

Tubes of Neon Light, Refracted

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Tubes of Neon Light, Refracted

by [bluerosebouquet](#)

Summary

His entire body felt tense as the door was pushed open. He trained his eyes on the floor, monologuing before he could stop himself,

“Just so you know, my buddies paid for this dance for me and I’m sure you’re very nice and very pretty and good at what you do but I’m actually gay so you can just- Do what you need to do but I don’t want you to be offended because I’m not as into this as you’re probably... usually...used to...”

He trailed away as he looked up, and met the eyes of the very tall, very broad, very handsome man leaning against the doorframe.

They stared at each other, and Shane blinked, struck dumb.

Or, the night of JJ's bachelor party, Shane is forced into a lap dance he very much does not want. Until he does, and everything changes.

Notes

Happy New Year!! My first long one for hollanov is here!

Was this supposed to be yet another freaked out, horny oneshot? Yes. Did it devolve into something much longer and more emotional? Yes.

Anyway, there may be some tags added, but I'm hoping for a four parter with longer chapters (we'll see if I can stick to that, lol). Very excited to share this one with y'all!

[playlist here](#)

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

Chapter 1: no shame in the mood



“Don’t be a fucking buzzkill, Hollander!” JJ was hitting him on the back, even as he was shoved forward, “It’s my bachelor party!”

“Right, of course,” Shane voice sounded distant, even to his own ears. He stared up at the neon lights of the club in downtown Montreal like they were flashing his death date.

It wasn’t just that he was, for the most part, deeply uncomfortable in clubs of any kind, or that most of the team was already drunk and he was sober, there was the added shit layer that this was a very upscale strip club, and Shane couldn’t think of a place that he would want to be less in the world.

“Come on Shane,” Hayden laughed, smacking him in the same place in the middle of his back, “Let me live vicariously through you. Jackie will kill me if I even look at one of them.”

Jackie probably had the right idea, he thought privately, even as he was steered inside, borne on a tide of extremely drunk, boisterous Montreal Metros.

It was a big space, darkly lit by strips of multicolored neon. A large bar dominated the back wall, while several stages split the rest of the room. Women and a few men were walking around with platters of drinks, bending over booths and small tables, angling themselves to stay out of the way of the stages as much as possible.

Against his will, Shane was steered back towards a large booth in the center of the place, with a few of every stage. He squeezed himself between JJ and Hayden, feeling slightly overwhelmed by the noise of the team, the music thrumming through the place, and the clinking of glass as shots were set down in front of all of them.

“Can’t avoid it this time, Captain!” several people chorused, and Shane forced a smile, picking up the shot glass and throwing back the liquid inside, keeping a determinedly straight face even as it

burned all the way down his throat, settling in his chest, loosening the knot there just slightly.

He tried to keep up with the multiple conversations flowing around him, sipping on a beer that had been placed in front of him by a very pretty blonde, and laughed as the others shoved JJ up to the front of a stage, a stack of bills in his hand, and one of those tacky sashes that said “bride” around his neck.

He was just starting to relax, when JJ seized the back of his neck, pulling him out of their booth, and standing him in front of the entire table.

“One more surprise,” he was grinning in the way Shane associated with imminent misery, and pulled him towards a side hall, lined with private rooms.

Immediately, he balked, trying to back away, but he hit a solid wall of the others behind him, blocking him in.

“Shane! Shane! Shane! Shane! Shane!” they were chanting, and he caught sight of Hayden, his phone up, a grin on his face.

“Hayden-” Shane tried to implore him, but everyone was laughing as he was led into one of the small, separate rooms, and shoved down into a plush leather armchair.

“A gift for you, Captain!” JJ saluted him, his eyes sparkling with laughter, “And for me too!”

As the door shut behind him, Shane was nearly hyperventilating. He had never even set foot in a strip club before, let alone had a private dance. Was he supposed to touch? Would that be offensive? Would it be even more offensive if he didn’t try to touch? Should he tell her that he was gay, just to put her at ease? Then at least she would know it wasn’t her problem that he couldn’t get hard when she danced on him.

If she danced on him, he had no fucking clue.

He thought about trying to bolt out the door, dodge around the rest of the guys and just try to pretend that he had had a good time when they were good and drunk and about to forget about him.

His entire body felt tense as the door was pushed open. He trained his eyes on the floor, monologuing before he could stop himself,

“Just so you know, my buddies paid for this dance for me and I’m sure you’re very nice and very pretty and good at what you do but I’m actually gay so you can just- Do what you need to do but I don’t want you to be offended because I’m not as into this as you’re probably...usually...used to...”

He trailed away as he looked up, and met the eyes of the very tall, very broad, very handsome man leaning against the doorframe.

They stared at each other, and Shane blinked, struck dumb.

He was wearing a meshy sort of shirt, so that his skin shown clean through, and shorter shorts than the ones Shane used for his workouts, with a kind of patterned tights situation...*fishnets*, Shane thought they were called, tucked into heavy boots.

He was well-muscled, almost like a professional athlete, and his light brown hair curled in a delicate way, long enough to brush low on his forehead and the back of his neck.

And if all this wasn't enough, his face looked like those sculptures he had seen in museums the few times Rose had dragged him into one. He had a strong nose, strong jaw, cheeks that were perfectly hollowed, and eyes that were sharp and calculating.

He was by far the most gorgeous person that Shane had ever seen. Ever.

His eyebrow arched as he looked at Shane, and he blushed, realizing that he had absolutely been staring at him for way too long.

"Sorry," he mumbled, eyes flicking back to the floor again, "I didn't- Uh- Sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" Shane looked up, a shiver traveling down his spine involuntarily at the deep voice, heavy with an accent that he thought may be German or Russian or something, "You did not do anything."

"Yeah," he tried to get a grip on himself, and fixed his eyes on a point just above the man's shoulder, "Yeah but- I'm not- A- I wouldn't be a good- I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"That is obvious," he moved into the room, closing the door with a snap behind him, and Shane jumped, "No one is going to kill you."

"Yeah," he shook his head, wishing very much that he could disappear into the floor, "Yeah sorry, I just- This isn't- I've-"

The man was moving closer to him, and Shane clenched his jaw, determined not to stare at his thick thighs or his broad shoulders.

He sat down on the little raised stage in the center of the room, and watched Shane steadily, his eyes trailing down his face, to the fists clenched in his lap, and his mouth curled up into a half sort of smile.

Shane looked pointedly in the other direction.

"Your friends do not know you are gay?" he asked, and the question was so direct that Shane's eyes snapped to his again.

"I- I mean- Not- I don't- I don't think so. I haven't- Told them."

The man didn't take his eyes off Shane's face, but his head listed to the side,

"So this is...a prank for them? Me?"

"I have no idea," Shane said honestly, "I don't- It's my friend JJ's bachelor party and- I don't know how any of this works."

"Obviously."

"Listen," he cast around, realizing he didn't know his name,

“James,” he supplied, sticking out his hand, and Shane couldn’t help but break out of his own panic a little, smiling as he took it. It was strong and calloused and-

Shit. *Focus*.

“Shane,” he cut his eyes back towards his face, “You can just- Tell them that you did whatever and- Keep whatever they paid you. And we can just- Go our separate ways.”

James inclined his head back, studying Shane in a way that made him feel exposed. He almost wanted to physically cover himself with his hands, even though that was silly and stupid and humiliating.

“Is what you want?” he asked, his voice washing over Shane so that it took him a second before he was taking in that he had actually asked him a question.

“What?”

“You want that? To pretend?”

The question drew him up short.

It’s what he *should* do. It would make the team laugh and he could reasonably go back out there and pretend like it had been a big prank and take it in stride.

It would be much harder to pretend like he didn’t think this man was the most attractive person he had ever seen if they did anything else.

But then again...

“I-” he started, but his voice trailed away as his eyes traveled down his chest. He was only a couple of feet away now, and Shane could see the defined muscles of his pectorals through his mesh shirt, down to the slight soft of his stomach, and the trail of hair that sneaked down below the waistband of his shorts.

Fuck.

He tore his eyes away, back up to meet James’, and there was a challenge there, open for Shane to take.

He swallowed, his teeth catching his bottom lip, and he watched James watch him, his eyes wandering over his face, almost like he could touch him just by looking.

“No,” he finally said, shaking his head slightly, “I don’t want- To pretend.”

There was something like triumph in his eyes, and he stood, looming over Shane in his armchair, moving forward until he was standing in between his legs. Shane looked up at him, wide-eyed, knowing that there was blank fear all over his face, but he reached down, his thumb dragging along Shane’s bottom lip.

It was feather-light, but Shane leaned into the contact shamelessly, his eyes fluttering, completely forgetting about where he was or what he was doing.

“What do you want?” his voice was low, clicked into a lower register, probably something that he used with the people that paid him, and Shane immediately started to overthink.

He had no fucking clue what he wanted, or how to ask for it.

“I-” he couldn’t quite make himself lean away from him, but tried to scramble for the right answer anyway, “Uh- Whatever you- I don’t-”

“Ah,” James’ voice sounded like he had realized something, “I see. You let me.”

“Let you...? Do what?”

“Everything,” he caught Shane’s chin in his hand, and Shane was suddenly spellbound, completely unable to move, “I’ll do everything, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he agreed at once, “Yeah.”

With the slightest lift of his mouth, James pulled away from him. Shane settled his hands in his lap, unsure of what to do with them, and eyes following him as he moved over to a panel by the door, tapping his fingers across it, so the lighting changed, dimmer than before, and soft music started playing out of speakers that seemed to be embedded in the walls.

Shane thought, dimly, that he might actually recognize the song. He was certain it was in Hayden’s gym playlist. Before he could think much more about this, however, James was back, standing in front of him with his boots gone, and the buttons of his shorts loosened, so that Shane could see an inch more of skin.

He reached out without thinking, his fingertips burning as he longed to touch him, but he moved back to the little stage, the metal pole in the middle the clear focal point, discarding his shirt as he went, so that Shane could see the freckles and moles that littered his back. His mouth watered as he stared at them, and he had to give his head a little shake.

He had never watched a striptease before. Truthfully, he had never been interested. It had always seemed put on to him, fake in a way that made the whole thing feel icky and unattractive.

But this?

Man, he could get behind this.

He moved in a way that told Shane he had done this hundreds of times before; exactly on beat, choreographed in a way to make Shane want more. And he did. He did want more, but he wanted him closer, not so far away.

He almost asked for it several times, even as his shorts slid down his legs and into a corner, and even as Shane’s breath was taken away by the smooth expanse of his back and his ass, barely covered by...underwear? He supposed that’s what they were. Even still, Shane still wanted more.

But he had given up control to him, and he liked not knowing what was coming next, of not having to decide or guess what the right answer was. So he let him dance, adjusting every so often to hide how hard he was becoming with every passing second, and taking in as much of James as he possibly could.

He thought that would be the end of it, but at the switch of a song, he dropped to his knees and crawled towards Shane, settling in between his thighs again. His cheek rested on his right knee, and Shane swallowed thickly, looking down into his eyes, just now noticing what a pretty blue they were.

“Since you don’t know,” his fingers skated up Shane’s left thigh, and he sucked in a breath at the feeling of it, “You’re not allowed to touch.”

He was going to have to sit on his fucking hands.

“But,” he continued, leaning up so he was almost in his lap and Shane felt teeth along the shell of his ear, “If you’re good, I make an exception.”

There was something warm spreading across his chest, something undefinable, something he couldn’t contain.

“Okay,” his voice was hoarse, “How will- I know if I’m- Good?”

“I will tell you,” he picked up Shane’s hand as he stood fluidly, and dragged it up his stomach and chest, until it was resting between his pectorals, “Okay?”

Shane nodded, again not entirely sure what he was agreeing to, but willing to allow him to do whatever he wanted if it meant he got to look at him for longer.

He dropped his hand the moment that James let go of it, and stared at him as he continued the dance, but this time *on* Shane.

The music played, burrowing its way into Shane’s veins, and the only real thing was this; their skin brushing, his heavy breathing in Shane’s ears, and Shane trying to hold on for dear life.

“Touch me,” his voice sounded almost strained, and Shane was driven crazy by the idea that he might want this as much as he did, “*Shane*.”

He shuddered involuntarily at the sound of his own name, thick and sweet inside his mouth. He brought his hands up, his palms skating along his ribs, and he threw his head back, grinding down against Shane’s hips, and he moaned loudly, unable to help himself.

“Like this,” he covered Shane’s hand in his own, dragging it down the planes of his chest, down his stomach, right to the top of the underwear, his fingers catching in the soft down of hair there, “Fuck.”

Shane wanted to kiss him. Badly. Maybe as badly as he had ever wanted anything. He arched up, trying to brush their lips together, but he held him back gently,

“None of that,” he said quietly, in a tone that was more chiding than unkind, “Or no touching.”

Shane whined, a sound ripped from deep within his chest, pathetic and wanting, and he grinned, patting him on the side of the face as he wrapped his arms around his neck, pulling him closer, so their lips were only an inch or so apart.

“Aw, such a pretty noise.”

“Fuck,” Shane’s fingers were digging into his thighs, “Fuck- Let me-”

He broke off, but he wasn't going to let him get away that easily,

"Let you what?" he crooned, biting the hinge of his jaw, and Shane was going to die, this was it for him, "Tell me."

"Let me-" he had no idea what. He couldn't pin down anything; his whole brain was just disjointed zapping thoughts from corner to corner. "I don't-"

"You can't come," Ilya warned him, penetrating through his dizzy brain, "Not here."

His head was swimming, but he wanted to do what he was told. He nodded blearily, trying to pull away, but James was shaking his head, grinning.

"I can get you right there, though, and you can think about me later."

Shane didn't say that he was probably going to be thinking about him for the rest of his life.

He nodded mutely, his hands settling on his hips again, allowing him to rock back and forth, dragging up and down Shane's hard cock through his clothes. His eyes rolled back, but he fought to keep them forward, on the man above him.

His hands were moving of their own volition, all over his skin, and his lips tingled, almost burning with the desire to brush them across his collarbone, his cheek, his lips, the vein in his forehead, the blush across his chest.

Shane was going to come. He was going to come all over himself and all over this beautiful stranger and he couldn't stop it he couldn't-

"Stop," he rasped, his fingernails digging into the muscle of his shoulder. He did, panting nearly as hard as Shane was, and his fingertips trailed across the bridge of Shane's nose, like he was tracing something.

Then, as soon as the tender moment had begun, it was over, and he had stood up, leaving Shane cold and wanting.

"Good?" he arched an eyebrow at him, telling Shane that he knew exactly how good it was.

"I-" he blushed, looking away, "It- Yeah. Yeah it- It was."

"Happy to be of service," he gave an ironic bow, so ridiculous that it made Shane snort with laughter. He thought it was a little embarrassing, but James lit up at the noise.

Shane struggled to his feet, swaying slightly, his body still thrumming finely from being denied something it so desperately wanted.

"Well- It was- Nice to- Or um- Yeah. I should go."

His eyes traveled down his face, like he wanted to commit him to memory.

Shane was being stupid again, of course he wasn't trying to do anything like that.

"Bye Shane," he held open the door for him, and Shane tried to flatten his hair back, and pull himself back from the abyss of pleasure he had just been falling down, "Nice to meet you."

They stared at each other for a long, long time.

“Right,” he sounded so stupid, “Thank- Or. Yeah. Bye.”

He made to move past him, dragging what little dignity he still had behind him, but he caught his arm, and before Shane could react in any way, he was pulling him closer, and pressing a lingering kiss to his cheek.

His lips were warm and slightly chapped, and he smelled like mint and cigarette smoke.

“Come back anytime,” his voice was sinful, dipped in honey, and Shane shivered as they broke apart, feeling like he had just taken a heavy blow against the boards. He nodded mutely, and he smirked, closing the door in his face with another sharp snap, leaving Shane staring for an inordinate amount of time, before turning back and finding the others in the busy club.

“He returns!” JJ slapped his back, laughing uproariously as they forced him into a spot in the booth in the center of their table, “How was it, Captain?”

“Fuck you all,” he pasted a fake smile on his face, “Bullshit stuff.”

They all howled with laughter, pounding the table.

“You were gone a long time,” several people pointed out, “Mouth that good?”

“They let me trade, so she definitely did,” he lied easily, and the others wolf whistled, favorably impressed by the lie.

“Look at this, our captain has game after all,” JJ slurred, waving his hand in the air, apparently calling for another round, “But I’m an honest man, and no one will get a hand on me tonight.”

The group devolved into laughter and ribbing, leaving Shane free to stare around, looking for James.

He spotted him after a few minutes, back in his shirt and his fishnets and his boots, walking around the outer perimeter of the room. Several people, men and women, stopped him, and he bent low to speak to them, a wide smile on his face.

Shane watched him for the entire rest of the night, until Hayden and JJ started dragging people out of their booth at around three, telling everyone that if they were late getting to the venue the next day, JJ’s fiancé would have their heads.

Somewhat reluctantly, he made his way to the door, supporting Hayden, who could barely stand. He couldn’t help that he glanced around one last time as he made it to the door.

He was standing by the bar, leaning with his back against it, and he caught Shane’s eye, gazing at him appraisingly. Shane raised his hand in an awkward half wave, before dropping it almost immediately.

How stupid could he get?

He thought he saw him laughing as the door swung shut behind him.

It was difficult, getting so many people from the club and back to the hotel that they were all staying in. They had to split between four different cars, and Shane hopped in the last one, once he was sure that every single one of his charges had loaded up, and that no one was left behind.

Hayden always called it “mother henning,” Shane liked to call it “being prepared.”

He sat in the front seat with the driver, apologizing profusely as JJ and Hayden sang a loud and off key rendition of a pop song Shane didn’t recognize. The driver, to his credit, seemed to be used to the whole thing, and parked them safely in front of their hotel with a wave of his hand and a slightly amused smile as Hayden toppled face first onto the concrete.

“Jackie’s gonna kill me,” he said, staggering upright, “Did I break anything?”

“No,” Shane steered him inside after looking at his face seriously, checking for scratches, “You may want to be quiet so you don’t wake her up.”

“Can I crash with you?” he begged as they all crammed onto the elevator, “Please Shane, I’m begging you. She’ll get up at four to start doing her makeup and her hair straightener, dryer, thing- It’s so loud!”

“Okay, okay,” he laughed at the desperate expression on his face, “But you text her, I don’t want to get a bunch of questions in the morning about where you are.”

“Oh man, I love you,” Hayden leaned forward, pressing a messy kiss to Shane’s cheek that reeked of rum, “You’re the best.”

“Don’t I know it,” he led them back down the hall towards their rooms, inwardly thankful that they were all in a block, so he could make sure everyone got where they needed to go, “JJ? Meet downstairs at nine?”

“God,” JJ moaned, pressing his forehead against the door of his hotel room, “I am going to die.”

“No you’re not,” Shane said bracingly, still half carrying Hayden, “You’re going to get married.”

“Yeah!” Hayden slurred unhelpfully, but it seemed to punch JJ into enough action that he swiped his card, and practically fell over the threshold.

“Good enough,” Shane said to himself, struggling with his own room key and overtly thankful that he had booked a room with two beds. He set Hayden on the one closest to the bathroom, before turning to him, taking in his appearance. He still looked pretty good, not like he was going to throw up at any second.

Shane needed to take the opportunity while he had it.

“I’m going to jump in the shower,” he told him, swiping the neatly folded pair of boxers he had laid out before he left, “Don’t throw up in that trash can.”

“I won’t,” he said, flopping back onto the bed, “Thanks buddy.”

Huffing a resigned sigh, Shane stepped into the small hotel bathroom, thankful for the moment of solitude. He turned on the shower, and took stock of himself and the evening.

He thought about James. His plush lips, his blue eyes, his hard cock grinding against Shane’s...

He stifled a broken moan in his hands, and stripped for the shower, determined not to touch himself until he was sure that Hayden wasn't going to come bursting in.

He stepped under the hot water, allowing the pressure to relax his tense shoulders. He forced himself to do his usual shower routine, and it wasn't until his conditioner had sat for the appropriate length of time, and was swirling down the drain at his feet that allowed his mind to wander back to the club, as his hand wandered to his cock.

It took nothing to bring himself back to that place, just some feather light touches and thoughts of that little room and an accent he couldn't name filling his ears.

His lips still tingled, as though they had actually recently been kissed.

"Fuck," his mind was full of his heavy hands and the words he had said to Shane,

And you can think about me later.

Shane was, he was jerking his cock to the idea of a stranger, a stranger in a strip club.

A stripper in a strip club.

But the shame in his stomach didn't stop him from chasing his orgasm, imagining pretty eyes and his name on his tongue.

"Fuck," he murmured, the rubber band about to snap back. He was right there, right there, right there just-

A frantic knocking made his head swing around,

"Shane, dude, I need you to hurry up, I think I'm gonna-"

Not wanting to have to pay the hefty cleaning fee he would be slapped with if Hayden threw up in his hotel room, he jumped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist, and pulling open the door to let him in.

Fortunately, Hayden was too intent on diving straight for the toilet to notice the tent in Shane's towel, and the redness on his chest that had nothing to do with the hot water of the shower.

Shane went to bed five minutes later, rolling over to try and drown out the retching noises still coming from the bathroom, and feeling thoroughly, achingly pent up.

JJ's wedding took place at a very nice country club just outside of Montreal.

It was a beautiful day, not too hot for the height of summer, and the flower beds bloomed all around the venue, a riotously organized mass of color.

They arrived only half an hour late, which was probably some kind of miracle, considering Shane had to consider dumping cold water on Hayden's face to try and rouse him in the morning.

"I'm going to die," he said, shoving a pair of sunglasses over his eyes and groaning theatrically as Shane opened the curtains, so that thick beams of sunlight hit him in the face.

“You can’t until the wedding’s over,” he deadpanned, “Or Catherine will kill us all.”

JJ and the others were in similar states of distress, but they all managed to get on the bus arranged for them, and were safely closeted in their own wing of the venue by ten o’clock.

“How are you so...not dead?” Hayden asked, tipping his face down to look at Shane behind his sunglasses, “Everyone else I’ve talked to barely woke up this morning.”

Shane shrugged.

“Just didn’t drink as much as you did. My benefit.”

“Fuck,” Mitty buried his face in his arms, “Don’t mention alcohol. Please. Don’t mention it.”

Everyone seemed to improve as the morning wore on, so that JJ even looked somewhat presentable when he was whisked off for solo pictures.

Shane dressed in his suit, a light blue flower pinned to his chest, his shoes shined so that they nearly glowed. He got the nod of approval from the wedding planner, and resolved to help the others tie their ties, most of them still too clumsy to manage it.

“You’re the best, Captain,” Mitty said, letting his head roll back, “Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Not win any Cups, that’s for sure,” Shane deadpanned, and the whole room laughed.

It was midafternoon by the time they were all expected to be ready, and Shane followed a still somewhat hungover Hayden down to the ceremony site, trailing a little behind the others, straightening his tie as he went.

The photographer was very nice, and only had them take photos for about twenty minutes before sending them back to the entrance of the venue, with strict orders not to come back out until, in her words “show time.”

The others broke into lazy chatter, and Shane stared out across the lush expanse of trees, watching as a few guests began to trickle in, taking their seats in the sunshine.

JJ sidled up to him as the sound of voices and laughter and music got louder and louder. He looked more put together than Shane had ever seen him, and the dark suit complemented by the light blue of his tie suited him well. He was working up to something, and Shane knew him well enough now to know what he needed, and why he was standing away from the others, by Shane,

“You nervous?” he asked him quietly, and JJ straightened up, even as his fingers tapped together, hands clasped in front of him as though in prayer.

“No,” he tried for his usual bravado, but Shane could see right through him, “Yes.”

He laughed, patting him lightly on the shoulder.

“You shouldn’t be, it’s going to be great.”

“I just want to make sure it all goes right, for her you know?”

JJ was rarely this vulnerable, and Shane knew he was one of the lucky few to ever get past the loud, brash, joking personality the entire Metros locker room knew. He smiled, moving to grip his shoulder instead of pat it, hopefully a grounding sensation for him.

“I think she just wants to marry you. She wants everything to go well, but marrying you is the priority.”

“I feel like I am going to forget my lines.”

Shane laughed.

“You mean your vows?”

“They’re basically lines. Lines about how much I love her that I have to say in front of everyone I know.”

“I can’t help you there, man. I’d be panicking about that too.”

JJ laughed in his own turn, surprised by Shane’s honesty. Before either of them could say another word, the wedding planner was hurrying towards them, looking harried, and motioning for all of them to get into their places. Shane squeezed his shoulder one last time, before hurrying off to his designated spot in line.

He was walking down the aisle with Catherine’s best friend from college, Audrey. She was very nice, with long dark hair and bright green eyes. The best part about her though, was she didn’t push for small talk that Shane didn’t really know how to give.

She smiled at him as he approached, her dusty blue dress brushing the floor, and they stood shoulder to shoulder, waiting for their cue to move slowly down the aisle.

Audrey looped her arm with Shane’s and they walked slowly towards JJ, whose foot was tapping rapidly on the ground. He tried to shoot him a reassuring smile, but he didn’t think he saw it; he was too focused on the doorway, where Catherine would be appearing any minute.

When she finally did, dressed in white and on her father’s arm, Shane saw JJ physically relax, like all his nerves had left him, maybe in the tears sliding down his face.

Shane was a sucker for weddings, but only cried a little during the ceremony. Well, okay, a lot, but it wasn’t even that bad, considering that Catherine’s sister was passing Kleenex down the line of bridesmaids the moment that the couple had grasped hands in front of the officiant.

He let his mind wander as the familiar words of sickness, health, better, worse, richer, poorer, washed over him.

He had never thought much about getting married, even before he realized he was gay. Maybe fleetingly, usually when he was the only single person in a hangout full of couples, he thought it would be nice to have someone to be with, have someone to come home to after games. But he had never been in love, and as he moved from the other side of his twenties to his thirties; the whole thing seemed increasingly unlikely.

Most especially because he couldn’t really come out. Not while he was playing, anyway.

It was fine, but the ache in his chest was a little more present when he went to a wedding, especially when he was about three feet from the couple getting married, and especially when they looked like the happiest two people in the world as they stared into each other's eyes.

Shane clapped along with everyone else when they kissed, and watched as they ran back up the aisle, hand in hand, leading the way to a patio connected to the main dining room hung with crisscrossing strands of lights.

The wedding party hung back as the guests disappeared, waiting for JJ and Catherine to come back so they could take their group pictures.

"Aw Hollander," Mitty looped an arm around his shoulder, grinning widely, "You old softy."

"Shane cries at every wedding," Hayden stood on his other side, a matching smile on his face, "You should have seen him last year at Morgan's."

"Shut up," he tried to scoot away from them, only to be called to order by the photographer immediately, chivvying them into position, with JJ and Catherine at the front.

Finally, at last, the photos were finished, and Shane followed the others back up towards the cocktail hour, already in full swing. He swiped a glass of champagne from a passing waiter that he had no plans to drink, and stuffed himself into a corner, hoping for a few minutes of peace before dinner.

He watched the crowd sinewing around, most of them focused on the bride and groom, but others were greeting each other with bear hugs and back slaps, separated by team or by retirement.

"Shane!" he looked around at the sound of his name, and smiled as he recognized one of the Metros' social media managers, Sarah. She was sweet, even though she was always trying to get Shane to be in videos where he had no idea what he was supposed to say or do at any given moment. He waved to her, and she made her way through the crowd, pulling someone with her by the hand and-

Shane felt the smile sliding off his face, the air leaving his lungs. The man that Sarah was leading right towards him, dressed in an immaculately well-fitting black suit, his hair slicked back, was the very same man that had brought Shane to the brink of an orgasm in a private room of a strip club the night before.

His eyes passed over Shane as he and Sarah approached, as though Shane were nothing more than a mediocre oil painting on the wall.

"Shane, I'm so glad I found you, everyone else is already so drunk."

"Yeah well," he tried not to stare at the man next to her, smiling as she gave him a one-armed hug, "Someone has to wrangle everyone back to the hotel."

"This is my friend, Ilya," she gestured towards him, and Shane drew up short. *Ilya?* "And Ilya, this is Shane, he's the captain of the team I work for."

Ilya inclined his head, sipping his champagne even as his eyes trailed down Shane's body. Shane nodded back, not sure what to do with himself.

“The ceremony was beautiful wasn’t it?” Sarah didn’t seem to notice the tension between the two of them, and settled next to Shane, taking in the crowd, “I’d love to get married here, but it would probably cost like ten million dollars, especially in the summer.”

“Probably so,” he wished he had something more interesting to say, even as his eyes kept wandering back to Ilya. He looked so good, like a model or something out of a magazine. Something unattainable in real life, instead of standing right in front of him. He was clearly bored, tapping the rim of his champagne flute with his fingers, like he was listening to a song inside his head.

“Who’s your plus one, Shane?” Sarah asked brightly, and he blinked, feeling a little punch drunk.

“Oh, it’s just me,” he saw Ilya turning his head in their direction out of the corner of his eye, “Since I’m in the wedding party, it was easier if-”

“Oh I get it, I was in my best friend’s wedding last year and I felt like I barely had time to eat, there’s so much to do.”

“Right.”

“Ilya, you were at Chelsea’s wedding, right?”

Ilya’s head turned slowly towards her, a lazy grin spreading across his face, which somehow made him even better looking.

“Yep, I barely saw you.”

“See!” she laughed, before she seemed to see someone else that she knew, “Oh, one sec, I’ll be right back.”

She hurried away, and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Shane alone with the handsome stranger that, he realized, he actually didn’t know the first thing about.

“I thought your name was James?” Shane asked, as soon as he was sure there was no one near him.

Ilya smirked, cocky and arrogant and indifferent. It pissed Shane off how good it made him look.

“You think I give my real name to anyone that comes in for a private dance?” he asked, and Shane flushed, embarrassed by how naïve he seemed. He scuffed his shoe against the large, flat paving stone underneath his feet, and did not meet his eyes.

“I didn’t-”

“Is okay, your first time,” he sounded almost patronizing, even as he shifted infinitesimally closer to him.

“Fuck you,” he said, feeling itchy, like there was something under his skin, and Ilya grinned, sharp enough to cut glass, “What are you even doing here, anyway?”

His eyebrows shot up, and he gave him a searching kind of look.

“I was invited, same as you were. Sarah is my friend.”

A thought had occurred to Shane, one that made him slightly sick to his stomach.

“Do you know anyone- Anyone else on the team?” he asked, trying not to betray the panic that was rising in his chest.

If Ilya knew someone on the team, that meant that he could have been in on the joke the night before, and that he was just waiting for the right time to tell the team that not only was Shane gay, but that he *had* actually gotten a lap dance from a male stripper the night before.

And that he had thoroughly enjoyed it.

Ilya however, cocked his head to the side, like the question confused him.

“No. Only Sarah.”

Shane nearly sighed in relief, leaning back against the wall behind him.

“Okay. That’s- Good.”

Something like a smile was curling Ilya’s mouth, and he was studying Shane, taking him in slowly, inch by inch.

“What?” he asked, his mouth going a little dry at the intensity of his gaze. Ilya said nothing for a long moment, but then he leaned closer, cutting the distance between them to nothing,

“Did you come last night?” he asked, voice quieter than before. Shane’s head swiveled around. There was no one around them for ten feet in any direction.

“I don’t see how that’s-”

“I am going to guess no.”

“You can guess whatever you want,” he snapped, making to turn away, but the feeling of Ilya’s fingers trailing down his arm made him stop, his heart stuttering in his chest.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice still quiet, but with an edge to it, and Shane stared at him with wide eyes, desire pooling traitorously in his stomach as he watched him, “Too drunk to finish the job?”

They both knew it was a lie. Shane hadn’t been drunk when he left, and he knew that.

“No,” he made no move to get away, and liked the feeling of Ilya invading his space, their champagne flutes dangling, long forgotten, in their hands, “My friend Hayden stayed in my room. He needed the bathroom.”

“And you wouldn’t do it in bed? Touch yourself?” Shane’s breath hitched.

“No,” he hissed, trying to sound scandalized, but he sounded more desperate than anything. His eyes were stuck on his throat, on the Adam’s apple that bobbed as he swallowed, on the freckles that dotted the skin there, at the fine gold chain that disappeared down his black dress shirt.

“Why?” his voice was maddeningly steady as Shane fought for breath, “Too uptight?”

“I’m not uptight,” he managed to say, and Ilya chuckled, his fingers trailing down his side now, and Shane should move away, bring back the distance. There were people around, people he knew, people that would talk if they saw him like this. But he didn’t care. His brain was nothing but white noise and the sound of Ilya’s voice in his ears.

“Yes you are,” his accent dragged across his skin, “But that is not *all* you are, I saw the more than that last night.”

Shane swallowed with an audible click, staring at his mouth, feeling his own fall open slightly.

He wanted-

“There you are!” Hayden appeared out of nowhere, already tipsy and paying no attention to Ilya, who had moved away from Shane smoothly and was leaning against the wall, pulling a lighter out of his pocket, “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Jackie’s been asking about you.”

“Right,” Shane let out a breath, “Course. Following you.”

He glanced back at Ilya as he moved away; he raised his eyebrows at him, that smirk playing around his mouth again, and Shane flushed, and tried to adjust himself so that it didn’t look like he was aching hard under his suit pants.

Shane was swept into the large, lavishly decorated ballroom, where most of the wedding guests were already congregated at their respective tables.

“We’re here, you’re next to me and Jackie,” Hayden said, a hand on his shoulder, and he nodded along, determinedly not looking over his shoulder to see if Ilya had followed them inside.

There was a little card with his name neatly embossed on the front of it in curly black lettering, and he took his seat in the spindly chair, his back to the entrance out to the terrace.

“Hi Shane,” Jackie reached out, squeezing his hand in hers, and he returned her smile, “Thank you for making sure this one made it here in one piece.”

“It was a close one,” he laughed as Hayden scowled at him, rubbing his forehead, “I can’t believe you’re drinking right now.”

“Little hair of the dog,” Hayden raised his glass of champagne, toasting Shane and Jackie.

“It’s six pm.”

Jackie snorted with laughter.

“Did you have a good time last night?” she asked him as everyone settled down to the first course, brought out to them by a fleet of white gloved waiters.

“Oh yeah, mostly because I didn’t get as drunk as everyone else,” he smiled, looking down at the clear soup that had been dropped in front of him, “But it was fun.”

“I heard you went to a strip club,” she sipped her own soup with good grace, even as Shane stared incredulously at Hayden.

“You really do tell each other everything.”

“Ah, you’ll get it one day,” Hayden spoke as if he was fifty years older than Shane, “When you’re married and everything.”

“Sure,” he rolled his eyes, even as his insides had gone cold.

