

courage [it couldn't come at a worse time]

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76621461) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76621461>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Hayden Pike , Yuna Hollander , Rose Landry , Svetlana Vetrova , J. J. Boiziau , David Hollander , Cliff Marlow Cliff Marleau , Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Canon Divergence Long Game Chapter 23 (Post Christmas) , Angst with a Happy Ending , Internalized Homophobia , Established Relationship , Breakups & Make Ups , Idiots in Love , Coming Out , Choices , Hurt/Comfort , Coming Out On Own Terms , Winter Olympics , Team Canada , NHL National Hockey League , Hockey , Character Study , Giving Characters The Growth They Deserve (Growth Requires Work) , SERIOUSLY THERE IS A HAPPY ENDING I SWEAR
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-29 Completed: 2026-02-23 Words: 81,926 Chapters: 9/9

courage [it couldn't come at a worse time]

by [veilofimagination](#)

Summary

"Why are you not scared?"

"I am scared," Ilya admits. "I just am tired. Of hiding me. Of hiding you. Of hiding how much I love you. I want to go to the rink— how do you say it? Authentically."

"Authentically," Shane supplies, automatically.

"Yes. Authentically. I want to go to the rink authentically, as me," Ilya confirms.

Ilya looks at Shane, pauses until Shane meets his eyes. "I want to say: I, Ilya Rozanov love a man, and that man's name is Shane Hollander."

-

Or, sometimes it takes a little more time, and some courage, to be with the one you love.

Notes

team, i'm on the bandwagon. i crushed these books (and the show). and i loved it, but here's my maybe controversial take:

ILYA AND SHANE DESERVED BETTER THAN BEING OUTED.

Shane deserved to CHOOSE his timing.

Ilya deserved for Shane to actually CHOOSE HIM. To choose to love him out loud on Shane's terms, not on the dumb NHL's (and plot devices).

this is that story.

Canon divergence from Chapter 23, the scene where Ilya tells Shane to leave. (team, i love angst, i am only a little sorry. happy ending guaranteed).

any resemblance to real people is probably not entirely coincidence, but is not meant to be an accurate depiction of those individuals.

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

Chapter 1: 2020-21 NHL Season

Chapter Notes

First scene and some other dialogue sprinkled in from TLG to help with the canon divergence, credit to Rachel Reid.

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

2020-2021 NHL Season

A ship in harbour is safe, but that's not what ships are built for.

— *G.T. Shedd*

*

"You wouldn't even choose me, would you?" Ilya says, "If it is between me and hockey."

"Of course I would," Shane says, though not as confidently as Ilya would have liked.

Ilya studies his face and sees Shane flinch. "*Would you?*"

Shane tilts his chin up defiantly. "Would you choose *me*?"

Ilya lets the question hang in the air, his whole body trembling with rage. He can't believe Shane would even ask that, after everything.

Finally, quietly, Ilya says, "You should go."

Ilya doesn't want to fight. He's exhausted, and miserable, and his boyfriend is breaking his fucking heart.

Quietly, in a voice that can't quite disguise his pain, he says, "I already chose you, Hollander."

*

Shane is terrified.

He should have stayed. He should have stayed and fought for himself, or...

Fuck.

He hadn't been paying attention to Ilya, or to what Ilya had given up for him. And okay, maybe Ilya had given up a whole fucking lot for Shane. For *them*. But Shane would argue it was worth it— *wasn't it?*

He calls his mom.

"I messed up," Shane says as soon as her face fills his screen.

"What? With your coach? It's a day off. How could you—"

"No. With Ilya."

The concern leaves her face immediately. She even smiles. "There's nothing you could do to ruin things with him. What happened?"

Shane sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed. He explains, not sparing any detail of their fight and Ilya's question: *me or hockey?*

His mom's voice is soft as she asks, "Would you be ready for that?"

Shane's pulse spikes the second she asks the question. "We can't," he says, immediately.

"It would be hard." Yuna's response is gentle.

"Impossible— we'd lose our careers," Shane argues, "Mom, I've worked so hard— I don't want to be *that gay hockey player*. I just want to be a hockey player."

"Well, you need to tell Ilya that," Yuna counsels, her tone patient and her face just showing concern for him.

"I will," Shane says.

"I'm sure he'll understand," his mom says, "He loves you. I think he'd live in a dump if it meant being close to you."

*

The Centaurs win their first game of 2021; a huge afternoon win against Carolina. Troy scores two goals and Ilya is ecstatic for him.

It almost dulls the pain of his personal life falling apart. Shane and he have talked a few times since he told Shane to leave, but they're going in circles: Ilya wants to come out and tell everyone about them, and Shane, well Shane just wants to be a hockey player. Not a gay hockey player. Not Ilya's hockey player. Just a hockey player.

He's told this to Galina in therapy too.

"You are a human being with a lot of responsibilities and pressure," Galina had told him. "You play a physically taxing, dangerous sport for a living. You are hiding a very big secret while also living your life in a spotlight. You are in love with a man you aren't allowed to be in love with. You are carrying trauma from your childhood that you have never allowed yourself to properly process. And you feel things very deeply. Deeper than maybe anyone realizes."

"Is that all?" Ilya had replied, dryly.

"I think you are depressed."

Depressed.

A big, clinical word, but one that Ilya knows. They'd discussed it, discussed what it meant and what options Ilya had for keeping it at bay. Medication— he's afraid of pills. Exercise— how can he exercise more. Things with friends— what friends.

"Your priorities seem to be divided between hockey and your boyfriend," Galina had pointed out.

"I like those things," Ilya had argued, even as his chest seized up a bit.

"Last time we met I suggested you talk to Shane about the things you've given up for him. Did you do that?"

"Yes!" Ilya had practically shouted. "That is why everything is fucked," he had added, explaining that Shane had asked if Ilya would choose him over hockey and that he couldn't even believe that Shane had uttered the question.

"What made him ask that?" Galina had prodded, and Ilya had explained about Bood's party, and how he had wanted to bring Shane, to introduce him as his boyfriend. How he had asked this question, and how Shane had reacted horribly.

"I take it," she had finally said, "that Shane is not ready to go public."

"No. I don't even know if I'm ready," Ilya had mused, "But some days I think I'll scream or die if I have to keep this secret any longer."

"Does he know that?" Galina had asked and when Ilya had admitted no, she had asked what he would say if he could say anything to him.

"I'd tell him I'm tired of hiding. That I want to be me— that I want everyone to know who I am. That I've loved him, since maybe the first time I saw him. And I want Shane to always know that— how much I love him. And I want others to know too. I need to love him properly."

"That's beautiful," Galina has said, encouragingly. "Can you try telling him that?"

He tried over FaceTime the next day. Predictably, Shane's face does something complicated and he said: "Ilya, I know you love me— and the world will know... one day."

"I want world to know now," Ilya says, feeling a bit like a child. "I'm tired of having a boyfriend that doesn't want anyone to know I am his boyfriend."

"I thought we were on the same page with this."

"We are not," Ilya retorted.

"Seriously Ilya? You know that if we get outed our careers might be over," Shane had said, again.

"And that's what you care about," Ilya argued, again.

"Well, yeah, of course I care about that."

Ilya had put his fingers to his forehead and sighed. He'd wanted to regroup, to try again, maybe stay calmer this time, when Shane added: "I have to go."

"OK."

"I wish our schedules weren't fucked. But maybe a bit of distance is good right now?"

Ilya had tried to smile. "I think so," he lied. "Yes. We will talk when we are in the same room."

Back on the plane out of Raleigh, his team was celebrating. "We are going to be unstoppable, baby!" Boody is yelling.

Ilya hopes so. He really hopes so.

*

They were not, unstoppable.

They strung together a few wins, but then, typically, it was back to losing. The Centaurs limped into the All Star Break.

His hopes for his hockey season are shattered. It'll be another year of not making the playoffs. Another year of headlines that say: *Where in the World Is Ilya Rozanov?* or *Russian superstar fails to lead team to playoffs—again* or *Draft Pick Flop?*

He's ready to admit he isn't happy in Ottawa. That he likes his team, and even the city— for all of its *boring*— but he isn't happy playing hockey here. Sometimes he catches himself longing for Boston.

Most of the time, he longs for Shane.

*

The All Star weekend is fun. Shane feels lighter than he has in a few months, arguing with Ilya on the sidelines and chirping him about who is the fastest skater.

He beats Ilya at the fastest skater competition. He's going to gloat about that more later, in private, because there's something about winning that turns him on. Especially winning against Ilya.

He does exactly that later.

"Finally," Ilya says, when Shane arrives at his room, stepping back so Shane can enter quickly. "You are too slow."

"Not according to the skills competition," Shane smirks and Ilya kisses him furiously.

There's something about sneaking around in a hotel room that sets Shane on fire. He hooks his legs around Ilya's ass and grips his shoulders, and Ilya kisses him. Shane sinks into the wonderful sensation of not giving a fuck about anything except Ilya: his hands on his body and his tongue in his mouth.

At one point, there's hollering in the hallway and Shane is pretty sure one of them is Dallas Kent, the homophobic and likely rapist the league is doing nothing about. It's a reminder of how close the hockey world is to them here— how close they are to being found out.

Even with Ilya's mouth tracing his body, Shane tenses at the thought.

"Ignore them," Ilya whispers.

"I'm trying."

Ilya goes back to tracing his body, kissing the hollow of Shane's throat. Shane puts the hockey world out of his mind and relaxes into Ilya's caresses, just lying there while Ilya makes him feel wonderful.

The sex is tortuously slow. Ilya takes his time, taking Shane apart with his mouth and fingers, until Shane is begging— "I want you", panted out between moans. Ilya's fingers sank inside him, twisting, curling, and gently stretching Shane apart while Shane breaths and sinks deeper into the sensation.

Loud knocking, followed by the voice of Cliff Marlow, jolts Shane out of the moment.
"Rozanov! You in there?"

All good feelings leave, abruptly replaced by pure panic.

Ilya handles it smoothly, talking to Marlow through the door as he stokes at Shane, smirking and chuckling softly into Shane's thigh as Marlow jumps to a slightly wrong conclusion, assuming Ilya has a girl in the room. He ultimately backs off.

"I can't believe you fucking chatted with him while you were fingering me," Shane hisses.
"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Wrong with me? I am not the one who fucking loved it."

"I did not," Shane replies, and while Ilya protests saying it turns him on, Shane is sure it's not true. The world encroaching on them scares him. It's too close, in these hotel rooms. People are too close to knowing.

Ilya just kisses Shane until the thoughts have drifted from his mind with the gentleness of Ilya's caresses, thoughts of the hockey world forgotten, and Shane is a quivering mess on the bed. Then he enters him.

"I love you so much," Shane whispers, as Ilya begins to move in slow deliberate strokes.

Yet, the hockey world moves outside. Shane feels it infringe on the edges of their bubble. He tries to ignore it. Tries to clamp down on the two mixing emotions of fear and concentrate on the curling heat low in his stomach of him being turned on by this. He tries letting their proximity turn him on, because there *is* something hot about doing this surrounded by their peers: something Shane feels is sexy about their secret.

"They would be so jealous of me. Getting to have you like this," Ilya whispers, and Shane shivers.

When it's over, they take turns getting cleaned up in the bathroom and Shane slips back into bed, still naked, as he waits for Ilya.

"You are staying," Ilya observes.

"Well," Shane murmurs, gesturing to the hallway, where loud male voices can still be heard, "I'm not going out there."

"They would not assume we are fucking," Ilya says, flopping down beside him.

"I *know*," Shane insists, but he's tense again, all the beautiful languidness that Ilya had fucked into him fading. He can't help himself from asking: "You wouldn't, would you?"

"Would not what?"

"Tell anyone that I'm in here," Shane clarifies, heart thumping. He stares at the hotel ceiling. "Because the sneaking around behind people's backs is hot—pretending that they could hear does turn me on," he admits, "but I don't actually want anyone to know."

There's a pause before Ilya asks: "Ever?"

"Not while I'm playing."

Another horrendously long pause. "We will play for long time."

Shane feels cold. He gropes for the blanket, pulling it over him. "Probably."

"So we will hide? For another ten years? Maybe more?" Ilya's voice is so quiet.

"What other choice do we have?" Shane asks. He tries to shrug nonchalantly, but deep down it does hurt: he wants better than this for them. But he doesn't see a scenario where he can continue to play and call Ilya his boyfriend in public.

JJ said it the other day: it would be a scandal. One big, fat, life ruining scandal.

"This is not what I want," Ilya says. "I have been thinking... about what would make me happy... and I want to not have this big secret anymore."

Shane reaches for Ilya's hand. "I wish," he murmurs.

"We can do it," Ilya says, fingers squeezing Shane's. He sounds eager. So sure. "We are brave."

I'm not that brave, Shane thinks.

"Please Shane," Ilya urges, "Let's do this. Let's try. I want to play hockey too, but if it doesn't work, we'd at least be together. If it all blows up in our faces we can go live on tiny island and teach hockey to island kids. We could win gold at the Olympics with kids who have never seen ice."

Shane finds himself smiling despite himself. It's a lovely dream. But that's what it is— a dream. A wish. It's not real.

"It's a nice thought," Shane murmurs. "But that is not how it would work."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's hockey!" Shane exclaims, sitting up. "You heard Marlow— he assumes you're in here with two or three girls. Because that's how it's supposed to be. The idea of you and me is insane."

Ilya's face hardens. "We are not insane."

Shane deflates. "Not to us, but to them—" he gestures blindly to the hallway, where the voices are still present.

"Who cares?" Ilya scoffs.

"I do!" Shane says, loudly, almost too loudly, and he clamps his own hand over his mouth. Ilya stares at the motion, a mix of sadness and anger on his face.

"I don't want to hide anymore, Shane," Ilya tells him.

"We have no choice," Shane insists again.

They sit there, at a stand off. Shane watches the emotions war on Ilya's face; watches him slowly shut down and pull away from him, both emotionally and physically as he rises from the bed.

Shane panics, and grabs his hand. "Come back," he pleads. "Let's just put this on pause for now. We can discuss in the offseason. This summer. After playoffs," he promises, even as his stomach flips. He's not sure what will change in the next four months, but he'll say anything to get Ilya to sit back down.

"After your playoffs, you mean," Ilya says, but he does sit down again, taking Shane into his arms.

"Maybe Ottawa will turn it around," Shane hopes, laying his head on Ilya's chest.

"What a nice thought," says Ilya, and it seems more bitter than usual.

*

The Montreal Voyageurs lose in the Stanley Cup Finals in 5 games to Las Vegas.

Shane is justifiably upset, and even though Ilya thinks he has right to be more upset than Shane given that Ottawa didn't even make the playoffs and there's hum about *another* rebuilding process in Ottawa that Ilya will have to suffer through, he lets Shane wallow in his post-playoff depression.

It means that it's the end of June and two weeks before the Ottawa camp before Ilya and Shane manage to have the conversation they've put on hold since All Star Week.

It's not a long conversation.

"I want— I need— to be honest with people," Ilya says, his voice small and unlike his own. Anya, his new dog, adopted as part of Ilya's attempt to find things that make Ilya— and uniquely Ilya—happy, pants at his feet.

He sits on the edge of Shane's couch, in his Montreal apartment, and can't stop thinking about the time in their lives when he was so dirty of a secret he wasn't even allowed here. Even now he sometimes feels like he doesn't belong here. There's hardly a trace of him. He doesn't even keep *clothes* here, even though there's pieces of Shane scattered all around his house in Ottawa.

