home. Instead he says, "Come here," and scooches as far over on the hospital bed as he can, tugging at their joined hands.

"You're injured," Shane protests. "And this bed is tiny. And the nurses will be back in here in a few—" Unfortunately for Shane, his arguments are cut off by a massive yawn.

"You already told the world that we are in love," Ilya reminds Shane. It still makes his heart warm every time he remembers. "So we do not have to hide from the nurses now. And it hurts me more to see you this tired than it will to share this tiny bed. Move your ass, Hollander," he orders, and is rewarded by Shane huffing and rolling his eyes, but obediently shucking his shoes and crawling carefully onto the bed next to him.

"Better," Ilya says as Shane settles against his uninjured side. It's a tight fit, not exactly comfortable considering all of Ilya's bruises and strained muscles, but Ilya isn't lying. Everything is always better when Shane is in his arms. "Was that Yuna?"

"What?" Shane blinks at him. Now that he's horizontal, it looks like he's fighting a losing battle against his eyelids.

"On the phone just now," Ilya persists. "Was it your mother?"

"Oh, yeah." Shane answers, smothering another half yawn. "Don't worry about it, though. It's just...whatever. We can deal with it when you're not in the hospital."

"It sounded important," Ilya presses. "Is something going on?"

Shane sighs. "Yeah. It's about what I said on the ice."

Ilya is curious. *So* curious. Shane mentioned an ESPN video, and Ilya's desperate to see it. Unfortunately, he doesn't even know where his phone is, and with both the nurses and his fiancé vigilantly enforcing the no screens rule, he's going to have to wait. But even without seeing the video, he knows Shane's words must have sent ripples of chaos through the hockey world like a rogue puck shot into the bench.

“Both of our teams want a statement for the media,” Shane continues, “but Crowell apparently wants us to downplay everything? I don’t know. It’s a minefield.”

“Hmm.” Ilya considers for a moment, then asks. “What does Yuna suggest?”

“She’s written a statement for me. For us. It’s... Well. It’s pretty straightforward and doesn’t leave a lot of wiggle room about our relationship. Not that there’s much question about it after what I said on the ice. Still, I think Crowell would be happier if we didn’t say anything. Or if we flat out denied everything.”

Ilya squeezes Shane’s hand. “You liked your mother’s message?”

“Yeah.” Shane says, “But there’s no rush to—”

“Tell her to post it. Post it for me, too. She can contact Harris on my team. He will know how to do it.”

“You don’t even know what it says,” Shane protests.

“I trust you,” Ilya replies. “And I trust Yuna. She wants what is best for us, and no one is smarter about how to deal with the politics of hockey.”

Shane huffs a little laugh at that. “True.”

“I don’t want to give Crowell, or anyone else who does not know us, the chance to tell our story.” Ilya watches Shane’s eyes harden as he considers what the commissioner might do. “Tell her to post it,” he repeats.

Shane considers for a moment then mutters, “Yeah, okay. Don’t look, I’m going to turn on my screen,” as he pulls out his phone.

“Your screen can’t be any brighter than these stupid hospital lights.”

“The lights are fully dimmed,” Shane says.

Ilya blinks at the seemingly bright ceiling, then risks a glance at Shane’s phone screen and winces at the blinding light. “Oh.”

“Idiot,” Shane scolds, though it sounds at least a little bit fond. “I told you not to look.” He types something out while Ilya closes his eyes, then puts his phone away as he tries to suppress another yawn. “Love you,” he murmurs into Ilya’s good shoulder as he snuggles close.

“You, too, моя любовь,” Ilya replies, though judging by Shane’s steady breathing he’s already fallen asleep.



"I want everyone to know I am doing this under duress," Hayden announces as he glares at Ilya, then mutters, "God, do you have to write it so big?"

Ilya pretends to be too busy inscribing the second O of ROZANOV on the cast in front of him to respond. It is true his name takes up quite a bit of real estate on the back of Hayden's wrist, but in Ilya's defense, writing on fiberglass is a lot harder than it looks. Also, the neon pink is pretty blinding. Is looking at neon with a concussion as bad as looking at screens? It's got to be at least as bright.

"Why are you under a dress?" Ruby asks from across Shane's living room.

"Not a dress. *Duress*. It's when someone doesn't want to—Amber, put that down!" Hayden yelps, and Ilya glances sideways in time to see Amber trundling into the room carrying a glass sculpture precariously in one hand and her bottle in the other.

"Jackie? Jackie! Amber's got one of Shane's trophies," Hayden says, desperately scanning the room for his wife. It's almost endearing that, despite his panic, he manages to keep his arm rock steady so Ilya can finish signing. Well, it would be endearing if it was anyone but Hayden. Since it is Hayden, Ilya takes advantage of his momentary distraction to add a few more key embellishments to his masterpiece.