The temptation to tell Hayden, tell all of his friends and his team who he was; it was growing stronger by the day. Sometimes, he thought that no one would mind, that they would laugh it off and love him as much as they always had. It’s not like he was a different person; he still loved hockey and the team and wanted to win as many Cups as possible.

But then, there would be an off-color joke, made in the locker room or out at dinner, and Shane would retract the words that were sitting on his tongue.

It was easier, he told himself, they didn’t need to know because it wasn’t their business. His parents knew, and so did Rose, and who else needed to know, really?

But at the same time, it hurt to withhold that part of himself with the people he spent the most time with.

He tried to shake himself out of his mood as dinner wore on, but that came with the price of his eyes wandering around the room, looking for broad shoulders in a black suit. He caught sight of Ilya at the other end of one of the long tables, apart from the wedding party, sitting with Sarah, his head inclined towards her over his glass, his face serious as he listened to her talk.

Shane watched him out of the corner of his eye through the courses, the chatter of those around him and the clinking of cutlery becoming a sort of dull roar in his ears.

He really should pull himself together, he thought as he missed his mouth with his fork for the third time; he didn’t even know this man, there was no reason for him to be this...whatever he was about it.

But then, he had never felt anything quite like this before. The tightness in his chest, the heat there; it was unfamiliar, addicting, something that he wanted more of.

They hadn’t even kissed, but Shane felt his proximity like a magnet being drawn towards its partner, and he couldn’t explain it, couldn’t explain why, couldn’t put it into words.

“Shane!” he jumped slightly at the sound of his name, and looked around at Hayden, who was staring at him with his eyebrows raised, “Jesus man, where the fuck did you just go?”

“What?” he hoped the light was too low for Hayden to see the blush creeping up his neck.

“I was trying to talk to you for like ten minutes,” Hayden appeared a little like a puppy that had been left out in the cold for too long, “Did you hear anything I said?”

“I-” there was no point in lying, “Uh, no man, sorry. Say again?”

“I was asking you if-” just as Hayden was speaking, Catherine’s sister stood up from the table, tapping a knife against her wine glass, and bringing the whole room to order.

“Before we cut the cake and start dancing,” she grinned at the bride and groom, “I think there are a few people that would like to say a few words.”

Shane was inwardly extremely thankful that he wasn't being asked to make a speech in front of a room of three hundred people, but applauded loudly as Hayden bounded up to take the mic, ever the extrovert.

"I just wanted to say, JJ came to the Montreal Metros a broken man," he started, his wide smile reflecting JJ's, "Never made the playoffs, aging rapidly, maybe already a has-been-"

The team laughed uproariously at this, Shane included, and Hayden pressed on, spurred on by the favorable reaction to his words,

"And then one day, everything changed. JJ comes in, looking like he's been possessed by the spirit of a great player. And now he's almost as important to the team as I am! What inspired this incredible change? Well, I think most of you can probably guess. Considering his better half is sitting right there."

He gestured towards Catherine, who was beaming at him.

"So congratulations to JJ and Catherine, and thank you, Cat for making him a better player, but more importantly, a better man."

He raised his glass, and the entire room followed suit, before breaking into deafening applause.

"Beautifully done," Jackie kissed him on the cheek as Hayden sat back down, and he grinned at her and Shane, who was blinking rapidly.

"Got what I wanted," he pointed at Shane, "If I can make Hollander cry, it's a good speech."

"I'm not crying!" he said at once, averting his eyes from them both, "Good job or whatever."

Hayden and Jackie laughed.

After the speeches, the dinner broke into a party, with people sweeping onto the dance floor after the first dances, and the DJ in the corner started a song with a heavy beat that everyone could move to.

Hayden pulled Jackie towards the floor at once, leaving Shane alone, nursing a long flat ginger ale, and watching the dancers as though he were a species apart from them.

He wanted, more than anything he longed for *that*. That intimacy of a dance, bodies pressed together in a long line, swaying slowly to the music, not caring who else was in the room.

It was a feeling that always made its appearance at events like this, a sort of loneliness that settled in his chest, past his bones and into his heart, leaving him cold and distant from the others; cursed to watch but never join in.

He stood, deciding to get out of his own head, and walked back out onto the patio, where the hanging lights gave a soft, warm glow across the sprawling lawn below him. He leaned against the railing, his eyes trailing across the grass, watching a few couples walking in the moonlight, away from the wedding.

"Fuck," he murmured, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand. He really wanted to go home, or even back to his hotel room. Maybe put on some mindless tv or call his parents, even though he

knew they were probably already getting ready for bed. Hearing their voices would make him feel a little less lonely, even for a moment.

“All alone out here?” he turned at the sound of his voice, straightening up at once.

Ilya was moving towards him, his champagne flute replaced by a whiskey glass filled with ice and a clear liquid. He had undone several of the buttons on his dress shirt, so that Shane could see a cross dangling between his pectorals. He pressed his lips together, locking eyes with him instead.

“Yeah just-” he gestured awkwardly towards the party, “A little much.”

“All weddings are, yes?”

“I don’t- Yeah. Yeah, they pretty much are.”

Ilya laughed, a pretty sound that made the corners of Shane’s mouth lift up involuntarily.

“They are a good couple?” he asked after a beat. Shane’s eyes flicked towards him again, and the soft warm light made him painfully beautiful, not that he wasn’t already before.

“Uh yeah,” he said, his brain scrambling, “Yeah, they’re great. JJ’s never been happier.”

“Are you married?” the question caught him off guard. Ilya was not looking at him, but was staring straight ahead.

“Uh- No. No. It’s just- Just me.”

“Just you?” he repeated, turning his head towards him. Their eyes met again, and Shane’s heart skipped, like he had missed a step going downstairs.

“Yeah. Yeah just- Just me.”

Ilya studied him for a long moment, his head listing to the side, and Shane was exposed, like a wound in the open air, pulsing with something that he couldn’t name.

“Are you still hard?” his quiet voice may as well have been a gunshot in Shane’s ears. Shane’s head swiveled around again, but they were completely alone on the terrace.

“No,” he lied, gritting his teeth at the expression on Ilya’s face. He may be hot, but he was kind of an asshole.

A really, really, *really* hot one.

“Liar,” that smirk was back, and Shane should turn around and walk back to the party, far, far away from him. But he was glued to the spot, rooted there by the feeling that he was giving him.

“Fuck off,” there was no heat behind his words, but he felt the color rising up his neck all the same.

They fell into silence again, and Shane couldn’t figure out if he wanted this to end or continue on forever.

“What are you going to do about it?” he asked, turning so that his back was against the railing, facing towards the party.

“Do about what?”

He gestured wordlessly towards Shane’s pants, the obvious bulge there, and he shifted his body unconsciously, trying to hide it.

“Can you fuck off?” he asked, angrier this time. Who the fuck was this guy to show up here and corner Shane and make him feel like this and tease him about it? “I didn’t ask you to come over here.”

Ilya grinned at him, slow and pretty.

“Okay,” he said, pushing off the railing and making to walk back inside, “Good night.”

Shane couldn’t stand it, he couldn’t *stand* it.

Without thinking, purely on reflex, he reached out, seizing his forearm. Ilya turned, watching him in an expectant sort of way.

Shane’s lips were tingling, but he had no idea what to do next, or how to go about doing it.

And once again, just like the night before, Ilya took pity on him. He closed the gap between them, and grasped Shane’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, just as he had the night before, tilting his face up so that their lips were only an inch or so apart.

“You need it bad, huh?” he asked, condescending, and Shane shuddered, his breath catching in his chest.

“I don’t-”

Ilya leaned down, brushing his lips along his jaw, and Shane moaned quietly, caught in his mouth, half stifled and desperate.

“Yes you do.”

There was something clawing its way through Shane’s chest, up his throat, half pain half something else, and he was pushing against Ilya’s strong hand, trying to force himself closer. But Ilya held him back, eyes glittering in the low light, apparently enjoying this as much as Shane was.

“No no,” he tutted, “Don’t be greedy.”

But Shane was greedy, greedy for something he had never had before, greedy for the simmering throughout his body, and greedy for Ilya, for his mouth, for his eyes.

Ilya’s mouth was so close to his, so close to brushing his lips that Shane’s head was dizzy with it.

Suddenly, without any warning, Shane’s brain clicked back into place.

He was at a wedding. At *JJ*’s wedding. Everyone that he knew was here, his whole team, his coaches, the team owner. Everyone was a few feet away.

He drew back, and had the confusing sensation of raw disappointment when Ilya let him go easily, and he stood away from him, panting for breath again.

“I can’t,” he sounded wrecked, “I can’t- Not here.”

Ilya nodded once, picking up his glass and turning smoothly back towards the wedding.

“Good night, Shane,” he said, and melted back into the crowd before Shane could say another word, or even think about calling him back.

Chapter 2: this might be my fucking coffin

Chapter Notes

Hi! Thank you for the love on this one so far, I'm writing very fast so not doing a usual week to week update on it, just spitting a chapter out whenever it's done!

(Unforch I do have to go back to the real world tomorrow (work) after two weeks but hopefully it won't slow me down too much)

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

In the weeks following the wedding, Shane was at something of an impasse. He was supposed to be at the cottage, but he kept hanging around Montreal, waiting for...something.

He didn't even know what he was waiting for.

"When are you coming out here?" his mother had asked him, and he had had no answer.

"Soon, I just have a few things to take care of here."

"Alright," she sounded unconvinced, "Well- Call us if you need anything."

"I will, love you."

He had never not been eager to get out to the cottage. He craved the open air, the quiet, the homecooked meals from his father and the banter from his mother.

But there was something uncomfortable sitting in the middle of his chest, and he had no idea how to get rid of it.

It was embarrassing to admit just how much his interaction, well, interactions with Ilya had been plaguing his every thought since the moment he had laid in his hotel bed that night, and finally gotten the release he had been craving for nearly twenty four hours.

He had stroked himself messily, with abandon, barely bothering to change out of his suit before he was laying flat on the hotel bed, on top of the covers.

It was one of those awful, stunted orgasms, kind of half of what it should be, a product of getting too close too many times, and then not working himself up this last time.

"No," he muttered, as soon as he had come, sticky release all over his hand, but still with that ache deep in his chest, unsatiated.

And that ache had persisted, even weeks later. Nothing he did seemed to soothe it; not touching himself, not going to the Metros' weight room for hours at a time, not running so hard his lungs burned.

He was disjointed, apart from himself, unable to slot himself back together as he had been before that night.

Before Ilya.

It was maddening, so maddening that he had even considered going back to the club, thinking that maybe, maybe if he had another dance, another private moment with him, he would be able to fill that void, that chasm that had opened.

He was too ashamed to do that, however. It was one thing to be dragged to a strip club for a bachelor party, quite another to go by himself. He wasn't that kind of person.

However, he was growing increasingly desperate with every passing day, stuck in between going to the cottage and feeling trapped in Montreal, knowing that the only thing that might make this all go away was on the other side of town, in low neon light and fishnet tights.

"You really need to get laid, Shane," Rose told him when he had confided some of his feelings to her.

She was shooting a movie somewhere in Australia, but had made time to call him late in the evening, surprising him out of the stupor he had been in, staring mindlessly at the tv, not taking in a second of the Blue Jays game he had thrown on, just to fill the silence.

He had his suspicions that his mother might have reached out to her, but was too embarrassed to ask. How many people had so few people to confide in that their mother would reach out to their ex girlfriend. Granted, Rose was one of his best friends now, but still.

"I'm fine," he said through gritted teeth, immediately regretting saying anything about it.

"You clearly aren't," she laughed, and he mirrored her, unable to help it, "You just talked for ten minutes about how you're so wound up and nothing helps. Have you even tried to find someone? *That* might actually help you."

"I don't-" he deliberately tried to keep his mind from Ilya, "How would I even go about that? What if someone talked?"

She sighed, a crackle through the phone, and he closed his eyes, trying to imagine her in front of him. Her kind smile, her eyes that would dance with humor at jokes that very few people would laugh at. So many people would kill to have a chance with Rose Landry.

Days like today, Shane wished he was one of them.

"I'm sure someone would, I don't know- On the down low?"

Shane gave a surprised laugh, torn out of his own depressing thoughts by her words.

"The down low?"

"Is that the term? I don't know."

"If you don't know," Shane leaned back, running a hand through his hair, trying to control the impulse to start laughing hysterically, "Then I sure don't either."

“Shane,” she sounded serious now, “Really, we need to do something about this.”

“I’m not sure you can help me, it wasn’t great for either of us last time.”

“Oh my god, I was *so* not talking about that!”

“It’s what it sounded like to me.”

They lapsed into silence. Shane could hear the sounds of her moving around a kitchen, probably in her trailer.

“Are you okay?” she asked quietly, “Really? You can tell me.”

He didn’t answer right away, but considered the question. He had been opened up to something he had never experienced before, and, try as he might, he had not been able to stuff his feelings back into the bottle that he usually kept them. It was terrible, but...

“I think I just need to go out to the cottage. I’m not going to get anything that I’m looking for here.”

A lie.

“I think your mom would like that.”

He huffed, rolling his eyes even though he knew she couldn’t see him.

“So she did call you.”

“No,” Rose sounded dignified, “She texted me.”

“Why she has your number is beyond me.”

“I love Yuna,” she said before breaking off, Shane could hear the distant knocking on a door, “Shane, I have to run, but call me later?”

“I’ll text, you’re busier than me right now, and the timezones are confusing.”

She laughed again.

“Okay. Will you promise me something?”

He swallowed, that uncomfortable knot of anxiety ever present in his chest.

“Okay.”

“Try and take care of yourself. And jerk off more, sounds like you need it.”

He laughed again, as at ease with her as he ever was with anyone.

“Okay Rose, goodbye.”

“Bye Shane, love you.”

“You too,” he hung up, scrubbing a hand down his face as he stared up at the ceiling, his eyes following the slow-moving ceiling fan as it circled above his head.

He had to get out of whatever this funk was. There were only a few weeks until the season started, when he needed to be in peak form physically and mentally; he had no time to be worrying about something he really couldn’t control.

He had been able to make do without that aspect of his life being fulfilled for a very long time, what was a little longer? A few more years, and he could retire, and people wouldn’t pay quite so much attention to everything that he did.

And it was harder to sell gossip on retired players than it was for the best ones in the league.

“Okay,” he told himself, sitting up on the couch and pushing himself to his feet, shaking out his arms, “Okay.”

He packed up and went to the cottage the next day, using the drive to clear his head. He drove with the window down, breathing in the smell of the trees as he turned down his driveway, appreciating the calm that stole over him the moment he laid eyes on the place.

He spent the rest of the summer doing yoga, swimming, and spending evenings at his parents’ house. It was easier to feel like himself when he was with them, and away from the city, but the uncomfortable knot in his chest was still there, even if it was fainter than before.

There was a small part of him that wished he could just stay there forever, locked away in his secluded little slice of the world, without having to worry about hockey or the team or the things that he wanted but was never going to be able to have.

People would understand, he would reason to himself, laying in his bed, and listening to the sounds of the birds on the lake at night. He had always been “antisocial” in Hayden’s words, would it really be so crazy to just stay here and live like a hermit and only hang out with his parents?

If he was always alone by his own choice, maybe that bone deep loneliness that lingered would go away completely.

But he had responsibilities. To his team, to the brands he had deals with, to his parents, who had sacrificed so much for him to be where he was. People relied on him. Fuck, the entire city of Montreal relied on him. He couldn’t just walk away from it all, even as much as he might like to, especially on the nights where the lake was quiet and he could watch the sunset from the firepit, the smoky crackling of the low fire he built and the loons the only noise.

None of the team had ever understood why Shane would prefer to live away from the city full time if he could, but the truth was that he only lived in Montreal out of necessity. The cottage, in the open air where he could see the stars without the hazy orange glow of light pollution, and take lungfuls of cold, clear air when he was anxious, that was the place he loved best.

So it was especially hard when September came, just as the leaves were beginning to turn, to get in his car and leave the cottage and the peace and comfort that it brought in the rearview mirror, so he could return to Montreal for fall training.

“How was the rest of the summer?” Hayden asked him the next day, when they were dressing for practice, the locker room noisy with the reunions of a summer apart.

“Good,” Shane said, not meeting his eyes, “Just went to the cottage after JJ’s wedding. Yours?”

“Yeah good,” Hayden waved his hands in the air, “Jackie and I talked about going somewhere, but her parents couldn’t make it work and mine are just too busy, so it didn’t end up happening.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah well, I’m just saying, enjoy it while you can,” he said, a wide smile on his face, “Once you get shackled up like the rest of us it won’t be so easy.”

Shane laughed uncomfortably, and turned to pull down his gear. He always hated when the others talked like that, like their families were an imposition or a burden. It was all normal “guy talk,” things that were painfully commonplace in any locker room, but the jokes had never felt funny to him.

Fortunately, his four weeks of constant exercise had put him in a good position for the season, and his coach was favorably impressed, so that while everyone else returned to the locker room sweaty and grumbling, Shane felt alive, like he could run a mile if he wanted to.

“You sure you’re human, Hollander?” Mitty laughed as they changed, “How are you not wrecked?”

Shane shrugged, putting his gear neatly back in place,

“I didn’t spend the whole summer pretending like the outdoors didn’t exist.”

The rest of the team laughed, and he was hailed with multiple blows on his back.

“That’s our captain!” JJ yelled, and Shane relaxed just a little, reminding himself that being with his team was worth being away from the stars.

It would all be worth it, especially when they won the Cup.

By mid-February, they were well on their way. The talking heads were calling it unprecedented, an incredible winning streak that the league hadn’t seen since the seventies. Shane was on fire, playing some of the best hockey in his career, and they were essentially already a lock for the playoffs if things didn’t collapse around them.

And Shane was determined to make sure they didn’t.

He led the room with an ease that had never been easy for him to achieve, but he could feel the admiration and respect of the others every time he stood in front of them, gearing up for a pregame speech.

They didn’t need to know that he rehearsed them in the mirror for at least an hour before he drove to the stadium. That was his, and his alone.

After a particularly brutal defeat of the Raiders, the Metros’ locker room was jubilant, filled with the cacophony of celebration. It was their second defeat of Boston for the season, and they were lengthening their lead in the division.

The playoffs were theirs, and so was the Cup.

JJ descended on Shane the moment he had returned from the shower, hitting him on the back so hard he thought it might be some kind of new form of massage he was really bad at.

“Captain, we are all going out to that club on 5th!”

“Oh I-”

“You’re coming!”

He probably should, even though he really didn’t want to. He could show face for half an hour, have one beer, and then leave. Just for the unity angle and everything.

“All right,” he relented, grinning at the explosion of cheers from everyone in the room.

The moment they arrived however; Shane was reminded why he hated going to clubs. It was loud and stuffy and packed with people, so he kept touching them accidentally as he tried to make his way to the bar. It took three attempts to flag down the bartender, and even then he had to yell his order to her, and she, in turn had to repeat her question about opening a tab twice before he took in what she was saying.

For the team, he reminded himself sternly, plastering a smile on his face as Mitty jumped on his back, again yelling something that was lost in the thrumming beat of the music.

When he finally had his beer in hand, he squeezed back through the crowd, avoiding the dance floor like the plague, and sat down at a booth where about half of the team was already cloistered, empty shot glasses already littering the table.

They cheered when he sat down, only for those cheers to turn to boos when he refused their offer of tequila shots.

For the team sure, but that was one bridge that he was not interested in crossing.

“Hollander killed tonight!” Drapeau thumped him on the back, “Send those Boston fucks packing back across the pond.”

“The pond would be England,” Shane muttered, knowing none of them were listening, “Good night for sure.”

“We are so winning that fucking Cup,” JJ crowed, and Shane was sure he would end the night standing on one of these tables, and quickly resolved to be safely in his apartment before that happened, “Might as well already engrave it.”

It was bad luck to talk like this, but Shane let it go. They all thought he was a stick in the mud anyway, no need to add to those rumors.

As the evening wore on, he found himself being dragged from table to table, greeting every member of the roster like he had never met them before. Hayden had forced another beer into his hand at some point, and he had finally extricated himself from a conversation about logos and branding with his very drunk goalie when his eyes found someone staring at him from across the room.

“Jesus Christ,” he ran a hand through his hair, “How the fuck does this keep happening?”

Ilya was leaning against a pillar to the side of the dance floor, a drink in his hand, and staring directly at Shane. When their gazes met, even in the low, strobing light, Shane could have sworn that he was grinning at him.

He blushed, looking away, and decided to escape before any more damage could be done.

He had worked so hard to get back to an equilibrium after the last time, and he couldn't risk losing focus, not now, not when they were on such a hot streak, and the playoffs loomed.

It was slow work, shifting through the crowd, but he thought that he had almost made it back to the bar, away from Ilya, when he caught sight of him again, this time right at the exit, so that Shane wouldn't be able to get out without walking right by him.

How the fuck did he get over there so fast? Could he fucking teleport?

Suppressing a sigh, he surveyed the room, weighing his options. He could go back to the others, hang around until Ilya lost interest or left, he could march right by him without saying a word, or he could...talk to him.

None of these options seemed appealing, but he did really want to go home, so he decided he would just walk by him, not give him what he wanted.

He started the slow progress towards the door, working himself up to not so much as look in his direction as he passed.

Of course, all that went out the window when he got close enough to him. He was dressed casually, in dark jeans with rips at the knees, and shirt that was patterned in some way, Shane couldn't make it out in the darkness. He had clearly had product in his hair at some point, but several curls had come loose throughout the evening, stretching down across his forehead.

His mouth quirked up as he watched Shane staring, and he realized that he had stopped in his tracks, spellbound by him.

Shit, he needed to move.

"Having good time?" he asked, pushing off the wall to step closer to him, his accent heavy on his tongue, and Shane thought he might be kind of drunk.

He made to do his usual lie, a resounding "yes" so he didn't seem like a buzzkill. But instead, the truth was pouring out of his mouth,

"Not really. I don't really like to come to these places."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Team celebration," he pointed around at a few of his teammates, who were all actually having too good of a time to pay him any mind, "They asked me to come out with them."

Ilya inclined his head, taking in Shane in a slow, calculating sort of way. Eventually, he said,

"You are type of person who just goes along with what others say, yes?"

He drew back, somewhat insulted by the implication, even though it was absolutely true.

“What?”

“You did not want to go to the club, did not want a dance, do not want to be here,” Ilya rattled off all these things easily, and Shane very much wanted to disappear in that moment, because it was as though Ilya had really seen him, exposing him in a way that he was not used to.

“I just- I have to be-” he scrambled, struggling to find the right words, “A good captain. And that means coming out here when I’d rather be-”

He trailed away, but the words “anywhere else” were in the offing. He looked at the floor, cursing himself for the way the words had landed, but Ilya’s laugh cut through the noise, and he looked back at him, surprised.

“You are funny. Very, very boring, but funny.”

He said something in another language, and Shane asked the question before he could stop himself,

“What language is that?”

He thought he knew, from the research he definitely hadn’t done after the wedding. Ilya’s head cocked to the side,

“Russian.”

“Oh. Right,” he flushed, it was humiliating that he had even asked the question.

“Like I said,” he continued, “Boring.”

“I am not boring,” Shane colored up at once, “I just-”

“You are boring,” he took a sip of his drink, eyes dragging lazily down Shane’s body, “Is not a question.”

“Whatever,” he said, trying weakly to push past him, but he might as well have been a brick wall for all the good it did, “I have to go, so-”

“Give me your phone,” everything seemed to grind to a screeching halt. The music, the people, the noise, all gone, and the only thing in the world was this, Ilya right in front of him, hand outstretched.

“What?” Shane asked stupidly, like his ears were filled with cotton.

“Phone,” he shook his hand, slightly impatient, “Give me your phone.”

Wordlessly, Shane reached into his pocket and deposited his phone in Ilya’s hand.

“Need your passcode, baby.”

Shane’s entire body shivered involuntarily at the pet name, and he took it back, unlocking it with fumbling, shaky fingers.

Ilya tapped on the screen for a moment, and then he was handing the phone back to Shane, who took it mutely, wide-eyed.

“I will text you,” Ilya said, and Shane was surprised that he could hear him with the roaring in his ears.

“W-Why?” he couldn’t help the question. It was multifaceted; why him? Why when he was a very closeted hockey player, and Ilya could certainly get anyone he wanted into bed with a snap of his fingers? Why did he keep popping up in Shane’s life? And why, why could Shane not forget him?

“Because,” he stepped closer, leaning down so that his hot breath ghosted across the side of Shane’s face, “I can’t seem to stop thinking about you. You feel that way too, hm?”

It wasn’t really a question, Ilya knew the answer, and so did Shane.

“I-” but he didn’t seem to need to hear anything else that Shane had to say, and slid his fingers along his jaw, brushing his lips across his cheek, and murmuring,

“See you, Shane.”

He melted into the crowd, and Shane was left rooted to the spot, completely unable to move for several minutes.

Part of Shane almost hoped that that would be the end of it. It was too dangerous to get wrapped in something unknown like this in the middle of the season. It would be better if Ilya didn’t text him, and he could be left with the memory of the interaction every time he touched himself.

But, the running theme with Ilya seemed to be that he was doing exactly the opposite of what Shane wanted.

Two days after their meeting in the club, Shane woke up to a text from an unknown number.

Where are we meeting?

He stared at the message for several seconds, his stomach doing something halfway between painful and nausea-inducing.

He decided not to respond.

He didn’t have time for this, not right now.

Shane was pent up and frustrated for the entire day. Consequentially, this meant that he played some of the worst hockey he had all season that night, and they only won to a bad San Jose team by the skin of their teeth.

“You okay, man?” Hayden asked him tentatively after the game, where the locker room was more subdued than it had been in months, “You seem- Off.”

“Huh?” Shane looked around at him, his phone in his hand, staring down at the message he had received that morning, “What? Uh yeah. Yeah man, just- Feeling a little- I think I might be getting a cold.”

“Oh,” Hayden’s expression cleared; this was evidently a good enough answer for him, “Well get away from me, Jackie would kill me if I brought something home.”

“Right,” he said absently, looking back down at the screen, thinking hard.

It wasn’t the playoffs just yet. Technically, he couldn’t jinx anything by going out of his routine *yet*.

And maybe it would be good for him; all the guys said that they played better when they-

Ugh, gross, he wasn’t going to think about that.

But he couldn’t come across as too eager, that he wanted it too much...he had to do this carefully.

He made his way over to the large block schedule that was tacked up on the wall, his eyes trailing down it to March. They were away this weekend, which he knew, but they were home for eight days after that.

His imagination immediately began showing him what exactly could fill some of that time, and he shook his head, reminding himself sternly that he was in the locker room. Now was not the time.

I’m away this weekend, Philly.

He sent the text in bed, surrounded by his soft pillows and warm duvet, his glasses pushed up on his nose.

Shane didn’t expect a response, at least not right away, but it didn’t stop him from staring at their two lonely messages for much longer than necessary, almost like he was trying to will Ilya to text him back faster.

No such luck. The screen remained smoothly blank, free of those three little dots and a new message.

Sighing, frustration settling in his shoulders, he picked up his book, and set his phone down on the bedside table, only stealing glances at it every few minutes.

He dropped off to sleep later than usual, but woke to another message, sent in the early hours of the morning.

Fun. Not what I asked.

“What an asshole,” Shane muttered, the corners of his mouth tilting up all the same.

He let this message sit as well, going through his carefully crafted morning routine. Pre-workout, gym for an hour, shower, breakfast, get dressed, head to practice.

It was easy, he didn’t have to think about it.

Which was kind of bad at the moment, because all he could think about was Ilya, about the promise of something there.

He decided he would deal with finding a place for them to meet when he got back from beating Philadelphia.

They did, handily as a matter of fact. Shane’s slump had only lasted one game, and he was grateful for it.

He returned to his shared hotel room with Hayden in good spirits, laughing at his stupid jokes, and responding to his mother's congratulatory text quickly, instead of having to work up to it.

His eyes caught on the text message from Ilya, his number still unsaved.

Fuck it.

He did some sleuthing as Hayden showered, singing off key. He didn't want to bring Ilya back to his place, not yet, not when he had seen people taking photos of him outside his building. He couldn't risk it. Not right now.

It was easy, to book the room on his phone, sneaking his credit card out of his wallet as the shower stopped running and Hayden's bad singing continued. He booked the room for the next day, and sent a message to Ilya just before he darted off for his own shower.

I come home tomorrow, meet me at 1440 Rue de la Montague.

I'll send a room number tomorrow.

He had said tomorrow twice. That was embarrassing. Tomorrow, tomorrow, like an idiot.

Shane scrubbed the day out of his hair in the shower, from head to toe, using body wash that Hayden always said was stupid to bring on road trips. It was a small thing, a luxury that he could keep with him no matter where he went, what city he was in.

He tried not to think about what tomorrow might bring as the sweet smell of it filled the shower, soft around the edges with the steam.

Shane only stopped by his apartment long enough to change clothes and drop off his overnight bag when they arrived back in Montreal the next morning. He tried on at least four different outfits before he settled on the least offensive pair of pants and t shirt he could manage to find, and ubered to the hotel, not wanting to leave his car with the valet.

He checked in with the front desk, watching them closely to see if any of them recognized him, but he was lucky, and shot another text to Ilya as he waited for the elevator.

1620.

I will be there in twenty.

Shane's heart did a strange skipping, and he felt sort of like he might be having a heart attack.

It was a nice hotel, nicer than the rooms that the team put them up in, and nicer than one he would have booked for himself for the All-Star Game or the MLH awards.

He told himself that it just made sense, wouldn't raise questions.

But the awful truth was that he wanted to impress him.

He paced up and down the room, his hands in his pockets, and the anxiety in his gut roiling like a pot on a stove.

What was he doing? This was the worst idea he had ever had. He didn't even know this person. He could be a stalker, or a serial killer, or even a fan.

He could get outed, his whole career blown up in smoke just because he wanted to-

He didn't even know what they were going to do.

Maybe he should leave, he thought frantically, watching the minutes tick by, just leave. Block his number, pretend like everything was fine. Live without this aspect of his life being fulfilled.

It made him sick to think about.

A quiet knock on the door made him freeze. This was it. No running now.

He took one long, shaky breath and pulled the door open.

Ilya was standing there, in a leather jacket and heavy boots, his hair left ungelled, and his eyebrow already raised at Shane, so that goosebumps erupted up his neck.

Shane stood back, allowing him to pass, and he stepped around him, staring around the room with a disinterested expression on his face.

"You live in hotel?" Ilya took in every detail of the neat, impersonal room, his eyes finally coming to rest on Shane, "Hockey pays that badly?"

"No," he probably could have fried an egg on his face, "I just- It's more- Discreet."

"Ah," Ilya grinned, lifting up his hands as though he was surrendering to something, "Discreet."

"Fuck you," Shane said, nettled by his tone, "It's practical."

"Is that everything you do?" Ilya shrugged off his jacket, and Shane's brain ground to a complete halt.

He was wearing a black tank top, so that Shane could see every line of the muscles in his arms, and the jut of his collarbone beneath the strong lines of his neck.

"What?" he asked slowly, trying and failing to seem casual.

His mouth lifted in a half smile, and he took a step closer to him. Shane could feel the crackling electricity between them from here, and he was surprised that the lights in the room hadn't dimmed in response to it.

"Everything you do is so practical," his voice was low, and his eyes drank him in, "But here you are. This is not practical."

"No," he shook his head experimentally, like he was trying to rid his ears of water, "No it's- It's not."

There was a pause, heavy with something that Shane couldn't place. He felt awkward. In movies, people just sort of...started, there wasn't a buildup or big conversation beforehand. But he should probably tell him- How did he even go about doing that? What was the right way to say it? Would he scare him off if he did?

Before he could work himself up into a further lather, Ilya spoke,

“Have you been with a man?”

“Uh- No,” it was openly honest, and he blushed, embarrassed that he was past thirty and was sort of still a fucking virgin, “I- It’s hard with- My job and stuff.”

Ilya folded his arms, shifting back slightly. It was difficult to read his expression,

“I do not do first times.”

Disappointment shot through Shane like an arrow piercing his skin. His shoulders sagged, and his head tilted down towards the floor. Of course, he should have thought of this.

“Right,” he said, his voice small, “Okay. Well- I- I’ll see you then, I-”

“But I will make exception, since you are so desperate for it.”

Something like anger flared in his gut, and his head shot up, meeting Ilya’s, which were sparkling with humor at how skillfully he was pushing his buttons.

“I am not *desperate*,” he tried to make himself believe the words as he said them.

“Yes you are.”

Shane wanted to argue, but he knew, deep inside himself, that Ilya was right. He *was* desperate for it.

They stared at each other, the moment lengthening to the point that Shane was almost uncomfortable.

Finally, Ilya hummed, shifting so that he was almost looming over Shane. His breath was coming in little stabbing gasps, whereas Ilya was cool and calm and collected.

“You want me that bad,” it wasn’t a question, and he stepped even closer to him now, so that their chests were almost touching, “Haven’t been able to stop thinking about it? This?”

He reached down, pressing his palm against Shane’s cock, which twitched under his touch, and he whimpered, the sound ripped from deep in his chest.

Ilya’s eyes narrowed just slightly, even as Shane’s head tipped back, nearly delirious in the feeling of having him this close again.

“Mmm,” Ilya hummed, his hands tracing up Shane’s sides, pushing up his t shirt, “I think you’d look good on your knees for me.”

Without thinking, his brain fully disconnected from his body, he sank down at once, his knees on the soft carpet below him, and looked up at him, waiting for him to tell him what to do next.

Ilya’s eyes betrayed a flicker of surprise, maybe at how readily Shane had dropped to the floor, but he didn’t have time to overthink things, because his hands were in Shane’s hair, guiding him forward, so that Shane pressed his mouth against his cock, still trapped in his pants.

“Take them off,” Ilya’s voice was commanding, but a different cadence than he had used at the club all those months ago.

Shane obeyed at once, eager to please. He unbuttoned his jeans, and eased the zipper down, his eyes up, locked on Ilya’s, making sure that he was doing well.

Ilya nodded, one hand still in his hair as he braced himself against the wall behind him.

Shane slid his briefs down over his hips and-

Look, Shane had seen a lot of dicks in his life. It was an occupational hazard of playing hockey for his entire life; it was just how locker rooms were. He had always known not to look, to keep his eyes up, but some things were unavoidable, and it wasn’t a big deal or anything.

But Ilya’s was the first hard cock that he had seen in person, other than his own.

And fuck, it might just be the most mouthwatering thing he had ever seen. It was thicker than his, and slightly longer, and curved to the left where Shane’s curved to the right. There was a bead of precum at the already flushed red head, and he had to stop himself from leaning forward and licking it off.