He braces for Shane's response.

"We can't— *I* can't," Shane says, predictably. "Ilya, no. I don't want to. Not yet."

Ilya draws in a breath. Says the thing he's been dreading saying: "Maybe this is not working anymore."

Shane blanches. "What?"

"Us. We want different things."

"We want the same thing: each other," Shane counters.

Ilya isn't sure anymore. Yes, he wants Shane, but he doesn't want to hide anymore. He's so tired of being a secret.

"I don't want to be a secret anymore," Ilya says aloud. He strokes Anya's head for comfort and picks up her leash.

He leaves a little bit later, a tentative agreement in place for Shane to give Ilya some space, and for Shane to think about what Ilya needs, and a promise to talk more at the Ottawa camp.

*

Off-Season, Summer 2021

Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

— *Anais Nin*

•

It's been a terrible summer, overall.

Shane can barely bring himself to enter his cottage, spending most of his time at his parent's and falling asleep on their couch more often than not. The only reprieve had been the Ottawa camp, as Ilya had been there too.

As requested, Shane has given Ilya space, but at the camp he thinks it had felt better between them. And while it hadn't been the same— no sneaking into rooms to make-out, no shared heated glances across the ice, and no going home with each other at night— Ilya had been there. They'd had dinner. They'd talked more than they had in the past five months of the hockey season. Maybe not about the big issues between them, but Shane figures they're building up to it. In another three weeks, they'll be at the Montreal camp and they'll talk there.

Shane's sure of it.

"Turning to the NHL," the TSN reporter says from the other room, where his parents are watching TSN's nightly coverage.

Chatter lately has been all about the upcoming NHL expansion draft, which will be held in late July to fill out the roster for the new team, the Calgary Inferno, in the NHL's triumphant return to the Alberta city, after almost two decades away. The rules have been dissected ad nauseam: each team can could protect eight skaters and a goaltender, or seven forwards, three defensemen, and a goaltender; and they had to expose at least two forwards and one defenceman who were under contract for the 2021–22 season. Any player exposed was eligible to be drafted by Calgary and be part of the Inferno by the next morning.

Shane's paid the expansion draft minimal attention. While he will lose a teammate in the draft, he knows that the most important Voyageurs have been protected— himself, obviously, Hayden and JJ. And while it'll suck to lose a teammate, he knows Montreal will rally.

"Teams have begun to release their protection lists for the 2021 expansion draft," the broadcast continues, *"One notable omission from the Ottawa Centaurs protection list? Ilya Rozanov."*

Shane drops the plate he's washing and the glass shatters in the sink. He shoves thumb into his mouth, sucking at the light flow of blood, and steps around the wall separating his parents's kitchen from their living room.

On the television is a split screen with a still of Ilya on one side and his season stats on the other. Shane stares at the screen, horrified.

"A shocker for sure," the analyst is saying. *"Not a lot people in this world that would have said Rozanov would be exposed in this draft, but here we are."*

The other analyst makes a show of shuffling his papers on the desk. *"Doesn't take a genius of a general manager to know who Calgary's taking from the Ottawa Centaurs."*

"No, Mike, it doesn't," the first reporter says, *"Let me be the first to say: Welcome to the Calgary Inferno, Ilya Rozanov."*

The analysts continue talking, but Shane's mom mutes the television, both her and his dad shifting in their seats to look at him.

"Did you know?" Yuna asks. She looks worried.

Shane shakes his head. "No— he has a no-movement clause... How? Their information has to be wrong."

His parents exchange a look; one of those wordless exchanges that soulmates can have. Something he used to have with Ilya. Shane's heart beats faster, and he feels like he should sit down before his legs give out beneath him. He grips the side of the wall for strength, as his parents' eyes shift back to looking at him, pity in their expression.

"Shane..." David tries.

He ignores them and leaves the room, already digging into his pocket and stabbing his finger at the contact card for *Lily*. It rings once, twice— three times, before Ilya finally picks up.

"Shane," he says, and he must be alone if he's using Shane's name. He also sounds half asleep. "It is middle of night." He pauses. "Why are you calling me?"

Belatedly, Shane remembers that Ilya is Croatia with Svetlana, the latter having dragged him there in between their summer camps, as Ilya has been avoiding being in Ottawa too much this summer. Avoiding Shane. Refusing to work on anything that's going on between them.

"TSN just announced you're being exposed in the expansion draft," Shane accuses, his voice steadier than he feels. "But that's a lie— how, *how*—"

"Not lie," Ilya says softly.

"I don't understand, you have a no movement clause in your contact—"

"I wave it."

"Waived," Shane corrects, automatically, before he has fully processed what Ilya has said.

"Yes. Waived it."

Shane feels like he sucker punched. "What— why?"

"General Manager asked. Explained they like me, but Ottawa needs to rebuild," Ilya explains and he may as well be speaking entirely in Russian for all the words make sense to Shane, "My contract is expensive. They wanted to make room for other parts— free up space to have more salary cap."

"You should have said no—"

"What reason?" Ilya scoffs, "They said, Ilya we care about you, this might be a best opportunity to leave and win more cups. NHL wants team to be immediately competitive. Who am I to argue?"

"Me. I'm the reason," Shane insists.

"Oh, am I allowed to tell them that?"

Shane doesn't know what to say. Because of course not— Ilya can't say that. Then people outside their bubble would know. Then he'd be that *gay* hockey player, keeping Ilya Rozanov hostage in Ottawa. Not just Shane Hollander, best player in the world.

He doesn't immediately respond, so Ilya continues: "I couldn't tell them that I need to be in Ottawa, as I am Shane Hollander's secret boyfriend and he needs to hide me close."

Shane squeezes his eyes shut. The words hurt. "Ilya..."

"They made convincing argument," Ilya says softly. "Calgary takes me, better for Ottawa; maybe good for my hockey too. Maybe another cup."

Shane feels stupid as he says: "Calgary will be in the Western Conference."

"Da."

"I'm in the Eastern."

"Shane..."

His breath has been stolen from him. He can't even begin to process with Ilya is telling him. This feels like the end of the world.

"We'll play each other two times a year. We'll never see each other," Shane gets out.

"Shane," Ilya says, again. His voice is so soft, apologetic. "We want different things..."

The word's are like a rough punch to the face. Rougher than any hit he's ever taken on the ice. Shane's entire body tenses and he finds himself sinking onto a step of his parent's stairs. "Camp was good. We were good. I thought—"

"You have changed mind?" Ilya asks.

"No," Shane says, too quickly and too defensively, as he hears Ilya sigh. "But—"

"No, buts," Ilya retorts, "I want to be honest. I want to go to the rink as me— you know this. I have told you this."

"And you can only do that in Calgary?" Shane asks, and his voice feels so small.

There's rustling and Shane thinks Ilya is sitting up in bed. Ilya sighs again, mutters a few things in hushed Russian that Shane can't catch, and then says: "I spent three seasons playing for a shit team so I could be with you. Three bad hockey seasons when I should be playing best hockey of life. Winning cups. But I do not play good hockey." He pauses. "And maybe I am near you, but I do not get to take you anywhere or touch you in public, or tell people about you, even my important people, or really be with you. Do I even have important people? Aside from you? I am never with my team. I barely know them. I never see Svetlana, probably my only friend. Because I am constantly driving the 417 and the 40. Stealing moments. I speak English. I do not go home; I make my home in your city, in your places, with your family. I do not have people aside from you and your people. I do not be me. I am not happy. I am *depressed* about all of this. Depressed so much, I think about whether I need medication— need pills. I hate pills. This all *hurts* me. I live in shadow of Shane Hollander. I am his secret."

"Ilya—"

"I was asked to do something that would fix one thing. One thing that would maybe make me happy. Maybe not play bad hockey."

"Calgary could be terrible too—"

Ilya laughs, bitterly. "That is your response?"

"Ilya..." Shane says, pleading. He knows he is begging; it's probably a pathetic thing to do. But he's not sure what other option is left, because Ilya is slipping through his fingers. "Ilya, I love you. Don't do this."

There's a pause on Ilya's side of the phone before he replies. "It is done. I am exposed. Calgary will be lucky to have me. I am great hockey player."

"Ilya..."

"Goodbye, Hollander," Ilya says softly. "I'll see you at Montreal camp."

The phone clicks and Shane is left staring at it, wondering what he has done. He's not sure where this all went wrong. He drops his face into his hands and groans.

His mom steps around the corner. She must have been listening from the other side, as she just drops down next to him on the stairs and places a hand on his back, rubbing gently.

"It's true, mom," he whispers, "I thought we could fix this, I thought he just needed time, but..."

He trails off and his mom tucks her arm around him and for the first time in as long as he can remember, he leans into her and cries.

*

On July 21 2021, Ilya Rozanov is selected first in the NHL Expansion Draft for the Calgary Inferno. He's in Calgary for the draft, and walks onto the stage to accept his jersey, already

emblazoned with the inaugural Captaincy for the new team.

He shakes hands and can't help himself from flashing the number one with his fingers when he takes a photo with his jersey and the new General Manager for the Inferno, Chris Conway.

The day is fun. The fire motif is everywhere and Ilya loves it. He will be the inferno— lead the team in a blaze of glory. Ilya feels excited about hockey for the first time in a long time, watching as some of the players he has known and admired from across the league get drafted beside him.

If he thinks about Shane, it's fleeting before he forces those thoughts away and thinks about hockey and fire instead.

*

In the East, Shane watches the expansion draft seated on Hayden Pike's couch. By the time they're done, three empty beers sit on the table next to Shane. It's the most he's drank in years.

"I'm sorry, man," Hayden says when Ilya gets drafted and crosses the stage to shake hands with various NHL executives. The image of him flashing the number one while holding the red Inferno jersey is put up consistently throughout the broadcast. Every time Shane feels sick.

"You don't even like him," Shane says, staring hopelessly at the screen.

Hayden shrugs and offers Shane another beer. He takes it gratefully, even if he knows he's going to spend several hours on the treadmill tomorrow working this off.

"Yeah, I'm not the guys biggest fan," Hayden says, flopping down on the couch and watching as Calgary takes their picks from New York. They'll be at Montreal soon. "But I know he makes you happy." He nudges Shane's arm. "Big fan of you being happy."

Shane tips the corners of his mouth up in the approximation of a smile. It doesn't reach his eyes. "I thought we would work this all out."

Hayden hums. "Work out the him wanting to go public thing."

"Yeah," Shane says, watching as the screen flips to Calgary drafts Cliff Marlow— whose contract has allegedly gotten too big for his production— from Boston, which ought to make Ilya happy.

Hayden scoffs. "Selfish, if you ask me."

"You have to say that."

Hayden shakes his head. "No, I don't," he sips his beer. There's some analyst talk while they wait for the next team's list to be on deck. Something about how the Rosanov-Marlow reunion will be something to watch this year, how fans should be excited to have that duo together again. "I think it's bullshit— you have a career to think about. It's not like you guys can't have a future, just like... not now. You had a plan, didn't you? Post Retirement?"

Shane nods, thinking of how many times he's told Ilya that they'll be together once they retire. How his face had done complicated things, and how increasingly, near the end, he'd shut down completely every time it came up. Because retirement is so far away. They're thirty. And still two of the best hockey players in the world— retirement could be a long ways off. Gordie Howe played until he was fifty-two, and sure that was in the 80s, but with nutrition and sports therapy, and proper fitness, there's no way that Shane can't play into his late thirties, early forties if he's real lucky.

Which would be another ten years of hiding.

But hockey is important. His career is important. It's all he's ever worked for, and his career won't survive the headline that *Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are Lovers*; or some

sleazy exposé that reads, *Rozanov Exclusive: The Man that Fucks Shane Hollander*; or any articles that muses, *Does Shane Hollander prefer to be the hole?*

He'll be outed and kicked out. Hockey will be no more.

Shane is trembling as he watches Montreal's logo appear on the screen. Both he and Hayden lean forward on the couch, holding their breath as Gilbert Comeau is selected off their team's roster.

"Damn," Hayden laments, "Good guy."

"Yep," Shane says, and tightens his hold on his beer, willing his hands to stop trembling. It's not even happening—his secret isn't going to be broadcast next— and he's so goddamn terrified.

"You okay?" Hayden says, looking down at Shane's hands and Shane nods roughly.

The analysts launch into their dissection of the pick, and Hayden picks up the remote, muting the television. He shifts on the couch to face Shane more directly.

"Maybe this is a good thing," Hayden says, "Rozanov is further away. We'll play him twice a year. It'll give you some time to get over him." He pauses and Shane tries to nod, even though he wants to protest— he doesn't *want* to get over Ilya— or panic, or throw up, or curl up in a ball on Hayden's couch, and maybe cry. "If he really loved you, he wouldn't be trying to force you out of the closet before you're ready," Hayden adds pointedly.

"I'm not ready," Shane agrees, his heart beating frantically. Because being outed is the most terrifying thing he can think of.

Hayden smiles at him. "And that's okay!" he confirms, a bit too enthusiastically. "Who is Rosanov to tell you when *you* need to be ready?"

*

Ilya arrives at the Montreal camp the last week of July in his Inferno jersey. The kids are excited, anxious to touch the jersey and gushing over the fact they're one of the first to have pictures of one of the new team's players.

He's a hit. Ilya plays it up.

"Now you can love me freely," he teases the Montreal kids wearing Voyageur jerseys. "No more hiding how much you adore me!"

"Nous n'avons plus besoin de vous détester. Mais on en trouvera un!" one kid chirps him as he skates around

Ilya doesn't understand but JJ Boiziau belts out a laugh and claps him on the back. "He says, you may not play for Ottawa anymore, so he doesn't have to hate you— but he'll find a reason!" JJ laughs and then looks at him sternly. "Same."

Ilya shakes off JJ's hand and retorts: "I'll just have to settle for beating you twice a year."

"You might have better luck in Calgary!" JJ chirps back.

Ilya waves his hand at him dismissively, skating off and doing a lap of the rink, watching as the kids run drills back and forth across the sheet. He loves these camps, the hockey, the kids, even most of the coaches. Maybe he can convince Shane to run one in Calgary next year. It'll be another week of their time, but even if Shane's not up for it, maybe Ilya can recruit some of his new teammates and run it himself.

He thinks he's like that. He thinks that would make him happy.

He's trying to find things that make him happy.

"Jerseys colours look good on you," murmurs Shane, as Ilya slides to a stop in front of him, snowing him with ice.

"I look good in everything," Ilya jokes.

Shane's smile is forced. "You do."

Ilya grins at him, easily. He wants it to be easy between them. Maybe they're not together—maybe they can't be together— but he still wants to be okay. Shane is important to him. He always will be.

The same easiness is not on Shane's face.

"Dinner later?" Ilya asks, trying to coax Shane into ease.

Shane's head jerks up. Something lights in his eyes and Ilya hates that he has to be the one to temper it.

"As friends," Ilya adds and watches Shane's face instantly deflate.

"Friends," Shane repeats.

"Aren't we?"

"I don't want to be your friend," Shane tells him.

Ilya looks at the ice, shuffles some of the snow he sprayed around with his stick. "Shane..."

"Okay, dinner," Shane concedes, quickly. "My place?"