"It's fine, Hayd," Shane says, coming to stand just behind Ilya's spot on the couch as Jackie arrives and gently extracts the trophy from a teary-eyed Amber's clutches. "It's just an old award from Juniors."

Jackie snorts as she inspects the trophy. "Oh, you mean just your Junior League Playoff MVP Award?"

"Jesus, Shane," Hayden protests. "Do you know how many kids would kill for one of those?"

As though to prove his point, Amber stretches up towards the trophy, opening and closing her little fingers as she says, "Want. Want!"

"What?" Ilya smirks at Hayden. "Sad you do not have one? I'll let you borrow mine some day."

"Shut up, asshole," Hayden mutters. "Are you done yet?"

"Yes," Ilya says, capping the Sharpie with a flourish and setting it on the coffee table. He has to squint a bit, the ever-present throb at his temples a little more intense after the effort of focusing. *Worth it*, he thinks as he eyes Hayden's cast. He wonders how long it will take for the man to notice.

Before Hayden has the chance to inspect the finished product, Amber erupts into full-throated sobs, so Ilya figures he has at least another minute before he gets to enjoy the fallout.

“You’re alright, sweetie,” Hayden says, pushing himself off the couch and scooping his daughter up with his good arm.

When she buries her face in her father’s shoulder, Ilya can’t help but be grateful for the drop in volume. Normally he loves it whenever Hayden’s kids are around. They’re hilarious and full of energy and so adorable it’s almost physically painful. Clearly they get most of their genetics from Jackie. Unfortunately, it’s only been four days since the hit, and two since he was discharged from the hospital. His brain is definitely still suffering the consequences of rattling around inside his skull, and the noise and chaos of four little Pikes in Shane’s echoey living room is maybe a bit more than he can handle.

“Uncle Ilya, are you okay?”

Ilya opens his eyes (when had he closed them?) and smiles at Arthur, who’s clutching his stuffed alligator and frowning. “Yes, am fine,” Ilya assures the quietest of the Pike children. Ilya’s never been quite as good at reading Arthur as he is at reading the girls, but his serious expressions sometimes reminds Ilya of Shane, so it’s safe to say he has a big soft spot for the kid. “Just a little headache.”

“Here,” Arthur says, holding out his stuffed animal. “Hug Chompy. He’ll make you feel better.”

Something in Ilya’s chest swells with warmth as the boy presses his prized possession into Ilya’s hands. Ilya takes it carefully, cradling the well-loved toy in his arms before he gives it a gentle squeeze.

“Ah,” he sighs, still hugging the soft alligator, “Chompy is a miracle worker. I feel better already.” It’s true, too. The headache is still there, but it’s hard to dwell on it in the face of Arthur’s cuteness. He slowly releases his hold. “Thank you Doctor Arthur.”

“I’m not a doctor,” Arthur says very seriously.

“A nurse, then?” Ilya suggests.

“No,” Arthur says, even more sternly.

“Hmm, maybe you are a...Shane, what is the one that gives pills?”

“A drug dealer?” Shane asks.

“No,” Ilya scoffs. “At the hospital.”

“Oh. A pharmacist?”

“A pharmacist,” Ilya agrees, holding Chompy up and considering the toy closely. “You give good medicine.”

“I’m just a kid,” Arthur says, and Ilya can’t smother his smile at the boy’s blunt sincerity.

“For now,” Ilya agrees. “But some day, maybe you are a great doctor or nurse or pharmacist. You can help many people. I know it.”

Rather than the smile Ilya was expecting, Arthur tilts his head to the side, his small brows furrowed. “Maybe,” he says finally.

“Thank you,” Ilya says again, and holds Chompy out to him. He’s a bit surprised when a second later Arthur clambers onto the couch and gives him a big hug before taking the alligator back and shuffling away.

Ilya sighs, sinking back into the sofa. He has to suppress a moan as he feels warm fingers slide along the nape of his neck.

“How’re you doing?” Shane asks. “Need to lie down for a bit?”

“No,” he replies, mostly truthfully as he melts into his fiancé’s touch. “I am—”

“You *fucker*!” Hayden squawks.

“Swear jar!” Jade and Shane chorus at the same time as Jackie says, “Hayden!”

Despite the painful decibels of the voices around him, Ilya grins.

“Did you see what he wrote?” Hayden waves his cast around in outrage. He’s still cradling Amber with his good arm. Maybe he’s more athletic than Ilya gives him credit for.

Jackie grabs his arm and steadies it enough that the text is legible.

There, written in large block letters across the back of Hayden’s wrist are the words:

ROZANOV’S

#1 FAN

Shane sighs, and scratches his nails through Ilya’s hair. If it was meant to be a punishment, it fails miserably.

“What?” Ilya raises an inquiring eyebrow. “Is not true?”

“I don’t even like you!” Hayden protests.

“Liar,” Ilya declares. “You defended my honor.”