His eyes moved up again, meeting Ilya’s, asking for permission. Ilya’s eyes were wide as he nodded, and Shane, still feeling completely disconnected from his brain and the anxiety that would normally have him pausing at every turn, decided to just jump in, to try and do everything he could to please Ilya.

His eyes focused again on the sight in front of him, and he wet his lips, leaning forward and allowing his tongue to trace the slit on the head of Ilya’s cock, tasting the precum there. It was salty, almost tangy, and left him wanting more.

Slowly, he let his tongue wander up and down the length of his shaft, working up to actually taking it in his mouth, with that little voice in the back of his head telling him that he would be bad at it. But Ilya was panting above him, moaning at every touch, which made Shane a little braver, more eager even if he did fuck it up.

He swirled his tongue around his head again before taking it fully into his mouth, his eyes fluttering closed at the feeling. He wanted to know how much he could take; his own aching cock proved that.

He opened his mouth wider, trying not to use teeth, and took in a little more, until the head of Ilya’s cock hit the back of his throat, and he gagged slightly.

“Relax your throat, and breathe through your nose” Ilya encouraged him, one hand still in his hair, so Shane couldn’t pull off and start apologizing, “Da, like that.”

He sighed contentedly at the praise, lightness overtaking his limbs, and he did as Ilya told him, breathing slowly through his nose, and relaxing into the feeling of something down his throat as he took more of him.

“Good,” Ilya moaned as Shane swallowed around him. He hadn’t managed to take all of him, but he didn’t seem to mind, and rocked just slightly, and Shane was seized by the violent desire to have him fuck his mouth. It was a strange feeling, one that would normally be accompanied by intense

shame and embarrassment, even if it only lived inside his own head, but in this moment, Shane just *wanted*, with none of the baggage that normally came along.

But it was getting a little hard to breathe, so he eased off of him, and obscene rope of spit connecting his mouth and Ilya's cock as he did so.

Ilya reached down, his thumb swiping across Shane's lips, wiping away the saliva there. It was almost tender, and he leaned into the contact shamelessly. Ilya pulled him to his feet, and Shane swayed, dizzy from the lack of air and having something he had only ever dreamed of.

He led them towards the bed, and pushed Shane back onto it, looking hungry.

"So hard already," he said, in that patronizing way that simultaneously pissed Shane off and made him wild for more, "All from just sucking my cock."

"Yes," Shane sounded nearly impatient, even to his own ears, and Ilya chuckled, low and dark and so very, very hot.

"We go slow," Ilya met his eyes, suddenly earnest, "Okay?"

"Okay," he said, a little dreamily, "Okay."

Ilya stripped him naked, taking his time. With every inch of skin he revealed, he pressed his lips to it, his eyes flicking up, a silent check in. And all Shane could do was hold onto his hair, fingers tangled in his curls, and nod, desperate for more.

"Okay?" he asked again when Shane was finally completely bare on the hotel bed, his chest heaving.

He nodded eagerly again, too wrecked already to trust his voice.

Ilya watched him for another moment, before he was tipping his head downward, and licking a wide, agonizing stripe up Shane's hard cock.

He gave a keening sort of noise, and arched off the bed, willing Ilya to take more of him, but he just gave him a wicked grin before pushing his legs up until his knees were by his ears.

It wasn't an entirely new sensation. Shane may not have been with a man, but he knew his way around, okay? But it was so strange, so foreign, to have someone else opening him up. Ilya's fingers were thicker than his, and, even with lube, it was odd to have the intrusion feel different than it did when he was playing with himself.

Ilya made a soft sound as he slid one finger, and then two, in and out of Shane. He kissed his inner thigh, and Shane could see, even in the low light, how wide his pupils had gone, so that the blue of his irises had almost disappeared.

He murmured something in Russian, lost against Shane's skin, and he closed his eyes, his head rolling back.

"So pretty," he said, in English this time, and Shane met his gaze again, propped up on the pillows of the hotel bed. His instinct was to blush and look away, but there was something about Ilya that made it hard to break his gaze. Instead, they stared at each other, the slick, wet sound of Ilya's fingers inside Shane and their heavy breathing the only noise in the room.

“Fuck,” Shane arched into him as he hit a particularly good spot, “Right there.”

“Yes,” Ilya said unhelpfully, sliding his fingers out of him. Shane whined at the loss, but watched him eagerly as he stood back, tearing off the wrapper of a condom with his teeth and rolling it carefully on his hard cock.

His mouth was watering again, and he swallowed thickly, hoping that Ilya wouldn’t notice.

He slicked himself with lube, his hand moving up and down his cock once, twice, three times, before he was back on top of Shane, kissing him delicately before muttering in his ear,

“You tell me if it is okay?” his teeth grazed the hinge of his jaw, and Shane’s whole body trembled with the anticipation of what was coming next, “Okay?”

Shane agreed, wondering if he was going to combust at Ilya’s next touch.

“Turn over,” he said his hands on either side of Shane’s hips, and he scrambled to obey, sticking his ass in the air in an entirely undignified way, but too horny to care. He was way, way past caring about any kind of decorum or embarrassment at this point.

It was like time slowed down to a single point the moment Shane felt the head of Ilya’s cock pushing against him. The stretch and slight burn were momentary, but the pleasure that surged through every single part of his body stayed, and he moaned into the pillow he didn’t remember he had started clutching.

Ilya was true to his word, and moved forward incrementally, pausing every inch or so to check in with him. He liked it, liked the feeling of being taken care of, almost as much as he liked the idea of being pinned down on the bed and fucked with abandon, care and check ins be damned.

He wanted it all. If it felt like this, he was greedy for it.

After what felt like an age, Ilya was fully inside him, and it was almost like he could come from this alone, just this feeling of fullness and the heavy presence of Ilya’s body around him.

Distantly, he felt lips on his shoulder, and Ilya’s deep voice in his ear.

“Still okay?”

“Fuck,” he lifted his head enough so that what he was saying wasn’t lost, “I won’t be if you don’t move right now.”

Ilya’s hand moved from its place beside Shane on the bed to his hair, pulling him up gently so that he could kiss the side of his face in a messy, wet way.

“I like when you talk like that,” his voice was quiet and dangerous, and Shane was dizzy from it, losing control, “Next time I’ll fuck you harder, yes? Hard like you want it?”

“Yes,” he was begging, “Yes.”

He chuckled, his hand releasing its grip on Shane’s hair and coming to rest on his hips again, starting a slow, steady pace that was angled in just that right way so that he-

“Oh,” his voice went up several octaves, nearly breaking like a piece of spun glass, “Oh- It- Yes-”

“Good?” he could hear the grin in Ilya’s voice. He knew it was good, the bastard.

“Yes,” his voice echoed around the hotel room, and he couldn’t even manage to feel bad for the neighbors, “Yes please- More I need- More-”

And Ilya obliged. He shifted Shane’s hips so that he was impossibly deeper, and Shane fell back into the pillows again, holding onto them for dear life. His hand sneaked down, running along his cock, and he whimpered, caught in the down of the pillow that he was starting to bite down on.

“That’s right,” Ilya’s voice was tight above him, and Shane wanted him to fuck him face to face next, so that he could see what he looked like. He was positive he was unreal, probably ethereally beautiful when he came undone. “Touch yourself for me, so good Shane.”

He whined, a long unbroken note that hitched with every thrust, and the angle was perfect, just right, so that he was suddenly right there, tearing towards an orgasm that he was positive that he wouldn’t be able to stop.

But he wanted to be allowed to, be good, be told.

“I’m gonna-” his voice was caught up at the top of his throat, tangled together with the noises that he couldn’t help, “Please- Let me-”

“Do it,” his accent was thick and sweet like molasses on his tongue, and Shane thought he might get hard from just hearing him talk, “Give it to me.”

Shane jerked himself in time to Ilya’s thrusts, and he came all over himself, biting down on the pillow so hard that he thought he might tear it.

Ilya moaned something guttural in Russian a moment later, and his hips stuttered before stilling, only stopped from spilling deep inside him by the thin piece of latex between them.

His eyes rolled back, he loved it.

They collapsed onto the bed, Ilya still inside him, slotting them together so that his hand rested on Shane’s stomach, catching the cum that was smeared there.

It should be kind of gross, but it wasn’t. Not now, not when it was Ilya.

Shane sighed happily, content to lay this way for hours; Ilya still inside him, his fingers trailing across his skin, his teeth biting down lightly on his shoulder, his tongue laving over the indents immediately after.

It was perfect.

Absolutely perfect.

“Good?” Ilya’s voice seemed to come from very far away, and Shane hadn’t realized he had been almost dozing until he spoke. He groaned a little, a soft sound, and twisted his neck around to kiss him, hand tangled in his hair.

“So good,” he said, sighing as Ilya shifted, and he was reminded that he was still inside him, “So good.”

He huffed a noise, almost a laugh, pressing his lips into Shane's hair, and Shane was too blissed out to wonder if he was like this with everyone he fucked.

They stayed that way for so long that Shane started dozing, listing between consciousness and sleep, with Ilya's warm breath on the back of his neck. He should probably tell him to pull out, he was still wearing a condom, and everything was getting a little itchy...but it just felt so nice. Nice to be held this way, nice to feel full, nice to have his lips brushing his skin every so often, breathing deeply.

Eventually, Ilya shifted, pulling out of Shane slowly, drawing a noise he knew he had never made before from him. He missed him at once, and it had been long enough now that he was half hard again.

He didn't want this to end.

"I have to go," he dragged his teeth along Shane's collarbone, his blue eyes staring up at him. Shane felt disappointment curdling in his gut.

"Oh. Right."

"I have work," he kissed the center of his chest, eyes still on him, "But I don't need to be there for an hour."

"Oh," Shane didn't know why he was telling him this.

"So I will take a shower."

"Okay."

"Jesus," he said exasperatedly, "You will come shower with me, and I will suck your dick in there, yes?"

"Oh- Oh- Yeah," he nodded eagerly, "Yes- I- Okay."

Ilya snorted, rolling off of him, and his ass was so arrestingly perfect that Shane just laid there, splayed out on the bed, staring at it with his mouth open.

He turned to look over his shoulder, only to come up with a laugh that bubbled out of his chest.

"Like what you see?"

"Huh?" he said, sounding punch drunk even to his own ears.

"Come on," he jerked his head, still laughing to himself at Shane.

Shane scrambled to follow him, dutiful and obedient.

Ilya was late leaving by ten minutes. He had spent at least thirty of those minutes teasing Shane under the hot water of the shower, dragging him to the very edge of another orgasm before pulling away, sucking on his inner thigh or just above his pubic bone.

Shane had just decided that the only recourse he had left was to die, when he finally took him entirely in his hot, wet mouth, and used just enough teeth that Shane was coming with a shout,

down Ilya's throat.

He stood up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and pulling Shane forward, kissing him, sliding his tongue inside his mouth so he could taste himself.

It drove him crazy.

The rest of the hour and ten minutes was spent kissing under the warm spray of the water, and then kissing wrapped in the fluffy towels that the hotel provided, and then kissing against the door, with Shane pinned against it, his leg hooked around Ilya's, pressing their hips together.

"I have to go," Ilya groaned, even as Shane kissed him over and over again, his hands tripping down to the waistband of his jeans, "I can't be late."

"When can I-" his voice caught in his throat, not sure if what he wanted was something he was allowed to ask for.

"You want this again?" he asked, looking smug, as though this was not the most obvious thing in the world.

"Yes," he said, his nails digging into the front of Ilya's shirt, like he could keep him there if he held onto him tight enough.

"I will text you," he leaned in, kissing him again, sweetly, "And you can get stupid hotel room and we can fuck in it."

"Okay," he sounded eager, too eager, but if he got to have this again, he didn't really care, "Okay I-I'll, well, hopefully- We'll be in the playoffs soon so it might- Be a while but- Yes."

"You can't fuck during the playoffs?" Ilya asked, looking at him like he was completely insane.

"It's a- Science thing," Shane said evasively, knowing that Ilya would laugh at him.

"A science thing? What is a science thing?"

"It's-" he tried to shift away, but Ilya was still holding him against the door, "It's just that when we get to the playoffs- We have certain- Things that we have to do."

"What things?" he was looking increasingly bewildered.

"Well, no shaving for one," he didn't tell Ilya that he had never been able to grow much in the way of a beard, "And no- No sex."

He looked mortified.

"How long are the playoffs?"

"Like two months if we go to the championship."

"And you think you will go to the championship?"

Shane shrugged.

“I hope so. Our team this year is really good, we’ve clicked in a way that I really think puts us in a good position to-”

Ilya’s head lolled back, and he started loudly fake snoring. Shane laughed, even as he shoved him in the chest.

“Fuck off.”

“You really will not fuck anyone for two months?”

“No I- I mean it’s not like I was- Before but. Yeah no. Probably not.”

“What if your science is wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if,” he leaned in again, pressing his whole body flush against Shane’s, “You need to fuck to win your championship?”

“Well,” his breath betrayed him, shaking as he exhaled, “I’ve never before and-”

“And you’ve won before?”

“Twice,” he said proudly, and Ilya rolled his eyes theatrically.

“Fine,” he pouted, but gave Shane a filthy kiss all the same, “I suppose I will just root for you to lose early.”

Shane’s mouth dropped open in horror.

“Don’t say that!”

Ilya snorted, clearly enjoying working Shane up like this.

“Is that against the science too?”

Shane shook his head, aghast, but not enough to pull away from him.

“It’s bad luck!”

“Oh, so is luck now?”

“It’s-” Shane felt almost cornered, ignoring the fact that he actually was kind of cornered, he didn’t mind that, “It’s science and luck.”

“Right,” he put an emphasis on the ‘t,’ “Well, if you decide you don’t want to follow your stupid made up science, text me, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane sighed, pulling him closer again, “I will but- Probably after I win the Cup.”

Ilya scoffed, but pressed another soft kiss to his mouth before spinning him around.

“I have to go.”

“Right,” he said, regretfully releasing his iron grip on Ilya’s shirt, “Right well- Thanks for- Yeah.”

Ilya’s mouth curved, and he pulled his chin forward, giving him one last kiss and a whispered,

“Bye,” against his lips before he was opening the door and disappearing from view.

Shane stayed where he had left him long after he had disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Also it really is so easy to write how hot Shane thinks Ilya is because I am CRAZY about him myself.

Chapter 3: on your knees, you'll understand

Chapter Notes

Y'all I am doing my best with the details of the NHL playoffs but I am VERY NEW to watching hockey and am almost positive I made mistakes. I'm very much a visual learner when it comes to sports but I didn't want to keep you waiting until April for me to watch the Stanley Cup playoffs lmfao, forgive me divas <3

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

As a wet March turned into a cool and breezy April, the Metros continued on their unprecedented hot streak. They had secured a playoff spot and home ice advantage for the first round, and just had to wait to see who they would be seeded against.

Shane had been worried that his...meetup with Ilya would make his concentration break, but it had done the opposite.

"You are on fire, dude," Hayden had said after their last match of the regular season against the Admirals, "Are you finally getting laid or something?"

Shane choked, turning crimson behind his visor.

"What?" he asked sharply, "No I- Just- No."

"Okay weirdo," Hayden said, laughing as he skated away to the locker rooms.

The truth was, Shane had been thinking about Ilya far more than was normal. Their afternoon in the hotel room had been- Well, something close to life-altering for Shane, and he wouldn't mind having it, having *him* again.

But he couldn't. Not right now. Not with the playoffs so close.

He wanted another Cup. Nothing could get in the way of it.

Not even a tall, golden-skinned Russian with pretty blue eyes.

On the night of the seeding matchups, Shane was invited over the JJ's house to watch the broadcast with the rest of the team. He showed up about five minutes before to an already packed house, filled with the cacophony of a relaxed and happy team.

"Fuck Boston!" JJ was saying, sprawled on the couch and giving Shane a lazy wave when he saw him, "I always want them to get fucked, I hope they're lowest."

"But I'd rather play them than Detroit," Hayden pointed out fairly, patting the empty space on the couch for Shane to sit next to him.

Shane did, sinking down onto the soft fabric, and looking up at the television mounted against the wall. He was determined to enjoy himself, even though he would normally be holed up in his apartment, taking notes on the entire thing, analyzing his potential opponents.

But that wouldn't be very captainly of him, and showing up for the team at this stage was crucial, even if he'd rather be ensconced in his own safe rituals.

He waited on tenterhooks as the announcers droned on and on, guessing who was going to be matched up with who. The rest of the team was betting, passing around a bowl of crumpled bills that Shane politely passed onto Hayden, eyes focused on the screen.

Predictably, their division was last to be seeded, and reminded Shane forcibly of why he had always wanted to present first in school. His leg bounced up and down uncontrollably, speeding up imperceptibly when the Metros logo popped up on the screen.

The team fell silent, all of them focused on the announcer's voice,

"The number one seeded Montreal Metros will face the number sixteen seeded Boston Raiders."

Cheers exploded from every corner of the room. Mitty leapt over the couch and jumped on Shane's back, and he grinned, relief seeping through his body. Boston was an easy target. They were having a down year, and hadn't beaten the Metros all season. They knew their roster backwards, and they had home ice advantage. It was about as good of a setup as they could have asked for.

He was anxious about the playoffs, but no more so than usual. They really were in a good place this year, better than they had been in a long time.

In a few weeks, Shane would be lifting his third Cup over his head, and would be listening to the roaring approval of a Montreal home crowd as he did so.

This dream became his singular focus for the next week, and by the time the first round of the playoffs had arrived, he felt as confident in his team and himself as he ever had.

Ten minutes before they were due to exit the locker room and face their opponents, Shane's phone buzzed with a text. He cocked his head to the side curiously; it was out of the ordinary for anyone to be texting him this close to a game, especially a playoff game. Rose knew better, as did his parents; so when his phone lit up above his head, nestled safely in the little cubby that held his helmet, he picked it up without thinking. No one would be texting him if there wasn't something really wrong...

Thinking about you down my throat.

His breath caught in his chest at the message. He glanced around automatically, but no one was paying him any attention, all of them wrapped up in their own pregame rituals.

He was not doing this; he was not going to be the reason that they lost this game.

I'm about to play.

He sent the text quickly, hoping that he might get the message that now was definitely not the time.

It buzzed again a minute later, and he grimaced. He should leave it alone. The message would be there after they played, and maybe the damage hadn't been done.

In spite of himself, he turned the screen to his face.

Are you hard right now?

Well he was *now*, which was distracting and unhelpful.

No, he decided to lie, and slammed his phone down, taking deep breaths through his nose, and gearing up for yet another overly rehearsed pregame speech.

Shane needn't have worried. They crushed Boston easily in games one and two, dropped games three and four in a close one, and then beat them in games five and six. The home crowd thundered their approval at the buzzer, and Shane was nearly tackled by his team, sliding all over the ice, as though they had already won the Cup.

To the people of Montreal, knocking Boston out of the playoffs was just as important as winning the Cup, maybe more.

And the only thing Shane was thinking about was the message that waited for him in the locker room.

He refused to respond until they had won the series. He paced up and down his apartment, typing and deleting messages that varied from wildly indecent to telling Ilya to fuck off.

Finally, he settled on.

This can't happen. It's the playoffs.

He didn't expect him to respond. It was late, he was probably working.

It didn't stop him from checking his phone every few minutes anyway.

Fuck, he needed to focus. He was in the *playoffs*, preparing for a second round with either Tampa or Detroit. He never needed to be more focused on hockey than right at this moment. He didn't have time to be worrying about whether or not Ilya was going to text him back.

He took a long, hot shower to settle his nerves and relax his muscles.

And if he jerked off to the thought of Ilya's mouth around his cock, well, that was just all part of the self-care routine.

He emerged forty-five minutes later, flushed and relaxed, ready to crawl into bed, his sore muscles aching pleasantly from the game. He plugged in his phone, and saw a message on the screen. His heart definitely didn't stutter at the sight of it.

So you can't sext during playoffs either?

His mouth quirked to the side, and he settled under the covers, groaning slightly as his mattress gave enough that he felt like he was sinking into clouds.

The thing was, he didn't really know the answer. He had never been in this position before, and it wasn't like he could ask any of the guys if sexting actually counted against the superstitions they all held to during postseason play.

He shouldn't take the risk, even though he really, really wanted to.

It's not a good idea.

Is not what I asked.

He bit his lip, worrying it between his teeth.

No.

Disappointment curdled in his stomach, and he pushed it away, frustrated with himself for getting into this whole thing now. He knew better and now look, exactly what he had worried about was coming true.

Ok.

Shane very much doubted that would be the end of it.

Does not mean I can't sext you.

"Asshole," Shane grumbled, setting his phone down on his bedside table and turning off the lamp, rolling over onto his side and hiding his smile in his pillows.

True to his word, Ilya texted Shane before every game in the second round against Detroit, *and* the Eastern Conference Finals against Tampa. Some of them were innocuous enough that he could reasonably explain them away, whereas others were so filthy that Shane felt like he could have fried an egg on his face when he read them.

Thinking about putting you through the bed next time, he had sent before the third game against Detroit, *See your ass jiggle when I fuck you*.

Shane had played the entire game half hard.

He should feel guilty. He was risking the science, the unspoken word that every hockey player followed during postseason. The reason that they didn't shave and some of them didn't shower (Shane would never have taken part in that one, and he sometimes thought it was just Mitty being Mitty), the reason that everyone was nearly relieved when they got knocked out, because at least they could get laid again.

He desperately wanted to ask one of them if they sexted during postseason, but that in itself would raise questions that Shane couldn't answer.

No one ever asked him about his love life because there was never anything to say. Shane was chronically single and had never been interested in hookups; they all made fun of him for it, teasing him by saying that he was in a committed relationship with hockey.

There would be too many questions.

So Shane agonized over the texts, vacillating between waiting a day to respond and not responding at all.

Ilya didn't seem to mind, but sent them regardless, and Shane couldn't decide whether he hated them or looked forward to them more.

And the even more maddening thing was...they were winning.

They had swept Detroit, and won a hard fought battle against Tampa in seven, so they were going to the championship, to play Dallas for Shane's third Cup.

Dallas had won home ice advantage, and Shane boarded the team plane in good spirits, better spirits than he had ever been before a championship series. The team had just clicked so well, he didn't feel like anything was going to break their concentration at this point.

He had only considered throwing his phone out the plane window once or twice.

Shane had made the executive decision to not look at his phone before any of the championship series games. Things had been fine so far, but he couldn't risk it, not when they were so close, not when he could practically feel the metal of the Cup against his lips.

He held firm for the first six games. Dallas was by far the best opponent they had faced all season, and they were ravenous for a Cup, just as Montreal was.

He would come back to the locker room after each game, sweaty and exhausted, and would slide his phone surreptitiously from its hiding spot, looking down at whatever filthy thing Ilya had sent him.

Think I should bend you over a chair in that stupid hotel room.

Or,

Need you to suck my cock again, baby. Wanna come in your mouth.

Or,

Jerking off to the thought of you riding me.

Shane liked it; he couldn't pretend that he didn't. He liked the way it made him feel; like he was desired, like Ilya was pining for him, even though he knew he was just playing a game.

He dutifully kept his hands to himself for games one, two, and five, not wanting to alert Hayden that something was different, or that he was risking their Cup by getting off in the shower.

But when he was at home for games three, four, and six...

He thought he was jerking off too much, he was almost sore. But he kept getting hard every time he thought about Ilya.

He knew he should probably feel some modicum of guilt. His teammates weren't behaving like horny teenagers, touching themselves secretly every chance they got.

But then again, his teammates weren't getting filthy messages from a demigod of a stripper with a perfect ass and a perfect cock and a perfect mouth and-

Fuck, he needed to jerk off again.

It all came down to game seven. In Dallas.

“I can’t believe how fucking hot it is,” Hayden complained as they walked from the team bus into the stadium, listening to the distant boos and jeering from fans around the barricades, “How do people live like this?”

It *was* hot, Shane could feel sweat building at his temples, threatening to run down his face, before they were blasted by AC so powerful it might have knocked him off his feet.

“This is nothing,” Comeau said loudly, and the others groaned, knowing what was coming, “Wait until fucking August and get back to me.”

“I have no plans to be in Dallas in August,” JJ said idly, throwing his bag down next to the locker where his white jersey hung, “Why would I ever come here again?”

“It’s not a bad town, Austin is better though, so’s Houston.”

“Comeau, we all know you have a love affair with Texas,” JJ snapped, more tense than normal, “If you love it so bad just ask for a fucking trade back!”

“Alright,” Shane intervened before he could snarl something back, “Take a breath. We need to focus, yeah?”

They both mumbled an apology, not looking at one another or at Shane, but he didn’t push the matter. Instead, he took several long, deep breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth, and settled himself into pregame ritual.

It’s just like any other game, he told himself as his anxiety started bubbling quietly in his stomach, making the room entirely too hot and too cold at the same time. *It’s just another game.*

But it wasn’t just another game. It was game seven of the championship series. The last game, the most important game, the game that Shane had spent the entire year working for. The game that he had given up everything that tasted remotely good for.

It was everything.

He could tell that he was starting to panic. His fingers and toes were icy cold, and there was that weight in his chest, heavy and invisible, impossible to ignore.

He was seconds away from having to give his last speech, but the words that he had so carefully rehearsed at seemed to vanish from his brain, and there was nothing left but an empty, blank, buzzing.

He picked up his phone absent-mindedly, trying to find a distraction, anything that would get him out of the anxiety attack that was building like the cresting of a wave inside him.

Shane swiped on the message from Ilya without thinking about it, too worked up to remember his promise to himself.

Shit.

Oh shit.

The buzzing in his brain had stopped, and he could no longer feel the uncomfortable physical sensations of anxiety overtaking his body. Every cell had suddenly done a one eighty, laser focused on the message his eyes were having trouble taking in.

No, it wasn't a message. It was a photo.

A photo of Ilya.

Oh.

A photo of Ilya in the club.

He was in a private room, Shane recognized it from the chair he had been pushed into all those months before, but there was a long mirror situated against the wall in this one. The light was starkly red, so that he was washed out, and Shane couldn't make out the fine details of the moles and freckles that littered his chest.

It probably should have bothered him that he thought that was a shame.

Ilya was shirtless, but he was wearing a sort of harness, buckled across his broad chest, with studs embedded in it, glinting and reflecting the red light that surrounded him. He was stuffed into those ridiculously small shorts, black this time and-

Shane swallowed audibly. He could see the loose hanging straps for a garter belt around his thick thighs.

He was a fucking vision, and Shane's mouth was watering just looking at him. He wanted to sink his teeth into him, leave indents all over his skin. Mark him as his, as *Shane's*. He was grappling with this somewhat disturbing train of thought when a text came in,

Play hard ;)

"Fuck," he muttered. He shouldn't have looked, why hadn't he just waited until after the game? Why had he been so fucking stupid?

How on earth was he supposed to hype up the rest of the team now? When this would be burned on the back of his eyelids. How was he supposed to concentrate on hockey, when Ilya was nearly two thousand miles away and looking like *that*?

"Ready?" Hayden asked, slapping him on the top of his helmet, and he jumped, shoving his phone back where he had stashed it.

"Yeah," he tried to keep his voice even, "Let's go win the Cup."

He had no idea what he said to them. The speech he had carefully memorized had left his head for good, and he had to just wing it. He thought he must have said something inspiring about their season, about their fans, maybe about the adversity had faced with injuries...he truly had no idea. But the entire team had cheered when he finished, and he was borne out onto the ice by them to deafening boos from the Dallas faithful, who had packed their stadium to the brim, all green and black and silver.

The moment Shane's skate hit the smooth expanse of ice, his brain settled down. He didn't think about Ilya, or about what the game meant; the only thing he thought about was the movement of his

body and his stick and the puck, of a pass to Hayden, of protecting Drapeau from a shot on goal. He lost himself in the sport he loved, and playing it to the best of his ability, without interference from the thoughts of inadequacy and fear that so often plagued him.

It was one of the hardest fought games of Shane's career. A true slugging match, each team hit the other beat for beat, and Shane was drenched with sweat every time he came back to the bench, working as hard as he had ever done to find a weakness, a soft spot in the armor of the Dallas defense.

Finally, late in the third period, he found it, and scored a goal that finally, *finally* put them ahead.

Dallas fought back ferociously, but Shane's team, the Metros team that he had honed to the finest point that they could possibly be, were not to be beaten, even away from their crowds and their home. They won the game 4-3, and Shane was able to lift the MLH Cup over his head for the third time, relief seeping through his body, lacing itself with that sweet exhaustion that only came from a game well played.

He grinned as he passed the Cup to Hayden, looking out at the small contingent of Montreal faithful that had made the trip down, cheering and beating on the glass. He waved to them, skating around to celebrate with his jubilant teammates.

It was hours later that Shane was finally able to sit down and take it all in. He had been rushed from the locker room, which was filled with the smell of champagne and thick with cigar smoke to a room full of reporters. Some he recognized from Montreal's beat, but most he didn't. National reporters, eager to get a quote from the winning captain.

Shane had never been good at speaking to the press, but gave the canned answers that the Metros' marketing team had drilled into all of them until his throat was sore, and his coach was finally called forward.

Outside the press room, with the cacophony of the locker room still reaching his ears in the distance, Shane sank down against the cement wall, looking up at the lines of pipe and fluorescent tubes of light that ran across the ceiling above him.

He let his eyes close, and allowed the victory to permeate his bones.

It never got old. He knew it never would, but there was something sweeter about this one, something that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Uh oh," he heard a distant voice down the hall, and knew it was JJ even before a familiar hand was yanking him up, "Looks like our captain might be dead."

"Nah," Shane shook his head, a wide, genuine smile stretching his face as he met JJ's eyes, "Just taking a breather."

"Breather's over, Hollander," his grin was wide, brilliantly bright, sparkling with victory, "Back to the fucking party!"

Shane didn't have an opportunity to check his phone until they were back on the team plane, flying home to Montreal with the Cup in tow, safely buckled into its own seat lovingly by JJ and Mitty, who were still half drunk on champagne.

Once the cabin lights were off, and Hayden was snoring loudly next to him, Shane pulled his phone out of his pocket, and scrolled through the notifications, mostly full of people he didn't know congratulating him.

So proud of you! read the text from his mother, with an attached selfie of her and his dad in front of the television at their house, beaming smiles on both of their faces that he couldn't help but mirror back.

Yes! Dinner on you next time, Rose had said, Kidding! But happy for you, love you!

Slowly, he scrolled back to Ilya's message, left opened and waiting for his reply. He stared at the screen for several minutes, tapping it every so often so it didn't go to sleep, warring with himself.

He knew what he wanted to say, but actually saying it was another battle entirely.

But fuck it, he had just won the fucking Cup. He deserved it, he was a champion.

When can I see you?

He sent the text before he could start overthinking it, and immediately turned on airplane mode. You know, for airplane safety and all that.

He fell into a sort of doze, halfway between sleep and wakefulness. His body was tired and his eyes stung and itched, but his mind was still busy, buzzing with the days' events, with Ilya's message, with what the playoffs being over might mean.

He chided himself every time things strayed that way. This was all a big game to Ilya, a chase. It didn't mean anything. It *couldn't* mean anything for Shane, not now, not at the peak of his career.

He didn't even want it to. Ilya was hot. They would meet, they would fuck, and that would be it.

Lots of people did hookups like this, secretly, without announcing it to the world. He was sure there were plenty of athletes that did it.

He could be that person. He could do casual.

Shane fell asleep still trying to convince himself of that.

The plane landed at half past two, and the team dragged their feet and their bags through the airport and to yet another waiting team bus to take them back to the practice facility and their parking garage.

"Fuck I'm glad I drove," JJ said on a yawn, "Or I'd be sleeping here. Cat goes to bed at like eight."

"Surprised she doesn't beat your ass with how loud you are," Mitty's eyes were closed as he spoke from two rows back, "You're always waking me up in the middle of the night laughing at some stupid video."

There was some muted laughter from the others, and JJ was too tired to argue, so he just said,

"Fuck you, Mitty."

Half an hour later, Shane climbed into his car, relieved to be alone. When he plugged his phone in, he realized he had left it on airplane mode, and turned it off hastily, only to be met by one simple word.

Today.

Grinning, he booked the hotel room sitting in the parking garage as the others pulled out around him, honking their horns and waving, and Shane went to bed exhausted but exhilarated with the win and the prospect of seeing Ilya the next day.

He checked into the hotel early again, and was relieved again that the staff at the front desk didn't seem to recognize him.

He had dressed more casually this time, just in a pair of loose sweats and an oversized sweatshirt that was starting to wear thin at the shoulders and the sleeves, where Shane was constantly picking at them.

He was still tired, but waves of anxious excitement kept washing over him every few minutes, so that he would stand up, pace to the window, back to the bed, check his phone, and sit back down, repeating the cycle over and over again.

There was a soft knock at the door at 2:15, and Shane pulled it open eagerly, only to be met with Ilya's strong hands dragging him closer, shoving him against the wall, and kissing him deeply as the door slammed shut behind them.

Shane moaned against his mouth, pushing his fingers through his soft curls, and hitching his leg around Ilya's hip, trying to draw him closer. His mouth was everywhere; against the side of Shane's face, at the shell of his ear, at his neck, on his lips again and again and again. Shane couldn't get enough, but sighed happily, pushing his own tongue behind Ilya's teeth, savoring the gasp, swallowing it.

"Fuck," he managed, and Ilya huffed a noise, somewhere between a laugh and a groan. He pulled Shane forward, walking backwards to the bed, and brought them toppling down onto it, never breaking their kiss. He rolled so he was on top of Shane, and their eyes met.

Ilya's face was flushed, his lips already a little swollen, and wet with Shane's spit. He looked like the most perfect creature Shane could imagine.

They stared at each other, each of them breathing hard into each other's mouths. After a moment, Ilya drew back, and Shane missed his weight on top of him the second it was gone.

He scrambled up, propping himself up on his elbows, looking up at Ilya.

"I should give you a reward," Ilya's voice was quiet, but it was like Shane could physically feel it on his skin, "For winning."

"Yeah?" he wouldn't be surprised if his tongue was hanging out of his mouth at the mere idea of this, "What- What did you have in mind?"

Ilya leaned over him again, his nose tracing a path along his jaw and up his cheek.

“Would need to be something good,” he said, and Shane’s whole body was tense, waiting for whatever was next, “For a champion and all.”

“Thought you didn’t know anything about hockey,” Shane gasped as Ilya’s hand cupped his chin.

“I don’t,” the tip of his tongue darted out, tracing along Shane’s upper lip, and he groaned, pathetic and wanting, “But I like pretty boys who are winners. Is that you? Hm?”

“Yes,” he thought it might have bothered him if anybody else called him a pretty boy, but it was Ilya, so it didn’t, “Yes I- I am.”