"Joe Beef?" he counters, even though he's not even sure he can get a table, but that's not the point. It's a test.

Shane blanches, and fails the test. "We *can't*."

"If we are friends," Ilya presses.

"I wouldn't go to Joe fucking Beef with Hayden, or JJ," Shane hisses between his teeth.

"Justin Trudeau and Barack Obama went to Joe Beef," Ilya counters, as this is one of the only facts he knows about Joe Beef, aside from the fact he wants to try it, and he has no one in Montreal to go to it with. Except Shane.

"My place," Shane insists through clenched teeth.

Ilya sighs. "Okay. Seven?" he asks, and when Shane nods, Ilya skates away.

*

Shane kisses him the second he's through the door, backing Ilya up against the door and kissing him thoroughly.

For a minute, Shane thinks Ilya has forgotten the distance between them, as Ilya kisses back, automatic, and that Shane can drag him into the bedroom and get Ilya inside him and fix all of this.

He whines into Ilya's mouth, which seems to startle Ilya out of the habit.

"Shane," Ilya says, and he's a bit breathless. "Shane..."

"Ilya, Ilya," Shane chants back and goes back to kissing him. He takes Ilya's face in his hands and kisses him sweetly, then harder, then nips at Ilya's lip and pushes his hands under Ilya's shirt.

"Блять," Ilya swears and then he's kissing Shane back fiercely, walking Shane backwards towards the bedroom before picking Shane up beneath his thighs and throwing him on the bed.

"Илья, Любимый," Shane says, looking up at him. Ilya's face goes soft and he's pulling his teeshirt over his head, shucking it to the side.

Shane unbuttons his own shirt, pushing it his shoulder, as Ilya steps forward and takes charge of unbuttoning Shane's jeans and pulling them over his hips. Shane's underwear is thrown to the side, and Ilya runs his hands over Shane's thighs.

"Это плохая идея," Ilya murmurs.

"No, no," Shane says, as Ilya spits in his hand and wraps it around Shane's cock. "We're always a good idea."

Ilya leans forward, covering Shane with his body and kissing him again. Shane runs one hand over Ilya and gropes wildly above his head with the other, searching for the lube he stashed under his pillow. He finds it and presses it into Ilya's hand.

"Fuck me," Shane pants between kisses, "Ilya please."

"This is not dinner," Ilya murmurs, but he uncaps the lube and squirts some into his hand, warming it between his fingers.

Shane arches an eyebrow. "Could be," he says, cheekily, but the snark is lost in a moan as one of Ilya's fingers circles him. "Yes...." he moans.

Ilya kisses his neck and works him open with quick, nimble digits. When Shane's ready, he steps back, undoes his own jeans and pushes them and his underwear to the ground, before crawling over Shane and slowly guiding himself into him.

"Ilya..." Shane groans as Ilya thrusts into him and then they're moaning and moving together and Shane slips happily into the perfection of it all.

When they're finished, Ilya pulls out and flops on the bed. Shane rolls onto his side, mouthing at Ilya's skin as he burrows into his neck. His body— his soul— feels more at ease than it has in months. He feels content down into his bones.

Ilya, for his part, is oddly still.

"Ilya?" Shane murmurs.

"This..." Ilya starts, "This doesn't fix anything. This shouldn't have happened..."

Shane's body instantly tenses. "Why not?"

"Because nothing has changed. For me or for you," Ilya says softly.

Shane tries to laugh it off. "Of course nothing has changed. I love you— I have loved you for years."

"In private."

Shane goes from content to angry in a second flat. "Of course *in private*," Shane snaps, sitting up, "How else could we?"

"We could say it. We could say it out loud."

"Ilya," Shane says, exasperated. He wonders vaguely how many times they can have the same argument. "We can't."

"I wanted to eat at Joe Beef with you," Ilya says, so soft. He sounds remorseful. He's not looking at Shane. "I wanted to try it. Everyone says it so good," Ilya rambles. "I wanted to be seen with you. Maybe hold your hand across the table."

"We *can't*," Shane insists. "Fuck, Ilya, don't you think I want that?"

"I don't know," Ilya says, "I am not sure you do. If you did, we would have plan to go public."

Shane presses his hands against his face, frustrated. "We have a plan. We are together— and once we're retired, we'll go public."

Ilya shakes his head. Shane can see a tear in the side of his eye that Ilya is attempting to blink back. "I don't want to wait."

"We *have to*."

"No," Ilya says. "You're just scared."

"Of course I'm scared!" Shane exclaims.

He's terrified, in truth. Of what would happen if they let more people— the world— into this private bubble of theirs. He's scared of the locker room talk, of the slurs that would be thrown his way, of the adding being gay on top of being an Asian minority in the NHL, and of what people would say about the two of them, about him getting fucked by his rival. Of all the games Montreal's lost against Boston or Ottawa, and what people would say about that. About what they would say about their integrity, and competitiveness, knowing that Ilya has languished on a shit team for years, just to be *available to Shane*.

"Why are you not scared?" Shane questions.

"I am scared," Ilya admits. "I just am tired. Of hiding me. Of hiding you. Of hiding how much I love you. I want to go to the rink— how do you say it? Authentically."

"Authentically," Shane supplies, automatically.

"Yes. Authentically. I want to go to the rink authentically, as me," Ilya confirms.

Shane sighs. His body is tense with fear, but he forces himself to breathe and slowly, he offers, "Maybe— Maybe, we could find a way for you to tell people that your bisexual, without them finding out about me."

Ilya shakes his head. He shifts out of bed, groping for where his briefs are and pulls them on. He looks at Shane, pauses until Shane meets his eyes. "I want to say: I, Ilya Rozanov love a man, and that man's name is Shane Hollander."

Shane's eyes prickle with tears. His breath stutters, and anything he wants to say is stuck in his chest. Even Ilya saying it here, hypothetically, causes him to panic. He pulls a pillow to his chest, tries to breathe deeply.

Ilya looks at him, moving closer when he realizes Shane is on the verge of a panic attack. Ilya takes him into his arms.

"Shane, Shane," he whispers, "It's okay, it's okay. I won't say that—"

"But you want to?" Shane forces out, between ragged breaths.

Ilya is silent, just holding him. He applies gentle pressure around Shane, until Shane starts to calm down. There's tears staining Shane's cheeks, and he's not exactly sure why.

"You want to?" Shane repeats.

"Da," Ilya says, "I do."

*

Ilya spends the first part of August packing up his Ottawa house and preparing to move to Calgary. He can't quite bring himself to sell it though, so much of the furniture is staying. Through his agent, he's found a property management company that will maintain it, and at some point will rent it out to someone. When he's ready for someone else to live here. In the space he kinda shared with Shane.

So it's just about packing his personal items... and Anya's personal items, as there's no way he's giving her back to Troy and Harris now. He thinks Anya will like the Alberta city. He's been told there is a lot of space, and wide open skies.

He's packing up his trophy room, because this is the one room he does not trust movers with, when his doorbell rings. Ilya wipes his hands and goes to the door, where Anya is already barking wildly.

He opens the door expecting Troy and Harris, or Bood even, and is surprised when he opens it to reveal Yuna Hollander.

"Surprised to see me?" Yuna asks, smiling, as Ilya opens the door to let her in.

"A little," he admits.

Shane's mother toes off her shoes and bends over to say hello to Anya. "Just because my son and you aren't on the best terms doesn't mean you're not still mine too."

Ilya's eyes start to feel hot and tight at her words. "Oh."

She squeezes his arm. "Come along," she says, "I assume you're packing? Let me help and you can tell me about Calgary."

Ilya leads her to his trophy room. "Movers handle most things. But I do this one," he tells her.

"Of course," she agrees with a laugh and he hands her packing supplies.

They work and Yuna asks him questions about the draft, his new place in Calgary, and the team. She asks after the coaching staff, and what conversations he's had. It's the first time anyone has expressed any interest in his new opportunity. Nobody else has bothered to ask how he feels about the roster that will surround him, whether he's optimistic, or how he feels about the new city.

"I am excited," he admits. "More than I have been in a while."

Yuna smiles, a bit sadly, as she wraps Ilya's gold medal from the 2009 World Junior Hockey Championship. "I was so mad when you won this over us," Yuna laughs. "Funny how things work out."

The atmosphere in the room is still pleasant, but Ilya feels like they're approaching the elephant in the room. He stills, grasping a box with hands and white knuckles.

"I love your son," Ilya says quietly.

Yuna carefully places the medal in the box. "We know that Ilya," she promises, and then gestures to the couch in the room, "Sit, please."

Ilya obeys, automatically, sinking into the couch in the room. He waits, slightly nervous for what this woman is going to say. He doesn't want her or David to hate him, because they've meant— they mean— so much to him.

"My son is a lot of things," Yuna says, tone slow and affectionate, "He dedicated, smart, generous— he is a great hockey player."

"Probably better than me," Ilya admits, in the safety of this room.

Yuna chuckles and takes his hand. "Shane is my pride and joy. I love him, and I will always support him," she says, and then pauses, meaningfully. "But he has been working towards a singular goal all his life. He has been able to do that, as his father and I have worked to ensure he can. He has not had to consider anything else." Yuna cups Ilya's cheek. "Not like you. He has not had to have this type of courage."

Ilya swallows hard. "Shane is courageous," he says.

"Yes," Yuna agrees, "But it is different. He has not had to search for happiness like you."

Ilya gives her the barest of nods. His eyes sting.

"I would have loved to meet the woman that made you this brave," Yuna says, softly, still cupping his cheek, "Maybe she could have taught me a thing or two to tell my own son."

All day, packing this house up, Ilya has wanted to cry. He thinks he's wanted to cry for months. In that moment, he does.

*

Chapter End Notes

for anyone that actually cares about hockey, the 2021 expansion draft created the Seattle Kraken. I've never been to Seattle.

But I do know Calgary (and Montreal; and Ottawa). I wanted to write about Calgary (and write about good Calgary hockey), and memorialize the name of the women's hockey team the Calgary Inferno, who had one of the best logos in hockey. Check it. Also I wanted to keep Ilya in Canada. For plot.

I'm not reliable on this platform, but come find me at [@veilofimagination](https://twitter.com/veilofimagination)

Chapter 2: 2021-22 NHL Season

Chapter Notes

"Oh?"

"Well," Ilya says, "Hockey is a tough world. Much out dated perspectives. Makes it hard to be you all the time."

He pauses to make sure he has the reporters attention, and is relieved when the reporter is staring at him, rapt with interest.

"But I want to change that. I am on quest to live my best, most authentic life at hockey rink," Ilya smiles, "So I will now tell you— and tell world: I am bisexual."

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

2021-2022 NHL Season

Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.

— Rumi

*

Ilya— and Anya— arrive in Calgary the first week of September. He's greeted by team officials at the airport, and, much to his amusement, bestowed with a white cowboy hat upon arrival.

"It's tradition," one of the officials meeting him whispers, in a tone that secretly says *don't mind the locals*, but Ilya is delighted. It is a funny tradition, the bestowing of a white hat on special visitors and dignitaries, but it makes him feel special, and a little giddy, and he knows instantly this hat is going in his trophy room.

"Special breed of Western hospitality," another official mutters, and Ilya can't help but agree. He feels wholesomely welcomed.

He's brought to his new house which is perched on the edge of the escarpment of an inner city community. The house is secluded, surrounded by mature trees, with a restaurant-caliber kitchen on the main airy floor and a NHL-caliber gym in the basement. There's a hot tub on the patio, and the second floor of the house is mostly wall-to-wall of one-way windows offering views of the downtown Calgary skyline, as well as the arena, which he is informed is affectionately nicknamed the *Saddledome* given its shape and proximity to the rodeo grounds, home of Calgary's giant outdoor show, and the absolutely awe-inducing Rocky Mountains. They're beautiful and humongous and Ilya can't wait to get out there.

"The views are incredible, aren't they?" one of the officials says, smiling at him as he takes it in.

"It is amazing."

"Welcome to Calgary, Ilya," the woman says, warmly.

Ilya feels a hum of excitement in chest that he hasn't felt in ages. He can't wait to get started.

*

Shane closes his cottage door for the final time for the summer. He stares at it for a moment, before swinging his bags over his shoulder and making his way to his Jeep.

His world feels smaller, as he makes the drive from his cottage to Montreal for pre-season camp. There's something missing, a gap in his heart, in his lungs, in everything.

Ilya.

He misses him desperately. They'd seen each other periodically over the summer. Nothing consistent, although Ilya had come for a goodbye dinner at his parents', and Shane had been

there, a week before he left for Calgary. Ilya had done a puzzle with David and Yuna had given him ice cream to finish, so it didn't languish in her freezer. It had felt normal until it didn't, with Ilya giving Shane the same goodbye he gave Shane's parents: a tight hug and kiss on the cheek.

Their goodbye felt odd. Not like the other times Ilya has left for his team. It felt like the beginning— stilted and not sure where either of them goes from here.

For the first time in a long time, Shane isn't sure how to prepare to play hockey.

*

Ilya loves this team already.

They do their pre-seasoning training in the mountains. The owners obviously have money to burn because they put the team up in Canmore the first week of September and the Inferno spend the entire week training in the outdoor air.

He races his team up a mountain, just barely beating Cliff Marlow to the top, who shoves him instantly to the ground.

"For fucks sake, Marlow!" pants Gilbert Comeau, who is third up the hill behind them. "You're going to kill our captain before the season even starts and then where will we be?"

"Just fine," snipes Cliff amicably. "He's been slumming it in Ottawa for three years. Probably lost all that magic from the Boston days."

Ilya jumps on his back, wrapping his giant body around Cliff's shoulders and covering his mouth with his hand. "My magic is just fine!"

"Your game is probably boring now! Like the city," Cliff laughs, shoving him off.

"I am not boring; is not in my *genetics*. I am always life of party," Ilya says, jumping off Cliff and slapping his teammate— his friend?— upside the head.

Comeau chuckles and lowers himself to the ground, as other members of the newly minted Calgary Inferno make it to the top, including their coach Darren Sutton, who comes in a pathetic last.

They guys chirp him for that, but the Canadian man— a home grown, Alberta product whose used to play in the show and has coached in the league since the early 2000s — just drawls, "I'm thirty years older than all y'all."

Ilya likes this coach already. Dry humour that meshes with Ilya's Russian style perfectly. Coach Wiebe in Ottawa was great, but Ilya feels a kinship with this coach, who apparently is a multi-millionaire but also kind of looks like he lives in his truck, or his tractor, more rightly. His famous for his unique interactions with the media, and his dry approach in his replies to their dumb, patented, questions. Once, during an actual NHL playoff interview, when asked what would make the difference during the series, Sutton's reply was: "The team that wins four games is gonna win the series".

Correction, Ilya already loves this man.

"I love all y'all!" Ilya shouts, testing the new slang in his mouth.

The team exhales with laughter.

*

Calgary roars their way into existence, with a 4-0-1 record in their first five games.

Ilya has 5 goals and 4 assists. His best start in years. He's flying out there.

There's something to be said for playing with no expectations, and Calgary certainly doesn't have any. Nobody knows what to expect from an expansion team in a city that hasn't had a team in years. But the city is ready and excited and shows up in the arena a sea of absolute red, bright and alive and burning.

Ilya thrives in it. Loves amping up the crowd by throwing up his arms and thumping his fist against the C on his chest; a gladiator in crimson. He feels like the spark in the middle of his inferno.