Hayden scoffs. “I punched a raging homophobe. You were barely even involved.”

“But everyone says so,” Ilya insists. “Is on the news.”

Shane’s fingernails bite a little harder into Ilya’s scalp in warning.

“Shane, I’m going to murder your boyfriend,” Hayden deadpans.

“Fiancé,” Ilya corrects smugly.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” Hayden groans, then he turns to his wife and says, “Here,” and foists Amber into her arms. The fact that Jackie’s audibly laughing probably isn’t helping to cool his rage. He grabs the Sharpie off the coffee table and uncaps it with his teeth.

“What are you doing?” Ilya demands.

Hayden gives him a steely glare before clumsily fisting the marker in his left hand.

“No, you’ll ruin it!”

“Good!” Hayden growls out as he angrily scratches the pen over Ilya’s words. Then his brow furrows with concentration as he starts to write something new.

Shane leans forward. “Do you always have to antagonize him?” he whispers into Ilya’s ear.

“Antaga–what?” Ilya asks. “What is this word? Is big word, and my brain is hurt.”

Shane rolls his eyes. “Do you always have to pick on Hayden?”

“He should not make it so easy,” Ilya says unrepentantly, “Or so fun. I like his little squawks.”

Shane snorts. “Don’t be such a bully. He’s my best friend.”

“There!” Hayden says, triumph in his voice as he brandishes the cast in front of Ilya. His edits are messy but legible, and the message now reads:

ROZANOV’S

██████

A DiCk

“See,” Ilya says, turning to Shane. “He bullies me back.”

“No,” Jackie shakes her head as she catches sight of the cast. “Absolutely not.”

“But it’s true!” Hayden insists. “He is a dick.”

Rather than debating her husband, Jackie simply narrows her eyes. “You’re not walking around our house, around our *children*, with that written on your arm.”

“Fine,” Hayden mutters in defeat, picking up the Sharpie and going to work again. A minute later he asks, “Better?”

The revised message reads:

ROZANOV’S

██████

A ██████

BAd GuY

Shane lets out a soft laugh and Jackie gives her husband an unimpressed look.

Ilya, meanwhile, clutches his fists to his chest and makes a pained face. “Stabbed in the back by my own personal defender!” he groans dramatically. “I am devastated! Betrayed!”

“Do you need Chompy again, Uncle Ilya?” Arthur asks, face scrunched in concern.

“Oh my god,” Hayden moans. “Why is no one on *my* side?”

“Because Uncle Ilya is the best,” Ruby calls from across the room.

“Alright kids,” Jackie cuts in, as Hayden spins indignantly to face his daughter. “As fun as this has been, I think that’s about as much bickering as I can handle for one afternoon. Thanks for having us, guys,” she nods to Shane and Ilya, and with impressive efficiency, she gathers their things and herds her gaggle of children and her still grumpy husband out the door.

“Jackie is amazing,” Ilya says, when the house is once again blessedly quiet.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees, propping his hip against the arm of the couch next to Ilya, a small smile on his face.

“How did Hayden manage to marry her?”

Shane snorts. “What, jealous?”

“No,” Ilya says immediately, “Why would I be jealous of Hayden when I have you?” He snakes his good arm around Shane’s waist and yanks.

“Careful!” Shane yelps as he tumbles sideways, scrambling to avoid putting pressure anywhere Ilya’s still hurt. It’s a lot of places, and Ilya momentarily regrets the rash action as his neck and shoulder clamor angrily at him for jostling them about, but when the end result is his hot husband in his lap looking like a startled cat, he can’t regret it for long.

“Jesus,” Shane mutters. “Don’t hurt yourself. You’re seriously going to give me gray hair.”

“Hmm.” Ilya tugs at Shane, adjusting his limbs into a more comfortable sprawl that avoids Ilya’s sore spots. Shane goes easily, moving where directed despite the little worried crease in his brow. “Would be hot, I think. Dignified.” He runs the fingers of his usable arm through Shane’s dark hair. “Maybe I should stress you out more.”

“Please don’t,” Shane says, and he’s smiling but his eyes are serious. He traces the still-tender bruise on Ilya’s left cheek. “If you really want me prematurely gray, I can dye my hair, okay? Just, try not to get hurt anymore.”

“Okay, возлюбленный,” Ilya says softly, hugging him close. “I will try.”



Ilya knows concussion protocols. This isn't, as his American teammates might say, his first rodeo. He knows he's supposed to rest his mind and body. No exercise, no overthinking, no screens. Unfortunately, his current concussion has been particularly light-sensitive, so both the doctors and Shane have been strictly enforcing the no screens part of that equation. But what both the doctors and Shane have failed to take into account is the fact that Ilya might literally die of curiosity if he can't watch the ESPN clip that the rest of the world has already seen.