“So good,” he purred, sucking Shane’s earlobe into his mouth for a moment before continuing, “Sit back against the headboard.”

Shane obeyed, wondering fleetingly if he should take off his clothes, before deciding to let Ilya tell him what to do.

He settled back against the squashy hotel pillows, eyes wide as he took in Ilya for the first time. He was dressed casually as well, kicking off his sneakers and pulling off his socks so he stood at the end of the bed in front of Shane, barefoot, but still clothed.

Shane’s eyes roved all over him, as though he could see through the layers to what was waiting for him beneath. Ilya caught this, and smirked in an overexaggerated way.

Shane rolled his eyes, but did not look away.

He watched as Ilya pulled his phone out of his pocket, tapping away at the screen, until a heavy beat was pulsing out of the speakers.

“Winners get rewards, hm?” he said, setting the phone down on a side table, turning to face Shane again.

“Yeah,” he’d agree to anything if Ilya said it, he thought, “Yeah.”

Smiling slightly at his obvious desperation, Ilya shrugged off his coat, letting it fall softly to the floor, and it hit Shane what was happening.

“Shit,” he whispered as the long lines of his shoulders and arms were revealed. He considered saying something snarky about Ilya not owning a real shirt, but then he was moving to the music, and any thought that wasn’t completely inappropriate had vanished from inside his head.

It was somehow much more sensual than the dance Ilya had given Shane at the club. It was less businesslike, more intimate, with Ilya crawling onto the bed and sitting directly on Shane’s lap. He touched him freely, with abandon, his lips pressed on every inch of skin that he could reach.

“Fuck, like that,” Ilya groaned as Shane mouthed at his nipple, licking a line between his pectorals, hands on either side of his hips.

Soon enough, Ilya was naked, still sitting on his lap like it was the most comfortable seat in the world, and was grinding down against Shane’s clothed, hard cock. Shane whined, tipping his head back as Ilya pulled his shirt over his head, his hands skittering down his ribs, pressing against his lower stomach, inches from where Shane wanted him most.

“Please,” he begged, his fingernails digging bluntly into Ilya’s skin, and he laughed in a condescending, arrogant way.

“But I thought you wanted your reward,” he said patronizingly, still moving to the music, “For winning.”

“I do,” his voice strained, his whole body pulled taut, “Fuck, please.”

“Then be patient,” Ilya pressed the ghost of a kiss to Shane’s lips before drawing away, his hands moving down to the waistband of Shane’s sweatpants. He arched up eagerly, allowing him to slide them off, joining Ilya’s clothes in the corner.

Shane was panting now, feeling prickly and hot all over as Ilya’s wide palm pressed against his hard cock, still trapped in the soft fabric of his briefs.

His smile was wide, watching Shane nearly come apart just from this.

“Think you’ve earned one more thing, baby,” his voice made Shane shiver. Still grinning, Ilya slipped his hand underneath, his fingers skating across his hard cock, and Shane whimpered loudly, biting down on his lip so hard it threatened to split, “Ah, you want it?”

“Yes, please Ilya I- Fuck me.”

“Not yet, so greedy,” he withdrew his hand and Shane moaned at the loss, before he was pushing the fabric down his thighs, and settling himself between his legs, looking at his cock with something close to reverence in his eyes, “Fuck, you have a pretty cock.”

Shane blushed all over, looking away from him.

“You deserve this, baby,” Ilya’s voice drew his eyes again. Shane thought that there was nothing better looking than Ilya between his legs, “Such a pretty boy with a pretty cock, all for me.”

Before Shane could form any kind of coherent response, Ilya’s tongue was swirling around the head of his cock, and he was swallowing him down, inch by inch.

His mouth was pure bliss, warm and wet and soft, and he was clearly experienced at this where Shane was a complete novice. What was more, he enjoyed giving head, and moaned around his him, so the vibrations zipped up Shane’s skin, and he scrabbled for purchase against the soft duvet.

It was embarrassing how close he already was, even from just a few minutes of Ilya sucking his dick, but everything other than the sensations of Ilya’s throat wrapped around him seemed muted, distant, completely irrelevant.

“Oh fuck,” he was tipping over the knife’s edge, “Fuck Ilya I’m gonna- Shit-”

Instead of pulling off, Ilya bobbed up and down, sucking harder, and Shane was arching up, pushing his cock further down his throat, his moans mingling with Ilya’s as he spilled into his mouth.

Ilya kept him there, holding him until it was almost painful, before finally easing off, and collapsing next to him, both of them breathing hard. Music was still issuing from Ilya’s phone, but Shane didn’t want him to move, didn’t want him to get up and leave the bed, even for a moment.

He rolled on top of him, pressing their chests together, and kissed him, savoring the lingering taste of his cum in his mouth. He felt him smiling, and his arms circled around Shane's back, holding him closer.

It would have been romantic if Shane didn't know better.

"Glad your stupid season is over," Ilya muttered, pressing his lips to the side of Shane's face, "Been waiting two months for this."

"You have?" Shane lifted his head, meeting his eyes, which instantly shuttered, like a wall had gone up.

"Your science is stupid," he said, instead of answering, "And it did not matter."

"You have no proof of that," Shane said hotly, pushing up on his chest, "How do you know I even read your texts at the arena? I didn't even respond to them while I was there, so--"

"Did you get off to them?" he asked, a cocky look on his face that told Shane he already knew the answer.

"That's not- Important."

Ilya laughed, full-throated and pretty in a way that made Shane's toes curl.

"Whatever you say."

They laid there, tangled together, Shane's sweat cooling on his skin, nearly dozing with the warm weight of Ilya so close to him, their skin brushing together with every intake of breath,

Incrementally, it occurred to Shane that Ilya had not come. Looking down, he saw his hard cock resting on his lower stomach, and reached down, pressing his thumb into the slit there. Ilya gasped, his eyes shooting open, staring at Shane like he had never seen him before.

"I thought you wanted me to suck your cock?" Shane said, feigning a casual tone that he did not feel.

Ilya grinned, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"So you *did* read them?"

In his turn, Shane flushed, but was already pushing himself down towards the space between Ilya's legs.

"I never said I didn't read them."

"Yes you did, you have bad memory."

Shane scoffed.

"Do you want me to suck your dick or not?"

Ilya propped himself up on the pillows, reaching down to fist a hand in Shane's hair, pulling hard enough that Shane sighed, his mouth falling open reflexively.

“Go on then, baby.”

It was easier than the last time, mostly because he knew what to expect. He breathed deeply through his nose, taking his time, until Ilya was fully in his mouth and throat. Shane’s eyes flicked upward to Ilya’s, brown meeting blue, a silent plea. He wanted Ilya to fuck his mouth, it had been one of the only things that he had thought about when he was laying in bed at night.

Fortunately, Ilya seemed to be able to read his expression and pushed his hips up, a slow rhythm that built until Shane was moving in time to Ilya’s thrusts. His jaw ached and the back of his throat was already starting to turn a little sore, but it felt so good. Everything was soft around the edges, and his body was loose and relaxed, a vessel for Ilya’s pleasure.

“Fuck,” Ilya’s hand tightened in his hair, and he bucked up, “Get off or I’ll- I’ll-”

Shane stayed in place, gripping either side of his thighs, and hollowed his cheeks until Ilya was moaning brokenly, and coming down his throat.

It was an odd sensation, a little unpleasant maybe, but mostly just really hot. Shane sighed around his cock, swallowing without thinking about it. He would happily stay here like this, with Ilya’s softening cock in his mouth, until he fell asleep.

But, to his dismay, Ilya was guiding him off of him, pulling him back into his arms, both of them spent now.

“Was hoping to fuck you before you did that,” he said, a hand tracing up and down Shane’s spine.

“You still can.”

Ilya snorted.

“Give me a few minutes, huh? It’s not like you-” he looked down, his eyes widening, and Shane’s face heated.

“Look-”

“You really are perfect, Christ.”

The praise wormed its way into Shane’s chest, settling there, just to the side of his heart.

“I’m not,” he mumbled, but Ilya shook his head vigorously.

“Oh yes you are, fuck,” he seemed to be taking in his own soft cock, disappointed, “Come here.”

They kissed for a while, languidly and without hurry, and Shane took the opportunity to learn the lines of his plush mouth. He had always felt like kissing was a little overrated; mostly wet and gross and something that Shane had never been good at, but Ilya was such a good kisser, Shane would be happy to be wrapped up like this with him forever.

Not in a romantic way or anything. It just...felt nice. To kiss him.

Eventually, Shane felt the slide of Ilya’s hard cock against his thigh, and he whispered against his mouth,

“Let me fuck you.”

Shane let him, and though it wasn't the hard and fast fuck that Ilya had promised him the last time, it was slow and sizzling and burned into his chest, spreading down across his entire body.

And when he came, untouched, he thought that this might be his purpose in life. Fuck hockey, he wanted this to be his full-time job. He wanted to be perfect for Ilya, all the time.

This was, of course, a fantasy, but he let himself live there even as they showered together and Ilya pushed him against the wall again, kissing him deeply, his hands under his t shirt, roving all over his skin.

“Call me,” he murmured, biting down on Shane's lip, pulling it out, before kissing him again, “When you are free.”

“I will,” he promised, kissing him again, “It's the offseason so-”

“I do not care,” Ilya said, “Call me.”

“I will,” he repeated, kissing him once, then twice, “I will I-”

Ilya silenced him again with another kiss before he was pulling away, towards the door, and giving Shane a long, searching sort of look,

“Bye,” he winked at him, letting their hands brush before he was slipping out into the hallway, leaving Shane vibrating behind him.

In the weeks that followed, Shane saw Ilya often.

He called him at every opportunity, booking different hotels around the city without even asking if he was free, thinking that he would just cancel if he couldn't show up.

But he did show up, every time. Sometimes they only had an hour before Ilya had to go to work, and would fuck frantically against the wall, not even taking off all their clothes before Ilya was pressing himself into Shane, and Shane was biting down on his forearm to stifle the noise.

And then, sometimes they would have hours, most of the afternoon until the early evening, and they would lay together, in the soft hotel bed, talking about everything and nothing all at once.

It was easier to talk to him than it was to talk to most people that he had known for years, and Shane found himself telling him secrets that he had closely guarded for as long as he could remember.

Some of them were silly, like his crippling fear of floating off into space untethered, and Ilya would laugh and laugh at him, even after Shane tried to smother him with a pillow. Where others were much more serious and personal, like his fear of a career-ending injury, of hockey being cut short with no choice in the matter.

Those times, Ilya would hold him and just listen, without poking fun.

Shane, in his turn, tried to learn more about Ilya, and while he shared some things about his life, like his friends and the car that he was working on restoring; Shane could tell that he was holding a lot back.

He didn't push, even though his curiosity grew by the day, and he longed to know more about him, to live inside the details that made him who he was.

He did his best not to think too much about it, and convinced himself more than once that an interest in him was normal. Learning about each other was what friends did.

Shane didn't know if he could classify them as friends, but it was much easier than the alternative.

He was putting off going to the cottage again, giving his mother every excuse he could think of. His parents were suspicious; he could tell in the way they said goodbye to him.

He supposed he should have known Yuna would only let him get away with his excuses for so long.

It was mid-July, a day so hot that it felt like he was living on the surface of the sun. But the heat outside had nothing on the feeling of Ilya rimming him for a full half an hour, splayed out on the bed with his knees by his ears.

He was still a little wobbly on his feet when he stepped into his apartment that evening, the sunset casting long shadows across the light wood floors. He smiled to himself as he flicked on the lights, touching his lips, which still tingled, surreptitiously with his fingers.

"Surprise!" if he had been holding anything, he would have dropped it immediately. As it was, he spun on the spot, nearly toppling onto the floor in fear and surprise.

"Rose," he clutched his chest, his heart rabbiting underneath his t shirt, "You scared me."

"And I've been waiting forever," she folded her arms across her chest, "Where were you?"

"What are you doing here?" he asked, evading her question, which he could tell did not go unnoticed, "I thought you were in- In-"

"I was in Iceland," she supplied, "But reshoots don't start for a few weeks, so I came back to spend some time at home."

"Oh," Shane scrambled, "Well it- Fuck, it's good to see you."

He reached out, pulling her in for a hug that she returned, and they swayed on the spot before she was breaking away enough to stare at him critically.

"So, what's going on?"

Shane's face heated traitorously.

"What do you-"

"Why aren't you at the cottage? And why is Yuna calling me again?"

He sighed.

“Sorry, she really-”

“Shane,” she interrupted him, “What’s happening?”

And Shane found that he couldn’t keep it in anymore, that the words were pouring out of his mouth like a faucet turned on too high.

He told her everything. How the team had gotten him a male stripper as a joke, how Ilya had been at the wedding, how he had run into him months later at a club, and how they had started meeting up.

Shane didn’t say the other thing, the simmering in his stomach every time he looked at him, the way he wanted to kiss him more than he wanted to fuck him sometimes.

“I don’t know what to do,” he told Rose. They had ended up on his couch, and he had buried his head in his hands, “It’s bad enough that he’s a guy.”

“But a stripper too?”

Shane looked up at her slowly.

“Not helpful.”

She laughed.

“You’re being weird about this whole thing. Who cares what he does? If you like him, and he likes you, I don’t understand- Well okay, yes I do, but...I don’t know.”

“But he *doesn’t* like me,” he said forcefully, “It’s- A casual thing. We’re just hooking up but- I’ve never done a hookup before so I don’t know- I don’t know- I think that I’m-”

“Oh Shane,” she sounded almost pitying, “Are you- Do *you* like him?”

He swallowed, looking across the room, which was now nearly dark. He hadn’t realized they had been talking for that long.

He had spent the last three months doing everything he could not to think about it. He wasn’t allowed to like Ilya. He wasn’t really allowed to like any man, not that way, not right now.

But the horrible, awful truth of it was that he couldn’t help it. He felt drawn to him as a magnet might, unable to resist the pull of him.

He liked his laugh, he liked the way he would wash Shane’s hair when they were showering together, he liked how he was always checking in with him when they were fucking...he liked everything, even when he was being a condescending asshole.

He turned his head back, meeting Rose’s eyes, and nodded.

She smiled at him softly, reaching out to wipe away tears that hadn’t quite fallen yet.

“It’s okay, Shane.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yes it is,” she scooted closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck, so that his forehead was pressed against her shoulder, “It’s going to be fine.”

“How can you possibly know that?” he mumbled, his words lost in the fabric of her dress.

“Because I’m psychic, and also a genius,” she said it so deadpan that he gave a watery laugh, “And you’re going to ask him out to dinner.”

“What?” he drew back at once, horrified, “I can’t-”

“Yes you can,” she took his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her, “And you’re going to. You can’t live like this, just on a hookups thing. At least one dinner, it can be here, at your place. He’s been here before so-”

“Uh, well-” he clenched his teeth together, embarrassed, “He hasn’t actually- Actually been here.”

She looked confused.

“Then where are you-”

“I book hotels.”

She rolled her eyes.

“God Shane, you *can* bring him here. If I could get in here without anyone noticing, then no one is going to notice this guy.”

“Ilya,” Shane said automatically.

“Ilya,” she repeated, “You can bring him here.”

Shane wanted to. He wanted to see Ilya in his space, in his warm apartment, in his bed. But it scared him, the whole thing scared the shit out of him.

“Okay.”

“I’m serious,” Rose patted his knee before standing up and stretching, “Next time you see him, you’re going to invite him here and make him dinner.”

“Okay,” he didn’t know what else to say, but he knew he couldn’t argue with her. She smiled at him.

“Good answer. Now what are we doing tonight?”

Shane texted Ilya the address to one of their usual hotels three days after Rose had left him with a kiss on the cheek and the threat of turning up and asking Ilya out to dinner herself if she didn’t have an update by the end of the next week.

Ilya was early, Shane had barely gotten his bearings before he was knocking on the door and sliding a tender hand along Shane’s throat, kissing him softly, sweetly on the mouth.

He had to ask before they had sex, he would never do it after.

“Wait,” he split them apart, and Ilya chased his mouth, “Hang on.”

“What?” he sounded impatient, and it was so endearing that Shane smiled in spite of how afraid he was.

“Would you-” Shane steeled himself, more nervous about this than he had been about meeting up with him for the first time. But Rose had told him to be brave, and she very rarely steered him wrong, “Would you want to- Get dinner sometime?”

This seemed to take Ilya completely by surprise. He stepped back from Shane, blank shock written all over his face.

“I mean just- We see each other a lot and- I’d like to get- To know you better. I’m a pretty good cook, and I could- Cook for us. At my place if- If you wanted,” he started babbling, filling the silence, “Obviously no- No pressure, but- If you wanted to- I mean, the invitation’s there. Anyway- Yeah-”

“I do not think-” Ilya swallowed, looking away from him, and Shane could see a faint blush creeping up his neck, “That is probably not a good idea.”

Shane could have died right there, on the spot.

“Right, of course-” he had rarely felt so stupid, “I- Yeah. Yeah you’re right, stupid idea.”

The silence swelled horribly, and Shane couldn’t believe it, he had ruined everything, pushed too hard for something that they would never be, and he was about to lose Ilya.

Not that he had ever had him.

But it still hurt. Fuck, it hurt like hell.

“I- Sorry,” was all he could manage to say, “Sorry. I just- I don’t know what I was-”

“I do like bad ideas, though,” Ilya cut across him, seemingly coming back to himself. Shane blinked.

“You-”

“I am saying yes.”

“Oh. Oh! Well- Okay- Um- I really- Anytime you wanted- I know you work- Work a lot so-”

Ilya was approaching him again, getting in his space, and, as usual, Shane couldn’t think straight when he was near him.

“How about Wednesday?” his voice was smooth and velvety, Shane could feel it on his lips.

“Wednesday?” What was that? A day of the week? A sex position? Fuck, he couldn’t see anything that wasn’t Ilya.

“Think, baby,” Ilya’s hands were on either side of his neck, holding Shane back from kissing him, “Wednesday.”

“I can do- Wednesday-” he said distantly, head listing forward, “I’ll make you- Dinner.”

“Dinner,” Ilya echoed smiling at how drunk Shane already was off him, “Should I fuck you now?”

“Yes please.”

He did, and Shane lost himself in the feeling of being held and touched and fucked by him, pushing everything else from his mind, even for a blissful few minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Dressing Ilya up in a harness in my mind because I am a freak and down absolutely horrendous for him.

(Also, we'll see about four chapters. It might end up being five lol)

Love you! Let me know what you think! <3

Chapter 4: just a needle in the hay

Chapter Notes

Okay, listen up! The rumors are true....five chapters lol, and a nice long chapter since I kept y'all waiting a little bit (curse my real adult taxpaying life)

Just noting that a tag has been added! All consensual but be aware <3

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

Shane was in a state of mild to moderate panic for the entirety of the next four days. He created an entire menu of food that he had never cooked before in his life, nearly burned down his kitchen, and called his father in near hysterics, begging for help on cooking beef bourguignon, and talking around details that he wasn't ready to give.

David did not push, but very gently talked him into cooking something that he actually knew how to make, and Shane settled on a creamy pesto pasta with salmon that he had made a hundred times.

A similar panic overtook him on Wednesday evening, when Shane went through every iteration of clothes in his closet, cursing himself internally for not letting Rose take him shopping more often. He even put on a suit that was collecting dust, before tossing it to the side and opting instead for soft sweatpants and t shirt splashed with a band that he had never once listened to.

Shane nearly jumped out of his skin when there was a knock on the door, and he hurried over to it, smoothing down his shirt unnecessarily. Taking a deep breath, he pulled it open.

Ilya was standing there, dressed in all black, with a pair of sunglasses pushed to the top of his head, and silver earrings that Shane had never seen him wear dangling from his ears. He smiled slightly at Shane, and he thought that there might be some nervousness mirrored back at him in the way they looked at one another.

"Hi," Shane said, standing back to let him into the space. Ilya brushed past him, his hand trailing across Shane's stomach as he looked around.

"Nice place."

"Thanks," Shane should have just left it at that, but started babbling before he could stop himself, "I've owned it for a few years. The views are great. And the building is a perfect location for me. Pretty close to the practice facility and the arena, so it's easy to get where I need to go. I'd like to- You know- Be somewhere with more space someday, like land and- And stuff, but for right now, where I am in my career I mean- It works- And-"

Ilya cut him off with a kiss.

It felt different somehow, when they were actually in Shane's space, in his home. It was terrifying, yes, but exciting too. He wanted Ilya to like his apartment, like his bed, like the way his sheets felt on his skin.

They fucked fast, frantically almost, and laid together after in Shane's bed, tangled up, each of them breathing heavily.

"You wear earrings?" Shane asked, reaching up to tug at the two silver hoops in his earlobe, "I didn't know that."

"I take them out for work," Ilya said, shrugging, "We are not supposed to wear much for jewelry."

"They're hot," Shane blurted, blushing crimson.

"Oh, are they?" Ilya grinned, "Good to know."

"I have dinner all planned," he changed the subject, not looking at him, but dragged his fingers along his skin, tracing patterns between each freckle and mole across his chest and stomach, "I didn't ask if you have any allergies but--"

"I don't," Ilya murmured, his voice somewhat muffled against Shane's hair.

"Okay," he said in relief, "I thought about doing this whole big thing but then I almost burned my kitchen down and so I just went with my- I have this diet that I do during the season and- It's just easier for me to- To cook that way--"

"Shane," Ilya cut him off mid ramble, and he turned his face up, meeting his eyes, "It's fine."

"Okay," he said again, breathing in the smell of his skin, "I can start if--"

"In a minute," his hands were dragging up and down his spine.

They stayed that way, in no hurry, and Shane couldn't help that his mind wandered to a place where this could be all the time. That Ilya's tender touches weren't mistakes, but purposeful and just for him, and him alone.

He needed to get out of this before it got any worse.

He slid out of bed, his mouth lifting at the pathetic noise that Ilya made, and pulled on his sweatpants, tossing another pair in Ilya's general direction.

"If you want to eat before midnight I need to get going."

"Whatever," he grumbled, but padded along behind him all the same, settling himself against Shane's kitchen island as he busied himself with prep work, "See, you already have all the vegetables chopped, we could have waited at least another five minutes."

"And you're the one that's always calling me greedy," he deadpanned, and Ilya's whole face lit up with his joke.

"Funny."

They chatted idly as Shane worked. Ilya was always telling him about the movies that he was seeing, the music that he was listening to, the clubs that he would go to. And Shane had nothing much to share other than hockey and-

“Oh!” he looked up from his careful work of transferring his marinated salmon into a baking dish. Ilya’s eyebrows shot up, surprised at his outburst, “I did see my friend Rose last week!”

Much to Shane’s surprise, a dark look crossed Ilya’s face. He snorted, folding his arms and turning away from him, staring across the kitchen at the backsplash.

“Oh, I know.”

“You know?” Shane cocked his head to the side, confused by his reaction, “How would you-”

“I know you see Rose Landry, she is a famous actress. Every person alive saw that you went to dinner together.”

It was an occupational hazard of being Rose’s friend. *He* could at least usually go out to dinner without being followed by cameras if he was on his own, but if Rose was there? Forget it.

“Yeah well,” he was still not understanding why Ilya looked so upset, “She’s a friend-”

He scoffed, his jaw clenching.

“Sure.”

“She is! I-” he blinked, taking in Ilya, shirtless, in Shane’s sweatpants, in his kitchen, but still inexplicably angry that he had been seen with Rose, “Are you- Jealous?”

“What?” he still refused to meet Shane’s eye, and there was next to no conviction in his voice, “No. I do not get jealous.”

Shane’s mouth curved in a smile.

“Yes you are, you’re upset that I went out with Rose.”

“You still go out with Rose,” he said moodily, his hands clenching and unclenching into fists as he spoke.

“But as friends.”

“Okay.”

“Oh my god,” he threw up his hands, nearly exasperated, “I’m gay. I told you that.”

“Okay.”

“Jesus,” he reached over, rinsing his hands in the sink, before moving to stand in front of Ilya, still staring over his head, “Can you like, look at me?”

Ilya did, teeth still gritted together. Shane nearly smiled again, but kept his brow furrowed as they stared at each other.

“I’m gay. Rose knows that,” Ilya’s face broke in surprise, “She kinda helped me- Well, figure it out. She’s my best friend, and it’s not- More than that.”

Ilya's eyes roved all over his face, searching him for a lie. Finally, he relented, uncrossing his arms and leaning his head back.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes, okay."

"Can I cook the salmon now?"

He shrugged, something like his easy smile creeping back onto his face.

"If you do not want me to starve to death."

Why was Ilya so upset at the idea of him having a girlfriend? He never asked Ilya who he saw, he assumed it was a long list. Why did it matter to him if Shane was with anybody?

Don't think about that, he chided himself. This was not what this night was supposed to be for. It wasn't! It just...he just wanted to get to know Ilya better. Like friends do.

They were silent as Shane worked, the sunset casting a spectacular range of colors along the horizon, and the smell of pine nuts and salmon mingling together in the air.

He stole glances at Ilya every so often, just to make sure he was comfortable, or maybe that he wasn't going to go anywhere. He seemed content to watch him, his eyes lingering on his hands. It made Shane feel simultaneously self-conscious and nearly dizzy at having Ilya this close to him for this long.

"Almost done," he murmured, reaching up to grab plates from the cabinet above his head, "We can eat at the dining table or- We can do the couch if you- Whatever-

"Where do you listen to music?" Ilya interrupted him, "Is too quiet."

"Oh," his face heated, even though he really shouldn't be embarrassed, "I don't really- Listen to much music."

Ilya stared at him.

"You don't have a way to play music at home?"

"Not- Not really."

"Okay," he moved fluidly from the counter towards the living room, scooping up the tv remote as he went.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked, craning his neck to try and get a better view.

"Fixing your problem."

The tv screen glowed, bright and sharp in the low evening light, lighting Ilya up starkly, so his skin reflected the screen in a muted sort of way. Shane watched him out of the corner of his eye, even

as he pulled the salmon out of the oven and plated each dish carefully, like a chef preparing for the biggest food review of his life.

By the time that Shane carried their dinner into the living room, Ilya had downloaded Spotify onto his tv, signed into his account, and low music was issuing from Shane's speakers.

"Thank you," Ilya said quietly, taking his plate from Shane's hand.

"I have- Uh- Water and- Ginger ale," he said awkwardly, "I don't drink a lot and- I don't have much else but- If you tell me what you like I can- Get it for next time."

"Water is fine," he looked at Shane with a sort of unreserved fondness that he had never seen before, and it made the room feel warmer by several degrees, "Thank you."

Shane sank down next to him a moment later, setting two glasses of ice water onto coasters on the coffee table. It was still so strange, having *there*, having their knees brush against one another as they ate, music that he had never heard before surrounding him on all sides.

"What are we listening to?" Shane asked after a moment, after ascertaining that his cooking was good enough for Ilya to collapse back into the sofa with a pleasurable groan.

"It is a playlist I made. Has a mix of everything."

"Oh, what did you make it for?" Shane asked. He must have been imagining the flush that crept across Ilya's cheeks.

"Is not important."

"What's the playlist called?" he squinted at the screen, "Boring?"

"Yes."

"But I thought you liked this music."

Ilya sighed, shifting away from him just slightly, but enough for Shane to notice.

"I do."

"So why is it called boring?"

Ilya seemed to be steeling himself for something. He met Shane's eyes after a moment, and said,

"Because I made it for you. You talk about how you do not know music. So. I do and- You need all the help that you can get so."

A tingling sensation was spreading across his chest, something foreign, alien.

"Oh."

They lapsed into silence again, the only noise coming from the speakers and the scraping of their cutlery against the ceramic of their plates.

“Do you-” he cleared his throat, he sounded a little hoarse, “I have this coconut milk ice cream that’s actually pretty good if you-”

“Okay,” their eyes met briefly. They shared a small smile.

Shane scurried away, balancing their empty plates and forks in his hands, holding them so tight that his knuckles turned white, so Ilya wouldn’t hear the forks rattling from the shaking.

Was this happening? Maybe he was just playing into his own fantasies, his own delusions. There was no way this meant to Ilya what it meant, what it *could* mean, to him.

He took a steadying breath through his nose as the cold air from the freezer hit him.

It was fine. Just keep going as he had done. Don’t change anything now.

He handed Ilya a bowl of ice cream a minute later, glancing up at the screen. He didn’t recognize the song, no surprise, but it sounded nice.

“Is this what you listen to?” he asked tentatively, sitting back down, a respectable distance away.

“Sometimes,” he gave a noncommittal jerk of his head, “Depends on the day. Some of this is what I listen to a lot, but some of it is just music everyone should know.”

“What does this song fall under?”

Ilya looked at the screen, then back at him.

“Ah,” he didn’t look away from him, but seemed almost...shy? Shane had never seen him like this, “My friend, Svetlana, she showed it to me.”

There was something he wasn’t saying, he could tell, but he decided not to push. Not that way, not yet, anyway.

But something else was crawling its way up his throat, something that he had been wondering about for weeks, maybe even months. It kept him awake at night, and he didn’t think he could tamp it down anymore.

“Do you-” he broke off, staring back across the room, so he didn’t have to see the expression on his face, “Do you do this with a lot of- I mean, a lot of the people you meet at- At the club?”

“What do you mean, this?”

“I mean,” he gestured between them, “This?”

Ilya considered him, his spoon hanging in midair.

“No, is not good to mix business and pleasure.”

Shane forced himself to ask the other question before he could back out,

“Then why- Why me?”

Ilya’s eyes dragged over his face again, and it was a moment before he responded.

“Because I did not think you would ever come back.”

Shane scoffed, offended, and Ilya laughed.

“Are you saying you *were* going to come back?”

He paused.

“No.”

“That is what I thought.”

They laughed together, moving closer until their knees were touching, and Shane could feel the heat of his skin through both layers of their sweatpants.

“Do you like it?” he prodded, seeing if he could get away with more, learn more about Ilya if they were both relaxed and in a space more personal than a hotel room.

“Like what?”

“Your job.”

Ilya’s eyebrows came together. He thought that he would make a joke, or turn away, creating that distance that made him feel like he was reaching across an endless canyon, when he himself was an open book. But then, Ilya seemed to be spilling out something like the truth,

“Ah, yes and no. It is a- Well-paying job. I get to make my own hours, do what I want to do most of the time. Is easy, I am hot and good at it. Sometimes it is annoying, but so is any job. I go, I work, I leave. I try not to think about work most of the time, just like most people. Well, most people that are not you.”

“So, what do you think about?” Shane pushed, wondering if Ilya would answer.

“I like music,” his eyes flicked towards him, “I like to take my dog to the park near my apartment. I like cars, working on them, when I can.”

“You work on cars?”

“Yes, I am restoring an old car with Svetlana right now.”

“Oh,” he drew back slightly, as he always did when Ilya mentioned Svetlana. He still didn’t really understand what they were to each other, not that he had any right to ask or even be curious about it. but it bothered him sometimes, well, all the time, thinking about Ilya with other people that weren’t him, “I don’t know anything about cars.”

“I know that, you drive a very boring car.”

Shane snorted.

“How do you even know what kind of car I drive?”

Ilya did not answer him, but smirked instead and turned back to his ice cream.

Shane was surprised when he spoke again, unprompted this time,

“You should meet my dog.”

Shane choked, nearly swallowing his spoon in surprise.

“What?”

“My dog,” Ilya repeated, and he was watching Shane with an open, earnest expression on his face, “I think you should meet her.”

Shane had no idea what to say to that. He had heard Ilya mention his dog every now and then, but it was a passing thing, and he had changed the subject every time Shane had pushed for more. So this was more than a little out of left field.

“Okay,” he tried not to sound too eager, but wasn’t sure if he was very successful, considering the soft expression that was creeping into Ilya’s eyes, “I- Okay.”

“Will prove whether or not you are a good person,” their knees were touching again, “If she likes you.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes,” he seemed perfectly serious, “She is the best judge of character.”

Shane’s smile was teasing.

“I’ll try and prepare myself.”

“You probably don’t have to worry,” his eyes had wandered across the room again, not meeting Shane’s.

“Okay,” his voice was a little shaky, “I want- Want to meet her.”

That warmth was back, spreading across his chest and down to the tips of his fingers. He wanted to reach out and touch and kiss and take and possess him. He wanted to hold him in his arms until they both fell asleep on the couch.

He wanted to make him breakfast and listen to him laugh at bad morning tv.

Shane wanted it all with Ilya, and it wasn’t until this moment with him that the full implications of that fact hit him,

He stood up suddenly, breaking the moment, and collected the ice cream bowls, turning his back on Ilya and making his way to the kitchen to wash the dishes.

He hated leaving dishes in the sink. Also, he was a fucking coward.

Ilya did not come into the kitchen, and Shane took the opportunity to try and calm his racing heart.

It didn’t really work, not when he knew that Ilya was only a few feet away, and not now that he couldn’t stop thinking that he might want the exact same thing Shane did.

He was not going to ruin this thinking of all the ways it was impossible, that it would never really work, that Shane couldn't come out. He was going to take it as it was, whatever Ilya would give him.

When he had carefully set all of the dishes in the dishwasher and punched in the cycle, he walked back into the living room, only to find it empty, and Ilya gone.

He panicked for a second, before telling himself sternly that Ilya would have had to walk right by him in the kitchen to get out of the apartment.

He turned on the spot, before catching sight of a silhouette on the balcony.

Ilya was leaning against the railing, staring out at the city, smoking. He didn't react when Shane leaned next to him, their shoulders pressed together, but continued to pull on his cigarette.

After a moment, Ilya spoke, his quiet voice nearly lost in the sound of the traffic below them.

"I did not think I should smoke in your nice apartment."

Shane smiled, pressing into his shoulder a little more.

"Thanks, I hate the smell of cigarettes."

Ilya snorted.

"You do not mind it with me. I smell like cigarettes."

"No you don't," Shane shook his head, "You don't."

Ilya pushed away from the railing, stubbing out his cigarette on the stone floor of Shane's balcony. Fluidly, he turned Shane so that his back was to the skyline. He leaned close to him, so that their lips were almost brushing.

"What do I smell like, then?"

Shane's brain was short circuiting.

"Like- Like mint."

"Hm," he pressed the lightest kiss to his mouth, pulling away before Shane could chase for more, "Mint?"

"Yeah," he rasped, "Mint."

"Anything else?" his thumb was tracing along Shane's cheek, like he was counting the freckles that were splattered across his nose.

"Like expensive body wash that I can never find when I go to the store," he was saying, hardly understanding what he was admitting, "It's- It reminds me of rain."

"You think a lot about it."

“I think about you a lot,” that had probably been a step too far. He drew back, thinking that Ilya would do the same, but he smiled softly instead, and pulled him forward, kissing him.