*

"304," Shane says, under his breath, as he and Ilya slide up to each other at the face off dot. Ilya doesn't reply, barely looks at him. Just squares up and focuses on the ice in front of them. Then the ref drops the puck: Ilya wins it for Calgary cleanly, sliding it back to one of his defenders.

Shane's been nervous for this matchup. The media has been hyping up the game for weeks—sports media has gotten excited every single one of Calgary "firsts" so far this inaugural season— but the first matchup of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov in Rozanov's new colours has received extra attention. Return of the Rivals.

The media's been itchy— it's hard to hype up a rivalry when you play in different conferences. When the teams play twice a year. But the media is trying.

Maybe Shane should have thought of this years ago. Maybe it'll be easier to come out as being in love with his rival, if the rivalry ceases to be a NHL narrative. Maybe—

Thwack.

Shane's shoved into the board by one of Calgary's defencemen, the impact surprising him, for all he's been lost in his thoughts. He's labouring as he skates away for a line change, and

when he's parked himself on the bench, Coach Thériault is quick to bend down to him and hiss into his ear: "Il faut que tu te reprennes ! I refuse to lose to these *newbies*."

Next to him on the bench, Hayden buries a laugh in his gloves.

"Get out there," Thériault orders, minutes later, and then Shane and Hayden are over the boards, along with their other line-mate. "Je veux un but!"

*

The game ends 2-1 Inferno and Thériault is murderous in the locker-room.

"Ce sont des bébés!" Thériault bellows, slamming his clipboard into one of the stalls.

"You'd think he forgot that they all played for other teams last season?" Hayden murmurs to Shane, as Thériault continues yelling. "Like Comeau sat right there."

Comeau had one of the goals tonight. Shane thinks that's probably part of the issue. Ilya had scored the other one— a pretty wrister right over the shoulder of their goalie, Patrice Drapeau. Shane had been on the bench at the time, and it had been impossible not to admire how beautiful Ilya had been.

After a while, Thériault stops yelling and Shane peels off his equipment, anxious to get out of here. Their plane leaves mid-morning tomorrow for a short flight to Vancouver, which means the team has a night off and the locker room is humming with everyone making plans before curfew.

"Tu viens?" JJ asks. Hayden and JJ both look at him expectantly, waiting for him to agree to go to some bar nearby with a few of the other players.

"Bah, pas moi," Shane replies, shaking his head and JJ puts on a pout.

"Shane, come on," Hayden argues. He looks at him pointedly: "What else do you have to do?"

Shane shrugs. "I'm tired buddy. And it's back to back games."

"Aye, aye, Captain," JJ jokes. "An early night, bien sûr."

Shane laughs, claps JJ on the back and nudges Hayden on the shoulder as his friend looks at him, a bit concerned. "See you on the plane."

*

Shane sits on his bed, in room 304 at the Westin in downtown Calgary, and waits.

He's so nervous. He hasn't been this nervous waiting in a hotel room since this thing between Ilya and him was new and still felt way too dangerous to let himself have this, even in private.

Shane knows that things aren't good between them right now. This is the least amount they've messaged each other in years, not that it keeps Shane from checking. But the *Lily* contact has remained eerily silent. It worries him, a constant thought nagging him in the back of his head as he is always wondering why, and thinking about what Ilya is up to, and always, always, missing him.

He's starting to panic, the longer he waits without a knock at the door. *Why is Ilya making him sweat? Did something happen?* Shane reviews the game in his head; he didn't see Ilya take any problematic hits. He looked fine all game. Skated hard. The goal was beautiful.

All signs point to him being okay.

Shane's brain is spiralling when there's a knock at the door and he jumps, opening the door quickly to usher Ilya in.

Except it's not Ilya.

"Hey buddy," Hayden says, awkwardly, "Can I come in?"

Shane opens the door a bit wider and Hayden steps through. "Okay," he says, and closes the door. Once it's closed he feels safe to say: "But Ilya should be here soon..."

Hayden shakes his head. "That's why I'm here," he says, perching awkwardly on the side of the room's dresser. He shoves the remote out of the way of his ass. "Rozanov's not coming."

The words don't really make sense.

"What do you mean?" Shane says slowly.

"He pulled me aside in the bar," Hayden tells him, shuffling a bit awkwardly, "He knows you're waiting here... but he's not coming."

"That doesn't make any sense," Shane replies, as it doesn't. How is Ilya *not coming* here? Not coming to see Shane? They haven't seen each other in months.

"Buddy," Hayden says softly.

"I don't understand," Shane repeats, a bit pathetically.

"He said that if he came here, he'd just— well he used some words I don't want to repeat when thinking about the two of you together— and you guys would fall back into things,"

Hayden says, all rushed. "He said it's clear you guys want and need different things and he doesn't think"— Hayden closes his eyes, clearly uncomfortable— "that spending the night with you would change anything." Hayden sighs. "And he doesn't want to lead you on, or hurt you."

Shane stares at Hayden, taking it all in. The words make sense, but the context doesn't. Why would *Ilya*, his Ilya, the love of his fucking life, say something like that? They were going to get through this.

They were going to get through this.

Right?

"Fuck, I'm an idiot," Shane says, finally.

"No, man," Hayden protests, "If anything he's an idiot. I've always said—"

Shane cuts him off, "I'm an idiot because it's really over and I'm too stupid to see that."

Hayden looks a bit uncomfortable and is too slow to open his mouth to correct Shane, before Shane is barrelling on, lamenting: "We've been together—kinda— since our rookie year—"

"Before, apparently," Hayden grumbles.

"— and we were building something. I thought we were building something. Something for the future. But it's over," Shane says, sinking onto the floor in front of the bed with a thud. "He doesn't want me anymore."

Hayden sinks down beside him, shoulder to shoulder. "I'm sorry, Shane."

Shane can feel the tears welling up in his eyes but he can't cry here, abandoned in his hotel room and sitting on the floor with Hayden Pike, even if Hayden is his best friend and only confidant.

Shane brushes the back of his hand across his face and it comes away wet. "Okay," he says, trying to keep his voice steady, "Thanks for coming to tell me. You can go."

Hayden shuffles a bit on the floor. His shoulder brushing up against Shane's and staying, a warm steady presence. "Not going anywhere, buddy."

*

Ilya has just thrown back his fourth shot of vodka at the bar of the Bourbon Room when Cliff Marlow slaps him on the back.

"Celebrating?"

"Da," Ilya says, sarcastically, knowing Cliff won't pick up on it.

"Great goal," Cliff says, holding up two fingers to the bartender.

"Thanks," Ilya mutters, taking up one of the shots the bartender pours for them and clinks it against Cliff's, before tossing it back. Bourbon this time. More apt.

"This is fucking fun," Cliff laughs, referring to their 22-10-4 record approaching December. "Who would have thunk it?"

"No one," Ilya says, smiling slightly, even though tonight's win feels lesser. Usually he loves beating Shane, but tonight... it feels weird. Maybe because he's sent Hayden Pike to Shane's hotel room instead of himself.

Cliff throws an arm over Ilya's shoulder, and suddenly it's like old times. "See anyone you like?"

Ilya almost laughs. *Yes, he wants to say, I did. On the ice. He's in room 304 with Hayden Pike, because I'm in the process of breaking his heart, so we can match, as he already broke mine.*

Instead, he makes a show of scanning the room. Cliff waits. *Cliff Marlow is friend, Ilya thinks, he's been one of your friends since rookie year. Big tough Marlow loves you, in his own way.* He decided to test the water: "That one, by billiards. Dark hair, blue shirt."

Cliff pauses briefly, only a little hesitation in his voice when he clarifies: "The dude holding the pool cue?"

"Da," Ilya says, and waits.

Cliff hums. "Okay," he says finally.

"I am bisexual," Ilya clarifies.

Cliff looks at him and quirks a bushy eyebrow. "Right on," he says, and shifts back to the bartender. "Two more I think."

The bartender pours and Cliff shifts one of the shots towards Ilya. Picks his up and goes to clink his glass against Ilya's. "Cheers to that then."

"You have problem?" Ilya says, accepting the cheers, but pausing before shooting.

Cliff swallows his shot, and wipes his mouth with his sleeve. "Nope."

"Okay. Good."

"Explains some stuff."

"Oh?"

"Always thought you were flirting with Scott Hunter, amount you chirped him."

Ilya is immediately offended, his eyebrows skyrocketing into his brow. "Hunter is *old*. And definitely not hot."

"Right," Cliff chuckles. It's an easy chuckle, and Ilya relaxes.

"Definitely *not* Scott Hunter. I wouldn't be caught dead with Scott Hunter," Ilya scoffs.

Cliff belts out a laugh and claps Ilya on the back. "Alright. So, never wing-manned for a dude picking up a dude before. How's this work?"

Ilya pauses. He doesn't want to discourage Cliff's enthusiasm for his secret, but also, he doesn't want to pick anyone up tonight. He just wants to drown his sorrow with his buddy, even if he can't tell his Cliff why he's sad.

"Not really in mood tonight, Mar," he says, shrugging. He orders them another two drinks, and takes up a seat on the bar stool.

"Okay," Cliff says, easy enough, sliding in beside him, "So who is your type, if not Scott Hunter?"

Shane Hollander, Ilya thinks, but cannot say aloud. He wouldn't give up Shane's secret, even if he would love to be able to shout: *I love, am in love, am so desperately, deliriously, painfully in love with Shane Hollander. He is the most beautiful person in the world, and I would have to live and die a thousand times before I could tell you the extent to which I love him.*

Instead, he looks to the screen where ESPN is playing highlights from a few games around the league. "Matti Jalo, is, as they say, blindingly hot."

Cliff looks startled for a second and then laughs. "A girl I dated over the summer said that."

"She has good taste," Ilya smirks.

"Oh yeah?" Cliff nudges him with his elbow. "Am I blindingly hot too?"

Ilya snorts. He raps a hand against the bar and starts laughing. It feels good, the burst of laughter pushing against the sadness that had settled in over the past few days, in the lead-up to the Montreal-Calgary game.

Cliff looks expectant, and Ilya marvels a bit at how easy this has been. How good it feels. *This was easy, so easy. I did it and nothing—pun intended—burned*, he thinks, joyfully, as he laughs.

"What's so funny?" their teammate Nico Karlsson asks, approaching them at the bar.

Cliff looks at him, waiting for Ilya to take the lead and Ilya feels a wave of gratitude towards him for letting Ilya control the response.

"I have just told Cliff here that I am bisexual," Ilya says, and watches as Karlsson's eyebrows raise slightly. No other indication of malice flickers across the Swede's face, so he continues: "And Cliff has just asked if he is hot."

"You said that girl had good taste!" Cliff says, gesturing the length of his body.

"Regarding Jalo!" Ilya laughs. He feels a bit lighter. *It's out there, it's out there*, he chants to himself, *It feels good*.

Karlsson snorts and pulls up a seat. "Well, I may be a straight man, but even I can admit Jalo is good looking," he pauses, pointedly, then adds: "For a Finn."

*

Shane moves through the season like molasses. It's his worst season of his career to date, and he catches himself wondering sometimes if what made him great may have been... Ilya. Maybe they made each other great.

Then he catches a clip from Sportsnet, or sees something on TSN, or ESPN, or hears about it on RDS or Radio-Canada, and has to admit Ilya is having a banner year.

So maybe it was just Ilya, making Shane great.

It's the mid-January before Shane finally sits down and forces himself to watch a full Calgary Inferno game. The commentators are buzzing with excitement about the team, rounding into the New Year first in their division and closing in on third in the Western Conference.

Ilya is beautiful in the game. Shane watches, enraptured. He can't take his eyes off Ilya, even when he doesn't have the puck.

Shane misses him with his whole being. It aches inside of him, the places where Ilya is missing.

The Inferno win the game. Ilya ends it with a Gordie Howe hat trick — a goal, an assist, and a fight— alongside a standard hat trick of three goals. Not a feat that has been achieved many times before.

"What a game from Rozanov," the commentator says, "He was, no pun intended, on fire tonight. I don't know who he thought was watching, but damn. He played a special one tonight."

Me, Shane thinks, I'm watching. Is he playing for me?

He watches the replays on mute, spilling into his fist.

*

At the end of January, Calgary heads east for a horrendous seven game road trip down the Eastern Seaboard.

Montreal and Calgary meet again, in Montreal this time and Ilya's hands itch the entire time he is there, desperate to get into his car and drive to Shane's apartment to sleep. His body feels off the whole day, like it's supposed to be somewhere else, doing other things, in another place. Like sleepwalking through someone else's dream. *This is not my life*, he thinks, more than once.

Thankfully, his team leaves the same night of the game, losing the game in OT, going straight to the airport and south to Ottawa for back to back games.

It doesn't feel any better there. Playing against his old teammates is weird enough— beating them 6-0 even worse. He's grateful for the post-game hugs from Bood, Troy and Harris, but he just wants to go to his *house* or Shane's parent's house. He wants to do a puzzle with David, or eat Yuna's chicken parmesan and curl up on their couch with an entire tub of ice cream to himself. He wants to see his *family*. Except they're not his family anymore.

At least he's not forced to stay in Ottawa overnight in a house that isn't his own. They depart immediately after the game, poised to spend their day off in Toronto and he feels both sick and thankful about that. It doesn't give him an opportunity to see Shane after either of the games, but that isn't to say he doesn't dream of it.

David sends him a text as he's on the tarmac in Ottawa — *good games, kid* — and Ilya's not sure if that makes it better, or not.

*

"I don't think I can play the All Star Game," Shane says, when Rose's face appears on Face-Time. "I can't see him."

"Hello to you too," Rose quips.

"Hello," Shane says, then immediately repeats: "I don't think I can play the All Star Game."

"So don't." Rose shrugs in her rectangle.

Shane stares at her. "I've played every year since I was a rookie except one, because I was injured."

Rose rolls her eyes. "Then be injured."

"I can't just fake an injury," Shane says, aghast.

Rose laughs at him. "Why not? You don't think that nobody has done that before? Come on, Shane."

Shane blanches in horror at the suggestion. Then, quickly, in his mind, he runs through the history of All Star Games. There was that one year, when Oli Koskinen was suspiciously absent. Coverage theorized he had taken a bad hit to the knee, but Shane watched those replays over and over again, and he was never sure. Same with Eli Smith (wrist injury) and Taylor Camden (undisclosed lower body) in more recent years.

"Holy shit," Shane says and his eyes are comically wide in his tiny square.

Rose laughs even harder. "Just say you're injured. Don't go. We can go to Cabo."

Shane purses his lips. "If I'm injured, I can't just go to Cabo."

"You can!" Rose insists, giggling. "Nobody will know. Sure people will speculate, but it's harmless."

Shane thinks about it for a few minute, running the scenarios through his head. "I'll be suspended for a game if the league thinks I'm faking." Ludicrously, Rose shrugs. "Those are the rules," he clarifies, and Rose gives him a look that says, *so, what?* "My mom will kill me," Shane adds.

"You're thirty," Rose chides him. "Plus won't she kinda get it? Avoiding Ilya. She knows how much you're hurting."

Shane nods, relenting slightly. "I'll think about it."

Two weeks later, Shane goes to Thériault and tells him he's tweaked his knee and can't risk the All Star Game if they're going to make that final playoff push. Predictably, Thériault is outraged and demands he rest. There's discussion all over sports media about his lower body injury, but he's been such a boy-scout of a player all these years, nobody dares call him a liar.