So rather than napping on the couch with a mask over his eyes like he should be, Ilya is peering at his phone, pilfered from Shane's bedside drawer while he was in the shower. He scrolls through his contacts, squinting despite lowering the screen's brightness. When he finds Harris's number, he gives a little grunt of triumph and hits call.

"Ilya!"

Ilya winces and quickly turns the volume on his phone down. "Hello, Harris," he replies, smiling despite the slight ringing in his ears. He can't help it. The Centaur's Social Media Manager is basically a walking ray of sunshine.

"How are you feeling? How's your head?"

"Still attached," Ilya says quietly. He can hear Shane rustling around upstairs, and he does not want him to know that he's talking on the phone.

"Glad to hear it," Harris replies. "How's your recovery going? I heard you'll be out at least three weeks?"

"Hmm." Ilya frowns. "Maybe. But listen, I need to ask a favor."

"Of course. Do you want a visit from Chiron?"

"Yes," Ilya replies immediately. Chiron, the Centaurs' official team dog, is second only to Shane in Ilya's affections. Then he remembers why he called. "Ah, I mean, yes, but that is not the favor I need."

"Alright, what is it?"

"Do you have link to the ESPN segment of my injury?"

"Of course. It's all over the place. You know how to use Google, right?"

"Yes. But there are too many stupid sites with opinion pieces and public commentary. I just want the broadcast with Hollander's comments. Was aired on ESPN, I think."

“Alright, you sure you want to watch it?” Harris asks, sounding uncharacteristically hesitant. “That was a pretty nasty hit.”

“Yes.” He wants to know what the world saw. What they heard. What Shane had said in those moments when he was down on the ice.

“Okay. Give me a second to find the link... The original broadcast was the Voyageurs home feed, and then ESPN replayed the clip of it, so—No, Chiron, get *down!*” Harris’ suddenly frantic voice is followed by a loud thump, a startled curse, and then the sound of helpless laughter.

Ilya holds the phone away from his ear for a moment until he can dial the volume down even further. “Everything okay?” he asks, as he gingerly puts the phone back to his ear.

“Yeah, sorry. Troy just got here and Chiron’s a little overexcited. He hasn’t quite figured out how gravity works yet.”

“Gravity can be challenging,” Ilya agrees with the profound understanding of someone who straps knives to his feet and runs on ice for a living. “Say hi to Barrett for me.”

“Sure thing. And I just texted you the link.”

“Got it,” Ilya says as his phone buzzes.

“Wait, are you supposed to be watching stuff? Isn’t it against concussion protocol or something?”

“Is fine,” Ilya lies. “Thank you!”

He hangs up before Harris can say anything else, in part to head off more questions, and in part because he can hear Shane coming down the stairs. He shoves the phone under a decorative throw pillow and leans back against the arm of the sofa, closing his eyes and pretending to rest.

Shane’s footsteps approach the couch, then a gentle hand cups his jaw, and a thumb strokes across his cheek. “Hey,” Shane says softly. “How are you doing?”

“Mmm, okay.” Ilya leans into Shane’s palm as he blinks his eyes open.

“I’m going to run to the store and grab some groceries. Do you want anything?”

“Chocolate,” Ilya says immediately. “And cheesecake. And a bag of Funyuns.”

“Gross.” Shane makes a face, but then his eyes linger for a moment on Ilya’s bruised cheek and his expression softens. “Fine. Do you want anything with actual nutritional value to wash those down?”

“No.” Ilya grins. “There is enough rabbit food here already. I will not die of scurvy.”

Shane lets out a startled laugh. “How do you know that word?”

“There was a documentary on pirates a few weeks ago,” he explains. “I watched it. Pirates are cool.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Shane decides. “And I’m leaving. Do you need anything before I head out?”

“No. I’m good.”

“Okay. I’ll be back soon.”

Ilya hears the front door open and close, then the sound of Shane’s car backing out of the drive. When he’s sure Shane’s gone, he retrieves his phone from under the throw pillow, opens Harris’ text, and clicks the link.

The video’s only four minutes and twenty-seven seconds long. Less than five minutes. Is that all the time it takes to derail the course of a life? Ilya shouldn’t be surprised. After all, it had only taken a few heartbeats, a warm handshake, and some beautiful freckles to completely alter the trajectory of his life the first time.

He hits play.

The video starts in the ESPN news room where the usual three anchors sit behind a long, glowing desk. The familiar intro music sounds and title graphics swirl around them before the camera zooms in on Tobias Greenwell, a retired defenseman from San Jose.

“Well, there’s some shocking news in the hockey world tonight, Ted,” Greenwell says.

“I’ll say. And we’re not talking about the Buffalo win over the Admirals this morning, as startling as that was.” All three men laugh.

“No, this news is a bit more surprising than that, isn’t it Rob?”

“Indeed. Honestly, I’m not sure anyone will believe us if they don’t see it with their own eyes. So let’s just roll the clip from tonight’s game in Montreal.”