In a way, it was like their first kiss, like they had never done it before. It wasn't filled with nerves and fear and anxiety, it wasn't too intense, borne from the leadup to sex, and it wasn't too soft either, basking in the glow afterward.

It was tender, filled with the promise of something that each of them had been too afraid to face. Shane's face was cradled in Ilya's palms, and his arms twined around his neck, pulling him closer.

They had made out before, of course, but Shane wanted to live in this particular moment forever; the feeling of Ilya's soft lips on his skin, the soft noises each of them were making, the stuttering of each of their hearts, beating asynchronously in tandem.

“Fuck Ilya,” Shane whispered against his lips, hands tangling in his hair, “Fuck.”

“Let me fuck you,” Ilya said, his own voice wavering as he broke the kiss, only to run his tongue along Shane's bottom lip.

Shane nodded eagerly, and allowed Ilya to hook his arms under his thighs and carry him inside. He paused by the couch, seemingly hesitating,

“Hm.”

“What?”

“I want to fuck you on the couch later.”

“That's unhygienic.”

“Oh my god,” he set him down on the floor. Shane whined, and Ilya shot him a withering look, “I am not carrying you up the stairs.”

Shane shrugged, grinning,

“It would have been pretty romantic.”

Ilya laughed, and pulled Shane in, kissing him again. It was still hungry, but without urgency.

“Come on Mr. Romance, up you go so I can get you naked.”

Shane practically dragged him up the stairs in response to that.

Afterward, Ilya held him, as he had done so many times before, but it still felt *different*, more tender somehow. His fingers played along Shane's shoulder, down his arm, while his other hand skated across Shane's stomach, gentle and possessive.

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Ilya sighed, pressing his face into his hair, “Why?”

“Just wondering.”

There was a pause, pregnant with something, and suddenly Shane was asking the question that he had sworn he wouldn't ask tonight.

"Can you stay?"

Ilya shifted so that he could look into his face.

"Stay? Here?"

Shane flushed, averting his eyes.

"If- Only if- I mean- It doesn't have to- Or, well, I know you're busy so- You definitely don't have to if you- You don't want to."

The silence stretched, and it was so heavy that Shane could physically feel it on his skin.

Fuck, he shouldn't have said anything. Everything had been going so well, he had been able to remove a few bricks from Ilya's walls, and they were about to go right back up, higher than ever, so he had no way of even beginning to take them down.

"Okay."

Shane's breath caught in his chest.

"What?"

"I will stay. If it is what you want."

"Is it what *you* want though?"

He paused, and it felt like he was silent for at least an hour to Shane.

"Yes," he said it with so much conviction that there was no doubting its truth, "It is what I want."

Shane twisted his neck around.

"Really?"

Ilya smiled.

"Really."

"I really-" Shane stopped himself. This was a good thing. It was what he wanted. He had said he was going to take things as they came tonight. He had promised himself, "Okay."

Ilya's lips brushed the top of his head, and he hummed happily, burrowing into his chest, his arms wrapping around his waist, so that there wasn't more than a millimeter of space between them.

As he drifted off, he heard Ilya say something in Russian, and resolved to ask him about it in the morning.

When morning came however, Shane was pulled incrementally from sleep by what he thought was a very, very good dream. Ilya was between his legs, his wet mouth around his cock, deep moans vibrating from his chest. And Shane fisted his hand in his hair, pushing his head back against the

pillows. Everything was hazy at the edges, and the details were lost, but it felt so good, it didn't matter that he knew, deep down, that he was dreaming.

Except...

The whole thing was dissolving as Shane was torn from his peaceful sleep. Well, everything but the sensation of a familiar mouth around him.

He opened his eyes blearily. Ilya *was* between his legs, and Shane's hand was already buried in his hair.

"Fuck Ilya," his voice was rough, gummed together with sleep, but Ilya moaned around him again, and the noise vibrated against his cock, so he arched up involuntarily.

He was close already, who knows how long Ilya had been doing this, inching him towards wakefulness by sucking his cock, and the thought of him waking up, seeing Shane asleep and hard, and taking matters into his own hands, was so hot that he was coming in Ilya's mouth without warning.

Ilya groaned at the taste of him, swallowing his cum like it was his last and finest meal, and crawling up Shane's body to kiss his mouth, swirling their tongues together in a way that should have been gross, but just turned Shane on more.

"Let me," he put pressure on Ilya's shoulder, rolling him onto his back, "Wanna- Return the favor."

"You can do whatever you want to me," Ilya said, and Shane's mouth watered at the words, like he could taste them.

Ilya was hard, and his body jerked as Shane ran a thumb across the head of his cock, pushing slightly on the slit, catching the precum there.

Fuck he was beautiful. He was so beautiful it made Shane feel like he was losing his mind a little every time he looked at him.

"Pretty," he murmured. He had never been one for dirty talk; Ilya was much better at it than he ever could be, but sometimes it would just slip out every now and then, a few words here and there.

Ilya always seemed to love it, and today was no exception. He moaned shamelessly at the little word, eyes wide as he looked at Shane, beseeching him. And Shane wasn't Ilya, and he couldn't deny him the pleasure of having his dick sucked, any more than he could deny himself the pleasure of sucking Ilya's dick.

Shane was a perfectionist in all aspects of his life. In hockey, in his diet, in the campaigns for the brands he signed for; he strove for perfection above everything else. Sex with Ilya was no different. He had learned from him, taken mental notes (at least when he could manage to form a coherent thought to remember) on what Ilya liked and what he didn't. He was determined to perfect it, be absolutely perfect at sucking Ilya off exactly the way he liked it.

Ilya's hand was in his hair the moment Shane opened his mouth. He allowed him to guide him down on his cock, controlling the pace, controlling Shane. He relaxed his throat, allowing it to slide further down, until his nose was pressed against his pelvis.

“Fuck baby, you take me so well,” Ilya’s voice was tight, and Shane’s eyes flicked up, locking with his. He could see the way his teeth were gritted together, and he knew he wasn’t going to last much longer than Shane had, “Your mouth- Fuck- Your ass. Made for me, hm? Almost embarrassing how easily you take me, so desperate for it always.”

Shane moaned. He loved it when he talked to him like this, a little condescending, sometimes even a little bit mean. It made him feel used in the best way.

“Love the way you suck my cock,” he continued, using Shane’s hair to fuck his mouth, and Shane’s whole body felt like it was melting into the mattress, “Love the way you feel.”

Shane loved it too. He loved everything about this with Ilya. Fuck he loved it. It would never be enough. He would need to have this forever, and if he didn’t get it he felt like he would die.

“Fuck,” Ilya’s voice was pitched up, tight and desperate, “I’m gonna come, fuck, Shane.”

His eyes fluttered closed, and Shane took the opportunity to watch him come undone. The way he heaved for breath, the way a pretty red flush crept across his chest and up his neck, darkening the moles and freckles that decorated his skin, the way the column of his neck looked as he threw his head back into Shane’s pillows.

Shane reached up, squeezing his pectoral with the palm of his hand, and Ilya groaned, guttural Russian pouring from his mouth.

He swallowed everything he gave him, and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, collapsing next to him.

“Fuck,” Ilya said again, lower this time, and pulled Shane closer, kissing him on the forehead, maneuvering his head so that it was resting on his chest, where Shane could hear the steady beating of his heart, “Good morning.”

Shane huffed a laugh, tilting his head to look at him.

“What a way to wake up.”

Ilya smirked, self-satisfied.

“So easy to get you to come, even when you’re sleeping.”

Shane flushed, but Ilya smoothed his thumb along his cheek, as though he could wipe away the redness.

“So sweet, the noises you make for me,” he continued, “Even said my name.”

“Shut up, no I didn’t.”

“Yes,” he nodded solemnly, “Begging me for more. Saying how good you want to be, how perfect my co-”

Shane hit him in the face with a pillow, and they dissolved into laughter, playfighting in bed until Shane had pinned Ilya against the mattress. He kissed him slowly, wishing distantly that he could have this all the time.

This thought persisted as Shane made them breakfast in his sunny kitchen, as they gave each other lazy blowjobs afterward on Shane's couch, as they showered together, as Ilya kissed him in the stairwell to the alley, until Shane couldn't hold it in anymore.

He caught hold of Ilya's shirt, holding onto him, so he couldn't get away.

"I want to," he bit his lip, thinking of every way this could go wrong, but pushing through anyway, "See you more."

Ilya raised his eyebrows playfully, his hands skimming down Shane's arms.

"You see me a lot."

"Shut up, I mean- Like this."

Ilya's looked like he was fighting some kind of internal battle. Shane waited on tenterhooks, holding his breath.

"I would- Like that."

He nearly sighed in relief out loud.

"Just- Yeah. Text me when- Whenever."

"I know how to text you, Shane," he smiled, detaching Shane's hand from his shirt even as he kissed him again, "And I will. Are you free this weekend? To meet Anya?"

"Yeah," he said it too quickly, too eagerly, "I can be. I can meet closer to you if- If you wanted. So she doesn't have to- Travel or whatever."

"She likes to ride," he said gently, "But maybe."

They kissed again, sugar sweet, each of them prolonging the moment for as long as they could get away with.

"Right," Shane's hands had slid into his hair, "Right. This weekend, then."

It felt like far too long.

"Bye," Ilya tore himself away, winking at Shane before he had opened the alley door, and disappeared into the bright sunlight outside.

Anya turned out to be a fat little black and tan dachshund who wiggled her whole body every time she saw Shane and peed when she got too excited. Ilya adored her, carrying her around Shane's apartment like a baby, which was slowly being taken over by her many toys.

"You are obsessed," Shane said one day, when Ilya had walked in the door with a dog bed and at least three more toys, Anya trotting happily by his side, before darting forward to lick Shane's ankles.

"Who would not be?" Ilya asked, smiling fondly as Shane bent to scoop her up, "Look at her."

Shane's parents had never had much in the way of pets. Shane had always been far too busy with hockey to have much more than a couple of goldfish when he was a kid. He had been nervous meeting Anya, especially since Ilya seemed to care more about her than anything else on the planet, but to know Anya was to love her, and he shouldn't have worried.

"She loves you," Ilya had said, sitting in the middle of a park on the east side of Montreal, watching as Anya splayed out across Shane's lap, showing her belly for uninterrupted scratches.

"She's so cute," he stroked her ears, which were soft and felt like the underside of a bunny rabbit. He glanced up, meeting Ilya's eyes, which were sparkling with something that he usually tried to hide.

As summer turned to fall, Shane and Ilya began seeing each other even more often. Shane had told his parents that he wanted to train in Montreal, and that he would come back to Ottawa for Christmas. He was pretty sure they believed him, and if they didn't, they never said anything about it.

He took the victory, and spent nearly every minute he could with Ilya.

Usually, they stayed in at Shane's place, since he was terrified of being recognized, but would sometimes take Anya out to a park near either of their places.

They always fucked, of course, but would do other things too, things that couples did. Dates. Ilya loved the movies, and took Shane at every opportunity. It was fine, as long as one of them went in five minutes before the other.

The more time he spent with him, the more that Shane learned that Ilya was not just the most gorgeous person he had ever seen; he was funny, smart, decidedly soft with the people (and dogs) that he cared about, and was very slowly letting Shane take a peek behind the curtain. He mentioned personal things more now, offhanded and casual, but his eyes would always dart to Shane's when he said something, as though he was afraid of his reaction.

But Shane wanted to know everything about him, the good and the bad, he didn't care.

His crush was morphing into something else every time they saw one another, and it was something far more dangerous, and far harder to control.

The truth of it was in his periphery most of the time, just at the edges of his vision, vanishing whenever he focused on it. At least until Ilya was kissing him goodbye, and then it was like a bubble in his throat; threatening to spill out at the slightest provocation.

He was getting in too deep, freefalling down a canyon without any parachute, any way to save himself.

The worst part was, he didn't think he really wanted to.

As the beginning of the season approached, he had rarely been less focused on hockey than he was right now. Every time he was practicing, his mind was wandering, wondering what Ilya was doing, if he was already at work, if Anya had given him any grief before he left.

On bad days, sick swoops of jealousy would permeate his stomach, thinking about other people touching Ilya, of his soft voice in their ears. They had no right to look at him, he would think,

pacing up and down his dimly lit apartment, twisting his hands together as he walked, no right to touch him.

This jealousy was always accompanied by intense shame. He and Ilya weren't even labeled; he had no claim to him, and especially had no claim to his job.

But it didn't stop him from texting while he knew Ilya was at the club,

You free tomorrow? Practice isn't until four.

And he would always wake up to a message back, usually sent at four or five in the morning,

Your place or mine?

He liked Ilya's apartment. It was well decorated, spacious, and the whole place smelled like him. It had taken Shane nearly a month before he had been able to accept Ilya's invitation, but it was worth it once he had, and Ilya had closed Anya out of his bedroom and fucked Shane until he could hardly remember his own name.

They would spend afternoons after practice and before Ilya went to work cooking in Ilya's kitchen, listening to his expansive playlists, and taking Anya on long walks around his neighborhood. Or rather, carrying Anya about ninety percent of the time while they walked and talked.

Shane was blissfully happy, and everything would be completely perfect if it weren't for the fact that they constantly had to hide. He could tell that it was wearing on Ilya. He didn't like arriving places at separate times, didn't like that they could never go out to restaurants, didn't like that Shane was constantly on edge when they were out in public.

He never said anything, but would clench his jaw and set his mouth in a way that said everything without saying a word.

Shane knew this wasn't sustainable, but he had no idea how to get out of it, because being away from Ilya for any length of time was starting to feel like an impossibility of its own.

He didn't know what to do. He couldn't tell him that he was falling in love with him, even though the temptation grew stronger by the day. He couldn't come out, even though he sometimes thought they all knew anyway, in the way the team looked at him when he said he wasn't seeing anyone.

So Shane was stuck in a liminal space, in between what he desperately wanted and what he knew he should do.

After hockey had always been the nebulous sort of promise, the thing he had told himself when he had realized he was gay. After he retired, he could quietly find someone, settle down, live out of the public eye. But he had won two more Cups since then, bringing his total up to four. He was the best player in a generation; there was no fading into obscurity, the league would make sure of that, not to mention his mother.

And he didn't want to wait, he wanted Ilya now, openly, publicly.

Instead, he had to focus on the opening game of the season against the Admirals.

"I won't be able to see you as much, during the season," he told Ilya, tracing a finger up his arm, towards his shoulder, "I'll be traveling a lot."

“I know,” he was laying on his back, staring up at the ceiling of Shane’s room, his breathing deep and even, “Anya will miss you.”

Shane could almost believe that his words were double edged. If he didn’t know better.

“I can still see her,” *his* words were definitely double edged, “Just- I’ll be gone a lot.”

“Mm,” Ilya hummed, seemingly unsatisfied.

“When do you work?”

He tilted his face down, meeting Shane’s eyes.

“You have something in mind?”

“I just- You could come to my game.”

He stared at him as though he thought Shane had lost his mind.

“As my- You know, my friend,” he clarified too quickly, looking away before he could see the disappointment in Ilya’s face, “My parents will be there. You could. Could meet them.”

He was asking for too much. He knew it, but he asked anyway, because he could never help himself asking when it came to Ilya.

Ilya opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again, before saying,

“You want me there?”

“Of course I do.”

His eyebrows contracted together, and for a second Shane thought he was going to say yes. But instead, he said,

“I work that night. Would not be able to stay for long.”

“Right.”

One step forward, three steps back.

“But thank you for- Inviting me.”

“You’re welcome,” Shane whispered, shifting his face so that he was staring at their feet, his head on Ilya’s chest, his favorite place to be, “I’ll keep asking, if that’s okay.”

“Is okay,” he could tell that he was smiling.

Shane was late getting to the locker room on opening day.

“Fuck, there he is!” JJ looked ready to collapse in relief at the sight of him, “We thought you abandoned us.”

“Nope,” he set his things down in his locker, stripping off his clothes and pulling his gear towards him.

“Where were you?” Hayden asked curiously, “You’re never late. Especially not for opening day.”

The truth was that Ilya had given him a “good luck charm” which involved three separate orgasms and Shane nearly crying from overstimulation on Ilya’s bed, which had made him very, very late for his traditional dinner with his parents, and completely unable to answer any of their questions. But it’s not like he could tell *Hayden* that.

“Traffic,” he said quickly, “And it took forever to get the check after dinner.”

“Hope that’s a good sign for us,” Hayden said easily, pulling his jersey over his head, “Anyway, ready to roll?”

“Yeah, for sure,” he scrambled around, out of sorts and guilty about it, but he couldn’t help but check his phone right before he led the team out onto the ice.

Ilya had texted three simple words,

Win or whatever.

But the star of the text was another one of his photos. He was in the club again, in that same private room with a mirror, but this time, his hard cock was in his hand.

“Fuck,” Shane flushed blotchily, his mouth filling with saliva reflexively.

You look so hot, he typed out, his fingers shaking slightly. He had never responded to Ilya before a game. At least, not since that first time.

All for you, my pretty boy hockey player.

He almost moaned out loud, in the middle of the locker room.

You gotta stop.

Or what?

Or he was going to come in his pants right before he took the ice.

He hadn’t come up with a good answer to his question before Ilya had texted again.

“Fuck me,” Shane turned down the volume on his phone the moment he realized he had sent a video. He turned down the brightness too for good measure, and tapped on the message. He watched as Ilya stroked himself lazily, still standing in front of the mirror. He angled himself so that Shane could appreciate his perfect ass, then twisted back to face the camera, his mouth falling open as he touched himself, eyes fixed on the camera,

On Shane.

This was *not helping*.

He closed out of the video before he could lose what little self-control he still possessed, and typed back,

You’re at work.

Buzzkill.

Grinning to himself, Shane put his phone away, adjusted himself surreptitiously, and rapped his stick on the ground, leading his team out to a roaring Montreal home crowd, vibrating with excitement at the prospect of seeing their Cup winning team take the ice.

They won by the skin of their teeth, but it was apparent to all of them that this was not the Admirals team of the past. Scott Hunter, who was probably only a couple of years away from retirement, played some of the best hockey Shane had ever experienced against him.

“Jesus,” Mitty threw down his helmet in the locker room, “What fucking team was that?”

“We won,” JJ pointed out, collapsing dramatically onto the floor.

“Yeah but- They’re supposed to be the worst in the league.”

There was some nervousness in the locker room, some modicum of fear. They had not lost to the Admirals in years, and for it to be close spoke to a change in their division, one that none of them were really ready for.

They were right to be nervous. The division was much more even than it had been the year before, and Shane could tell, he could feel in his bones, that they were not winning the Cup this year. There wasn’t the same magic, wins didn’t feel easy, but were hard fought every single time, and not nearly as plentiful as they had been last season.

Metros fans were going home disappointed more often, and Shane felt the pressure of it everywhere he went. People would stare at him at the grocery store, and he told himself that he was imagining their accusatory looks.

The city and its fans had grown accustomed to a level of success since Shane had joined the team, and now, as captain, they *expected* that success, and he was not delivering up to their standards so far.

The only time he actually felt like himself at all anymore was during stolen moments between away games and practice with Ilya. He refused to let Shane talk about hockey, but continued to educate him on music, on movies, on all the things he said made life worth living, that Shane had never had the time to pay attention to.

Shane had discovered that he loved quiet, understated movies, usually with an undercurrent of romance in them. Ilya would always groan and roll his eyes when he would alight on one, but he would press play every time, and their hands would end up entwined, and Ilya’s head would rest on Shane’s shoulder, warm and steady.

He clung to these moments whenever he boarded the team plane, or whenever he was playing the bracing, ever-positive captain after a loss. There were times when he imagined himself like a tapestry strung up on a loom, unraveling in a zig zag pattern with every loss. He was clutching onto the edge of control by his very fingertips, and the only thing holding him there was the promise of seeing Ilya after he got home.

As Christmas loomed, Shane found himself almost constantly longing for his parents’ warm house with the Christmas tree they had had longer than he had been alive, decorated with multicolored lights and ornaments that Shane had made in grade school.

He just wanted to get out of Montreal, even for a couple of days, and be around people that wouldn't look at him with burning disappointment in their eyes.

He fantasized sometimes of bringing Ilya with him, but he knew that was impossible, not least because Ilya would probably spend the holiday with his own family, and wouldn't be interested in staying with his long-term closeted hookup.

But still, it was nice to think about.

"Do they even let you take Christmas off?" Ilya bemoaned, sprawled dramatically across Shane's bed, as Anya ran up and down the little set of stairs Shane had picked up for her, pointedly not looking at Ilya when he saw them for the first time, "Or are you forced to play your stupid sport all the time, and not have sex with me?"

"We get a couple of days at Christmas," Shane stood over him, smiling involuntarily at the way his arm was thrown across his face, "But then we're back on the 28th."

"I hate it."

Shane didn't, but he did want a little more time.

"Are you going to keep being dramatic, or are you going to fuck me?"

Ilya's head snapped up.

"I'm sorry, when did you become bossy?"

He shrugged, shifting forward so that he was standing in between his legs.

"Since I've been on the road for the last three months. I'm pent up."

"Aw," Ilya sat up, running his hands up the outside of Shane's thighs, and there was fire in his touch, "Poor baby, playing his stupid sport with stupid sticks, can't even jerk off in a shared hotel room."

"I get off plenty in the shower."

"Do you?" he pushed up the hem of Shane's shirt, exposing his stomach to the cool air, "What do you think about?"

You, Shane wanted to say, You're all I ever think about anymore. No one else will ever come close. The words were clawing their way up his throat, nearly choking him with how badly he wanted to say them.

Instead, he swallowed them down, tilting Ilya's chin up, and kissed him to silence himself.

"What about you?" Shane asked him after, when they had cleaned up and were laying, clean and damp from the shower, in bed, Anya snoring between them.

"What about me?"

"I mean- Is the club open next week? Or are you-"

“Is closed,” Ilya shrugged, scratching Anya idly behind the ears, “Will be nice to not have to go to work every day.”

Shane’s heart stilled in his chest. He could ask. You know, there was no harm in asking.

“Do- Do you have any plans?”

“Ah, no,” he smiled, “Will probably just stay here.”

“What about Christmas?”

Ilya cocked his head to the side, his eyebrows raised.

“What about it?”

“I mean,” Shane gestured around at the snow falling outside the window, “What are you- Doing for it?”

Ilya hesitated, something vulnerable crossing his face.

“Ah,” he cleared his throat, “Probably just staying in, with Anya.”

“Oh.”

There was a pause, and Shane waited.

“Svetlana is going home. To Russia,” Ilya nearly spat the word, “So. I will- Do something with Anya instead.”

“Why don’t you go visit?”

Ilya smiled bitterly. He moved away from Shane and, not for the first time, Shane thought it was like he was trying to cover himself up, hide himself. He thought he was going to change the subject, or not answer at all, but he said,

“I can’t go back. My family knows.”

Shane looked at him questioningly.

“Knows what?”

“About me. Being bisexual.”

“Oh and- They wouldn’t be supportive?”

Ilya looked at him like he was crazy.

“It is Russia.”

“Oh,” he felt so stupid, “Right. Sorry I- Sorry.”

Ilya’s fingers found his, and neither of them looked at one another.

“Is okay,” he said quietly, giving Shane’s hand a squeeze, “It was a long time ago.”

“But still-” they were teetering towards something they had never done before, real emotional vulnerability on Ilya’s part, “I- It would be hard not to- Be able to go home.”

He chanced a glance at him. Ilya was blinking rapidly, his chest rising and falling, and his grip on Shane’s fingers tightened, so that it was almost painful.

“It-” he cleared his throat, “It is. Yes.”

Shane returned the pressure on his hand, and they stayed that way, holding onto each other, neither of them saying another word.

“I’m sorry,” he said eventually, “I’m sorry, Ilya.”

He nearly jumped as he felt pressure on his shoulder. Ilya had pressed his forehead into Shane’s shoulder, and rested there. It couldn’t be comfortable, not the way he was twisting to not disturb Anya, but he did not move, and Shane stayed still too, not wanting to jolt him out of this moment.

Tentatively, he reached around with his other hand, and pushed his fingers through Ilya’s curls. He sighed softly, pressing down against Shane’s shoulder, like he could bury himself there.

Shane wouldn’t mind that. Not one bit.

But even as Ilya curled himself closer, snorting with soft laughter as Anya groaned and growled at the intrusion into her space, Shane’s mind was whirring, like the machine there had been left on high.

Ilya, alone for Christmas. Ilya, without anyone to spend the time with.

And Shane, with three blissful, beautiful days off.

He shouldn’t ask. It was too much, far too much. Ilya had barely given him an ounce of insight into his life, his past; Shane would be pushing things too far by asking him, he would scare him off.

“What is it, Shane?”

His eyes flicked over, he hadn’t even realized that Ilya had pulled back and was watching him carefully.

“What do you mean?”

“You have something that you want to say. I can tell. What is it?”

Shane could pretend that he had tried not to say it, but it would have been a lie. The words were tumbling out of his mouth before he could even attempt to stop them.

“It’s just- I’m going to my cottage, my lake house really, in a couple of weeks, for the holiday. You could come if- If you wanted to.”

Their eyes met, and though Shane was terrified of what he had just done, the ever-present knot of anxiety in his chest had eased just slightly, like a weight had been lifted.

Ilya’s eyes were moving all over his face, a tic that Shane had noticed, something that he did when he was nervous.

“Spend Christmas with you?”

“Yeah I mean,” he shrugged, “You- My family loves Christmas. Always have, and- I’d hate to think you’re spending it alone.”

“What about Anya?”

“She can come too,” he said quickly, “It’s a house, there’s a yard and everything, my parents have one too-”

“Your parents?” his eyebrows had shot up, “You want me to- Meet them?”

“Um,” yes, yes a thousand times yes, “Yeah. I told you that before, with opening day. They- You’d like them, I think.”

Ilya was quiet for so long that Shane reached down to stroke Anya’s back, just to give himself something to do. She grunted in her sleep, and shoved her legs against his thigh as hard as she could. He smiled.

“Okay,” he looked up at Ilya, whose eyes were unfocused, maybe a little teary. Shane pretended not to notice.

“You’ll come?”

He raised his eyebrows, and Shane flipped him off, not wanting to disturb Anya.

“If you’re- Sure.”

Shane nodded. He had never been so sure of anything in his life.

“I’m sure.”

Ilya seemed to be waiting to catch him in a lie. Finally, he relented, and reached over, pulling Shane towards him, pressing their lips together. He melted into the contact, his hands in his hair, and his heart pumping wildly at the idea of what was to come.

Chapter End Notes

I am ignoring book canon for Anya because Ilya is a dachshund owner #tome

Also if you know me you know that the [playlist](#) Ilya mentions does exist because I have playlist derangement syndrome

Love y'all down! Hope to have the last one later this week...but also it might be very long so we'll see <3

Chapter 5: i feel so seen and i can't dream

Chapter Notes

Hiiii!!! Sorry for the delay!! I am currently experiencing the opposite of the AO3 curse and am in the active process of building a house so that has cut down on my writing time significantly but...I mean this has a 23k word count so...I hope that's enough to buy me clemency.

I just didn't want to keep adding chapters to the count so here we have a MONSTER of a final chapter lol.

Some content warnings for this one:

CW for references to suicide (the Irina of it all yk)

CW for a vomit mention

CW for references to Shane's orthorexia/general ED talk

CW for references to the racism Shane experienced in hockey (passing reference only)

Also a gentle reminder that there is absolutely nothing wrong with Ilya's line of work, but this story is from Shane's POV, and he does struggle with it.

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

“You’re bringing someone?” his mother sounded like he had just told her he was going to the moon, “*Here?* For Christmas?”

“I mean,” Shane tapped his fingernails against the side of his phone, the clicking noise a comfort, “If that’s okay.”

“Of course it is!” she sounded delighted, “Well, I guess it’s just- We didn’t know, so- Tell me about him!”

“Uh,” he flushed, even though he shouldn’t be embarrassed and even though it wasn’t even his to be embarrassed about, “Well- His name’s Ilya.”

“What does he do?” she asked eagerly, “How did you meet?”

Oh god, how the *fuck* was he supposed to explain that?

“It- Um,” he cleared his throat, “We met at JJ’s wedding.”

It was sort of true, only mostly a lie.

“Well we’ll be so happy to meet him,” he could tell she was practically vibrating with excitement through the phone, “Does he- Any allergies? Preferences?”

“No he- He’s easy.”

“Are you coming down together?”

“He’s taking his own car,” he said, “That’s the other thing. He has a dog he’s bringing. She’s great but- I know we don’t usually have dogs in the house so-”

“No problem,” and he thought she would agree to anything he said just now, “Is she- A big dog?”

“No no, she’s really small,” he shook his head, though she couldn’t see him, “And she’ll probably just sleep on the couch the whole time and beg at Ilya’s feet during dinner.”

“Well, great! Are you coming on the 24th?”

“Yeah, I’ll get settled at home and then maybe- Could we come for dinner?”

“Shane,” she sounded exasperated, “Of course you can, we can’t wait to see you. And meet Ilya.”

“Right,” his mouth curved, “Okay. Okay so- See you in a couple of days.”

“Love you, Shane, we’re so excited.”

“Yeah,” he couldn’t even put into words how he was feeling, it was too complicated, “Me too. Love you.”

For the first time in a long time, Shane was not anxious about doing something out of his routine. Okay, sure, he had the baseline of anxiety that was just there no matter what he did, but he was actually...excited to introduce Ilya to his parents.

He was sure they would love him, how could they not? And he was pretty sure Ilya would like his parents. Shane liked them a lot, and Ilya tended to like a lot of the things that Shane did, hockey notwithstanding.

But being less anxious than normal didn’t stop him from texting Ilya like he had never traveled anywhere before in his life.

Did you pack a jacket? It’ll be cold by the lake.

Yeah.

Okay cool, and I have extra thermals if you need them. It’s warm in the house but still good to have on hand just in case.

Shane, I live here too. I know what the weather is like.

Right. Sorry.

It’s okay, I can’t wait to see you.

Shane couldn’t either. They had lost two out of three of their last games, and Shane was ready to not fucking think about this team for a few days. *Just one more game*, he told himself, settling back against the squashy pillows of the hotel bed. Just Boston, and then four days with Ilya and Anya and his parents.

Me too. I sent you the address right?

Yes, we're good, baby.

He blushed happily at the pet name.

Okay, I'll see you tomorrow. I'll probably get there like midmorning.

Okay, Anya is excited.

"Who're you texting?"

Shane's neck twisted around. Hayden was watching him, an easy smile on his face.

"Oh just- A friend."

"The same friend you're always texting right before games?"

It was like the air had vanished from the room. Shane couldn't draw a breath in.

"I- Uh-" he scrambled, came up empty, and blurted out, "It's not anything- It's not anything serious."

And that may have been the biggest lie he had ever said to anyone ever.

"Whatever man," Hayden laughed, "It's good to see you get out there. Doesn't happen much. What's her name?"

"Lily," he said, biting the inside of his cheek, where the fuck had that come from?

"Okay," he tilted his head to the side, "You okay?"

"Yeah," he said too quickly, "Just- Ready for the break."

He looked sympathetic, any suspicion of who Shane was seeing seemed to vanish. They had both been struggling with the team and their shortcomings this season.

"We'll beat Boston," he said it confidently, "And then- Well, *you'll* be able to relax, unlike me."

"It's not my fault that you and Jackie have five kids."

"*Four*, and you know that you asshole," he laughed, and the conversation melted into Hayden's holiday plans, and far away from Shane and the truth of who he was seeing.

They did beat Boston, which was a relief, because Shane didn't think he had another loss in him.

The team flew back to Montreal that night, and were greeted by softly falling snow, piling on the sidewalks, giving Shane's drive home an ethereal, unreal glitter.

He tossed and turned in his own bed, getting up several times to check his carefully packed suitcase, then the groceries he had picked up before he left for Boston, then his phone, worried that Ilya might cancel on him.

Shane dozed fitfully until the sun rose, and stopped himself from jumping in the car the moment that he was fully awake. Instead, he showered, scrubbing himself thoroughly from head to toe, did

thirty minutes of meditation, made his smoothie, and walked in laps around his apartment, until he couldn't take it anymore.

Leaving now, he texted Ilya, *Let me know when you're on your way.*

Should be leaving in about an hour, he shot back, *We probably won't need to stop.*

Okay, see you soon!

He thought the exclamation point might have been a little juvenile, but Ilya sent back a heart, so maybe not.

Shane had always liked driving longer distances. It was mindless, he could watch the scenery pass him by, and even listen to the "boring" playlist that Ilya had made him now. It was nice, being in his warm car beetling along the snowy roads. Festive, almost.

He arrived at the cottage just past eleven, and unlocked the door, flipping on the lights and smiling at the little fake tree that his parents had come over and set up for him. They usually celebrated the day at their house, but it was nice to have some decorations here too.

He took the opportunity to get settled, checking his phone every so often and stopping dead in his tracks every time he heard a noise.

Finally, just after one, Shane heard the telltale crunch of gravel on the driveway outside, and he stopped himself from running to the door, instead walking at a perfectly normal, leisurely pace.

Ilya was setting Anya down on the snow covered driveway carefully. She was dressed in a little coat and matching snow boots, and Shane almost burst out laughing at the sight of Ilya, dressed all in black, sunglasses over his eyes, and his fat dachshund looking up at him reproachfully for putting her down in these conditions.

"Hi," Shane called, walking down the steps carefully to greet them, "Need any help?"

"Will you take Anya?" Ilya said, even as she ran towards him, whining and barking in excitement. He scooped her up, dusting off her feet with snow that had barely had time to collect there, and waited for Ilya, who swung a backpack over one shoulder, a duffel bag clutched in his other hand.

"Drive over okay?" Shane asked, holding open the door for him, eyes trailing down his body as he passed him by.

"Fine," Ilya looked around with interest, "Anya slept the whole way, she probably needs to go out."

Shane slid open the door to the deck, and shuffled across it, careful not to slip on the snow. He set Anya down in the yard, and chuckled to himself as she stared up at him, incensed that he was betraying her just as Ilya had.

"Come on Anya," he was not above begging, "It's cold, do your business so we can go in."

If she could open her mouth and curse him, he was certain that she would have. Instead, she wandered around the yard for a too-extended period of time, lifting up her feet as high as they would go. Finally, at long last, she squatted in a tiny patch of dirt around one of the trees, and Shane carried her back towards the house.

Ilya was watching them from the window, a soft expression on his face.

“She put me through it,” Shane complained the moment they were inside the warm living room. Ilya hummed in response, and set to work unzipping her paws from the boots, while Shane unbuckled her from her jacket, “I have a bed for her here. Right by the fire.”

Their eyes met, and for once, Shane did not look away.

Once she was free from her winter clothing, Shane settled Anya into her bed, and she flopped over happily, as though their brief stint in the cold had sapped her of all her energy.