Shane and Rose go to Cabo.

They sunbathe and laugh and get pissed on tequila and fruity cocktails with umbrellas in them, and on the second night when Shane is so drunk that he tries to kiss her, Rose just quietly redirects his face with her entire palm and hugs him instead, holding him as he melts down and cries, on the beach of their private villa, huddled together in the sand.

*

The Calgary Inferno lose in the Conference Finals to Colorado, who go on to win the Stanley Cup. Ilya can't find it in his heart to be that disappointed— there were no expectations for this team, and he led them to the Conference Finals. His first playoff appearance in four seasons. This team's first appearance ever.

The Montreal Voyageurs lose in the first round; a pitiful showing after last year's Stanley Cup appearance. Nobody is saying it's Shane's fault explicitly, but analysts everywhere are speculating about what has thrown off the hockey's stars game all year. Shane's always known that Montreal is a tough hockey media market, but the Canadian press is relentless. "*He's been an utter ghost all year,*" said one analyst, and Shane hears that criticism when he closes his eyes, right after: "*We want different things*" and "*I want to go to the rink authentically, as me.*" Shane limps into the off season, feeling every bit of a failure.

*

Off-Season, Summer 2022

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it.

— *Brene Brown*

*

On the request of the Inferno's management, Ilya does an interview for *The Athletic* right at the end of June, set to appear in their first edition in July.

Most of the questions are predictably about hockey and Ilya answers them with as much ease as he can in his second language, pleased to be talking about Calgary's success and his own hockey revival. He handles his time in Ottawa carefully, stating that he enjoyed his time there (true) and that it was a good move after Boston (also true), but that at his age he wasn't interested in rebuilding again and while he wishes Ottawa much success, he needed a fresh start (also true).

Near the end of the interview, the young man reporting for *The Athletic* asks: "Over the years there's been a lot of speculation about whether you settled in Ottawa for someone special. Any truth to that rumour?"

Ilya laughs, easily, but inside his heart is pounding. His secret— Shane's secret— their secret, so close to the surface.

"Net— No," Ilya lies, smoothly, plastering a smile on his face. "But I would like if you did not print such speculation, even if it is not true," he adds, and the reporter slowly nods, obviously a bit disappointed. "I will give you bigger scoop?" Ilya suggests, and is left wondering if that's the right word, until the reporter looks up, suddenly eager.

"Oh?"

"Well," Ilya says, "Hockey is a tough world. Much out dated perspectives. Makes it hard to be you all the time."

He pauses to make sure he has the reporters attention, and is relieved when the reporter is staring at him, rapt with interest.

"But I want to change that. I am on quest to live my best, most authentic life at hockey rink," Ilya smiles, "So I will now tell you— and tell world: I am bisexual."

*

The Athletic publishes the article right before the Game Changers' Ottawa camp.

"Câlisse de tabarnak," JJ Boiziau swears, lounging on Shane's condo's patio with a beer in hand, one long leg swinging over the arm of his chair. "Have you seen this?" he asks Shane and Hayden, holding out his phone in front of him and wiggling it.

Hayden leans over in his chair, pushing his sunglasses up onto his head so he can read JJ's screen. "*Exclusive — Authenticity at the Rink: Ilya Rozanov Comes Out As NHL's Sole Bisexual Player*," Hayden reads aloud, "Holy shit."

Hayden looks up at Shane, the panic on his face almost laughable, if Shane was capable of laughing at this moment.

JJ continues reading. "*2009 1st overall draft pick Ilya Rozanov has never been a shy figure of the NHL. He does everything on the ice a 110%: skates hard, shoots hard, checks hard, competes hard. Rozanov has always been singularly focused on playing great hockey. Now he's approaching his life with the same fortitude.*"

JJ chuckles under this breath, then shakes his head, clearly bewildered. He continues, "*I am on quest to live my best, most authentic life at hockey rink,*" Rozanov said, *leaning forward during our interview, as if he had a secret to share— because he does, one few in the NHL have managed to say out loud. "I will now tell [the] world: I am bisexual'.*"

JJ stops reading and makes some random comment to Hayden, causing Hayden to chuckle, but Shane can't hear them. Shane just gawks at the phone in JJ's hand, struggling to comprehend the words. He can't believe it. Ilya *did it*. He said it out loud.

People know.

He wants to reach for his phone and text him, but before he can, JJ throws his phone down on the table and laughs as he takes a swig of his beer: "Guess your crush didn't need to be so unrequited, Shane."

Shane blanches with horror. Hayden looks at Shane nervously.

The silence lasts so long that JJ ultimately looks up from his beer and says, "Mais putain, is this not news?"

"Um," Shane starts, his heart beating frantically.

"Course it is," Hayden says swiftly, picking up JJ's phone where the article is still lit up. "*Following in Scott Hunter's footsteps...*" Hayden reads, then pauses to add his own commentary: "Oh wow, Rozanov's gonna hate that line. Can't wait to bring that part up tomorrow at camp."

JJ is still staring at Shane. "Qu'est-ce qui me manque? I am out of la loop."

"Um," Shane repeats, "Well... See the thing is," he tries. His palms are sweaty and his heart is beating deliriously fast.

"Sit down buddy," Shane vaguely hears Hayden say, and then he's sinking into a chair that Hayden must have pushed behind him.

Ilya let the world in. Shane can let one more person in. It's just JJ. JJ, his teammate who loves him. Probably.

"You see," Shane says again. "Rozanov— Ilya— and I were, well, kinda of—" he swallows, hard, "— together. For a while." He pauses before adding, "A long while."

JJ stares at him. "So your unrequited crush?"

"Not so unrequited," Shane confirms, throat dry.

"Oh," JJ breathes. "Mon Dieu."

"Oh god," echoes Hayden, leaning back in his chair and looking up to the sky. Shane glares at him.

"You didn't tell me," JJ murmurs, frowning. His forehead creases as he thinks. "Pourquoi pas?"

Shane looks at his feet and then at Hayden for support, who shrugs unhelpfully. Then he looks back at JJ. "I wasn't ready."

JJ looks at Hayden too, as if Hayden has all the answers. Hayden just waves his hands in protest: "Dude, I rather would have not known." He pauses, then quickly clarifies: "About Rozanov. Not about Shane. Happy to support Shane."

"And why now?" JJ asks Shane, still frowning.

Shane looks at JJ's phone held loosely in Hayden's hand. "Trying to be a bit braver, I guess," he answers, honestly.

"C'est très courageux," JJ agrees, "I am sad you did not trust me, but... I am *tellement content* that I know now."

JJ stands up, the chair he's sitting in creaking under his weight, as the big man gets to his feet. He gestures for Shane to stand, and Shane does, his legs weak underneath him, but he lets JJ embrace him, letting JJ squeeze him as tightly as needed. Shane looks at Hayden, who is looking on a mix of pride and fluster on his face.

Shane hugs JJ back.

Ilya did it, he thinks, He let the whole world in.

And Shane let one more person in on his secret, and the world didn't collapse under him. It kinda feels good.

*

At camp, Shane corners Ilya on the second day.

"I read the article," he stammers and Ilya looks up from where he is shoving pylons into a corner. Shane pushes him to the side and starts stacking them more nicely for the equipment staff.

"Oh?" Ilya says, and Shane thinks he's nervous. "What did you think?"

"I'm proud of you," Shane says softly, struggling to meet Ilya's eyes.

"Thank you," Ilya says, just as soft. "I am happy to have said it. And the sky has not fallen yet, as you say."

Shane shocks himself with a laugh. He finally turns to look at Ilya head on. "Good."

"Very good." Ilya beams.

"And thank you for keeping me out of it," Shane says before he can stop himself. He regrets it, immediately, because the second he says it Ilya's face falls.

"I would not—I would not *say* anything that is yours to say," Ilya says, angrily. "You think I would?"

Shane bites his lip. "No," he admits, "I don't. Not you. But I thought maybe there'd be mentions... like people would jump to that conclusion."

Ilya stares at him. He clenches his jaw tightly, like he's keeping himself from saying something mean, but slowly, Ilya opens his mouth to retort, "Not everything is about you, Hollander. This might be about me." It's awfully reminiscent of something he's said to Shane in the past and Shane suddenly feels ugly. "I will pretend you ended conversation after being proud of me."

Ilya shoves past Shane, pausing, almost reluctantly, at the door to add, "I invited Ryan Price and Hayden Pike to Joe Beef tonight, we have room for one more. Think about it?"

"Hayden said *yes*?" Shane asks, confused, but Ilya's footsteps just echo down the hallway.

*

Hayden had said yes. When pressed on their way to the restaurant, the two of them alone in Hayden's car, Hayden had just shrugged and said, "Who doesn't like Joe Beef? Rozanov said he had never been. Crazy that you guys didn't go."

Shane stares at him. "How would we have gone?"

"I dunno," Hayden shrugs again as he flips on his turn signal to steal a parking spot someone has just pulled out of on Rue Notre Dame. Weren't you guys supposed to be friends or something? Wasn't that the whole point of these camps?" When Shane just continues staring at him, baffled, Hayden adds, wide-eyed: "Or do they not deliver?"

Shane had never considered it.

And so, he finds himself contemplating all these things throughout dinner, as he stares into his dish while the other three men happily eat their own meals, chatting all the while. Ilya seems to be enjoying himself, as he keeps moaning around his fucking fork, which Shane is finding insanely distracting. Part of him wants to stab Ilya with Shane's fork; the other wants his finger, or his tongue, or his cock, to be Ilya's fork.

Most of him just keeps wondering how many completely normal things he kept Ilya and him from doing because he was so afraid of it being seen in the wrong way. Would anyone even have blinked at him sitting in this restaurant with Ilya? Would any outlet even have wasted ink or time or space on that headline?

He's not sure anymore. It had felt forbidden for so long, so absolutely unreachable. A pipe dream. He'd never imagined being able to eat in a restaurant with Ilya, not outside of his daydreams.

He looks at Ilya now, happily eating his Lapin à la Royale, and wonders what else he missed out on with this beautiful man, who used to be his.

Maybe he could be his again, Shane decides later, as he drowns his third vodka and ginger ale, a weird combo that somehow works for him. And that they were willing to serve him, even if the waiter did raise his eyebrows until Ilya had taken over, politely asked him to just bring Shane the drink, just as Shane was about to back down and get water. Ilya and Hayden had both given him some side-eye as he departed from his rigorous meal program, but fuck it, he's having a horrible day.

A horrible year.

"I think I want to bring camp to Calgary next year," Ilya, to Shane's left, is saying.

"That would be cool," Hayden, to Shane's right, is saying.

"The Rockies are gorgeous; would be fun just to hang out there for a week or two," Ryan comments from across the table.

"You could stay with me! And Anya!" Ilya exclaims happily, over buttering more bread and groaning around the piece as he sucks it into his mouth. Both Shane and Ryan advert their eyes this time, and Shane swears Ryan blushes too.

Under the table, Shane slowly inches his foot towards Ilya's. When his foot finally touches Ilya's, a flicker of excitement runs through him.

Later, Hayden grumbles: "That was my foot."

"Sorry," Shane says, agonized, and pretty fucking tipsy, "I thought— I wanted—"

"I know what you wanted," Hayden moans, as he parks his car in front of Shane's building.

"He moaned around his fork," Shane whines pathetically.

"What?!" Hayden almost shouts, scandalized. He shifts in his seat. "Buddy, you are getting pathetic. You've got to get your shit together or Roz—"

"Roz?" Shane exclaims, so confused as to what's happening to him.

"— is never going to take you back," Hayden finishes, then adds: "Rozanov. Roz. Rozanov," he grumbles. "Whatever."

Shane deflates, shrinking in the seat of Hayden's car. He puts his hands over his face. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"And I am," Hayden assures him. "But honestly, you are pathetic. Even Jacki thinks so."

"Even Jacki?" Shane repeats, horrified, peaking one eye out at Hayden, who nods, sagely.

"Yep," Hayden says, popping the p. "Ruby and Jade probably think so too, maybe even Arthur. Maybe even *Amber*." Hayden leans over him to open Shane's door. "Now get out of my car, loser. We got camp again tomorrow."

"Fuck," Shane swears, unbuckling his seatbelt and stepping out of Hayden's ugly family car.

But even he has to reluctantly agree. Maybe he is a bit pathetic.

*

Ilya expects some fall out from *The Athletic's* article, but he manages to remain pretty isolated from any criticism all summer. In July, he tries to stay off the internet by keeping busy, coaching at the two Game Changers camps, talking to Yuna about setting up a third in Calgary, and spending a week in Boston with Svetlana.

"You cannot go home now," she tells him needlessly, in whispered Russian on the floor of her living room one night, three quarters of a bottle of vodka finished between them. "You will never return to Russia."

"Da," he agrees, uncapping the bottle. His head lays in Svetlana's lap, and Anya's head lies in his; his dog half asleep, the low rise and fall of her side a modicum of comfort as Svetlana says ugly, painful truths aloud.

"You are man without country," Svetlana muses, petting his hair.

"Da," he says, pushing up slightly so he doesn't drown in her lap as he takes a swig straight from the bottle.

"Seems this was impulsive," Svetlana tells him, taking the bottle from him.

"Net, the opposite. I have thought much about this. It is the only thing I think about," Ilya tells her, as she drinks. He strokes Anya's nose to help distract himself, now that the bottle no longer occupies one of his hands.

"And you did this for Jane?"

"Net, I did it for me," Ilya murmurs. "He," he adds, because Svetlana knows it's a he, she always has, "He does not want to be public. I am not worth that risk to him."

"Дыпак," she spits, angry for him. "You give up privacy, safety, country, family, loyalty to team that drafted you— your national pride! The ability to visit your poor mother's grave again, may her soul rest in peace— and he cannot take leap of faith for you?"

"He cannot," Ilya says, miserably. She summarizes all the things he's given up so easily; he's not sure Shane could even name them.

"I hate him," Svetlana says, looking down at him sternly.

He tilts a corner of his mouth up in an approximation of a smile. "If you could hate him for me, that would be nice, as I cannot hate him, not even for a single day."

Svetlana brandishes the bottle in one hand, now mostly finished, and points a finger on the opposite hand at him, then back at herself. "I will murder him for what he has done to you. I will be beautiful avenging angel."

Ilya laughs. "A bit drastic, darling."

"No, Ilya," Svetlana promises. "Not remotely drastic enough. You, my Ilya, deserve so much more than to be someone's dirty, shameful, secret."

"Thank you," he murmurs, because it's nice for someone else to say it out loud. "Even if that person is Shane Hollander?" he adds, quietly, after a lengthy pause, because he's drunk enough and he trusts her.

Her mouth drops open, a gasp filling the room. He has the sense that if he had told her in public, like at a restaurant, she'd be half lying on the table in shock. She pulls herself together quickly though, straightening her posture and taking another swig, finishing the bottle and letting it roll away on the floor.

"Fuck him. Captain Canada, goody-two-shoes, number *two* overall," she seethes, on his behalf. "Hardly good enough for you."

"He has more cups than I," Ilya murmurs, shifting off her lap and stretching to reach an unopened bottle on her liquor cart. He disturbs Anya in the process, who patters off to sleep in a fancy dog bed Svetlana had enthusiastically bought his dog.