The clip starts mid-play, with the voice of longtime Montreal commentator Tom Mitchell narrating the action.

“Hollander takes the puck deep into Centaurs’ territory,” Mitchell says, as Ilya watches his smaller self chase Shane down and slam him against the boards. “There’s a battle behind the Centaur’s net. Hollander’s on the puck, but Rozanov’s on him, poking hard with his stick, giving him no breathing room.”

Ilya lets out a soft huff of laughter. Will the commentators be more careful about accidental innuendos now that they know about him and Shane? He hopes not.

“And it’s Rozanov freeing the puck, shooting off a pass to Haas.” The second announcer, Danny Higgins, says. “They’re flying up the ice. Haas passes to Rozanov and—”

Even knowing what's going to happen, Ilya winces when the hit comes. He watches their bodies collide, sees the moment the hit turns from clean to dirty, the way Wilson's stick snaps up and catches him in the face. Ilya's cartwheeling forward, momentum carrying his body through the air, and some part of him is reliving it, the weightlessness, the blinding pain in his cheek. Then he hits the ice headfirst.

"-Ouch!" Mitchell cuts in. "That was a violent check by Wilson. Rozanov's down on the ice, not moving."

"We've got a scrum in the corner. Looks like Dykstra and Barrett took exception to the rough treatment of their captain. Wilson's down, but Comeau is joining the fray." The camera is zoomed in on the fight, as bodies in black and red smash into bodies in blue. Ilya and Shane aren't on the screen at all. "You know, that hit almost felt personal. I wonder if there's any bad blood between those two."

Ilya snorts.

"Maybe," Mitchell replies. "Wilson did play for Boston before he was traded to Montreal. That would mean Rozanov was his captain for a few years."

Wilson had practically worshiped him in Boston, followed him around in the clubs like a stray puppy hoping for scraps. As far as Ilya's aware, the only thing he'd done that had pissed Wilson off was leaving Boston for Ottawa.

"Well, either way, the linemen are going to have their hands full here. I think the whole team's in on this one."

"Not the whole team. What's Hollander doing?" Mitchell asks. The camera view changes, and there, at center ice, is Shane kneeling beside Ilya, holding his hand.

"Looks like he's checking on Rozanov, who does seem to be moving a little bit at least. The medical team's on their way out with a stretcher."

"I tell you, Danny, these guys may compete hard on the ice, but it's great to see their rivalry doesn't stand in the way of sportsmanship."

Ilya wants to laugh. To cry. To *scream*. How can these men not see the truth? Shane's almost as white as the ice, and even on his tiny cell phone screen, with his eyes half squinted against the glare, Ilya can see the tremors running through his body.

"True. This level of respect from one great player to another should really be applauded."

A ref skates up behind Shane and lays a hand on his shoulder as the medical team surrounds Ilya's prone form.

"Looks like the lineman's asking Hollander to return to his bench, but there seems to be some sort of issue..."

"Woah," Higgins interrupts. "Is that Pike attacking Wilson?" The camera view shifts again, and suddenly Hayden is center screen, his face a snarl of pure rage as he throws himself at the

much taller Wilson. Wilson looks utterly bemused for half a second before Hayden's punch connects.

"It is!" Mitchell says. "He's dropped his gloves. Pike's fighting his own teammate!"

Hayden's fury seems to make up for the size difference. He gets in three good hits, and knocks Wilson's helmet off before the hulking defenseman manages to react. There's blood on Hayden's knuckles and on Wilson's teeth by the time the big man brings his arm up to fend off the blows.

"Well, you don't see that every day!" Higgins sounds simultaneously horrified and delighted.

"You can say that again. I definitely didn't have Voyageur-on-Voyageur violence on my bingo card for this season." Mitchell lets out a hearty chuckle.

"The linemen are trying to separate them, but the whole team's piling back in again. I haven't seen a fight like this since...well if we include Pike punching a member of his own team, I've never seen a fight like this."

The commentators watch in silence for a few moments as chaos reigns. Evan, Troy, and Hayden are pummeling Wilson while Comeau and the refs try to pull them apart. J.J.'s wrestling Holmberg with one arm and trying to fend off Luca with the other.

"There's definitely some hot tempers on the ice tonight. I wonder what—"

"Tom," Higgins interrupts, "What's happening down there with Rozanov and Hollander?"

The camera flashes back to center ice. Ilya's been strapped to the stretcher, and Shane's still gripping his hand. "The medical team's wheeling Rozanov off the ice, and Hollander is..." Mitchell stumbles to a halt, clearly struggling to summarize what he's seeing. "He appears to be holding Rozanov's hand. They're leaving the ice together."

There's a long moment of silence as the camera follows the stretcher's progress.

The view cuts back to the top box, where Mitchell and Higgins are staring at each other, mouths agape.