“You’d think she just finished a twelve-hour shift,” Shane said idly as Anya sighed heavily, her eyes already half-closed.

“She works very hard,” Ilya’s voice was right by his ear, and his hands slid up Shane’s stomach, pulling him back so they were pressed together, “She’ll be asleep for a while.”

“She’s not a baby,” Shane said, arching his neck back, and pretending like the idea of Ilya putting a real baby down for a nap wasn’t the most appealing idea in the entire world.

Ilya pressed his lips to Shane’s skin, breathing him in.

“Yes she is.”

“You’re right.”

His hot breath huffed along his neck, a puff of humor.

“And you are easy.”

“Since the princess is asleep,” Shane turned, taking Ilya’s hand, and pulling him towards the bedroom, “If you wanted a tour-”

Ilya’s answering grin was wide, and he let Shane lead him, let him push him down onto the bed, let him climb on top of him.

“We have some time,” his voice was muffled as he kissed down Ilya’s chest, “Dinner isn’t until like six.”

“Fuck,” Ilya’s hands slid into his hair, “We might be late.”

“You’re gonna fuck me for five hours?”

“I’d fuck you for the rest of our lives if I could.”

Shane’s heart stuttered, and he crawled back up Ilya’s body, kissing him on the mouth.

“Might get uncomfortable, after a while,” he murmured, pushing a hand through his hair. Ilya shook his head, taking Shane’s face in his palms.

“No, let me show you.”

They were, in fact, late for dinner. Ilya edged him for almost an hour, then drew two, no, three orgasms out of him, fucking him recklessly, without the dim reminder of neighbors and thin walls in the back of their minds.

Shane thought that he might be losing it when Ilya dropped to his knees in the shower, practically holding him up as his legs shook, unable to support his weight. His fingers dragged through Ilya's wet hair, and he held the strands in his fist, rocking forward even as he wanted to get away from his wet mouth and the noises in the back of his throat.

"Fuck, *fuck* Ilya-" his voice was pitched up, unrecognizable, and he threw his head back, almost drowning under the spray from the shower, "I can't- Fuck- I can't come again-"

Ilya didn't pull off of him, but hummed, his arms coming up to wrap around Shane's thighs, and took him deeper, all the way down.

One more, was the silent command, one that Shane could not ignore, *Give me one more*.

He did. Fuck, he had no idea how he did it, but he did. It hurt, but the pain of it was nothing compared to the overwhelming pleasure of having Ilya like this, all to himself, away from work and hockey and everything that wasn't just the two of them.

Ilya's hand was splayed against his chest, between his pectorals, now supporting almost all of his weight as he threatened to topple over. He stood, groaning, but kissed Shane anyway, sliding his tongue inside his mouth, so that Shane could taste himself there.

He was wrung out, exhausted, but not enough to not want to return the favor. Shakily, he sank down on the hard floor of the shower.

"We will be late," Ilya said quietly, even as his hands skated across the top of Shane's head, trying and failing to not pull his hair.

"I don't care," his voice rasped, but Ilya was hard and beautiful in front of him, and he wanted this, to please him, to make him come in Shane's mouth, to taste him just as Ilya had made him taste himself.

Ilya moaned loudly as Shane took him as deep as he could, gagging a little. It didn't matter how many times he did this, it took a minute to get accustomed to the feeling of Ilya down his throat.

He said something low, guttural in Russian and pushed his hips forward, still holding Shane by the hair. His hands came to rest on the outside of Ilya's thighs, and he relaxed, swallowing around him, breathing through his nose.

His knees hurt and his jaw ached and water was getting in his eyes, and absolutely none of it mattered when he was looking up at Ilya, and watching him lose control.

He came in Shane's mouth, and pulled him up to his feet, pressing kisses all over his neck and his chest, catching his chin with his thumb and forefinger as he always did, just to look at him.

"Fuck," Ilya was panting, and the water had gone cool, so Shane reached over to turn it off, "You make me want to keep you."

Shane blinked, and he was speaking without thinking,

“You can, if you want to.”

They stood there, staring at each other, rivulets of water trailing down their bodies, dripping in the silence.

Then, Ilya smiled, wide and beautiful, and he was pulling Shane in, kissing him.

“Okay.”

It was something close to a confession, and those words were back again, right at the back of Shane’s throat, threatening to make an appearance at the slightest provocation. Instead, he leaned forward, kissed him again and said,

“Come on, or my mom will start calling.”

Ilya, he had learned, was incapable of going for more than five minutes without listening to music of some kind. He was constantly looking to fill any silence, so he plugged his phone into the charger in Shane’s car the moment they had settled Anya in the backseat, and had soft music issuing from the speakers.

“It’s only like a ten minute drive,” Shane pointed out, “And this isn’t even Christmas music.”

“Are you saying you want to listen to Christmas music?” he asked, amused, his eyes on Shane as he turned around in the drive, carefully watching the backup camera, “And I don’t care, I just like the noise.”

“Silence is golden sometimes,” he sassed.

“I can turn it off-”

“No, I was just-” he shook his head, “Being silly.”

Ilya’s warm hand found his on the gearshift. Their fingers tangled together, and they listened to the quiet music all the way to his parents’ house.

The Christmas tree twinkled in the window, and the warm glow of light from the windows made the whole house look cozy, inviting.

Shane glanced at Ilya, whose expression betrayed the fear and nervousness that he was clearly trying to hide. Shane squeezed his hand until he turned his head.

“Ready?”

Ilya took a deep breath, and nodded.

Shane let him retrieve Anya from the backseat, thinking that it might be a little easier for him if he had her in his arms. Grounding, familiar, safe, all that.

He led the way to the door, and pushed it open without knocking.

“Hi,” he called, “It’s me.”

“Shane!” his parents voices came from the kitchen, and he grinned as he followed the sound, checking behind him to make sure that Ilya was still there.

They were both cooking, his father at the stove, his mother chopping vegetables by the sink, the garbage can next to her. They set down what they were doing and converged on him, each of them hugging him tightly. He leaned into them, pressing his forehead into his father’s shoulder. It was a shit season, and they were some of the only people that knew that and wouldn’t judge him for it.

He disengaged himself gently from his mother, and stood back, so that he and Ilya were shoulder to shoulder.

“This is Ilya,” he said, his hand coming up to rest on his shoulder, “He’s my- My friend.”

It was lame, not the right term, but the only one that Shane could think to use.

“Hi,” Ilya said awkwardly, trying to keep a squirming Anya in his arms, who was desperate to meet the new people, “Nice to meet you.”

His parents looked between them for a heartbeat, and then his mother was stepping forward, and pulling a very surprised Ilya and a delighted Anya into a hug.

“Great to meet you,” she said pulling away and patting his cheek, “So happy to have you for Christmas. And who is this?”

“Anya,” Ilya seemed relieved, “Ah, sorry, she’ll probably-”

He broke off, clearly embarrassed, so Shane finished for him,

“She pees when she gets excited.”

His father laughed, and bent down, pulling open the lowest drawer by the stove and handing Shane a roll of paper towels.

“We come prepared.” Ilya set her down gently, and she ran around them all, rolling over on her back and wiggling around like an upturned beetle. He could tell that his parents were smitten. But, like, who wouldn’t be?

“Anything we need to help with?” Shane asked, stepping back to skate a hand down Ilya’s arm.

“No no, we’re just about done,” his mother shooed them away, “Go sit down.”

He took Ilya’s hand, feeling a thrill at being able to be open with him like this, and pulled him into the small living room.

At once, Ilya was taking in the photos splashed all over the walls.

“Look at you,” he placed his palm against Shane’s cheek, staring at a photo of him with spiky hair and a wide, toothy smile, “So cute.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” Shane laughed, but Ilya shook his head.

“I am being serious.”

They held each other's gaze for a long moment, before Ilya was breaking it, moving towards the tree.

"Did you make all these?" he reached out, tracing the edge of a paper drum that Shane had definitely made when he was like five.

"Most of them," he stood beside him, "Some of them are family ones."

"I like this one," he said quietly, pointing to a small plush cow in a dress, "Makes no sense for Christmas."

"I know, it's one of my favorites too," Shane grinned, picking it up and dropping it into his palm, "I love decorating the tree, but with the season, obviously I can't do that anymore."

He liked the way Ilya looked, lit up by the multicolored lights of the Christmas tree. It made him softer, *pretty*, a word that he was always using for Shane, but could be easily applied to him too.

Shane reached out, pushing a hand through his hair, just looking at him. Their eyes met, and Ilya smiled shyly. He had never seen him so unreserved, so away from the persona that he sometimes put on when they were fucking. Shane liked that persona a lot of the time, but there was something about this, it made him feel like he could be floating off the floor.

"Dinner!" his father called, and the moment broke. They separated slightly, their hands entwined, grinning sheepishly.

"Come on," Shane said quietly, "My dad's a great cook."

It was easier than Shane had expected. Ilya slotted in with their dynamic seamlessly. He made Shane's mother laugh, got into a far too detailed discussion on something called a chassis with his father, and endlessly complimented his cooking, so that the whole house was full of warm chatter and laughter by the time the plates were cleared.

"No, no, you're a guest," Shane's father insisted, essentially shoving Ilya back down into his chair, "Stay here."

Ilya sank back, pulling his glass of wine towards him. Shane could see his fingers tapping on the stem, and resisted the urge to pull one hand into his lap.

"So Ilya," his mother sat back in her chair, that calculating expression on her face, one that Shane associated with 'manager' instead of 'mom,' "Tell me about you."

Shane gave Ilya a significant look, hoping to convey to him that he didn't have to answer anything if he didn't want to.

"Ah," he rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously, and Shane reached out under the table, gripping his knee, "There is not much to tell. I came here from Russia when I was eighteen, and have been here ever since."

"Interesting, and what do you do?"

Shane's chest tightened, but Ilya was ready with a canned response he was sure he had used a hundred times,

“I am in hospitality.”

“Okay,” she nodded approvingly, “So, what brought you to Canada?”

“*Mom*,” he said warningly. Ilya was not forthcoming about his background to Shane, and he didn’t want to pressure him into anything, “This isn’t an interrogation.”

“What!” Yuna looked genuinely surprised, “I’m just-”

“Is okay,” Ilya’s foot tapped Shane’s under the table, “It is just- Not very happy.”

“That’s alright,” she looked somewhat mortified that she had offended him, “We don’t have to-”

“My friend Svetlana, she is my best friend from Russia, was coming here for school, and I- Could not stay home, so I followed her here. Got a job, and just- Never wanted to leave.”

“Right,” Shane could tell she had about a million follow up questions, “So you’ve been here-”

“Twelve years.”

“And you haven’t been able to go back to Russia in all that time,” her eyebrows contracted, and she moved like she wanted to touch his wrist sympathetically, “I’m sorry.”

Ilya blinked, evidently thrown by her open kindness towards him. He stared at her for a long time, his expression unreadable, before he said,

“It- thank you. I really only- I wish I could see my mother, that’s all.”

“And there’s no chance she could come here?”

“No,” he shook his head, something like a bitter smile crossing his face, “She- My mother is dead.”

He said it matter of factly, but Shane could see through him, the pain underneath.

“I’m so sorry,” his mother really did reach across the table this time, taking Ilya’s hand in hers, “I am so sorry, Ilya.”

Ilya nodded jerkily, his eyes on the table in front of him. Eventually, he said,

“Thank you. There are not many people who- Know that about me here.”

Shane saw her squeeze his hand.

“You don’t have to thank me for anything, it’s what moms do.”

Ilya looked up at her, eyes wide. He nodded, smiling at her in a watery way, and they broke apart.

“Alright, enough interrogation, as Shane says,” she said, wiping her own eyes, “Pie? Anyone?”

“You okay?” Shane asked the moment she had disappeared. Ilya nodded, glancing towards the door to the backyard.

“I need- I’ll be right back,” he stood up, touching Shane’s hair lightly so he wouldn’t think it was a reprimand, and stepped out into the cold air.

Shane didn’t chase him, but gave him a few minutes to himself. He helped his mother cut four too-large slices of apple pie, and set them at each place at the table, a fork beside each plate.

Then, and only then, did he follow him outside.

Ilya stood in the yard, a cigarette dangling from his fingers, staring out at the dark expanse of grass and trees in front of him, blanketed in snow. Shane approached him cautiously.

“Pie’s ready.”

Ilya hummed, lifting the cigarette to his lips again, taking a drag.

“I’m sorry she asked about that,” Shane said, staring out at the dark yard as well, “It’s not her business-”

“Is okay,” he looped his free arm around Shane’s shoulders, blowing the smoke away from him, “I-I like your mother.”

He leaned into his warm weight, a welcome contrast to the biting cold.

Shane let the silence stretch, happy to just be near him like this, have him here, with his family.

“Thank you for-” Ilya broke off, clearing his throat loudly, “I am happy to be here.”

“Me too. Happy to- To have you here, I mean.”

Ilya turned, pressing his lips into Shane’s hair, before he stubbed out his cigarette.

“I want pie.”

Shane smiled as he trailed after him, back into the house.

“Come over whenever you get up tomorrow,” Shane’s mother kissed them both on the cheek and scratched Anya’s ears, “We’ll be awake.”

“See you tomorrow,” he hugged his father, “Merry Christmas Eve.”

“Merry Christmas Eve,” they repeated, “See you tomorrow.”

They drove home in near silence, the only noise coming from the Christmas music that Ilya had put on and Anya’s loud snoring. Shane’s fingers itched; he wanted to hold Ilya in his arms, press kisses onto his face, make sure that things hadn’t gone too far.

He wanted Ilya to like his parents, like their house, like the cottage.

Maybe he could see himself coming here again, when they had more than four days.

Shane kept a lid on his anxiety until they were back inside the house. Anya trotted happily to her bed, flopping into it dramatically, but Shane stayed by the entryway, watching Ilya’s back. He turned towards him, reaching out a hand, but Shane said,

“I hope it wasn’t too-” Shane rubbed his hands together, in spite of the warmth around him, “I know they can be a lot so I just- I hope it-”

“Enough talking,” Ilya stepped towards him, pushing him against the wall, his hands already under his shirt, “I do not want to talk anymore.”

“Okay,” Shane folded, catching Ilya’s face, kissing him, and leading him to bed.

The next morning, Shane and Ilya laid lazily together, only briefly getting up to let Anya out and feed her breakfast.

“We should get going,” Shane gasped, his hands fisting in Ilya’s hair as his mouth closed around his nipple, “Or we won’t have time for anything but dinner.”

“This could be dinner,” he reached down, grabbing a handful of Shane’s ass, “But I like your parents too much to skip it.”

“Ugh,” he shoved at him weakly, “Don’t bring up my parents when we’re- When-”

“When we’re what?” his eyes glittered, “What are we doing?”

“Fuck,” he was hard, his cock pressing against Shane’s thigh, “Let me blow you, please.”

Ilya’s eyebrows lifted in delight, it was rare that Shane would ask openly like that.

He rolled onto his back, splayed out and gorgeous against the sheets, his hard cock curving across his lower stomach.

“Whenever you want, baby.”

They loaded up in the car just before ten, Anya quaking in Shane’s arms despite her coat.

He turned, looking behind him for Ilya, only to see him balancing a few packages in his arms.

“What are those?”

“What do you think they are? They are for your parents.”

Shane stopped, staring at him.

“You didn’t have to-”

“I know that, I wanted to. Can you open the trunk please?”

He hesitated, before his brain caught up with him, and he scrambled for the keys, popping the trunk so Ilya could stash his neatly wrapped gifts inside.

“Come on,” Ilya poked his head around the car, “I thought you said you didn’t want to be too late.”

Shane almost said it. He almost blurted it out, right there.

Instead, he handed Anya over, and drove to his parents’ house, the words hanging on the back of his throat.

His parents greeted them with smiles and warm cups of tea (a necessity since Shane didn't drink coffee).

"Ilya, we do have coffee if you want it," David said, jerking his thumb to the kitchen, and Ilya paused before saying,

"Actually yes, that would be great."

Shane rolled his eyes.

"This tea is not bad!"

"Okay," Ilya said flatly, "Whatever you say."

"You really didn't have to get us anything, Ilya," Yuna picked up one of the packages that Ilya had set on the dining table, "Really."

"I wanted to," Ilya returned with Shane's father, holding a steaming mug of coffee in his hands, "Thank you for having me."

"Of course," David clapped him on the shoulder, "If you bring Anya, you can come back anytime."

Ilya smiled widely, looking down at Anya, who was wagging her tail, clearly hoping that someone had food.

It was a really great Christmas, at least in Shane's opinion. They exchanged gifts, Yuna surprising Ilya was a package of his own.

"I asked Shane over and over what you liked and only managed to draw little bits out of him, so I hope you like this."

Ilya's eyes were wide as he took the package from her hands.

"You really-" he cleared his throat, "Didn't have to-"

"We wanted to," she echoed his own words back to him, "It's not Christmas without a little something, you know?"

He seemed almost overwhelmed, but tore off the wrapping paper, and opened the box carefully, like he was afraid it would crumble into dust in his hands. He lifted the flaps, and peered inside.

"You-" he looked up at Shane's parents, shaking his head slightly, "Were these...yours?"

They nodded, smiling at how shocked Ilya seemed.

"I can't accept this."

"Oh, sure you can," David said easily, "We've been trying to get Shane to listen to...well, anything, for years, and he told us about how much you loved music. So, it's a little sampling from both of our collections."

Shane leaned over, looking over Ilya's shoulder. Inside the box was a stack of vinyls, organized alphabetically. He recognized a few vaguely from the shelves in his father's office. Shane supposed

he had talked a lot in the lead up to Christmas about how much music Ilya listened to.

“Thank you,” he sounded like a little kid, looking at Shane’s parents as though he had never seen anything like them before. They both beamed at him.

“Well fair’s fair, isn’t it?” his mother said, nudging the package that Ilya had brought her with her toe, “We’re just the same, aren’t we?”

“My gift is not nearly as good,” Ilya said, ducking his head, “Not nearly.”

“Well I don’t believe that,” David said, pulling his package towards him, unwrapping it carefully, just as Shane always did.

“Oh wow,” David said, and they broke away from each other, “Ilya, wow.”

Each of them held a frame in their hands, large and white. They were staring down at them, something almost like awe in their eyes.

“What is it?” Shane craned his neck to try and see, before his mother turned her frame around, showing him...

It was a photo of him, one that Shane had framed in his own apartment, stuck on one of the shelves in his living room. It had been taken just after their first Cup win, while the team had been moving back towards the locker room, their trophy held high above their heads. Shane had watched them go, and then sank down against the boards, looking up at the rafters, a smile on his face.

It had been a moment just for him, that pure happiness that had permeated his body after finally achieving what he had worked so hard for. It had felt like all those hours of training, all those early practices, all those sacrifices his parents had made, had actually been worth it.

Ilya had had the photo blown up, and edited just slightly, so the colors popped, and the background blurred, making Shane look almost angelic, ethereal and otherworldly.

“This is fantastic, Ilya,” Yuna said, her voice shaking a little.

“I made two because-” Ilya bit his lip, “Well, I did not know if you had two offices or- I did not know-”

“Well one’s going in my office at work for sure,” David was still staring down at the photo, his fingers trailing across the frame, “This is really something, thank you, Ilya.”

He smiled, and Ilya returned it eagerly, his hand still tangled with Shane’s.

Fuck, Shane wanted to say it. Right now, in front of his parents. He wanted to tell him...

“I got something for you, too,” Ilya said, pushing a package towards him as well. Shane took it, not even bothering to hide the look on his face.

“Thank you,” he bit back a laugh at Ilya’s expression when he pulled out a gift of his own, “And for you.”

“You did not have to get me anything,” he said seriously, and Shane really did laugh this time,

“Same to you, but here we are.”

He knew his parents were watching them closely, but he didn't care. He only had eyes for Ilya.

They opened their gifts at the same time. Shane's box was much smaller than his parents', and a little heavy. He unwrapped it, opened the box, and saw-

“Is this...?”

“You are always complaining about wanting to have your phone less,” Ilya said, “And that you don't like to bring it with you to the gym and that is why you don't listen to music. So...”

It was a heavy, full-sized iPod, one that he had secretly coveted from his classmates in school. They had always been notoriously expensive, and most of his parents' extra money had gone to hockey camps and special training and equipment, so he had never bothered to ask for one. He knew they would have gotten it for him, and he would have felt guilty about it, even as a child.

“I added in songs, ones that we've listened to that you said you liked,” Ilya said, almost anxious, “Here.”

He pressed the center button, so that the screen lit up, and scrolled through the songs that he had added, a nostalgic clicking noise coming with every scroll.

“I hope-” Ilya broke off, glancing towards Shane's parents, “You like it. Is- Well-”

“I love it,” Shane said sincerely, doing everything in his power not to lean over and kiss Ilya on the mouth, “Really.”

Relief flooded his face, and he turned to his own package.

Shane felt stupid. His gift wasn't nearly as thoughtful as Ilya's.

“It-” he tried to head it off before he had finished unwrapping it, “I mean- It's not as-”

“Shut up,” Ilya said shortly, and tore off the paper. It was a large and heavy box, so it remained on the floor as he slit it open carefully. He sat up straight, staring at him. “No.”

Shane flushed.

“I think it's- It should be the right one. You said you had trouble sourcing it for a good price and- Well- A lot of the guys on the team work on cars so I just asked around and- Yeah. If it doesn't work I'm pretty sure I can return it.”

“What is it?” his father leaned forward, looking into the box.

“I am-” Ilya was still staring at Shane like he hung the moon, “Restoring a car with a friend of mine. I needed this part and I wanted- Well, it is hard to come by, very expensive. And- This is it.”

“I hope it's the right one,” Shane said anxiously, but Ilya was leaning forward, ignoring his parents, and kissing him gently on the lips.

“Is perfect,” he said quietly, one hand against the back of his head, “Thank you.”

Shane sighed in relief.

“Okay,” he nodded, his eyes never leaving Ilya’s, “Okay- Good. Merry- Christmas.”

Ilya laughed, drawing back. Shane’s parents had disappeared into the kitchen, giving them a moment of privacy. They returned a moment later, fresh cups of coffee in their hands, and a fondness in their faces as they looked at the pair of them.

“Well,” Yuna settled down gracefully, as though they hadn’t left at all, “Is that everything, or-”

“Oh well, I also got some stuff for Anya,” Shane drew out a paper bag, “But I didn’t wrap them for her.”

Ilya shook his head playfully, taking the bag from him and rifling inside.

“Too bad, she will be upset. Next year you’ll have to do better.”

Shane grinned, giddy.

Next year, next year, next year.

They spent the rest of the day cooking, relaxing, watching pieces of *A Christmas Story* on the tv, and taking Anya out and begging her to do any kind of business as she sniffed around and they shivered.

Shane had never seen Ilya so relaxed. He insisted on helping his father in the kitchen, and he and his mother listened to them laughing, exchanging long suffering looks, as though he and Ilya had been married for years.

That was a fantasy that grew stronger by the day, one that Shane thought he might never be able to express out loud.

They left after dinner to go back to the cottage. Yuna and David swept each of them up into long hugs, and Ilya seemed to have a hard time disengaging from Shane’s mother. She murmured something to him that Shane couldn’t hear, and patted his cheek in a soft, affectionate way.

“Come back anytime, Ilya,” David said, “We loved meeting you and Anya.”

“I’d- Love that,” Ilya said, smiling at both of them one last time, before hoisting Anya more securely into his arms and climbing into the passenger seat of Shane’s car.

Shane waved to his parents, and climbed in himself, glancing over at Ilya, whose face was barely lit by the front panel screen.

Their eyes met in the low light, and they looked away from each other, grinning.

“Have you had a good Christmas?” Shane asked half an hour later, his voice quiet as he stroked Ilya’s hair, his head laid in his lap, sprawled across his couch.

“Yes,” Ilya’s fingers trailed across Shane’s knee. It wasn’t sexual, but intimate, tender. “Very, very good. I like your parents very much.”

“Yeah,” he ducked his head, “Me too. They love you, by the way.”

Ilya didn't say anything, but Shane could feel him smiling.

"I think-" he started, but cut himself off, clearing his throat. He sat up, turning away from Shane, and he reached forward, touching his shoulder.

"You can tell me," he whispered, "I'm not- I want to hear it, if you want to say it."

He twisted back to him, searching his face, biting down on his lip hard enough that his teeth would leave indentations there. Finally, he spoke as though the words were ripped from him,

"I miss my mother. I wish she was here. I wish- I wish she could *be* here. Or I could go- Back to Russia, even just for a day, to visit her."

Shane's whole body ached for him. He couldn't imagine never being able to see his parents, even where they were buried, ever again.

He didn't like thinking about that, it just made him anxious.

"Did- What was she like?"

Ilya turned his head slowly to meet Shane's eyes. He looked at him in a measured way, as though weighing his options.

Suddenly, without warning, Ilya was talking more than Shane had ever heard.

He told Shane about his childhood, how his father and brother had always seemed to hate him, and how no amount of excelling in sports or school had seemed to change that. How his mother was the only person that he could count on to give him a smile or a word of consolation after a bad day.

"She was amazing," his eyes were faraway, "She always made me laugh. She had so many stories, always teaching me something new. Mama always liked me better than my brother, I think. We danced together, she took me to church. I loved her voice, I loved to hear her sing."

He told Shane about her struggles, that he could hear her crying in his bedroom late some nights.

That he tried to save her.

That he couldn't.

"I tried," his voice was strained, threatening to break like splintering glass, "I started singing, trying to cheer her up. I knew she was sad, and I knew it was bad, but I just- One day I went into her room and- And-"

Shane stood up from his seat on the couch, and wrapped Ilya in his arms, and his head dropped down onto Shane's shoulder, his breath hot and shaky against the fabric of his shirt.

"I miss her," he cried, his hands coming up to scrabble down Shane's back, trying to find something solid to hold, "And she never knew- Knew me. Only my father and my brother and they- They hated me anyway, and being- When they found out, they made sure I knew that I could not ever come back. And I don't even- Even want to. But I- I wish I could see her, visit her."

"Tell me-" he didn't want to push too far, "What you would tell her. It can be in Russian, but it might- Help."

Ilya drew away from him, wiping his eyes on the sleeves of his sweatshirt.

“Are you- Really?”

“Yeah,” he nodded vigorously, “I just- Want to be someone you can talk to. Whether that’s- in English or Russian.”

Ilya’s thumb trailed along Shane’s jaw, and that soft look was back, full of something that Shane still couldn’t put a name to.

“Okay,” he kissed his mouth gently, and Shane guided them back down to the couch.

He talked for a long time, and Shane held his hands in his own, listening intently even though he didn’t understand, letting the language wash over him. It was pretty in its own way, he decided, but maybe that was just because Ilya was the one speaking, and Shane thought that everything Ilya said was pretty.

When he finally paused for more than a few seconds, Shane shot him a tentative smile, trying to gauge him.

“Thank you,” he drew in a long, ragged breath, “I- Thank you.”

“Anytime,” he hoped Ilya knew that he meant that, that he would listen to him talk about whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, forever if he wanted that too, “Really.”

Ilya closed his eyes for a moment, before he was pulling Shane close, his hands reaching for him, sliding down his ribs towards his hips.

“I want to go to bed,” he said quietly, his voice as sharp as a razor, “Come on.”

He pulled Shane towards the bedroom, and they fell into each other, their laughter muffled from the outside world by the snow building on the windowsills outside.

Shane and Ilya lived in a secret world of perpetual bliss for the next day and a half. They rarely left the bed, getting up only for short swaths of time, usually to feed Anya or to take her outside or shower. Shane thought more than once that food should be an optional thing, and that he should be able to get all the energy that he needed from Ilya fucking him through the mattress, leaving him boneless and spent, only to return fifteen minutes later with a plate of food that normally he would have been loathe to eat in bed.

But it was Ilya, and he asked him to, so Shane did it without question.

His walls seemed to have finally disappeared, and he talked for hours all about his life, his friends, Svetlana, his cars, everything that Shane had been desperate to know for months.

“So how did you meet Sarah?” he asked him, resting between his legs on the couch, each of them absorbed in their own activity; Ilya in his phone and Shane in a book about the great hockey captains in Canada’s history. He arched his neck back, so that he was looking at Ilya upside down.

“Svetlana,” he said simply, the corners of his mouth lifting as his eyes met Shane’s, “They met in college, and I just- Sveta brought me along a lot, most of my friends were her friends first, besides at work.”

“Sarah’s nice,” Shane pressed, keeping his expression carefully neutral.

“Yes, very. She is very funny.”

“Right.”

Ilya’s eyes danced with humor.

“Why are you asking about Sarah? Every time you ask about someone you just end up jealous.”

“I am not-” he could feel the heat rising up his neck, “I am not *jealous*!”

“Of course you are,” Ilya set down his phone, hauling Shane up a few inches, so his arms could cross across his chest, “Is very obvious.”

“Whatever,” he couldn’t manage to be angry about it, not when Ilya’s fingers were sneaking down his shirt, not when his lips were against his neck, not when Shane loved him so much it felt like the end of the world, “Believe whatever you want.”

“I believe the truth,” Ilya’s voice had gone lower, rougher, “And I also believe that you are hard.”

It was true, and Shane flipped around, silencing Ilya’s laughter with a kiss that melted into a moan a moment later.

But the time they had seemed to be running out like grains of sand in an hourglass. First, they had thirty-six hours left. Then, Shane realized they only had twenty-two. And suddenly, it was down to ten, slipping by faster than he could try to catch it in his fingers.

“I don’t want to leave,” he said, watching Ilya make breakfast the morning they were both due to leave, not even complaining about the amount of butter he was putting in the pan.

“I don’t either,” Ilya cast a glance over to him, “This has been nice.”

“So nice,” he agreed, “I’m gone until the 5th.”

“I know.”

“So- What will you do for New Years?”

“The club will be open,” he shrugged, “Great money on holidays. So we will both be working.”

“Right.”

Shane had a myriad of things that he wanted to say to him, but none of them fit quite right in his mouth, so he stayed quiet, accepting his plate with a word of thanks. They ate standing at the kitchen island, Anya begging at their feet.

“Will you-” Ilya broke the silence, focused on his eggs, “Will you take your Christmas gift with you, on the road?”

“Of course,” Shane grinned, happy that they could get away from their impending departure, even for a second, “I can’t wait to use it.”

Ilya's eyes sparkled, and a pretty flush crawled across his cheeks.

"Okay, that's- Good. I like that."

"I'll miss you," Shane said in a rush, "While I'm gone."

He could tell that Ilya wanted to make a joke, deflect, change the subject. He waited.

"I will- Me too."

It was as much of a victory as Shane could ever have hoped for. He beamed, and Ilya rolled his eyes, flicking his hand like it wasn't a big deal, but Shane crowded him against the sink all the same, and kissed him until they were both breathless.

They spent their last hours together, away from the real world, in bed. Ilya fucked him face to face, foreheads pressed together, breath hot in each other's mouths, kisses wet and sloppy, their rhythm unchecked. It should have made Shane feel off kilter, even a little gross, but instead there was a bright bubble beneath his ribs, an orb of light that he could carry with him until he was finally back in Montreal.

And more importantly, back in Ilya's arms.

It took them a long time to pack; they kept getting distracted by each other, so that Ilya had shoved Shane onto the bathroom counter, and Shane's legs had wrapped around his hips.

It was nearly dark by the time they had finished, and Ilya stood in the hallway, his bag at his feet, and looking a little lost as he stared at Shane.

"I'll see you in a little more than a week," Shane tried to make it seem like that wasn't that big of a deal, "Right?"

"Right."

"And just- You can text me whenever," he babbled, not wanting him to leave, not wanting this to end, "I'll have my phone on me, you know?"

"I know Shane," he was moving towards him, "I know."

Ilya kissed him, and Shane pulled him closer, wanting to shove him down against the sofa, take him in his mouth, beg him to stay.

Instead, something much, much worse happened,

"I love you."

Fuck.

He had blurted the words out before he could stop them. They had finally burst their boundaries after months of trying. And now they were out there, in the open, and he couldn't take them back.

Ilya drew back, and a complicated array of emotions seemed to flicker across his face, like a sped up movie. Shane thought he could make out relief, then confusion, then disappointment, and lastly, and most horribly, settling into resignation.

“What does that mean?” he finally said, his voice quiet, almost small.

“What do you mean, what does that mean?” Shane’s whole body had gone cold, “It means I love you.”

“But only here, yes?” Ilya asked gesturing around at the cottage, the fire still crackling lowly in the grate, “Only here and in your apartment or mine? Never outside.”

“I-” he had no idea what to say to that. Of course he wanted more, he wanted to hold his hand in public and take him on dates and not worry about going into the same movie at the same time.

But he couldn’t.

“I mean- It’s not just- I can’t just come out- It’s different because you’re just-”

That was the wrong thing to say, he knew it the moment the words had passed between his lips, and he wanted to snatch them out of the air, take them back, but the damage was done.

“Just what?” he asked, his eyebrows raised and his arms folded.

“It’s-” he tried to backtrack, even though he knew it was futile, “It’s not that, I just-”

“Just because I work in a strip club?” Ilya finished, looking arrogantly indifferent, a mask that Shane barely recognized anymore, “Just because I am a stripper?”

“No,” they both knew he was lying, and it made him feel like shit, “I just- I can’t come out. I can’t.”

Ilya’s smile was devastated. He nodded, his eyes on the floor.

“Yes, of course.”

“But I do want to, I really-”

“No you don’t, Shane,” he shook his head, retreating across the room, away from him, “You don’t and you know you don’t.”

“But-” he could feel what was coming, deep in his chest, and it felt like the ground was splintering underneath his feet, the whole world about to crack and shatter with the weight of it, “I can- I mean, it-”

“This has gotten out of hand,” Ilya seemed across an ocean, “For both of us.”

“No, wait-” he was begging, pleading to delay what was coming, “Please, Ilya-”

“We should have ended it months ago,” his voice was clipped and cold and distant, with none of the warmth that Shane hadn’t realized he had grown accustomed to, “We let it go on too long. I want something you can’t give me, and I won’t be- I won’t do this.”

“Ilya-”

“Goodbye, Shane,” he didn’t look at him, “Good luck with the rest of your season. I wish- You the best, really.”

With that, he shouldered his bag, scooped Anya into his arms, and swept out the door, leaving Shane with his heart rattling in his chest, and with next to no idea of what had just happened.

He had no idea how he got back to Montreal. He didn't remember getting in the car, he didn't remember if he locked the door to the cottage, he didn't remember if he turned off the lights. He just looked up and realized he had pulled into the parking garage of his apartment.

He went upstairs slowly, the strap of his bag heavy on his shoulder, and keyed in the code to the door, his head swimming, unable to focus on any one thing.