Svetlana looks thoughtful as he pulls the cap off and takes a swig. "Weak backhand though. And you have more career goals," she decides, and he feels a wave of gratitude towards her, enough to pass her the bottle.

They fall asleep in bed together that night. He considers fucking her for old times sake, but isn't even sure he could get it up at this point, and settles for sleeping with her warmth in his arms.

"It would be so much easier if I was just in love with you," he murmurs, on the edge of slumber.

"Da," she sniffs, "You should be so lucky."

He chuckles and kisses her hair and falls asleep easily for the first time in what feels like a year.

*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for the response to this. Comments and kudos make my life.

Chapter 3: 2022-23 NHL Season

Chapter Summary

“Is impossible not to miss you,” Ilya murmurs, and Shane coaxes him backwards on the bed’s edge so that Shane can place his knees on either side and slide into Ilya’s lap.

“Doesn’t have to be this way,” Shane tells him, taking Ilya’s face in his hands. “Things can go back to the way they were.”

Ilya’s thumbs tuck under Shane’s shirt and press against his skin. “I do not regret telling world who I am.”

Shane kisses him again. “I’m going to do it,” he promises, between desperate kisses, “For you, Любимый.”

“Shane, моя любовь,” Ilya says, brushing his thumb over Shane’s cheekbones, “You can not do that just for me.”

Chapter Notes

This is in the tags, but just a warning for some homophobic commentary in the first few sections; both outwards and internal.

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

2022-2023 NHL Season

Courage does not always roar, sometimes it’s the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, I will try again tomorrow.

— Mary Anne Radmacher

*

The sky does not stay up forever.

In August, he rents a house outside Canmore, with stunning mountain views of what he learns are called the Three Sisters. It's almost like cottage-life. Sort of feels like his past summers at Shane's cottage, only he's alone.

And he doesn't back onto a lake.

Still the same wolf-birds somewhere nearby though.

But mostly he is alone.

Part of him wonders if he should have convinced Svetlana to stay with him for the rest of the summer, just so he wouldn't be alone. He's always hated being alone. Alone in a house, alone in his family, alone in a country; alone, alone, alone.

At least he has Anya, who is always excited to see him and willing to run everywhere. They spend so much time running up and down the mountain trails that Ilya's fairly convinced he's going to enter this season in the best shape of his life. He wonders if this is what Galina meant by doing exercise for fun, and he asks her one day during one of their Zoom sessions, but she just turns the question back around on him and he admits, that maybe he's doing it more because he's afraid of sitting still for too long.

Regardless, he returns to Saddledome for pre-season games in the best shape of his life, and is predictably greeted with wolf whistles from various teammates during the first pre-season workout when he strips off his shirt.

"Careful," Zack Sooley, a veteran here on a professional tryout, says, bent over his skates, just barely audible over the hum of the locker room, "He might take it as an invitation."

"What the fuck did you say?" Cliff threatens, taking a step forward. "Stand up and repeat that."

"Cliff," Ilya sighs, as part of him was expecting this. "Let it go."

"Should probably listen to him," Sooley says, nodding at Ilya. "Captain. Girlfriend, whatever you call him."

Something burns in Ilya's chest, but he forces himself to stay in his spot. However, Cliff lunges, yanking Sooley off the bench and throwing him up against one of the walls. Sooley pushes back and there's a scramble, guys on either side trying to pull Sooley and Cliff apart. Ilya watches, resigned, eyes only widening when Nico Karlsson—quiet, sweet, dependable Swedish defenceman, Nico— steps up, grabs Sooley's shirt, and punches him in the face.

"Enough!"

The locker room freezes as Sutton steps in, his voice ringing loud across the locker room. It's startling— Ilya's not sure he's ever heard Sutton raise his voice above his low drawl before, with the exception of calling out drill or line changes. Nico slowly releases his grip on Sooley, who stumbles back onto the bench.

"Now," Sutton says, back to his normal register, "I could pretend I don't know what's going on, but even for a country boy like me, that would be pretty naive, wouldn't it?" He pauses, looks around the room and eyes Ilya still seated on the bench. "This isn't an issue here. It's not going to be an issue here."

"Right, Coach," most players murmur. Ilya nods, a bit wide-eyed.

"Right," Sutton continues, and then pauses to look at the room, eyeing the players that have started to unlace their skates. "Don't know what you're doing," Sutton says, pointedly, crossing his arms, "Feels like we have at least another hour or two skate in us, don't we?"

"Coach—" one player starts to protest and Sutton pins him with a glare so pitying that everybody laces up immediately, Ilya included. One by one, they file back onto the ice.

Ilya makes long work of moving to the door of the locker room, aiming to be the last one out. As he grabs his stick, he says: "Coach, I—"

"Why are you still in here?" Sutton interrupts, "I really hate when we waste time on things that aren't practice."

"Da, just—"

"Roz," Sutton cuts him off, "Ice is that way."

Ilya nods, files away whatever he was going to say for later and hits the ice, spending the next hour in a bag skate session, no pucks to be found.

Sooley is cut by morning, and when the media asks Sutton about it the following day on the sidelines of their practice, his response is just a dry, "I need guys that are good in the locker room, not just at getting to the puck," before he casually skates away and barks out more drills.

*

Shane is determined to not have a repeat of last year. Whatever is— or isn't— going on with Ilya, he needs to get back to basics. To hockey. He navigated playing this game at the highest level while also figuring out he was *gay* and in love with his rival... he can figure out how to compete while nursing a broken heart. Should be easy enough.

He can do that.

He comes out of the gate on a rip: 8 goals in 10 games and the media is praising his name again. Montreal is clicking. He's leading on the ice and in the points totals, both on his team and across the league, and it feels good.

So he starts to think; maybe he can come out this year too. Things are going well. He feels more like himself. So, maybe he can do this too.

Shane starts practicing in the mirror in the safety of his condo. Stares at himself, hunches over the counter and nods at his reflection.

"I am Shane Hollander," he says aloud, testing. "I'm a pretty great player hockey. And I'm—"

The word gets stuck. He reaches for his mouthwash, uncaps it and gargles for 45 seconds before spitting, as if he can dislodge the words when he spits out any grime.

He wipes the back of his mouth with his hand and stares at his reflection again. He's sweating.

"Guys. Coach, team." A bead of sweat drips off his forehead. "I have something to tell you. I am— I like— you see," he struggles, searching for the words even though it's right there. *Say it.* "I am—"

He promptly throws up, quickly moving to the toilet and knocking his mouthwash clean off the counter in the process. The liquid drips down the side of the cupboards and onto his bathroom tile. The green stains his sock.

*

Back to hockey basics then.

One shift at a time. One game at a time. Get pucks deep. Shots on net. Get traffic in front. Finish checks. Stay out of the box. Stick to the system. Play a full 60 minutes. Play his game. Keep it simple.

Shane can do that, even if further bathroom practices go nowhere.

And Shane manages, for a while.

For a bit.

It's difficult at times to focus, because he hears the talk. He remembers hearing these things about Scott Hunter too, but when things are said about Ilya it feels more visceral. Every fibre of his being hurts when he hears things; he wants to yell and scream and punch people and cry. *That is the man I love that you're slandering*, he wishes he could shout at people, *He's worth ten times you*.

None of these words come out.

He also wants to hide.

Every comment pushes him further back into the closet. Every slur proves to him that he will probably never be able to come out. Every thinly veiled piece of homophobic language uttered in the locker-room or in the face-off circle slides hideously over the ice and smashes into his chest like the ugliest blind hit. Every insult slams him against the boards and knocks the wind full out of him and confirms that he will never, ever, ever, be able to let that part of him out.

Because if people are saying these things about Ilya— amazing, beautiful, brilliant, Ilya— what will they say about Shane?

Hayden finds him in his car one day, late after a game, his head on the steering wheel and cheeks stained with tears he tried not to shed. When someone raps their knuckles against the passenger it makes him jump and drag his t-shirt over his face, hoping it just looks like sweat, until he realizes it's just Hayden and unlocks his door so his friend can climb in.

"Wasn't that bad of a game. We won," Hayden jokes, but he looks worried as he gets into Shane's car. Shane doesn't even try to force a laugh and Hayden tempers down quickly.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Shane shrugs. He grips the steering wheel, flexes his fingers around the leather. "The thing that was said out there. Shad, he threw out that slur against the ref, so casually." He stammers out, bafflingly defensive, even though it all makes him sick: "I mean, he was angry. It was a bad call."

"Guy's just trash," Hayden tells him. "He'll be suspended."

"Great," Shane intones.

Hayden nods, drags his teeth over his own lip. He sighs. They both know it's not enough. "Yeah."

"Shad had rainbow coloured tape on his stick last season."

"Yeah, man, I know," Hayden repeats.

"I've heard that word a thousand times," Shane says, softly, staring at the steering wheel. "It was always used in the locker room... It was just how we grew up. Fuck, you've probably used it. *I've* probably used it."

"Probably," Hayden agrees. He traces the outline of the car vent with his fingers. "But we grew up. Learned. Became actual human beings. Talked to some people outside our junior hockey bubble of the mostly white, upper middle class."

"How— How am I ever going to say it out loud?" Shane wonders, and even the hypothetical question feels too dangerous, even for the car, where it's just Hayden and him. His stomach curls. "Every time I hear a slur— I flinch. Every time someone whispers something sick attached to Ilya's or Scott's or Ryan's—fuck Ryan is *retired*— name, I just resent myself. I hate myself for being this way. I want to—I want this piece of me gone—"

"Shane...." Hayden interjects.

Shane shakes his head to wave Hayden's protest off. Grips the steering wheel tighter until the back of his knuckles are white. "I wouldn't, don't worry..."

"Okay," Hayden says frowning, "If ever—"

"Yeah. Promise," Shane says, cutting him off. He squeezes his eyes shut. He wouldn't, but sometimes, in an ugly, horrible—hopefully small— part of brain, he wonders what he'd do if there was a way to carve this part of him out. He can't do anything about his skin colour, but this, this other thing he can hide. Then: "I don't feel safe to say it, not in this sport."

"Okay. But, if— no, *when*, you ever do, I'll be there," Hayden promises.

Shane sucks some air in that comes off halfway between a laugh and a gasp.

"Thanks, Hayden," he murmurs, and Hayden pats him on the thigh. "I just don't think it'll ever happen for me. Maybe long after retirement. When everyone has forgotten who I am."

"Maybe," Hayden says quietly and for a second his hand just rests against Shane's body. "Maybe not."

"I'm not Ilya. I'm not Scott. I'm not even Ryan Price. I can't stand in that light." His voice wavers. "I do not have that type of courage. It's impossible."

Hayden hums quietly. "One day, I think it's going to make some Canadian kid super proud knowing the name he has on his jersey is that of some sort of superhero. Doing what they see as seemingly impossible stuff."

Shane feels tears prickle behind his eyelids. Hayden's just saying things to make him feel better. He's like Ilya, dreaming of impossible things.

*

Three weeks later, at practice, one of the Voyageur rookies, on a call up from the AHL because of injuries on the team's roster, makes a comment under his breath about not wanting to do a drill— "This is so gay, can't believe they're making me do this"— and Hayden shoves him to the ice—"We don't say that here"— then points to the A on his chest, and demands fifty pushups.

Hayden's asked about it a few games later when Shane and him are trotted out for a media appearance post Montreal's Pride Night game. Shane can't stop his leg from bouncing in his seat, nervous to be sitting here in his *You Can Play* shirt, while decidedly feeling like he cannot.

"Hayden, Nate here from *Out Sports*. A video leaked with you demanding a payment of 50 pushups for the use of some homophobic language during a practice. Care to comment?"

"Uh," Hayden says, lamely. Shane almost—almost— rolls his eyes. "Feel like it's fairly self-explanatory."

"Sure, but, for those out there that need it spelled out," Nate, the *Out Sports* reporter, says and smiles.

Hayden leans awkwardly towards the mic. "Uh, well, my family and myself, we believe in a world where humans are treated with respect regardless of who you are, or what you're born into, or who you love. Those are the types of things I want my kids to stand up for," Hayden say, rubbing his neck nervously, unused to having to actually give insightful answers. They usually just give canned answers to fairly repetitive questions. "I think that hockey has historically had a certain culture... One that needs to shift so the league's safer for everybody. Guess I'm just trying to be part of that shift— you're asked to choose which side you're on and I hope it's pretty clear what side I'm on."

Nate the reporter nods. "Thanks, Hayden. Any chance these new strategies are inspired by your off-season friendship with Calgary Inferno Captain Ilya Rozanov?"

Hayden stares at him. There's a genuine thirty-second pause between the question and when Hayden finally scowls, "Um, well, I guess it's not-*not* influenced by Rozanov." Hayden then finds himself and chirps: "But I'd hate to give him too much credit."

The media pool laughs and Shane manages to quirk one side of his lips, while Hayden just stares, first at the reporter and then at his own hands, in shock.

The questions move on, as another reporter asks: "Shane, great night again— would you walk us through what was going on in your mind when you scored that goal in OT?"

Shane leans forward. "Well, obviously they have a great team over there," he starts and launches into a typical short hockey-answer to a typical hockey-question, wondering how it is that he's here with married straight-man Hayden Pike, and Hayden's the one fielding questions about his support for the LGBTQ+ community, and there's duelling parts of Shane that are simultaneously glad he's not being asked and wishing he had been.

*

Ilya is proudly wearing a [Y'all Means All](#) shirt during his media availability after Calgary's Hockey is for Everyone game, sitting beside Coach Sutton and one of his alternate captains, Frank Panto. It's his new favourite shirt, with his favourite Western slang. He will probably ensure he is buried in this shirt.

"Ilya," a reporter says, "Rick here, for the Calgary Herald. Calgary's sitting pretty two games out from the All Star Break, how you feeling about the team's success?"

"Pretty good," quips Ilya, and watches, bewildered, as Rick takes notes.

"Frank?"

"We're playing some disciplined hockey. Mickey's standing on his head for us," Frank intones, automatic; media trained from an early age, "We're getting pucks where they need to be."

"Coach Sutton, Cale here, TSN; team was a bit slow out of the gate here tonight, was fatigue a factor?"

Sutton drawls out his response, "No. We had a day off yesterday. No excuse for it. I'm fifty-five, I felt awesome today."

"Coach Sutton. Eric here," another reporter interjects. "Some concerns being floated that there might be some distractions on the team, stemming from tonight's theme and associated announcements earlier in the season. Care to comment?"

"Nope," Sutton drawls.

"Does that mean that there are distractions?" the reporter asks. A few cameras flash and click.

"Nope."

Ilya leans forward but Sutton levels him with the most minuscule of *sit-the-fuck-down*-looks and Ilya leans back again. He feels frustrated, albeit resigned; these questions have been coming all season from one outlet or another. He just hates that it's happening tonight. It's his first Hockey is for Everyone game as an out-queer athlete. Ilya's been wanting to enjoy this.

"So no comment then," jackass-reporter Eric surmises. "But disappointing Coach, I think we as the media expect some more insightful answers to help us provide coverage of this team."

Sutton leans over the microphone. "Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer. My momma taught me that."

*

Shane is at his parents' house the day before he's set to fly down to the All Star game in Dallas, practicing in the mirror again.

He's got past the throwing up phase.

Still can't quite say the word out loud.