Mitchell recovers first, blinking hard and clearing his throat. "Well," he starts, pauses, and blinks again. "I'm honestly not quite sure what to make of that. We're less than halfway through the game, and the captains of both teams just left the ice."

"I understand why Rozanov's gone. Anyone gets hit that hard and they're going to need some medical attention. But Hollander?"

"And let's not forget that Hayden Pike just went nuclear on his own teammate. He's usually a pretty steady guy. By all reports, he's more of a peacemaker than a fighter. What do you think set him off?"

"Something had to. Did you see the look on his face? That wasn't a minor argument."

“Definitely not,” Mitchell agrees, then pauses for a moment, putting his hand to his ear. “Hang on. Yes, I’m being told that we actually have some footage that could clear up a few things. Hollander’s wearing a mic tonight for our Mic’d Up Montreal segment, and, yes, I’m being told that our team has a clip of the incident lined up. Let’s take a look, and see what caused all of that chaos.”

The audio quality suddenly changes as the camera flashes back to the ice. This time, the view is focused solely on center ice, where Ilya’s still body is lying. Ilya hears the sound of skates skidding and the thump of knees on ice as the video shows Shane coming to a stop next to his prone form.

“Ilya?” Ilya swallows hard as he hears Shane’s voice. It’s more a gasp than anything. Thin and broken. Shane’s fear in this moment is a tangible thing, and for the first time, he wonders if he actually wants to watch this.

“Shane?” His own voice sounds no better. Pained and groaning as the body on the screen rolls towards Shane, towards the comfort and safety he offers.

Distantly, the sounds of a scrum erupt. Ilya can hear Evan yelling, “You *fucker*! What the hell was that?”

“I’m here,” Shane replies.

“Shane?” Ilya watches as his on-screen double looks vaguely around and tries to lift his arm. “What happened?”

Shane removes his gloves and takes Ilya’s hand. “You took a bad hit. Flipped headfirst into the ice. Are you okay?”

The sounds of the scrum behind them grow louder. Ilya hears the unsteady scuffing of skates against ice, a few thumps against the boards and a lot of cursing as one of the refs and the medical team skate up to Shane.

“Hollander, get back to your bench,” the ref demands.

Shane’s freckles stand out starkly against his bloodless cheeks as he sits stubbornly, refusing to move.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the background, Ilya hears Wilson’s voice say, “Ah, Christ, is Rozanov a fucking faggot, too? Guess I’m glad I never left him alone with my kids.”

“Hollander, back off,” the ref says, at the same time as Hayden’s voice yells “*You fucking piece of shit!*” and the sounds of fighting and noise from the stands surge once again.

“I can’t. I…” Shane gasps, and Ilya’s shaking now as he watches this, the phone unsteady in his trembling fingers. He can see the fear in Shane’s face, see the curl of his spine when the ref places a hand on his shoulder and tries to move him manually.

“You need to go back to your bench, Hollander,” the ref repeats. “They have to get Rozanov to the hospital.”

“I have to go with him,” Shane says, barely audible now over the chaos behind him.

“Go with him?”

“Don’t go,” Ilya hears his own voice, weak and confused, call out. And he remembers it vividly, his recurring dream of his mother visiting him in his half-lucid state. Her beautiful face fading as the arena lights grew brighter over his head. “Я хочу познакомить вас с Шейном. Don’t go.”

The ref is still talking to Shane, still trying to persuade him to leave Ilya’s side, but Ilya can barely hear over the blood rushing in his ears. Can only just see the screen through the tears in his eyes.

It’s Shane’s voice that grounds him, that brings him back as he says, “I have to go with him.”

Ilya swipes away the tears as a new voice, one of the medics, says, “I’m sorry, sir, you’d have to be family to go with him.”

And then Shane looks up and meets the medic’s gaze. Ilya can see the moment Shane makes his decision. His shoulders straighten, and there’s an obstinate set to his jaw. And then Shane, vigilantly private, chronically anxious Shane, says, “He’s my fiancé.”

Someone laughs. The ref says, “That isn’t funny. Back to the bench, or it’ll be a misconduct.”

“I’m not joking,” Shane replies, and his voice is steady, full of conviction. And Ilya knows, he knows that Shane is literally facing down one of his worst nightmares. The threat of public exposure has plagued their relationship for over a decade. Ilya had watched it happen in real time when they were discovered at the cottage, watched Shane pace and rant and shake even in the privacy of his own home. But here, in front of thousands of live viewers, and television audiences alike, Shane’s steady as a rock. Ilya’s heart swells as he watches his brave, beautiful man.

“I love him,” Shane says, and the words hit Ilya like they did the first time Shane uttered them, cocooned in his home, in his bed at the cottage. It had just been the two of them, then, and Ilya felt gutted and loved in equal measure as Shane scaled the walls he’d built around his softest and most vulnerable self, climbed inside, and held him in a warm embrace. “We’re getting married.” Ilya’s chest feels full to bursting now with fondness and pride and wonder. What a miracle it is to be loved by this man.