Shane went through the motions. He unpacked his bag, put his clothes in the laundry, laid everything out for his smoothie in the morning, and repacked for his stint of away games, setting everything carefully in a suitcase.

He scrubbed himself down in the shower, head to toe.

Finally, he had nothing left to distract himself. He sat on the edge of his bed, and tried to brace himself for the wave of realization that was about to slam over him.

He had ruined everything.

Ilya was gone.

Ilya didn't want him.

Ilya didn't love him back.

All because Shane couldn't give him more, couldn't give him what he deserved.

He slid from the bed to the floor, wrapping his arms around his knees. He wanted to cry, but tears refused to fall, so he just ended up rocking back and forth.

Shane had never been through a breakup before. He didn't know what they were supposed to feel like. Was it supposed to be all-consuming, like his soul was being flayed out in the open, exposed to the air as a raw nerve, as a wound pulsing with invisible blood?

Was it supposed to be this bad?

Then again, could he even call it a breakup? It's not like they had ever labeled it. They had never called each other boyfriends, they had never talked about living together, they had never done any of the things that movies had told Shane that couples did.

Shane had thought about all those things, in the privacy of his own mind, but he had never said them aloud.

He regretted that now.

He wanted to call someone, but he didn't want to have to console his parents, and he didn't want to explain it to Rose. And there was no one else. No one else in his life knew about Ilya.

This is exactly what he was talking about, a nasty voice said inside his head, You could barely be honest with yourself. You were expecting him to just wait around, never be seen in public, never be labeled forever. You were always expecting him to be at your beck and call. You never even bothered to ask what he wanted. And now it's too late, and the best thing you'll ever have in your life is gone.

Shane curled to the side, laying on the floor, his cheek pressed against the rug, scratchy against his skin, unpleasant. He thought that he probably deserved it.

He wasn't sure when he had dropped off to sleep, but supposed he should have been grateful that he had set an alarm, because his phone woke him in the morning, chirping irritatingly from its charger on his bedside table, telling him in no uncertain terms to get his ass up and get ready for the flight to Tampa.

His eyes opened slowly, his head aching and his mouth bone dry. His neck and back ached, probably from sleeping on the floor.

A killer start to a gameday.

Shane tried with all his might to be normal. He forced himself to drink his smoothie, only for it to all come back up a moment later. He tried to go to the gym, but was so wobbly he nearly toppled off the treadmill. He tried to shower, but the water was like tiny needles prodding his skin.

All in all, he was ready to get the fuck out of his apartment and get this road trip over with.

Before he hurried out the door, bag over his shoulder, he gave the space a sweeping glance, a ritual he did every time he left, in tandem with checking the burners on his stove at least three times. His eyes alighted on the iPod that Ilya had given him, sitting neatly on his bedside table, headphones wrapped around it.

Looking at it was like pushing on a bruise, but he scooped it up all the same, and stuffed it into his backpack, hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Hayden was waiting for him in his usual seat on the team bus. He looked happy, rosy-cheeked and well-rested, but his eyebrows contracted when he saw Shane.

"What happened to you, man?" he asked as Shane collapsed next to him, stuffing his backpack unceremoniously underneath his seat, "You look terrible."

"Bad night of sleep," he said shortly, sinking down so that his knees were pressed against the seat in front of him, "It's fine. I'll sleep on the plane."

He could tell that Hayden was staring at him, and fixed his eyes on the rest of the team filing onto the bus, giving them false, and hopefully encouraging smiles.

They had to win today. Shane might actually snap if they didn't.

"How was your Christmas?" Hayden asked tentatively, breaking the tense silence that felt like a poisonous cloud above Shane's head.

"Fine," he forced himself to turn his head, meeting his eyes, "How was yours?"

“Oh good,” he seemed to have passed some kind of invisible test, and Hayden’s expression had cleared, “You know, with four kids it gets a little hectic, but-”

Shane let him talk, tuning him out enough that he could just respond with one or two word answers here and there. He did his best not to let his mind wander back to Ilya; he could feel his eyes burning every time his thoughts strayed towards him, and he had to focus. He couldn’t let his team down, not more than he already had.

As they all settled onto the team plane, Shane dug into his backpack, pulling out the iPod, and unwrapping his corded headphones carefully from around it.

“Where the fuck did you get one of those?” Hayden asked, snatching it out of his hands and turning it over in his own, “I haven’t seen one of these since I was in fucking high school.”

“It was- A Christmas gift,” his voice caught in the lie, but he didn’t seem to notice, “They said I should listen to more music.”

“This is awesome,” he scrolled through the albums, “This person has weird taste though, is this your music?”

“Some of it, yeah,” he didn’t want to talk about it, “Just trying to- I don’t know, expand my tastes.”

“Well you are kind of a psycho for not listening to music,” he observed, before putting in a point to stuff his own headphones into his ears, and closed his eyes, effectively ending their conversation, much to Shane’s relief.

He did not sleep on the plane. He was unable to settle on anything to listen to and skipped from song to song, twisting his hands together, anxiety blooming into panic in his chest.

He couldn’t do this here, not now, not right before a week long road trip.

Hockey was everything, it was the most important thing in his life, and nothing...else in his personal life was going to change that.

Shane may not be good at anything else. He may not be good at falling in love, or keeping the person that he loved around; he may not be good at talking about how he felt or being brave enough to say it in the light of day, but he was good at hockey.

Fuck that, he was the *best*. And he was going to drag his team with him come hell or high water.

The Metros lost three out of five road games that week.

It was the lowest that Shane had ever felt in his life. He tried everything, every pep talk, every strategy all those hockey books had given him, but nothing worked. The team left Dallas dejected and defeated, facing the prospect of a gauntlet down the backstretch of the schedule, and with their playoff hopes hanging by a thread.

Shane called his mother the night he got home, just needing to hear a friendly voice.

He desperately wished he could call Ilya.

“Hi,” she answered on speaker, “Dad and I are here.”

“Hi,” his voice wobbled, and he was folding like wet paper, pressing his hand over his mouth to try and stifle his crying.

“Oh Shane,” they both said in unison, and his mother continued, “It’s fine. Sure, you have an uphill climb to get to the playoffs, but you can- It’s not anything you haven’t done before. The team is just out of sync right now, that’s-”

“It’s not- Not that,” his heart ached with a twisting sensation, painful and inescapable, “I mean, that fucking sucks too but- But- It’s Ilya- We- I don’t know what happened but it’s over and my team sucks and I don’t- I don’t even know what to do. I don’t know- What to do.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone, and Shane, who normally couldn’t let silence sit for any length of time, let it stretch, let it fester, because what was the point of saying anything else? What was the point of telling them that he felt like powdered glass; impossible to put back together? It was all crashing down around him anyway; they’d find out soon enough.

He barely heard their words of attempted consolation, and excused himself just a few minutes later, irritated for breaking down to them like this.

Shane collapsed into bed the moment he hung up, and spent the entire night staring up at the ceiling, his heart as heavy in his chest as if it had been replaced by a concrete block.

Things did not improve for the team when they returned home. Shane was playing harder than he ever had in his life, but his performance was suffering, and the team was just not good enough to lift him up when he wasn’t playing his best.

They tried, but it was looking like they may not even make the playoffs at all, and that would be a first for Shane in his career.

“Everyone has a down season now and then,” his mother had told him bracingly, but they both knew that there was something else, probably the reason that his game was so bad. His parents had taken his lead in not mentioning it, even though he knew they wanted to.

He thought about Ilya at least a hundred times a day. He thought about calling him, about texting him, about whether or not he had already taken Anya out, if he had made that vet appointment he kept putting off.

Shane hadn’t even realized how much of his life Ilya had occupied, and now that he was gone, he was left with an empty space instead of the warm, solid presence that he craved.

Even Sarah seemed to be giving him the cold shoulder, and he was seized with terror that Ilya had told her, that she would tell the rest of the world.

He hated himself for that. It was the whole reason he and Ilya weren’t speaking.

Winter bled into spring, and the change in weather did nothing to change Shane’s mood. The Metros were having a historically bad season, and more than a few talking heads on podcasts and in articles written directly after their worst losses had suggested that Shane might be past his prime.

Their words should mean nothing to him. What did they know? Most of them hadn’t played the game in decades, some of them had never even played professionally. Who were they to say that

Shane having a bad stint during a bad season meant that his career was coming to a close? He was only fucking thirty-one, it's not like he had one foot in the fucking grave.

But they felt like the stings of wasps, burrowing into his skin, and he couldn't shake them.

What was worse, the team had seemed to take it upon itself to diagnose Shane's issues. The conclusion?

"You need to get laid," JJ had announced to him, his tone similar to that of someone who had just proved a completely unassailable point. He lifted his chin, looking at Shane proudly, who had frozen while untying his skates.

"Uh," was all he managed, before Hayden was chiming in,

"If you get laid, it'll snap us back into being good," they stood shoulder to shoulder, cornering Shane, and he had no idea how to get out of this, "It's a good idea."

"Right," he stuffed his feet into his sneakers, eager to escape this situation as fast as possible, "Well, I gotta go--"

"At least think about it," JJ begged him, catching his arm as he swung his bag over his shoulder, "You want us to win, don't you?"

Shane turned his face away so neither of them could see it twist. No one wanted to win more than Shane. No one else on the team had given up anything that tasted remotely good. No one else read every book on hockey they could get their hands on.

No one else was living a fucking lie.

"I'll think about it," he relented, shouldering by them, "Gotta get to the press room."

Unfortunately for Shane, Hayden and JJ seemed completely focused on their mission, and had recruited the rest of the team as well, so he could barely move without someone trying to set him up with their wife's friend or their girlfriend's sister.

He worked hard to be a good sport, waving them away with a joke and a smile, but his insides would curdle every time it was brought up, and he was reaching his breaking point.

"You can always tell them that we got back together," Rose told him after he had finally confided in her. She hadn't said much about Ilya, and he was grateful for that. He was good at compartmentalizing, and Ilya was something he had to force to the very back of his brain so he didn't lose his mind at any given moment.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said tiredly. He had her on speaker, and hockey on the tv. The Admirals were currently beating Winnipeg 6-0 in the third period, "The less information I can give them the better."

"But it would get them off your back," she reasoned. He could hear the rustling of paper as she shifted something around.

"Are you home?" he asked, "In New York?"

"No, I'm in LA right now, wrapping that space movie."

“Is this the one where a random guy wakes you up?”

“Yeah,” she sounded dismissive, “God I hated my costar.”

It was nice to talk to Rose. She was one of the only people that treated him as anything other than a hockey player anymore. His mother tried, but he sometimes thought she loved the Metros more than she loved him; he knew she was disappointed with the way things had gone this season.

“You should come up this summer,” he said, “Spend a few days at the cottage.”

“Yes I’d love that! I should have some time late, like in July?”

“That should work, I’ll be free before the playoffs,” he tried and failed to not sound bitter.

“Stop wallowing,” she ordered, “You’re still the best player in the entire- Shit, it’s my agent, I gotta go, but I’ll call you later?”

“Yeah. Yeah of course, love you.”

“Love you! And I’m serious if you need a fake girlfriend, I’m a good cover!”

Shane considered it, especially as JJ and Hayden got more and more insistent, shoving pictures in his face and asking him to rate them out of ten to “determine his type,” but he had lied enough. So he kept his mouth shut as best he could, and resolved to make voodoo dolls out of them if they ever tried to force him on a blind date.

It was the day of the last game of their regular season that Shane finally snapped.

They were on yet another losing streak, and they were not going to the playoffs. Not even if they won by fifty goals.

Shane was putting on his gear, listening to the din of chatter around him, when Hayden was waving a phone in front of his face, so close to his nose that he almost went cross-eyed trying to keep it in focus.

“Well?” he asked, a smile on his face.

“What am I looking at, exactly?”

“Jackie’s friend! I told you about her. She’s great. You’ll love her. I can set you up on a date with her next week.”

“That’s okay,” he couldn’t help the exhaustion that bled into his voice, “Thanks though, buddy.”

“Shane come on,” he wheedled, “Just one date? I promise you’ll like her. She’s stupid hot.”

“You shouldn’t be saying that when you have a wife,” Shane deadpanned, hoping that would be enough to change the subject.

“It’s just a fact,” he held out the phone again, as though a second look would change Shane’s mind, “Seriously man, if you won’t do it then I will.”

“Really Hayd, thank you but-”

“Just meet her! You never know when-”

“I don’t want to fucking talk about my love life anymore!” Shane shouted, and the entire locker room went quiet, everyone staring at them, “Fuck! Leave me the fuck alone about it, why don’t you?”

Hayden drew back as though Shane had slapped him, and, for the first time in his life as a captain, Shane did not follow his team, but lead the way out of the locker room, his stick clutched in his hand.

In this moment, right now, he hated hockey. He hated what it had taken from him, he hated the life that so many would die to have. He hated the sacrifices he had to make, he hated the sacrifices that his *parents* had to make, and he hated that he would have to make them for the rest of his life.

They lost. The Admirals and Scott Hunter made sure of it, and Shane went home without speaking to anyone, not that anyone had tried to.

The moment he crossed the threshold of his apartment, the situation crashed down around him, pulling him out to sea like a California riptide, and he sank down against the door, sobbing into his arms until his nose bled, staining his shirt and his arms and his face, but he didn’t care, he let it flow, same as the salt that burned his eyes.

He cried for the season, for his career, for his team, for his parents, for Ilya, and for himself. He cried until his chest ached and his lungs burned, until every molecule of energy he had was spent on keeping him alive through it.

If he was braver, maybe if he was a better person, he would be brave enough to stand up in front of the world and tell them who he was.

But Shane was not brave, he wasn’t anything more than a good hockey player who everyone thought was losing his touch. He couldn’t stand up in front of the world, he couldn’t tell them he was gay, even to give himself exactly what he wanted.

It probably didn’t matter anyway.

It was too late.

He crawled into bed, shedding his clothes until he was in nothing but his briefs, and curled into the covers, hiding his face under them, cutting out all light.

Shane faded in and out of consciousness, coming to enough to know that he was not really resting. He had strange, disjointed dreams, Ilya weaving in and out of them, and he was running from something, or running towards it, only for it to get closer or farther away no matter how hard he pushed himself.

The team was called for one last meeting before the summer, and he somehow managed to get himself together enough to attend.

The meeting room fell silent the moment that he entered, all of them watching him carefully, as though they had never seen him before. This did nothing to improve his feeling of being othered, and he settled into a seat right at the front, where a good, talented, commanding captain always sat.

He didn't think he was any of those things anymore.

No one spoke to him as the rest of the team took their seats, and he kept his eyes straight ahead, fingers tapping against his knee.

"Well," their coach stood in front of them, arms folded, looking every bit as disappointed as they all felt, "I'm not going to sugarcoat it--"

He didn't. He went on and on, pulling footage throughout the season, playing it on the screen, pausing every so often to quiz them on what went wrong and why. It was as though they were back in college, but then again, Shane had never experienced a losing season in college. And neither had the Metros franchise, at least, not in the last thirty years.

"I expect you all back here in September, ready to work and get back to where we are supposed to be," he left them with that, stalking out of the room and slamming the door behind him.

The rest of the team broke into tentative chatter, and Shane stood up, following his coach's path to the door.

The hallway outside smelled like lemon Pledge. It burned Shane's nose as he moved slowly down the hallway, his hands in his pockets and his eyes trained on the shiny cement floor.

"Captain," JJ caught up with him, and Shane didn't turn around, "Shane!"

He took a deep breath, readying himself for the inevitable fight.

"What?"

JJ's face was full of earnest concern. It was, in its way, a gentle reminder to Shane that he did have friends, even when he was kind of terrible to them.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he deadpanned, "Maybe having the worst season in thirty years or something. Just an idea."

"No," JJ pushed back, taking a step closer to him, "There's something else."

"JJ--" he raised his eyes to the ceiling, asking for...he didn't know what. Just for this to be over, he supposed.

"You know--" JJ cut him off, "You can talk to me. And to Pike. And probably to Mitty, but who would want to talk to him?"

Shane snorted in spite of himself. He thought he might cry again, and that would be embarrassing. Humiliating, even.

"I don't think you'd want to hear it."

"Come on," he bumped their shoulders together, "I have played with you for five years now. Five seasons. You are one of my best friends. You can, or you could, tell me anything."

Shane hesitated. If he did this, there was no going back.

But he was so tired. And if he could tell them, test the waters with them, with two people he loved and trusted above almost anyone else...it might make the whole situation easier, and it might ease the pressure on his aching heart.

“Okay,” he relented, “Okay. I- Can I talk to you and- And Hayden? Can we- Meet somewhere?”

JJ gave him a mock salute, and hurried away to Hayden, who was chatting idly to Comeau in the hallway, where half the team had spilled out, clearly unconcerned with their coach’s harsh words or their captain’s distance.

Shane watched, as though he were a million miles away, as JJ caught Hayden by the shoulder, whispering intently to him, their heads together like two children plotting something in the back of class. Hayden’s head swiveled, finding Shane, who waved awkwardly, only to drop his hand a moment later, swinging it back and forth.

Panic was crawling up his throat, almost like he was about to vomit.

He couldn’t do this.

What if they told the team?

What if they told the fucking press?

What if they turned their backs on him?

What if-

“Where did you want to go?” Hayden and JJ were watching him, side by side, each of them with their hands stuffed into their pockets.

“Uh,” he had no fucking clue, “I mean- We could go to- To the offices. There’s a meeting room there.”

“There is?” JJ was stunned by this piece of information, and it made Shane laugh, a part of the weight on his chest lifting.

“Yeah, Coach uses it for private meetings with position groups.”

“Shit, shows what the fuck I know,” JJ jerked his head, “Let’s go.”

Shane only thought about turning on his heel and sprinting in the other direction ten times in the time it took for them to walk down towards the team offices which were, mercifully, already deserted. He held open the door, letting them walk inside, and considered locking the door behind them before deciding that was too much and would just make him look more insane.

He refused to sit, but paced up and down in front of them, his hands behind his back, his thumbnail digging into his opposite palm.

“So,” he shouldn’t be doing this, “Well- So- Um...”

Hayden and JJ waited, clearly alarmed.

“It- So... You know how- How I didn’t- Take you up on any of the dates you’ve tried to set up for me?”

“Yeah,” they said slowly, in unison.

“Well- So- There’s a- A reason for that,” this was horrible, “And I guess- I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t know how you’d react.”

“Okay.”

“It- So- Well, the thing is- Is-” Shane breathed deep, “I’m gay.”

He let the words hang there, in the air, floating in space between the three of them. They stared at each other, then back at Shane.

Finally, JJ broke the silence,

“Well, I guess that explains it.”

Shane blinked.

“You’re- I- *What?*”

“Explains why you were not interested in Cath’s sister,” he shrugged, “She is hot like Cath so, makes sense.”

Shane’s eyes found Hayden’s then, and he didn’t look angry just...pensive. Which maybe was more scary depending on how he looked at it.

“Have you been gay this whole time?”

Shane laughed.

“Uh yeah. Pretty much.”

“So the whole time we’ve played together, you’ve been-”

“Well. Yeah but I- I didn’t really figure it out until- Until Rose.”

“Oh shit,” Hayden’s eyebrows lifted, “Fuck, I forgot about her. She sniffed you out?”

“Oh god,” he waved his hands in the air, “Don’t say it like that. She just- Realized that I probably wasn’t as into her as any other straight guy would be. She’s great, didn’t- Judge or anything.”

“Why did you think we would?” JJ suddenly demanded, almost accusingly, “You could have told us.”

“It’s just- It’s *hockey*, you know? I didn’t feel like I could tell anybody because what if I lost the room? What if I lost you?”

“That’s dumb, Shane,” Hayden pointed out, “My kids like you more than they like me.”

“And Cath’s other sister is gay too! She has a wife and everything,” JJ said excitedly, “She can set you up with her gay friends.”

The relief that was seeping through Shane's veins was so powerful that he had to lean against the wall to keep himself from falling over.

"So you're- I mean, it's not weird?"

"It's kinda weird," Hayden said, "But not because you're like, gay or whatever. Just- I don't know, you've been so off recently, what happened in the last few months?"

"I was-" how would he even begin to explain it, "With someone. It was- It wasn't like, labeled or anything but it was- Serious. To me, at least. And- He ended it because- Well, it's not exactly fair to try and make someone live in the closet just because I am."

JJ's eyebrows came together.

"That's-"

"That sucks," Hayden said helpfully, "He wouldn't even try?"

Shane smiled sadly, his shoes suddenly much more interesting than their faces.

"It wasn't right. We were always sneaking around. How would you have felt if Jackie never wanted to get married or officially date or be public because of her job?"

"Okay yeah, I'd be pissed."

He rubbed his forehead, trying to stave off the headache that was building behind his eyes.

"So what are you going to do?" JJ asked.

"Go to the cottage for the summer," he said mechanically, "Watch the playoffs. Get myself back in shape. Move on."

"Are you going to tell anyone else about this? The rest of the team?"

"Not," he shook his head, "Not right now. I just- I wanted you to know but- I don't know, maybe one day? But not- Not now. Not soon."

They nodded, and, without warning, JJ had stepped forward and was pulling Shane for a quick, tight hug.

"Whatever you need," he repeated when they broke apart, "I mean it."

"Me too buddy," Hayden chimed in, "We've got your back."

"Thanks," he said gruffly, even though that meant more to him than he could ever say, "Thank you."

They all stood there for a moment before JJ said,

"Well, I have to go. Cath wants me to start cleaning the house before we leave for Spain."

"Kept man," Hayden teased, leading the way into the still empty hallway and towards the team garage.

“Says you,” JJ fired up at once, “At least I do not have fifteen kids yet.”

They bickered all the way to their cars, and continued arguing through their windows even as Shane pulled away. He rolled the windows down as he drove home, the breeze on his face blowing away the remnants of anxiety that still lingered in his body.

It had gone about as well as he could have ever dreamed. There had been no shouting, no accusations, no biting disappointment or coldness. It was good to have this, to have people on his team, that knew him best, know this last, most important part of him.

And still, his chest ached, longed for Ilya.

There was nothing to be done about that, he told himself sternly, he would just have to learn to move on, like everyone else did.

Because Shane had always been so great at letting things go.

And so he descended into an in-between period. He drove out to the cottage the next morning, his bags packed and his apartment locked behind him.

His parents hugged him tightly, not offering words of consolation that they knew he didn’t want to hear, but welcoming him home with open arms and his favorite meal on the table.

They watched the playoffs together, his mother rattling off stat lines on players and pointing out who she thought should be traded to what team in the offseason. He had always liked watching with her; it made him feel less like the most intense person about hockey in the entire world.

He couldn’t bring himself to openly root for any of the teams remaining, but had settled on Seattle being the least offensive of his options.

“I think it’s the Admirals’ year,” Yuna told him sagely as they watched Carter Vaughn check someone brutally into the boards.

It stung more than it should have, and Shane contended himself with folding his arms and pretending like it didn’t bother him.

When he was alone, he went about his usual summer routine. He worked out, swam in the lake, mediated for at least an hour a day, read, and let himself be a little more lax with his diet.

He was getting better too. He only thought about Ilya fifty times a day instead of a hundred, or a thousand.

Progress was progress, even if he still couldn’t get off to anything but the idea of him.

It would fade in time. It had to fade. Like anything.

Much to Shane’s dismay, his mother, as usual, had been right. The Admirals were on a tear, flattening Seattle and moving on to the finals to face Los Angeles.

Here too, they dominated, and Shane and his parents sat in the living room, watching as the team dogpiled in the middle of the ice, crushing their captain underneath them.

“Good for him,” Yuna said in a satisfied way.

“That’s my division rival, you know?” Shane said snappishly.

“Oh come on, he’s at the end of his career, he deserves this.”

“Your mother loves to root for an underdog,” David pointed out, reaching out to squeeze Yuna’s hand.

“Then I haven’t been living up to expectations, have I?” Shane said grumpily, and they just laughed at him.

He watched as Scott Hunter lifted the Cup above his head a few minutes later, and he tried to feel some modicum of happiness for him. He was a good guy, well liked in the league, but *fuck*, all he could really manage was burning jealousy that he was there and Shane wasn’t.

As the families of the players came onto the ice, Shane stood up, stretching. He had to get out of here, this whole thing was making his chest hurt, the shadow of blonde hair and pretty blue eyes there out of the corner of his eye.

He wondered bitterly if he would ever be allowed to bring anybody onto the ice, or if he was destined to be like Hunter himself, who skated around the edges, eyes on the crowd, no one to kiss or hold either.

“Where are you going?” his mother asked, eyes still glued to the screen as Shane walked towards the back door.

“Just outside,” he shrugged, “Need to get some air.”

Yuna watched him carefully for a moment, before she nodded, allowing him to be dismissed. He reached for the handle, his fingers closing around the cool metal of the doorknob only for her to call him back a second later,

“Shane! Look- Look at this!”

He turned.

“What-” the world was tilting on its axis, and he was stuck with his feet glued to the ground. Scott Hunter, who had just won the Cup, was standing at center ice, kissing a man.

His eyes were locked onto the tv, mouth slightly open, as the din of his mother’s voice and the announcers and the roar of the crowd were reduced to nothing more than meaningless buzzing in his ears.

He wasn’t the only one in the league.

All he could think about was Ilya. Winning the Cup, kissing Ilya on center ice, not caring who saw them.

Scott Hunter had just proved that Shane didn’t have to be alone to play hockey.

Before he could come up with any kind of words, think about anything else, his phone buzzed in his hand, and he looked down, half expecting to see Ilya’s name across the screen.

It was Hayden, and Shane cursed himself, his arrogance and stupidity to think that Ilya would be watching hockey, let alone that he would be thinking about Shane.

“Hey-” Shane started, only to be cut off immediately,

“Did you see that?” Hayden yelled, seemingly forgetting that the phone connection meant they didn’t have to try to communicate with their voices only over hundreds of miles, “Holy fuck!”

“Yeah, yeah I saw it,” his voice came out shaky, “I saw it. I can’t- I mean...wow.”

“This is crazy,” he seemed delighted, overjoyed, and Shane loved him a lot, right in this moment, “What are you going to do?”

“Well I’m not flying to New York to kiss a random man,” he laughed, “I’ll tell you that.”

They lapsed into silence, each of them watching the tv, where Hunter was still holding tightly onto the hand of his partner, stealing glances at him every so often, a dopily happy smile stretched across his still sweaty face. Eventually, Hayden said,

“So...” Shane knew the tone, and he knew it could mean nothing good.

“What, Hayden?”

Hayden paused for a long time.

“Was it Hunter?”

Shane waited for more words, but none came.

“Was what Hunter?”

“Was that, you know,” he sounded sheepish, “Who you were *with*, before.”

Shane’s jaw dropped, half-shock, half-indignation.

“*What?*”

“I don’t know! You didn’t say who it was! I just- I wanted to like, console you or something if- He like, left you for that hot guy he was kissing!”

“It’s not-” Shane struggled, at a loss for words, “I wasn’t fucking Scott Hunter!”

“Okay! All right! I just wanted to be a good friend!”

“You can be a good friend without ever suggesting that ever again!”

Hayden started laughing and, after a moment, Shane joined him, ignoring the way his parents were staring.

“This is so crazy,” Hayden managed, “You and Scott Hunter!”

“Me and Scott Hunter aren’t-”

“I just mean you’re both like,” he lowered his voice to nearly a whisper, “*Gay*.”

“You don’t have to whisper,” Shane said, matching his volume, “It’s not contagious.”

Hayden huffed on the other end.

“I didn’t-”

“I’m just fucking with you,” Shane was grinning, and the muscles in his face felt almost taut, like they weren’t used to the motion anymore.

There was a distant crash from Hayden’s side of the phone.

“Fuck, sorry man, gotta go, Ruby just broke something and Jackie’ll kill me if there’s glass on the floor.”

“Okay, bye man.”

“Bye! Sorry I said you were- Well, whatever with Scott Hunter.”

“Goodbye Hayden,” he hung up the phone, smiling to himself as he stepped outside at last, into the cool spring air.

He turned his face up towards the sky, letting the sun warm his skin, and thought about Ilya, about what this might mean.

Shane had never thought that he was the only one, really. It had felt that way a lot of the time, but he had known, deep down, that there were other players that were...like him. But to have one come out, and to have it be a player that high up in the game, a brand in his own right, an undeniable force, one that the league would not be able to push out and ignore, that was the part that shook Shane the most.

Maybe he had been a coward. Maybe he could have come out earlier. Maybe he should have been the one to take the leap, change the game.

Maybe then Ilya would still be here, in his parents’ house, holding his hand, complaining loudly about having hockey on the tv, Anya snoring in his lap, resting on her pillow with a blanket under her chin.

He sighed, letting his eyes drift closed, and letting himself dream about that idea, even if it was as distant and impossible as Shane reaching the moon.

But then, something started building inside his chest, something untenable, something that Shane didn’t recognize. Hope maybe, or maybe reckless daring.

He could *try*. He could tell his team, not just the ones he was close to, not just his best friends; he could tell them all, tell them who he was, tell them that they were just going to have to live with that, tell them that he was in love with the hottest stripper in North America and probably most of the world.

No okay, that was definitely a lot, definitely too much.

But the first part...he could do that. Scott Hunter had shown him that he could, at least, do that.

Shane spent the rest of the summer working on himself. He had never done that before, really worked on himself personally. Physical perfection was something he had always demanded, but the other stuff had always fallen by the wayside, or rather, hadn't really been thought about at all.

But if he wanted Ilya back, and *god* did he want Ilya back, he knew he couldn't start that fight without knowing himself better, and there were times where he didn't think he had ever really known himself.

He asked around quietly, to guys who had mentioned here and there that they worked with a therapist, and finally settled on a very nice man who agreed to meet with him once a week in his quiet office in Montreal.

He was younger than Shane had expected, dark eyes framed by thin, round glasses, and a shiny bald head that sometimes mutely reflected the lamps in his office. He always wore a button up shirt and a bow tie, and had a sharp sense of humor that Shane appreciated, even when he felt like he might be about to be crushed into dust when they spoke about things that were too uncomfortable, too hard to hear.

Shane told him everything. He told him about hockey being the only thing he ever felt like he was good at, he told him about the words that were thrown around the locker room from the time he was a young teenager, how he refused to say them, but was too afraid to push back. He had enough problems, he didn't need to remind the rest of them that he wasn't white like they were, no need to draw attention to himself.

He talked about controlling his diet, his exercise regimen, his routine; how it felt like the world was ending if anything was out of place. He talked about the weight he often felt hanging on his shoulders,

"Like that guy, in the myth or whatever."

"Atlas."

"Yeah, him. But Montreal is so...fucking demanding. I don't know- I don't know how to handle it without the routine. Because that way I can- I don't know. Break it up into little pieces so it's easier to deal with."

"But you aren't dealing with it," he said, pushing his glasses farther up his nose, "You talk a lot about other people, Shane. What do you do for you, just for you? Not to be a better hockey player, not to be a good son; what do you do for yourself?"

And so, with that, Shane told him about Ilya. About meeting him, about falling in love with him, about losing him, about his job, how it bothered Shane, how it shouldn't. He pulled no punches, talking so much that his throat would be dry and sore by the time he left, but his heart was lighter every time.

"So," his therapist always had a specific tone when he was about to broach a subject he knew Shane wanted to stay away from, "When are you telling your team?"

"Ugh," he turned his face away from him, staring out the window at the trees that were dappled with late summer sun. The time had gone by much faster than he had anticipated, and the prospect of actually following through with his promise to himself was terrifying, "I don't know. I shouldn't have told you."

“Yes you should’ve, because now you have someone to hold you accountable,” he jotted something down in his notebook, and Shane hated when he did that. It was like he was failing an invisible test, “You start practice...when?”

It was often beneficial that he knew nothing about hockey, but explaining the ins and outs of the game and politics and team dynamics was annoying at times.

“Next week.”

“And you’re still planning to do it that first week?”

“I guess so.”

“How are you feeling about it?”

He scoffed.

“Bad. Horrible. Like I’m going to die.”

“But?”

Shane sighed, scratching the back of his hand over and over so that the skin turned red.

“But I know I need to. And not for Ilya or for- If that could- If we could start up again or whatever- I need to do it because- For me, I guess. Even though that sounds stupid and cliché.”

“I don’t think it does.”

“You have to say that because it’s, like, good for me.”

He shrugged.

“I technically don’t have to, but it does help pay my bills.”

“And you’re sure you can’t just do it for me?”

He nodded solemnly.

“Afraid not.”

It was the last thing Shane wanted to do when he walked into the Metros’ practice facility a few days later, but he pushed through.

“Uh,” he cleared his throat in the locker room after practice, hands behind his back, his fingernails digging half moons into the skin of his palm, “I wanted to- To tell you all something.”

The room fell silent, several guys poking their heads around the corner of the bathroom, half-curious, half-concerned.

“So,” just say it, just say it, just say it, “So...I’m gay.”

Okay, he maybe should have done some buildup to that.

His eyes found Hayden, then JJ, who nodded encouragingly, and this, more than anything, made him brave enough to keep talking.

“It’s not- I’m still the same person that I always was but- You’re my family, and I wanted you to- To know that.”

It was a little lame, not at all the eloquent speech that Scott Hunter had given at the MLH awards a few months ago, but Shane hadn’t wanted to rehearse or have lines that he needed to remember. He wanted it to be real, from himself, and sometimes that meant awkward and a little stilted.

The locker room was silent, all of his team staring at him. He unfocused his eyes so that he wouldn’t have to see the looks on specific faces, but before he could even manage to come up with anything else to say, JJ stepped forward, and clapped him on the shoulder,

“And if anyone has anything to say to our Captain, they can take it up with me.”

“Whatever Daganais,” Mitty said, rolling his eyes, “Like you could take me. Not that I want- Sorry Hollander, I didn’t mean-”

“Mitty shut up,” several people said, and the tension in the room broke, and everyone went back to their routines, leaving Shane still in the center of the room, a boulder in a rushing river. His heart raced, slamming against his ribs like he had just run miles, and his face and neck were sweaty, even though he had just showered. But the ever-present knot in his chest had eased, and only eased further as some of his teammates passed him as they left, patting his shoulder, a silent comfort.

Nothing needed to be said, that light touch was all that Shane needed.

“You good?” Hayden asked, his backpack slung across his shoulder, ready to go, waiting for him.

“Yeah,” and he meant it, “I am, give me a sec.”

Shane was surprised, in the weeks that followed, how little things changed. He had expected there to be some iciness, some distance, but most of the team just...didn’t seem to care.

It sort of made him angry, that he could have been open with them from the beginning, that all his worry and anxiety were mostly for nothing.