He doesn't understand why this is so hard. He's been able to tell people before— Rose, Ilya, his parents, Hayden, and Jackie, Ryan Price, JJ— why can't he say it to anyone else? But when he tries to imagine saying it to strangers, his chest gets all tight, he gets cold, and he feels nauseous.

He gives up, leaving the bathroom and walking to the fridge of his parent's kitchen to grab a ginger ale, when he sees them pinned to the fridge.

Tickets.

Calgary @ Ottawa.

"Mom," Shane starts, fingering the tickets lightly and pulling them off the fridge. "Dad. What are these?"

David looks up briefly from his crossword and sees what Shane has pulled off the fridge. "Tickets to your game, I assume."

"Last I checked I didn't play for Ottawa." He pauses when his dad looks up again. "Or Calgary."

Yuna snatches the tickets from his hand and pins them back to the fridge. "They're to Ilya's game."

Shane's heart skips a full beat. "What."

"You heard me," his mom says, opening the fridge and handing him a ginger ale, placing it where the tickets used to be.

"Why—" He breaks off, clears his throat and then, stronger: "Why are you going to Ilya's game?" Out of habit he opens the ginger ale and then, realizing he no longer wants it, scowls at it. He puts it down in the counter.

Yuna ignores him, busy pulling pots out of a cupboard next to the sink. "Pasta OK, no sauce, high veggies?" she asks, her head halfway into their pantry.

"Yeah, thanks," he answers, automatically, and then shakes his head to get himself back on track. "Mom, why are you going to that game?"

Yuna straightens and places the pasta on the counter. She puts her hand on her hip. "We always go to a few of Ilya's games a year. If you're on a road swing and it's too far for us to attend."

"Right," Shane says, stupidly. Then, belatedly: "Wait, what."

"It's not like we are skipping your games, Shane," David adds, like that is the issue at hand here.

"What if someone *saw* you?" is ludicrously Shane's first question.

Yuna sighs. "We sit in terrible seats and it's not like anybody really knows what we look like anyway."

"Yes, they do," Shane insists. The amount of times he's seen crowd shots of his parents celebrating his goals with the caption *Shane Hollander's Family* underneath begs to differ.

David puts the side of his pen to the corner of his mouth, as he studies the crossword. "Then they would just think we are supporting the local team."

"Supporting *Ottawa*?" Shane says, baffled. "People in Ottawa barely support Ottawa."

"We went to the Ottawa Charge game the other night. With you," Yuna points out, starting the tap and filling a pot with water, "We supported them."

Shane closes his eyes briefly. "That's different."

"It's not like we are wearing Rozanov jerseys," David chimes in.

Shane hadn't even thought of that. His head hurts. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Oh, I don't know," Yuna muses, and looks for David for an answer, who shrugs. She places the pot on the stove and flips on the burner. The gas hisses and springs into life. "A few years? After he spent that first Christmas with us and I overheard him talking with his brother. Couldn't understand a word, but it sounded so tense."

"Yes, definitely after that," David agrees.

Shane stares at both of them. "Okay, so that explains past games— but are you forgetting the fact that Ilya and I split up?"

"Well, honey, we didn't break up with him," Yuna tells him, not even looking at Shane as she starts chopping vegetables.

"He left *me*," Shane says, feeling a bit petulant, "For a team in a different Conference. Without talking to me. Without consultation."

Yuna sighs. "We know Shane, but he was part of this family. You can't expect us to just flip a switch. We already did that once."

"After needlessly hating him for ten years," David adds, pointlessly, chewing on his pen.

It takes a lot of effort not to groan, stomp his foot, and throw up his hands like a child. This feels like a betrayal.

"You guy cannot go to that game," Shane determines.

Yuna and David both look at him, and then at each other. Yuna tucks the hand she is holding the knife in under her other arm and turns to fully look at him. "Shane," she says, levelly, "How many games of yours have we been to?"

Shane shrugs. "Wouldn't know. A lot."

"A lot," Yuna confirms. "And how many games of Ilya's has his family been to?"

Shane stares at her. "Come on mom, that's not fair. His family's in Russia."

Yuna shakes her head and goes back to chopping. "I sit next to Soren Miitka's mother most home games. She also lives in Russia."

"Soren's close with his family," Shane protests. "Ilya just has his brother and he hates him—"

A knife slams. "Shane!" Yuna says, firmly, startling him. David also looks up from his crossword.

"I'm just saying, mom," he says, angry, hurt and a little confused, "A little support from you guys would be nice. I'm trying to get over this— over him!" He adds, and then he does throw up his hands and stalks away.

It's the middle of winter, but he goes outside and sits on the back deck and suffers in the early February cold, grateful that he paid for his parents to install a roof on this deck, so at least he's not sitting in the snow and the wind is blocked out. He puts his head in his hands and breathes deeply, the hurt stabbing at him.

A few minutes later his dad follows and dumps a coat over his shoulders.

"Shane," David says, sitting down next to him, in his own coat and hat. "I know— your mother and I both know— that you're in a tough spot. And hurting."

"I am," Shane agrees, his voice muffled by his hands.

"You are," David repeats, putting his hand on Shane's shoulder, "But son, that boy was important to you. And to us. And he has no one. In probably one of the toughest year's of his adult life." He pauses. "Did you see that statement by the Russian Hockey Federation?"

Shane had. It had been terrible, centring around rhetoric of traditional values and protecting children involved in Russian sports. It had stated that Russians considered themselves normal, standard people, that the presence of these sorts of individuals would not be tolerated on their national sporting stage, and had condemned Ilya's article as homosexual propaganda.

He nods.

"Shane, we love you, and we are always going to be on your side," David promises, "I'm sorry that you're hurting and I know maybe this doesn't make it better— we didn't intend for you to find out." David squeezes his shoulder. "But your mom and I are going to go to that hockey game. If us hiding in the back helps even a little, we're going to do that."

"But Dad," Shane protests, weakly.

"Shane, it's just one game," David counters. "We're careful."

Shane sighs. He runs his hands over his face. "Okay," Shane says, deflating as the anger leaves him. "Just, Dad, I just— I miss him, and I need him. And I know all I have to do to get him back is just say the words out loud— but it's like to the whole damn world, and I just can't. I have to though, to have him, and I can't," he stammers out and David squeezes his shoulder again. "I'm scared."

"Shane, you can't just come out if it's only to get Ilya back," his dad tells him softly.

"But I love him," Shane protests, his eyes welling with tears. He presses his palms into his eyes to hold the tears back. The feeling is so overwhelming, so confusing, so soul sucking. He feels wrecked, completely broken without him, but he loves him, and coming out is the only way to get him back. He just needs to say the words. "I have to. I can get there. I'll practice. I can do it, if it means getting him back."

"Shane, you have to do that for you, not for anyone else," his dad says, hugging him. Shane sinks into it. "We love you," David murmurs, "No matter what you choose to do."

*

The All Star game feels different this year. Shane gets the invitation to not only go but Captain the Atlantic Division team, and he agrees, partially spurred on a bit guilt concerning

last year's missed appearance.

Shane's Atlantic Division beats the Metropolitan Division 10-6 in their "semi-final" 3-on-3 face off. He scores two fancy goals to intense cheers from the crowd, and assists on three others, leading his team into a clash with the Pacific Division in the final show down.

Ilya is the Pacific Division Captain and for the first time in a long time it truly feels like they're rivals— and just rivals. Shane wants to win, and, in the end, Atlantic takes the final 12-11, with Shane getting the final goal off an absolutely slick backhand shot, using his body to box out the lone defender back and snapping the puck over the goalie's shoulder. It's a fantastic goal, and Shane's smug about it, showboating more than he usually would, especially since the defender happens to be Ilya himself.

"Smug little shit," Ilya murmurs, later, as he slides onto a stool next to Shane at the hotel bar.

Shane smiles into his drink. "Who has the weak backhand now?"

"Oh. Still you," Ilya smirks, gesturing to the bartender for a drink.

Shane thinks about kicking him in the shin, then thinks better of it. "Just embarrassed about being absolutely walked."

"I am not D-man— you would not have gotten shot off had one of them been back," Ilya retorts, and then Shane does kick him in the shin.

"Surely the greatest Russian player to ever grace the NHL has some defensive skills," he teases.

"In Russia, they are not so concerned with defence," Ilya says. His tone matches Shane's teasing lilt, but something in his eyes has gone dark; the smile on his lips not quite reaching his eyes. When his drink arrives, he throws it back quickly, and gestures for another.

Shane frowns. "Hey," he says, leaning in a close as he dares in the public space. Shane itches to touch him, but he clenches his hands in a fist to stop himself. "What's wrong?"

"Is nothing," Ilya says, shaking his head.

"Tell me," Shane prods, wanting to know; wanting any little insight into Ilya's world. "Please."

Ilya's quiet for a few moments then: "Just has been difficult few months. Article response to article has been mixed. Shitty reporters at most games. Coach and team good, but sometimes opponents, not so much. Then statement by Russia hockey. Has been a lot."

"Ilya..." Shane murmurs, and he's brave enough to let his knee knock against Ilya's and stay there.

Ilya looks startled. But he doesn't move his knee away. He nods to the bartender when his new drink arrives, and once he leaves, murmurs, low under his breath, just for Shane: "And I miss you." A pause. "Is hard without you."

Shane stares at him, heart thudding. "I—" he cuts himself off, wants to say *I miss you so much*, but can't. Not here. "Same," he says instead and Ilya gives him a small smile over the rim of his glass. "Do you regret it?"

Ilya shakes his head. "Telling truth? Net."

Not the truth, but do you regret leaving me, Shane wants to ask but the words are painfully stuck in his throat. "Good," he says finally, and wants to follow it up with *I am trying to say it too*, but again, he can't.

They make idle small talk for a while while they both nurse drinks, before Shane decides he's tortured himself enough and beckons over the bartender, taps his card on the machine and heads upstairs to his room. Ilya catches his elbow as he tries to leave, "What room are you in?" he whispers, and Shane is helpless but to tell him.

A bit later, once Shane's peeled off his jacket and is lying, thoughts spinning, on his bed, there's a knock at his door. He sits up, automatically on alert, and slowly makes his way to the door, opening it a creak to reveal Ilya.

"Can I come in?" Ilya says, cautiously.

Shane nods, stepping aside to let him in and then shutting the door quickly behind him. He can't help himself—the reflex is to shut the world out immediately and ensure nobody can peer into this. The second the door is closed behind him, Shane impulsively hugs him.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs into Ilya's neck. "About all the press. About everything. About not being there."

Ilya's hands are tense on his back, but gradually loosen as he wraps his strong arms around Shane and hugs him tightly. Like he needs this too. Like Shane is a lifeline for him as well.

"And I miss you too," Shane murmurs, tilting his head up.

Ilya leans down, closes his eyes, and presses his forehead against Shane's and breathes in deeply. It's the most at peace Shane's felt in ages, and it's easy to tip his mouth, close the gap, and then they're kissing. Ilya steers Shane towards the bed, sitting on the edge of it and bringing Shane to stand in between his legs.

"Is impossible not to miss you," Ilya murmurs, and Shane coaxes him backwards on the bed's edge so that Shane can place his knees on either side and slide into Ilya's lap.

"Doesn't have to be this way," Shane tells him, taking Ilya's face in his hands. "Things can go back to the way they were."

Ilya's thumbs tuck under Shane's shirt and press against his skin. "I do not regret telling world who I am."

Shane kisses him again. "I'm going to do it," he promises, between desperate kisses, "For you, Любимый."

"Shane, моя любовь," Ilya says, brushing his thumb over Shane's cheekbones, "You cannot do that just for me."

"я могу," Shane murmurs. "I can. For you, anything."

"Do you want to?" Ilya asks, in a whisper. The hold of one of his hands is tight on Shane's hip.

Shane hesitates. "I'm scared, but—I will. I have to for you."

Ilya shakes his head, stroking his thumb across Shane's cheekbone again and then cupping his face. "Is not easy," he tells him, "I was wrong." He pauses to kiss Shane again, it feels a little like goodbye. "You must do for you. Not me."

*

The thing is, as Ilya has told Galina in their therapy sessions over Zoom, he *is* happier in Calgary. Hockey is not depressing, he has Anya, and he has found things to do around the city that he genuinely likes doing, from trips into the mountains, and different charity projects with the Inferno Foundation. Galina cracks a small smile when he tells her one of this rooms is completely filled with lego, which he finds at least gives him something soothing to do when at home.

But overall, he's still lonely. He still doesn't have *people*. Okay, he has Svetlana, but she is in Boston and busy with her own life. On the team, he regularly hangs out with Cliff, Frank and Nico, with Nico even making an attempt in Russian at times, but they mostly talk about the team or hockey generally or women at bars. He's talked to his brother once since *The Athletic* article was released, and it went as expected— a lot of yelling and calling Ilya a disappointment. He knows the Hollanders were at his game in Ottawa, which soothes something in him, but that's still *someone else's* people. And Shane, who was his person, is far away and complicated, and the *Jane* contact stays for the most part pretty quiet, aside from the odd comment about highlight reel plays.

Otherwise, he is alone. While most on the team go home at night to wives and girlfriends, he goes home to an empty house, other than Anya.

I miss you, he wants to write to Shane, *I have made mistake. Please take me back.*

"I think I have made a mistake," Ilya says, in Russian, one day in therapy.

Galina looks at him inquisitively through the screen. "Regarding?"

"Shane," Ilya tells her, slouched in an island chair in his team-branded hoodie, his laptop propped up the counter and a cup of what is now cold coffee beside it. It's a frigid mid-winter morning in Calgary, the late-February sun just starting to stream in his windows. "In ending things."

"I see. Have things changed between you and Shane?" Galina asks. Her pen taps gently against her face. "Have you talked?"

"Yes—Sort of," Ilya says. "He knows that I wanted to come out. That it was important to me. I think he understands."

"Okay. That is good. Important," Galina says, encouragingly. "And him?"

"What about him?"

"Has he made a decision, regarding his own journey?"

"He has not," Ilya admits. "He is scared."

"I see," Galina hums. "So, what has changed?"

I love him, Ilya wants to say, because that's the reason. Nothing else has changed; he still wouldn't be able to take Shane out in public or tell people Shane's his. And while he does think Shane would take him back, even if he did, they'd be in the same spot—hiding from the world—only maybe worse, because Ilya has told the world he's bisexual— the speculation *will* be there this time.

And he knows Shane's still not ready. He's not sure he could put either of them through that.

"Nothing," he admits, looking at the corner of his kitchen counter instead of at Galina's pixelated face. "We would have to hide." Galina is quiet, waiting patiently until he starts to speak again. Ilya rolls his cold coffee cup back and forth between his palms. "Maybe," he continues, slowly, "Maybe, I am afraid I let go of my person. I do not—well, have never had," he corrects, "many people who loved me."

He can hear Galina's pen scratching a few times on the pad of paper she keeps during their sessions. He waits, frowning at his cold coffee. It feels, as it always does, both horrible and good to say the words out loud.

"Do you think no one else could?" she asks, once the scratching has stopped. "That you couldn't have your own people?"

Ilya shrugs at the camera, still looking at the countertop. "I am not sure."

He never quite got over being surprised that Shane wanted to.

*

He meets Jessica in April, right before playoffs are set to begin.

It's at a regular-season end charity poker event put on by the Calgary Inferno Foundation, and Cliff actually sees her first.

"Whoa, who is that?" Cliff exclaims, slapping Ilya in the chest.