On screen, Shane tugs his chain out from under his jersey, and the ref looks between the ring he holds up and the one on Ilya’s chest in confusion.

Ilya hears his own loopy voice call out “Shane?” again, and watches the stubborn resolve on Shane’s face crumble back into concern.

“I’m here,” Shane says, as the ref’s expression slides from confusion into something that might be sympathy.

“We have to get him off the ice. If you can let go for just a second...” the medic prompts, and Shane finally releases his hand, watching stony faced until Ilya is transferred onto the stretcher. As soon as Ilya’s strapped in, Shane skates forward, taking his hand again without hesitation. When the medics wheel the stretcher off the ice, Shane is right by his side.

“You know,” Mitchell says as the video cuts back to the top box, “I think I may need to write out a new bingo card for this season.”

Ilya pauses the video. There’s still a bit of it left, but he doesn’t need to see the talking heads dissect what they think they saw. Ilya knows what happened, knows the courage it took for Shane to do what he did and say what he said. He doesn’t need anyone else to analyze it for him. Instead, he drags the progress bar back until Shane’s determined face fills his screen, then hits play.

“I’m not joking. I love him. We’re getting married.”

So few words that hold so much meaning.

He rewinds again.

“I’m not joking. I love him. We’re getting married.”

And again.

“I’m not joking. I love him. We’re getting married.”

And again.



When Shane’s car pulls into the drive half an hour later, Ilya is actually resting his eyes like he’s supposed to be. His head is aching, but he has no idea whether it’s thanks to the light of the screen or the emotional whiplash.

“I’m back,” Shane says unnecessarily, as he shoves open the door, arms loaded with bags.

“Did you get Funyuns?” Ilya asks with unfeigned interest as he pushes himself up on his elbows and peers over the back of the couch.

“Yes,” Shane says. “And chocolate and cheesecake too.”

“You spoil me,” Ilya says. Then he catches sight of Shane’s expression, the tension in his jaw and the crease in his brow, and asks, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. The store was...interesting. I’d sort of forgotten, you know? That people know now.”

Ilya’s stomach clenches. He’d been so invested in watching the video that he hadn’t even stopped to think that Shane was leaving the safety of home to face the churning maelstrom of judgment and public opinion outside.

“Are you okay?” he demands, gaze raking over Shane for signs of...he’s not even sure what. A fight? Shane looks normal, a bit stressed maybe, but Ilya knows words can hurt far worse than a fist without leaving any physical marks. “What happened?”

“Nothing. I mean, nothing major. I got a few looks from people,” Shane says as he walks into the kitchen and sets down the grocery bags. The way he says ‘looks’ lets Ilya know they weren’t friendly, and Ilya can almost physically feel the discomfort radiating off of him. Shane tolerates the public aspects of being a star so he can play the sport he loves, but he’s never relished it like some players Ilya knows. And now, thanks to Ilya, that attention is going to be exponentially higher.

“There was a couple in the store wearing our jerseys, though,” Shane says as he opens the fridge and starts putting the groceries away.

Ilya blinks. “Really?”

“Yeah. The wife was in yours and the husband was in mine. They were holding hands. It was cute, and they, uh. They caught me staring at them, and came over and...”

Ilya holds his breath.

“They congratulated me. Us. And they said...” He pauses, with Ilya’s cheesecake in his hand and swallows. “They said thank you. I guess they’ve always rooted for different teams, and now they have something to root for together.”

“Come here,” Ilya demands, suddenly desperate to touch him.

Shane smiles, and slides the cheesecake into the fridge, shutting the door before heading over to join Ilya on the couch. Ilya immediately grabs him, arms winding around Shane’s ribs, tugging him in close. If he had his way, he’d never let him go.

Later, Ilya waits until Shane is busy in the kitchen making his gross pre-workout protein smoothie to pull his phone out from under the couch cushions where he'd stashed it earlier.

He opens a text thread he rarely visits. *Thank you*, he types, then hits send.

It only takes a second before "Jackie's Annoying Husband" replies, *for what?*

I watched the video. He doesn't specify which one. Doesn't have to.

It takes a little longer for Hayden to reply this time. Three dots appear, disappear, and appear again before the message comes through. *Wilson got a two game suspension. He'll be back in the locker room on Thursday.*

Ilya grits his teeth. He shouldn't be surprised. He knows how the league works, what it chooses to punish, what it chooses to ignore. He closes his eyes and releases a long, tired breath.

"You okay?" Shane calls from the kitchen. How did he even hear him over the sounds of the blender and chickpeas and fiber?

"Fine," Ilya calls back.

"Do you need anything?"

Yes, Ilya thinks. I need the world to wake up, to stop being so blind and so stuck, to celebrate love instead of condoning hate. "No," he says aloud. "I'm fine. Just tired." It's true in a way.