“That’s how anxiety can be, Shane,” his therapist had told him, even keel and steady as always, “Your brain blows it out of proportion and then you actually do the thing you’re afraid of and it often isn’t as bad as you were thinking. You know that.”

“It’s still stupid,” he said petulantly, folding his arms and slumping down in his seat. They had had something of a breakthrough in the last few weeks, where his therapist had broken through a sort of invisible wall that Shane had, and he was much more comfortable now.

“I’m not arguing that,” he smiled at him, “How are you feeling about the first tip off?”

“That’s basketball,” he said on a long-suffering sigh, “Hockey doesn’t do tip offs. But...good I guess. Expectations are always high but we had such a bad run last season that I think people are just- They want us to win, the playoffs aren’t good enough so. The pressure’s on, but I do well under pressure.”

“And Ilya?” Shane jerked involuntarily at the sound of his name.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly, “I want to- Do something, but I- It’s been like ten months. That’s a- Really fucking long time.”

“Would it be worth it, though?”

“Yeah,” he didn’t even have to think about it, “Yeah it- It definitely would.”

“Then it sounds like you have a few decisions to make.”

But Shane didn’t know how to make those decisions. A text was too impersonal, going to his apartment was too stalkerish, and a phone call was too psychotic.

He often wished that he could just snap his fingers and send everything back to the way they were, but his therapist, annoyingly, told him that wasn’t how life worked and that things changed because they were meant too.

Again, annoying.

The temptation to contact Ilya was growing by the day, and he knew he needed to do it soon. The season loomed and his free time was already running out, and he couldn’t stomach the idea of another year without him.

Which was probably what spurred him to do something either entirely romantic or recklessly stupid. Even years later, he wasn’t sure which.

Three days before their opening game against Toronto, Shane stood in front of the strip club that Ilya had always joked he would never set foot in again. And don’t get him wrong, he didn’t really want to now, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and he was desperate enough to try anything if it meant a chance to work things out.

It was a Sunday night, so the club was quiet, with only a few people sitting at the bar or the booths scattered around the stages, the music pulsing so loudly that it was almost impossible to hear anything else.

Shane scanned the room, but didn’t see Ilya anywhere. With a sinking feeling, he approached the bar, where a very pretty girl was making a complicated drink with a paper umbrella and at least four cherries. She leaned over to take his order, eyes alight at this new prospect in her club, and he stammered,

“Uh hi- Hi- So- I have a- A question I guess.”

“Okay.”

“I uh-” he had no idea what he was doing, “Sorry, I’m new at this.”

She smiled, endeared by his awkwardness.

“That’s okay, I can help you with whatever you need.”

He squared his shoulders, pushing past his fear of doing this wrong,

“How do I get a private dance with someone specific?”

“Who are you looking for?”

“Um...James?”

Her smile became a little fixed, like she was disappointed in his answer. She pushed back from the bar, and swept around it, touching his shoulder lightly as she passed, her fingers trailing down his arm,

“I’ll see if he’s available.”

She disappeared, and Shane released a long slow breath, the hiss of it lost in the music. He drummed his fingers against the smooth, cool surface, hoping that he was doing the right thing, that he wasn’t fucking all this up. Well, more than he already had.

The bartender reappeared after a few minutes, and gestured silently for him to follow her. He did, placing his feet carefully on the dark floor so that he didn’t stumble or fall, as she led him back towards the exact same room he had gotten his first dance from Ilya, all those months before.

It was so ironic that it was almost funny, but Shane kept a straight face, and sat down in the chair, hands folded in his lap, waiting patiently.

It felt like an eternity before the door was pushed open, and he was meeting Ilya’s eyes, which lifted in surprise, shock overtaking his usually carefully controlled features.

He looked good, not that he didn’t always. He was wearing that leather harness, strapped tightly across his broad chest, and his shorts had somehow gotten even smaller, so that Shane’s eyes were drawn to his thighs, and his mouth watered reflexively.

“What are you doing here?” the snap in Ilya’s voice brought his eyes up. He was angry, Shane could tell, but there was something else there too, something under the anger, something that matched Shane’s own heart.

“What does it look like?” Shane smiled at him shyly, “I want a dance.”

Ilya stared at him, his tongue running along his bottom teeth, taking him in. He seemed to be considering whether or not to turn on his heel and leave Shane there.

Finally he lost whatever internal battle he had been fighting and, snapped the door shut, and tapped on the panel, changing the lights, and turning up the volume of the music, which were songs that Shane now recognized.

He stepped towards him, standing between his legs, towering over him so that Shane tilted his face up, trying and failing to meet his eyes.

“What do you want?” he was using that voice, the one for clients, the one that he never used to use on Shane. It hurt more than it should have.

“You,” he said simply, his hands still resolutely in his lap, resisting the almost overwhelming desire to touch him, to take him in his arms, to hold him.

Like he used to.

Ilya’s face twitched, and Shane could see the desire there, it mirrored Shane’s own.

“You can’t have me,” he said, “You know that.”

“But what if I could?”

“How’s that?” he asked, his frustration bleeding through, showing his hand, “How would you manage to do that?”

Shane shrugged.

“I don’t know, I was thinking maybe kissing you in front of the world when I win the Cup next year.”

Ilya stared at him, the music around them completely at odds with the ache in Shane’s chest. It was like the worst face-off of his life, and all he could do was wait.

But he had to say it, he had to know.

“Sounds a little too familiar,” Ilya couldn’t hide his smile, even as much as Shane could tell he wanted to, “I like being unique.”

“What if- What if we just start slow?” he asked tentatively, watching his face intently, “Like- Just you and me?”

“I won’t be a secret, Shane. We- I told you that already. It was not- Good for me, to- To be hidden away, not be able to tell anybody about you.”

“I know that,” he took a deep breath, steeling himself, “I told the team.”

“What?” his eyebrows lifted in surprise, “That you are-”

“Gay, yeah,” it felt so good, still so good to have that weight lifted off his chest, “I mean, I didn’t tell them I was in love with the hottest stripper in Canada, but- Baby steps, you know?”

Ilya moved forward, crawling in Shane’s lap, his hands running up his neck, until they were in his hair, tugging his head back so they were looking into each other’s eyes.

”I should be angry at you,” he said, “I should hold a grudge forever.”

”You can if you want to, I’ll just keep coming back.”

Ilya snorted derisively.

”That’s all it would take to get you to be a regular?”

”I’m desperate, what can I say?”

There was a pause, one where Ilya seemed to be chewing on his words before he said them. Shane waited, holding his breath.

“So,” he arched a playful eyebrow at him, “you said in love with, huh?”

“I already told you that,” he whispered, his eyes sliding all over his face. He really was so beautiful, so perfect that Shane couldn’t have designed him better even if he tried.

“I-” Ilya broke off, shifted his head to the side, and Shane knew he was trying to hide the emotions on his face. Slowly, like he was afraid of startling a horse, Shane reached up, turning his face back towards him.

“I do love you, you know? I wasn’t kidding about that.”

“Were there other things you were kidding about?” he asked, arching an arrogant eyebrow at him.

“Mostly about liking your cooking.”

“Fuck you, Hollander.”

“Please do.”

His mouth curved up, and he leaned down, kissing him. Shane’s eyes fluttered closed, one hand on either side of his spine, holding him as close as he possibly could.

He tasted like the promise of something that Shane had never thought he would be allowed to have, a future that he had almost been too afraid to take.

Ilya was smiling in earnest when they broke apart; his fingers trailed gently across the bridge of Shane’s nose, tracing the freckles there, an insecurity that he inexplicably adored.

He said something in Russian, a phrase that stirred something in the back of Shane’s mind, something that he had said once, when Shane was half asleep, something that he had promised himself that he would ask about in the morning.

“Can you translate? I think I know but- Can you tell me?”

“I love you,” he whispered, so quiet that it was almost lost. But Shane thought he would have heard it even if he hadn’t said anything at all. Some things you just know, you know? “I can’t believe how much I do, even with how stupid it is.”

“Me too.”

“Is not stupid for you,” he said dismissively, “Only for me. To fall in love with a stupid hockey player.”

Shane laughed, kissing him again. Because he could, because he wanted to.

“Will you-” he cleared his throat, “Will you come to my game on Wednesday? It’s opening day, I’d love for you- To meet my team, my friends. My parents will be there so you don’t have to sit alone and- You definitely don’t have to if you don’t want to, it’s just- Just an idea and I know you may need some time and everything so no pressure but-”

“Shane,” he settled him with a grounding touch, “I will come. To your game.”

“Thanks for the clarification,” he grinned, relieved.

“Oh I intend to come later too,” he said in a businesslike way, “You will have to stay up late.”

“I don’t mind,” he shook his head to prove his point, “I can go to your place, hang out with Anya.”

Ilya's answering smile was so wide and bright it could probably power the earth for several years.

"She will like that. She missed you."

"I missed her. Mostly you though, don't tell her that."

Ilya's head dropped against his shoulder, and Shane could feel the vibrations of his laugh.

"No promises," his voice was muffled, and Shane brought his arms up, wrapping them around him, holding him, their breaths coming in tandem, as one.

After a moment, Ilya pulled back, and Shane knew that the smile curling his mouth could mean only one thing,

"You still want a dance?"

"Huh?"

"Come on, pretty boy," he said patronizingly, grinding down on Shane so that his cock twitched, "How long has it been?"

"Since what?" he gasped, fingers scrabbling for purchase along the wide expanse of Ilya's back, and his voice was low in Shane's ear.

"How long since you've been with someone, how long since you've come?"

"I haven't-" he groaned, throwing his head back, "I haven't been with anyone since- Since you-"

"So good," he purred, his hand snaking down, pressing his palm against his erection, "Always good for me."

"Shit," he panted, his fingers sliding through the space in between the skin of Ilya's chest and his harness, pulling him forward. Ilya's eyes widened in surprise, pupils blown out. Shane almost never took control like this, and he could feel the thrum of his carotid under his other palm, "Fuck I missed you."

"I missed you too, baby," he said quietly, more tenderly, "Let me give this to you, hm? And we can do the rest later."

"*Later*," it was a promise, laced with desperation, "Fuck yeah, later."

"Okay," he pried Shane's hand off his harness, "You have to let me go if you want a good show."

"I want *you*."

"I know you do, like I want you," he pressed a lingering kiss to the side of Shane's face, "Let me do this."

It was sensual, filled with heated touches and lines mouthed down each other's neck, hands heavy and hot, filled with the months of aching longing that neither of them had been able to express. The music threaded between them, tying them together, and all Shane could feel was Ilya's body against his, and all he could hear was his heart in his ears.

Ilya removed himself from him after far too short of a time, pressing light kisses to Shane's face, to his mouth, even as he stood, adjusting himself languidly through his shorts.

"You need to go," Ilya said, "Or I won't stop."

"I don't want you to," Shane whined, reaching out for him, "Please."

"Be good and wait for me, baby," he lifted his chin with one finger, "And I'll make sure you don't regret it."

"Fine. Fine."

"Anya will be happy."

"Well I can't disappoint her."

"That's right. I will be home at about four, maybe earlier since it is so dead."

"I love you," Shane said, whispering it against his mouth.

Ilya said it again in Russian, hands trailing across Shane's shoulders as he walked towards the door.

"I'll see you later?" he asked, catching his hands, afraid that he might disappear if he walked away again.

"Yes, Shane," Ilya pressed him against the door, kissing him gently, "You will. You still have your key, yes?"

"Yeah," he nodded, "I don't know why you didn't want that back, I could have been a stalker."

Ilya studied him, his eyes intense and serious even in the dim red light.

"I wouldn't have minded, if it was you opening the door."

Shane floated all the way to Ilya's apartment, and let himself in, greeting a delighted Anya and taking her out for a walk, just to make things easier for Ilya when he got home. Then, he shuffled into the bedroom, and plugged his iPod into the speakers he had there, so that soft music issued from them.

Anya was sleeping in his lap by the time Ilya pushed open the door, at around half past two. Shane looked up at him from his phone, surprised.

"I thought you'd be later."

"I left early," he knelt down, stroking Anya's head until she opened her eyes blearily and started whining, licking his face in delight, "I had something to get home to."

Shane smiled, and let Ilya take Anya from him, settle her in her soft bed, and lead Shane to his, closing the door behind them.

He stared at the speakers in surprise, his eyes trailing over to the iPod, then to Shane.

"You kept it?"

“Of course I kept it,” he scoffed, “What, did you think I’d throw it away?”

“I thought-” the expression on his face was odd, something Shane had never seen there before, “I thought you might be angry enough at me to.”

“Why would I be angry at you? You weren’t the one who was forcing me to live in secret.”

“That’s true,” Ilya said, and Shane laughed, “But I also- Do not talk much about how I am feeling. It is hard for me to. I thought- That I had pushed you away.”

Shane approached him cautiously, reaching out a hand to skitter down his arm. Ilya let out a shaky breath, almost impossible to see if Shane wasn’t so attuned to him.

“I think-” he tried a small smile, “We may not be great at- Talking to each other about this stuff.”

Ilya answering chuckle was watery.

“But,” he continued, “I’d like to- Try. If you would.”

It was a long moment where they held each other’s gaze, and Shane did not break it.

“I would,” Ilya said slowly, “But I would also like to fuck you.”

Shane grinned.

“Be my guest.”

Afterward, tangled together, Shane asked,

“Have you been- How many people have you been with since- Since me?”

Ilya didn’t answer at once, but dragged his fingers up and down Shane’s back, his breathing deep and even, his heartbeat steady under Shane’s cheek.

“I tried,” he finally said, “A few times but- It never felt right. I was always wishing-”

He broke off, and Shane lifted his head off of his chest, meeting his eyes,

“What?”

“I wanted them to be you. And none of them were.”

“Sorry it- I’m sorry that I- Put you in the position I did,” Shane slid his hand across Ilya’s stomach, “My therapist told me that I was being unfair and I know that I was so I wanted- I need to tell you that I’m sorry.”

Ilya nodded slowly, still tracing patterns along Shane’s back,

“Thank you,” he said, “I did not- Realize I needed to hear that.”

Shane did not answer, but reached over, squeezing his hand in his.

“What made you-” Ilya cleared his throat, “Tell your team? Was it that old hockey player that kissed his boyfriend after winning the trophy thing?”

“Scott Hunter,” he replied, “And it’s the *Cup*.”

Ilya waved his hand, as though he could shoo away Shane’s words.

“Whatever.”

“Yeah it- He sort of made me realize that I had been- That I didn’t want to live my whole life and just maybe get what I wanted when I retired. And- I felt lonely a lot of the time; that I was the only- The only one like me- Gay I mean, in the league. And to have someone else come out and- Like that, it- It made me sort of realize that maybe I could too.”

“So they are expecting to meet me?”

“Uh, well- Hayden and JJ know that I was seeing someone but- They don’t really know. I’m going to tell them tomorrow. If you still want to meet them.”

“Of course I do,” he kissed his forehead, tender and impossibly gentle, “I am looking forward to it.”

“I missed you,” Shane burrowed deeper into his chest, humming happily at the steady heartbeat under his ear, “So much.”

Ilya did not answer, but his arms tightened around Shane, and that was answer enough.

“I don’t get it.”

Shane sighed.

“What is there not to get, Hayden?”

“I mean like...you stopped seeing this dude months ago right?”

“Yeah, right after Christmas.”

“And now...” his eyebrows were furrowed together, as though he was trying to work out a very complicated math problem, “You’re back together with him and he’s coming to opening day?”

“Yeah.”

Hayden opened his mouth, his jaw working furiously, but no sound came out. It was kind of funny to watch, even though he and Shane had the same conversation over and over for the last two days. JJ had just slapped him on the shoulder in congratulations, but Hayden had not been able to wrap his head around how quickly things had changed.

To be fair, Shane couldn’t really either, not that he was complaining.

“I don’t understand what’s so hard for *you* to understand,” Shane took pity on him, and spoke before he managed to make any noise, “People get back together all the time.”

“But it’s been like ten months,” Hayden said weakly, “And it’s you. Like I’m surprised you didn’t make him do a fresh background check.”

“I can be spontaneous!” his words were met by laughter throughout the room, and he flushed, turning bitterly back towards his gear, Hayden still watching him.

JJ walked by the pair of them, his jersey thrown carelessly over his shoulder, and leaned down so only they could hear him say,

“It’s probably a gay thing.”

Hayden looked shocked while Shane snorted with laughter. He reached up for his phone, and unlocked it. He was being paranoid about Ilya showing up, but it did feel like the most important thing that had ever happened in the history of the universe.

Are you here? Shane texted him anxiously, *Mom and Dad are already in their seats and you’re right next to them.*

I am here, he responded immediately, *Your parents say hello.*

Okay good. I’ll see you after, they can tell you where to go.

I know Shane.

Thanks for coming.

Only because I will be coming again later.

Gross, not in front of my parents.

Ilya sent back a yawning emoji, and Shane grinned even as he stowed his phone away.

He really had no idea how quickly things would change when he had finally gotten off his ass and taken Ilya back. His parents and Rose had both been delighted when he had called them, still in Ilya’s bed, the morning after.

“It’s about time honestly,” Rose had said, the sound of a rowdy set in the background of her call, “When do I get to meet him?”

“Can you pause for three seconds?” he tried to sound nettled, but the ever-present grin on his face dulled the sharpness of his tone, “We literally just-”

“I’ve waited long enough!” she declared dramatically, “I want to meet the stripper that is stealing my best gay ex boyfriends’ virtue!”

“Goodbye, Rose,” he hung up on her as she was laughing.

Between practice and Ilya’s job, they had only had a few hours together, but those hours were as precious as gold to both of them, and they had spent most of them in bed. Shane took the time to relearn the shape of Ilya’s mouth, the desires of his body.

A few hours was not nearly enough, but he was hoping that, with luck, this was just the beginning.

Shane looked up into the stands as they took the ice, skating laps and warming up. He could see his parents waving to him and-

He smiled so widely it hurt his face. Ilya was wrapped in a hoodie and a jacket, his arms folded against his chest with cold, but his eyes were fixed on Shane as he passed by their seats.

Shane waved, and Ilya rolled his eyes dramatically, but waved back and Shane could see, even from a distance, that he was smiling too.

“Ready for this?” Hayden asked, bumping their helmets together.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling at ease and relaxed, like he was exactly where he was meant to be.

They won. Shane had played effortlessly on the ice, the stick an extension of his arm again. He could see the gaps in the defense, and worked with the rest of his line seamlessly, effectively silencing all those who had spent the better part of a year insinuating that he was close to retirement. He was Shane fucking Hollander, and now that he had a better idea of who that really was; he was going to make sure no one forgot it anytime soon.

“Great fuckin game!” Mitty jumped on Shane’s back in the locker room, “Fuck me Hollander, good to have you back!”

“Yeah yeah,” Shane waved him away, but not before he had thoroughly mussed his hair, “Great, now everyone in the press room is going to ask about this.”

“Make sure you tell them I’m your favorite on the team.”

“Not a chance.”

Shane had never wanted to escape the press more in his life. He drummed his fingers on his knee, giving practiced, polished answers to all of their questions: *How do you feel about the team this year? There was a lot of talk about you in the offseason, did that affect how you prepped in the offseason at all? How have you worked with the room to keep morale up?*

Finally, at last, he was replaced at the microphone by his coach, and was free to stumble down the hallway, to the waiting area where friends and family that attended the games congregated. Most people had already gone home, but there were a few he recognized still gathered around, chatting animatedly to one another after a summer apart.

But Shane only had eyes for Ilya, who was standing just behind his parents, chewing on his thumbnail as he approached them.

“Great game,” his mother kissed his cheek, and his father held out an arm for a hug, but Shane was looking at Ilya, who drank him in, head to toe.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his hands reaching out, running down Shane’s shoulders towards his hands, “I did not realize that they would- Fucking hit you so hard.”

Shane shrugged.

“All part of the game, that wasn’t anything.”

“It didn’t look like that to me,” he smoothed his thumb across Shane’s cheekbones for a fraction, but pulled back, looking around at the people still around them.

Shane smiled, and pulled him in, kissing him, hands tangling in his soft hair. He could feel him smiling against his mouth, and his hands rested dutifully at his waist.

They broke apart, grinning at each other.

“Hayd and JJ should be here in a second,” he said, his fingers tangling with Ilya’s, “I think the news that we’re seeing each other again is making Hayden short circuit.”

“Why?” Yuna asked, shocked.

“I think he just- Thinks it should have taken longer. I don’t agree, I think it took long enough.”

“Yes,” Ilya chimed in, squeezing Shane’s fingers, “Too long, I would say.”

“Well we know Hayden and JJ,” David yawned hugely, stretching his arms above his head, “And we old people need to get to bed.”

“You aren’t that old,” Shane complained, “You always act like you have a foot in the grave.”

“Just a pinky toe,” Yuna kissed his cheek, then Ilya’s, “We’ll see you for breakfast in the morning? Ten am at-”

“The diner by my place, yeah,” Shane said, pleased at the way David also gave Ilya a side hug, “Drive carefully, text me when you get to your hotel.”

“We will,” they said in unison, “Love you!”

Shane and Ilya waved as they disappeared before turning back towards each other, a giddy grin on each face.

“You kissed me in front of them. In front of everyone,” Ilya said quietly.

“Was that okay? I probably should have asked-”

“Shut up,” he pulled him close again, “Stop talking.”

Shane angled his mouth up, silently asking for more, but Ilya had barely moved an inch towards him when JJ’s voice rang out across the hall, echoing loudly against the stone and metal,

“Captain!” Shane waved him forward, Hayden trailing along a step behind him.

“Hey guys,” he gestured towards Ilya with his free hand, “Well, this is Ilya, my boyfriend.”

Ilya’s eyes shot to his face, adoration apparent all over his features.

JJ and Hayden were staring at him, wearing matching looks of confusion mingled with recognition. He had hoped that maybe they wouldn’t recognize him *that* quickly.

“But-” JJ’s head listed to the side, “I know him from somewhere.”

Shane sighed. Well, now seemed to be the moment.

“Uh yeah, he was at your wedding. Sarah from the social media team knows him.”

“No, I know him from somewhere else.”

“Well...he’s also-”

“Wait,” comprehension dawned across Hayden’s face, “You were at the strip club we went to, the night of JJ’s bachelor party.”

“Right,” Ilya said, his accent heavy, “I work there.”

“But-” JJ and Hayden’s eyes widened, nearly popping out of their sockets, “Is this the guy we bought you a dance with?”

Shane bit down on his lip.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’d be him.”

“But you said,” Hayden looked between them, “You said that you traded out for a girl.”

“I lied,” Shane shrugged, “I did a lot of that. Anyway, this is Ilya.”

There was a ringing silence, before JJ burst into laughter,

“Hollander, you are maybe the only person on earth who would actually convince the stripper to fall in love with you,” he howled, “Jesus! Hollander bags a stripper!”

Ilya grinned, sticking out his hand, which JJ shook, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, and JJ took his hand, shaking it energetically, even through fits of laughter.

“You’re-” Hayden cleared his throat, looking up at Ilya, who regarded him almost coldly, “Different than I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know...but not- I-” he seemed to be grasping at straws, “Yeah. Uh. Hi. Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands briefly, JJ still positively giggling at Ilya’s choice of profession.

“You like the game?” he finally managed to ask, “Shane’s never mentioned if you were a fan or-”

“No no,” he shook his head violently from side to side, “No. I mean- It was fun but I have never- Watched hockey before I met Shane.”

“At the strip club,” JJ pointed out unnecessarily.

“JJ,” Shane said warningly, but Ilya seemed amused by him.

“Yes, why? Are you interested in a private dance too?”

JJ’s mouth fell open, and Hayden crowed with laughter. It took a moment for him to recover himself, but he joined in with Hayden too.

“I like him,” he pointed to Ilya, as though there could be any doubt in who he was referring to, “You’ll have to come to a dinner sometime, meet the team. They’re gonna lose it when they find out, Hollander.”

Shane gave Ilya a significant sort of look, meant to be an apology and a subtle warning that this was what he was in for now.

“Sure,” Ilya said easily, still entertained by how excited JJ was to hear he was a stripper, “Sounds fun.”

“Well we’ll let you,” JJ winked exaggeratedly, and Shane groaned, “Get to it.”

“Jesus,” Hayden steered him away, “Bye Shane. Nice to uh, nice to meet you Ilya.”

Ilya saluted lazily, a grin still spread across his face.

“Sorry about them,” Shane said, twisting his hands together, “I know that-”

Ilya kissed him, silencing the thoughts that crept into his mind.

“Take me home,” he said against his mouth.

“Okay,” he sighed dreamily, “Did you drive or-”

“Took an Uber,” Ilya’s hands pushed under his t shirt, and Shane shivered at the heat of his touch, “Unless you have plans to give someone else a ride.”

“No,” his voice was sluggish, “Just- No.”

“Come on then,” Ilya nudged him with his hip, towards the garage, “Or I’ll have to touch myself in the car. Since I can’t wait.”

Shane had never been so grateful that he lived pretty close to the arena. Gameday traffic had mostly died down, but they still had to wait a while, and Shane kept stealing glances over at Ilya, making sure that he hadn’t disappeared.

“Did you like them?” Shane asked anxiously, unable to hold it in anymore.

“I liked JJ.”

“What about Hayden?”

“I did not like the way he didn’t defend you when that guy hit you into the side.”

Shane paused, taking in this statement, searching for the words to respond.

“That’s just part of the game, Ilya.”

“He was right there,” he said dismissively, “He should have done something.”

He did his best to hold in his laugh, he really did, but it bubbled out of his mouth anyway, and Ilya turned towards him, scandalized.

“You are laughing at me?”

“I’m not!” Shane lied, “It’s sweet.”

“Is not sweet! I will go down there myself and deal with it if someone else does that!”

“Okay, you’d probably be a great hockey player. I can teach you to skate.”

Ilya flicked his wrist at him in disgust, eyes reflecting the red brake lights in front of them, and he mumbled something under his breath.

“What did you say?”

“I said I would be a better player than Hayden, even though I have never even done ice skating.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“I still think you are making fun of me.”

“I swear I’m not!” Shane took his hands off the wheel for a moment, holding them up in mock-surrender, “If you want to learn to skate I’ll teach you.”

“And then I can go up against Hayden.”

“And defend my honor, sure.”

Ilya pouted, folding his arms across his chest.

“Whatever, if you want to depend on him. He has a crush on you anyway.”

“No he does not.”

“Yes he does. Is very obvious.”

Shane laughed, and reached over, resting a hand on Ilya’s knee. He kept it there for the entire rest of the ride, until he pulled into the parking garage and put his car in park.

Ilya crowded him against the wall of the elevator, kissing across his face, leaving Shane gasping for air.

He could barely get his keys out fast enough, nearly falling over the threshold of his apartment, dragging Ilya with him.

It was quiet inside, just a few lamps left on, and Shane looked around, expecting Anya.

“Where’s Anya?”

“Sveta is looking after her tonight,” his voice was in Shane’s ear, and his hands were wrapping around his torso, “I told her I had things to do.”

“What things?” he failed to keep his voice in check, and it shook as Ilya mouthed a line down his neck.

“Mm,” he hummed, pulling Shane’s unbuttoning Shane’s dress shirt, “I think you know. Do they always make you wear suits to the games?”

“Yes,” Shane gasped, grinding back against him, “It’s a dress code thing. We can go a little more casual now but- I like to- Fuck- Stick to the formal stuff.”

“I like it,” he loosened Shane’s tie just enough to slide the shirt from his shoulders, “Very hot.”

Shane’s hands moved up to pull off his tie, but Ilya clicked his tongue, pushing his hands away.

“Leave it,” he said, sliding his palms down towards the zipper of his suit pants, “Fuck, you made me so hard, watching you play.”

“Played like that for you,” Shane babbled, willing Ilya to touch him where he needed him most, “All for you.”

“Ah,” his hand sneaked into the waistband of Shane’s pants, and he pressed his palm against his hard cock, through his briefs, “Is this all for me too?”

“You know it is,” he whined, “Please Ilya.”

Ilya took pity on him, and led him to the bedroom, settling him on the bed, and crawling over him, stripping him until he was just in his underwear, and panting as though he had run miles. Ilya knelt above him, strong thighs bracketing Shane’s, sliding the smooth fabric of his tie in his fingers, observing Shane in a detached, hazy way.

“I could tie you up with this,” he said simply, letting the tie fall, trailing it across Shane’s heaving stomach, “Or blindfold you, so you can’t see. Would you like that?”

Shane thought that he might like both of those things very much, but tonight he wanted to look at Ilya, hold him in his arms, take him apart in all the ways he had fantasized about every night they were apart.

“Yeah but can we- Not tonight?”

Ilya’s expression softened, and he leaned down, giving Shane an impossibly tender kiss.

“Not tonight,” he agreed, tossing the tie aside and pinning Shane in place with his hands and his thighs, so that he was completely immobile, “Tonight I want you like this.”

Shane couldn’t believe that he had ever managed to live without this for any length of time. He had forgotten what it was like, just how right it felt when Ilya was between his legs, opening him up with his tongue and his fingers, so that Shane became pliant and relaxed, sinking down into the mattress like he could disappear into it, unaware of the noises he was making or how loud and embarrassing they were.

“Love the sounds you make,” he heard Ilya say dimly, as he surfaced, reaching over for the bottle of lube on the bedside table, “Jerked off to them so much I thought I’d get tired of them, but I never did.”

“Please,” Shane begged, willing to give him anything that he asked for, “Please fuck me.”

“I will, baby,” Ilya shushed him, pushing a hand through his hair, “I will.”

“Face to face please?”

Ilya laughed.

“Bossy tonight, are we?”

“Maybe,” he turned his face away, suddenly shy, but Ilya caught him, moving him back, so their eyes were locked with one another.

“Let me look at you while I-” he spread Shane’s thighs out further, and began pushing in. The burn of him was a relief to Shane, a fix that he needed, that he craved, “Fuck, Shane.”

They did it slowly, taking all the time they had. Shane’s thighs wrapped around Ilya’s lower back, and each gaze never left the other’s face.

It was a little embarrassing maybe, how quickly Shane felt himself getting close, his orgasm curling along his spine, that lovely pressure that he couldn’t help but want to give into. He wanted to draw it out, have Ilya inside him for as long as possible. He whined, trying to draw away, but Ilya held him fast, shaking his head slightly.

“I want to see you come,” he told him, voice rough hewn, “Do it for me, yeah?”

Shane wanted to be good, he always wanted to be good for Ilya.

In his turn, Ilya picked up the pace, and caught Shane’s jaw in his hand, firm, possessive.

“Mine,” he said, eyes fixed on his face.

“Yeah, yours,” his voice caught up in his throat, so he could barely speak at all, “Yours Ilya, fuck- Oh fuck- I’m-”

Shane came untouched, all over himself, and Ilya followed right after, gripping his jaw tight enough that it might bruise. Shane found that he loved that idea.

It took them a while to catch their breath, and though he could already feel the tacky unpleasantness on his stomach and between his thighs, he could have happily fallen asleep like this, with Ilya still inside him.

“I’ll go get something to clean us up,” Ilya said, voice muffled in the skin of Shane’s shoulder.

He whined as he pulled out, head listing to the side as the dim noise of a faucet in the bathroom reached his ears. It was only a moment later that Ilya was back, swiping a warm cloth tenderly across his stomach.

“I love you,” Shane sighed when Ilya had returned again, crawling back under the covers with him.

“I love you too,” Ilya whispered, kissing his forehead gently.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” his eyes were heavy, threatening to flutter closed, but he needed Ilya to know this, to hear it, “It really- It’s what I always wanted, with you.”

“Me too,” there was something else there, and Shane waited, making sure he didn’t push, “I liked it when- When you called me your boyfriend.”

Their eyes met.

“I did too. I liked- Calling you that.”

They lapsed into silence, thick and heavy with the words that they had both been holding back for so long.

“Do you-” Shane propped his chin on Ilya’s chest, “I really want- This, *you*, for as long as you’ll have me.”

“You can have me forever if you want it,” Ilya said, fingers gentle against his skin, “I will not go anywhere.”

“And I won’t either,” Shane promised in his turn, and he was dreaming of long dinner dates and a wedding and even the shadows of children running around a house, children with Ilya’s laugh and Shane’s nose, children with Shane’s determination and Ilya’s kindness, children that were half of each of them, but entirely theirs.

Those were distant dreams, far in the future, but they were more solid than they ever had been before, almost as though he could reach out and touch them.

“What are you thinking about?” Ilya asked.

“Dreaming about the future,” Shane said sheepishly, “I think I’m a little cliché.”

“I think I am too now,” he kissed him, “You are turning me soft.”

“You’ve always been soft,” Shane poked his stomach, “But I’m glad, it’s one of my favorite things about you.”

“What is your favorite thing?” he wagged his eyebrows suggestively, and Shane scoffed, pushing against him, but not enough to actually roll away.

“You’re terrible.”

“That is too bad for you, since you’re stuck with me forever.”

“Ugh,” he smiled, “Lucky me.”

“Lucky you.”

They kissed, knocking their teeth together, because neither of them could stop smiling, and Shane fell asleep in Ilya’s arms with the promise of *forever* echoing in his ears.

It was the best night of sleep he had ever had in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Some specific chapter chatter before I get emo:

David and Yuna (specifically in the books) remind me a lot of my own parents. I am very close to them, like Shane, and they have informally adopted many of my friends throughout

my life and into my adulthood. I think they would just...kind of accept Ilya without question. If he makes Shane happy, he makes them happy, you know.

The Scott realization is just too good, I love it so much and wanted to keep it, so here we are. Obviously, Shane has it a teeny tiny bit easier than book/show Shane and Ilya, because the whole "rivalry" thing is out the window, but I do feel like Shane would have an incredibly difficult time regardless, just because of who he is as a person. I love him dearly and I love to psychoanalyze him lmao.

Sending Shane to therapy while not going myself...let's not look too far into this.

And yes, the Hayden/Ilya beef is forever, I could not have them meet and not lowkey despise each other lmao.

Ok, designated finishing a longfic author's note sap time:

I really appreciate all the love on this one, thank you, truly. I'm not the best at responding to comments (I get overwhelmed and have to compartmentalize a lot lmao), but just know I read all of them and appreciate them so much.

This has been such a fun one to write, I loved living in this world with this Shane and Ilya. AUs have kind of always been the things that I liked writing best, so it's been such a pleasure to delve into this idea and have so many of you be into it too!

I can't seem to do anything but read about hollanov, watch hollanov, or write hollanov, so I will be back extremely soon, but in the meantime, love you all dearly, thank you for taking the time to read and comment, it means the world to me <3

(And to the commenter who asked if I would ever write something from Ilya's POV...well...you inspired me diva, so that is on the way lol)

End Notes

Excited about this one! Thank you for reading! <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!