He looks down at his phone and types out, *Will you punch him again?*

This time, Hayden's reply is almost instantaneous. *Maybe.* Three dots reappear immediately, and Ilya just stops himself from barking out a laugh when he reads, *The cast might make it a bit more effective.*

Would that be considered armed assault? He shoots back. *Shane will miss you if you are in prison.*

Shane would visit me in prison.

True.

Anyway, no jury would convict me once they meet that asshole.

Ilya wishes that were also true. He sits in silence for a moment, then glances down at his phone when the screen lights up again.

Thought you might like to see Ruby's new addition to my cast. She did it while I was asleep yesterday.

It takes a second for the slightly blurry photo of Hayden's neon-pink cast to load. Ilya's initial signature is still clear, along with Hayden's half-assed edits, but there, in a shaky child's

handwriting, two new words are visible. The message now reads:

uncle

ROZANOV'S

not [REDACTED]

A [REDACTED]

BAd GuY

Ilya laughs, then blinks hard against a sudden stinging in his eyes. *Ruby is best*. He sends. *Surprised you have not colored over it yet.*

She's the worst, Hayden immediately contradicts. *She hid all the sharpies* 😬

My hero, Ilya sends back, then hesitates for just a second before following it up with, *Must run in the family.*

"Hey, you're not supposed to be texting," Shane admonishes as he comes into the living room, gross smoothie in hand, and catches sight of Ilya staring at his phone.

"Is okay," Ilya says. "My brain hurts only a little."

"If it's hurting, stop."

"Okay," Ilya agrees easily. "Conversation is done anyways."

"Who were you texting?"

"Why?" Ilya asks.

"So I know who to yell at."

"Hayden," Ilya says, immediately throwing Shane's best friend under the bus.

Shane rolls his eyes. "Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. Listen." He hits call, then speaker and holds the phone out between them.

It rings once, then Hayden says, "What do you want, Rozanov?"

"Shane does not believe we were texting."

"What?"

"He asked who I was texting. I say you. He does not believe me. So I call for evidence."

Hayden huffs out a sigh. "Yes, we were texting."

"See?" Ilya says.

Shane narrows his eyes at the phone. "You know he's not supposed to be on screens, right?"

"What?" Hayden sounds flustered. "No. It's been, like, five days, right?"

“Doctor’s orders,” Shane says, shooting Ilya a stern look.

“Damn it, Rozanov,” Hayden curses. “You just had to get me in trouble.”

“Yes,” Ilya admits unrepentantly.

“Anyways,” Shane cuts in before they can settle into their normal bickering. “No more texting until his brain is back to normal.”

“His brain has never been normal.” Hayden mutters.

“Be nice,” Shane says.

“Yes, Hayden. Be gentle with my precious brain. No more texts.”

“You started it!” Hayden protests indignantly.

“Now you sound like Jade,” Ilya points out.

“Well, Jade is usually telling the truth. Ruby is a menace, just like you. You’re a massive dick, you know that?”

“No, I have a massive—”

“Ilya,” Shane warns.

“And on that note,” Hayden says, “I’m hanging up. Have a good day, boys.”

“Goodbye Hayden,” Ilya singsongs as Shane says, “Bye Hayd.”

The screen goes dark as the call ends.

“Phone,” Shane holds out his hand expectantly.

Ilya hands it over easily. He’s seen what he wanted to see, after all. But as Shane walks out of the room, he calls, “Wait.” When Shane turns back to him, he asks, “Can I listen to it one more time?”

“To what?” Shane asks.

“Your words. On the ice.”

Shane blinks. “You watched the video?”

“Yes.”

“God,” he mutters. “Why did you want to watch that? It was awful.”

“I wanted to know what happened. What you said.”

“I could have told you if you’d asked. You really shouldn’t be looking at something that bright. The doctor said...”

“I know,” Ilya admits. “And I won’t look. Just want to hear your voice say it again.”

Shane blinks. “Say what?”

“What you said on the ice in front of all of those people. That you love me. That we’re getting married.”

“Idiot,” Shane says fondly. “You don’t need a video for that. I’m right here. I love you. We’re getting married.”

Ilya leans back against the arm of the couch. There’s still a lot of unanswered questions, a lot of shocked and angry people out there who aren’t going to understand them or their relationship. But there’s also a couple in Montreal wearing their jerseys, and friends and family who have their backs. He’s still not sure what either of their teams is going to do in the long run, or how everything’s going to play out, but Ilya is certain of one thing, at least. Together, they can do anything.

He meets Shane’s eyes and smiles. “I love you, too.”

End Notes

Thank you so much to anyone who has read, left kudos, and commented on this fic. Being a part of this fandom has been an absolute joy. Thank you also to my amazing friend who looked over chapter 2 to make sure it made some semblance of sense. I think the story is done at this point, but I thought the story was done after chapter 1, so who knows 😊

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