"Who is who," Ilya mutters, as he studies his cards. Nine of hearts and an eight of hearts. Not amazing, not terrible. Same suit at least.

"Her," Cliff says, and, outrageously, points.

Ilya slaps his hand down. "Stop that," he murmurs, even though he automatically follows Cliff's indication and sees a woman with black hair moving through the crowd. At the table, someone raises, confidently; Ilya glances back at his cards and decides to dare. He calls. "It's rude, Cliff," he mutters to his teammate, who is still gawking.

"I fold," Cliff tells the dealer, chucking his cards onto the table and jumping off the stool, and fixing the cowboy hat he's wearing on his head, pulling it lower on his forehead. "See ya, Roz," he adds and gives chase.

Ilya rolls his eyes and watches as everyone else makes their bets. Then the dealer lays out the first three cards: a queen of clubs, ten of hearts, two of spaces. He has a draw now—nothing solid, but possibilities. The river finally falls, showing a five of diamond. Ilya exhales and slides his cards forward when the round ends, just as Cliff appears back at his shoulder.

"You win?" Cliff asks, returning suddenly to Ilya's shoulder.

"Net," Ilya says. He stands up, adjusts the black Stetson the Foundation has given him for the night, and bids goodbye to the table. "You?"

"Naw," Cliff drawls, "She wasn't interested."

"As they say: shocking," Ilya quips, and leads Cliff to the bar where the bartender refills their drinks. He starts looking for a new table to lose money for charity at, and Cliff and him play a few more hands as the night goes on.

When the night is winding down, Cliff having abandoned him for a new woman and Frank and Nico have long departed with their wives, Ilya is left standing by the bar, and staring at what is probably his final drink of the night before he goes back to his apartment, alone—again.

"Final count from Table 12," someone says, tossing a bag on the counter. One of the charity organizers picks up the bag and murmurs thanks, and the owner of the voice slides into the stool two down from Ilya. "Gin and tonic, please?" the woman asks, and then, she glances at Ilya, must take in the pensive look he's sure he's wearing on his face, because she goes: "Tough night, cowboy?"

Sheepishly, he removes his hat from his head and drops it on the bar. "I did lose much," he admits, "But, is for charity."

"Not a poker player then," she says, tapping her card when the bartender arrives with her drink.

"Better at hockey," he says. He leans over and holds out his hand. "Ilya Rozanov."

"I know," she says, and when he grins, she adds, "It's on your jersey", and stretches out to tap the sleeve of the uniform he's wearing, before offering her own hand: "Jessica Martínez."

"You work for Inferno Foundation?"

Jessica shakes her head and brushes black hair behind her shoulder, as she twists in her stool to face him. "No, I'm a nurse at the hospital. Just here to volunteer."

"Ah, hockey fan then?" he smirks, knowingly.

She looks him straight in the eye over the rim of her drink. "Nope."

Ilya feigns offence, mouth dropping open. "But we are so good! And we have the best Captain in entire league," he laments, tapping the C on his jersey.

She laughs and Ilya grins. He shifts a stool closer to her and then gestures for the bartender to bring him another. The conversation flows easily on topics he never speaks about and there's not a minute about hockey. He finds himself genuinely charmed and then quickly disappointed when the bartender comes over to tell them they need to vacate the lounge as it's closing.

"Continue on somewhere else?" he asks, after paying for their drinks, and stepping out into the night air. He doesn't want to stop talking; this is the most he's talked to anyone outside the rink in ages. He's not afraid to admit he likes it.

Jessica at least looks a bit regretful as she declines, shrugging on her coat. "I have a morning shift."

"Ah," Ilya says, not sure if he's hiding his disappointment well. "A real job."

She smiles. "Not all of us get paid to shoot pucks into a net."

"Ah! So you are fan," he laughs, and he thinks she blushes slightly, as she reaches into her pocket to order a ride on her phone and then holds it in one hand, monitoring the rides progress. "Can— can we talk again?" he inquires, feeling pathetic.

She looks a bit startled, but holds out her other hand and he deposits his own phone into it, watching as she adds her number. "Call me after your playoffs," she says.

"So June, when I am in best mood as we have won Cup," Ilya promises, boldly. "I will buy all the celebratory drinks."

Jessica laughs and wishes him good luck as she gets into her lift, and he goes home feeling slightly less miserable.

*

The season ends with a bang, much like it started. Despite his best playoff performance of Ilya's life, the Calgary Inferno lose in seven games in the second round; as do the Montreal Voyageurs.

Montreal is disappointed with the lacklustre post-season performance, laying the failure on the shoulders of players who underperformed, Shane and Hayden among them. Shane exits the playoffs with bruised hip and a broken thumb that he'll spend the summer rehabbing, along with a still broken heart.

Narratives about on-ice distractions in Calgary persist into the playoffs, especially as Calgary faces a team in each round that is more than willing to fling mud on the ice, every check finished with a sting, both physically and mentally. Coach Sutton spends his post-game pressers waving off comments about sexuality and the NHL, refusing to entertain any of the reporters who bother to ask him about it and has one reporter physically removed from the media room during Game 4 of Round 2. Ilya leaves the season exhausted, and not just from hockey.

*

Off-Season, Summer 2023

Make voyages. Attempt them. There's nothing else.

— *Tennessee Williams*

*

Ilya hops down, inelegantly, from the horse he's been riding all morning down the Stampede Parade route. He's hot, sweaty and sore in ways he didn't know he could be from being in the saddle all morning, as he and several other Inferno players rode the parade route for the kick-off of Calgary's Stampede festivities. He hands the reins to a volunteer and pets the horse one last time before it's led away. Another volunteer hands him a water bottle and he accepts it gratefully, drowning half of it in one go.

"It is fucking hot," Frank swears, as he hands the reins of his horse to different volunteer. "Drink somewhere, inside?"

Ilya shakes his head, as he wipes sweat off his brow with the hem of the plaid shirt he's wearing and flicks open another button of the collar, so it hangs more loosely. "I'm meeting someone."

Frank grins, taunts: "Ooh."

"A friend," Ilya corrects when Frank starts teasing him.

He leaves Frank and makes his way through the volunteer area to one of the exits, signing a few autographs as he makes his way. He keeps the cowboy hat he's had on all day on, pulling it lower over his face as he escapes into the downtown core and over to Stephen Avenue, and then to the pub where he's agreed to meet Jessica.

The pub is busy and while people do gawk as he walks in, most leave him alone as he makes his way to the back and slides into the booth across from Jessica, who has apparently already ordered them drinks.

"Hi," he greets and picks up his beer.

She barely looks up from studying the menu. "Take off the dumb hat. How was it?"

"Good. Hot," he says, throwing the cowboy hat onto the bench next to him, and pushing a hand back through his curls to rid himself of what he's sure is terrible hat hair.

She inches the water pitcher in his direction. "You couldn't pay me to get on a horse and ride the parade route."

Ilya laughs, as he pours the water. "Is fun. Is silly. I like this city."

Jessica nods at him sagely. "You would. You're both odd."

Ilya grins and opens his own menu to glance at it, knowing that he's going to disobey everything his nutrition plan says and get something terrible and greasy.

"Tell me about hospital," he asks, eagerly, and Jessica launches into some grotesque story about the idiot that came into the Emergency Room last night, sparing no detail and Ilya is enthralled with every gory detail.

They've seen each other several times since playoffs ending, and each time they spend more time talking about Jessica's hospital work than Ilya's hockey. She has the driest sense of humour of anyone he's ever met, maybe outside of his Coach, barely watches games unless they're on in a patients room and has no idea who any of his teammates are, and is more interested in his lego hobby and his dog than his endorsement packages. Sometimes, he

wonders whether she'd even know who Shane Hollander is, if he was brave enough to mention him. But they never talk about hockey; instead, she sends him podcast recommendations, sits him down to watch weird art-house movies, and commandeers his kitchen to make terrible cocktails that he reluctantly tries.

It's refreshing. A little corner of the world that has nothing to do with hockey, or Russia, or Shane, it's just... his.

Plus, she has no interest or regard for his nutrition program, so when he orders both a cheeseburger, fries, and nachos she barely blinks, before proceeding to eat half of his fries.

She does make him pay though, and he complains about this as he taps his credit card once they're leaving. "You are using me," he moans, and Jessica just laughs.

"Yes," she jests, dryly, "I only like you for your wallet." Ilya mimes stabbing himself, with faux outrage, at her words. "Now walk me to the train, I'm meeting Lindsay."

"Ah," Ilya says, falling into step with her. They maneuver down Stephen Avenue, weaving in and out of the crowds, with Jessica's arm threaded through his. "Third date?"

"Fourth," Jessica replies, as they move to cut through Olympic Plaza, and then swearing under her breath when they get stopped by a huge crowd.

"What is going on?" Ilya asks, trying to peer over the crowd.

Jessica sighs. "Citizenship ceremony. I forgot."

She pulls on his arm to steer them down another street, but Ilya's standing still, staring as the people in the plaza finish the last lines of an oath, and then a band starts up. It's only the beginning notes of the anthem, the same music he hears every night on the ice, but something feels different about it. He's entranced.

"Ilya?" Jessica prods, gently, and he snaps out of it.

"Yes. Right," he says, and follows her.

*

Hayden flops on the couch of their Airbnb in mid-August, the day before the first day of Game Changers camp in Calgary, and groans into the cushions: "I don't understand why we couldn't stay at Rozanov's, like everybody else."

Shane drops his bag beside Hayden's head.

"You don't understand why we couldn't stay Ilya's like everyone else," he repeats, blandly.

Hayden lifts his head. "That's what I said."

"You don't?" Shane yells at him. He picks up one of the pillows and whacks Hayden with it, full force. "Really?"

"It's like a whole fun week of guys bonding time," Hayden laments, "I never get those weeks. I have, like, seventeen gremlins in my house. We're missing out."

"Oh my god, Hayden." Shane holds the pillow up threateningly.

"Dude, you've never sounded gayer," Hayden chirps and Shane smacks him again.

He smacks him a few times and then groans: "You honestly don't understand how I might not want to spend a whole week in the house of my ex-boyfriend, who I remind you I am still hopelessly in love with, for some *bonding time*?"

"I mean, when you put it that way," Hayden replies. "Just kinda feel like we're missing out. Plus we had to rent our own place. Roz's place was free."

Shane sighs. "We can afford it."

"I dunno man," Hayden murmurs, "I'm only on a \$4.9 mil AAV."

"Shut up, dude."

"Pennies compared to your twelve million-ish cap hit. What's Roz making these days?"

"I don't know."

Hayden rolls to his back and taps on his phone. "13.5 hit. Wow, he makes more than you," Hayden reports, "I think he can afford to feed us for a week."

"Fuck off, Hayden. You're a terrible friend."

"I'm your best friend," Hayden retorts, stretching out on the couch. He leans over to grab the remote for the television.

"For now."

"Well," Hayden says dryly, as he flips on the TV, "Can't see you getting a new one any time soon, given that we are missing out on bonding time."

The week continues like that: they go to camp, coach, and Shane tries not to be too awkward in front of Ilya, who seems like he's having the fucking time of his life doing this camp in this city with some of his own teammates; and then Shane drags Hayden back to their Airbnb in the evenings, much to Hayden's dismay, where they watch action films and Shane contemplates his life choices.

"You guys should really come by tonight," quiet, socially awkward, Ryan Price tells Shane as they're putting equipment away one night. "Last day tomorrow, so tonight is really the last night before everybody splits off. We're BBQing." Shane just shrugs and continues stacking equipment, but Ryan continues: "Come on, man, it's a big crowd— me, Bood, Troy and Harris are both here, and Frank and Mickey from the Inferno."

Shane shrugs again, but before he can say anything to politely decline, Hayden steps into the equipment room, obviously having overheard part of the conversation, and hisses: "We are going."

When Shane hesitates, Hayden begs: "We're missing out man, please let me have this. I want one night to just be a guy at a party."

"It's not really a party," Ryan says, and Hayden glares at him.

"The BBQ then— whatever! Shane, please," Hayden says.

Shane looks at Ryan and then back at Hayden, who looks at him with such big puppy eyes that Shane finally relents.

Which is how he finds himself standing inside of Ilya's house and looking at the life Ilya's built without him. Upon arriving, Hayden immediately ditched him and made his way outside with Ilya, Ryan, and most of the other guys, leaving Shane to navigate this horror on his own.

He stands in the middle of the kitchen and surveys the space. He can admit the views from the house are beautiful, but it's otherwise sparsely decorated, with minimal touches that make it look like Ilya actually lives here, except for the trophies that Shane can spy in the adjoining living room, along with a white cowboy hat for whatever reason. One of the adjoining rooms on this level seems to have exclusively lego in it, as well as two air mattresses where he assumes some of the guys have been crashing all week. The brief tour he was offered, but declined, mentioned there was a guest bedroom and the master upstairs, as well as the full gym downstairs.

"Beer?" calls Frank Panto, who is gathering plates with Mickey Larson. Both are Inferno players and stepped into the camp as new defence and goalie coaches, respectively, for the Game Changers Hockey Camp, as Leah Campbell, Max Riley, and JJ hadn't made the trip out west.

"There's like a hundred in here," Troy Barrett adds, handing Harris Drover condiments out of the fridge, along with what looks to be a pitifully small stack of lettuce, tomatoes, and onions.

Shane takes the open fridge door from Troy's hand. Troy releases it, and he and Harris head outside, while Shane stares into the fridge for a moment too long. He scans the contents, before finally sliding out one of the ginger ales he finds tucked in the top corner.

Shane opens it as he leans against Ilya's kitchen counter, essentially bare except for a fancy coffee maker and dozens of empty beer cans. He feels a bit vindicated in his choice to stay at the Airbnb as he looks at the mess around him made by a bunch of guys staying in the same house. He's not really sure whether Frank and Mickey are staying here, or whether they return to their own places at night—they've apparently been here for food and drinks every night, according to Ryan. At least Hayden and him are sleeping in real beds and not on air mattresses crammed into the corner of a room.

Shane's staring at a bunch of prints outs labelled *Discover Canada* peaking out from a folder next to Ilya's fridge, when he realizes that everyone has departed the kitchen, and that he's probably being weird by being in here by himself. He takes a sip of his ginger-ale, steels himself, and opens the door to the outside, the rest of the guys' voice swimming into focus.

"You can't seriously expect to win a cup within four years of becoming a franchise," Zane Boodram is complaining, while petting Ilya's dog, Anya.

Ilya hands BBQ-responsibilities to Hayden so he can turn to face Bood fully. "Conference finals last year, second round this year," he ticks off on his fingers, "Is possible."

"Ridiculous," Hayden murmurs, from his new spot at the BBQ.

"We're going to do it," Frank chimes in, clinking his beer can against Ilya's.

"Keep dreaming, Roz," says Wyatt Hayes.

"What a story it would be though," Harris muses, perched next to Troy, whose hand is on his back.

Shane watches them with envy. The rest have barely blinked at their familiarity. Maybe he underestimated this group. Maybe he could have safely told his and Ilya's story here. Maybe that could be him, hip cocked into Ilya's side and Ilya's arms half wrapped around him.

The idea makes his stomach queasy though, and he averts his gaze, sipping at his ginger-ale. It's an impossible dream anyway: he hasn't gotten anywhere, despite staring at himself in the mirror for months wishing the words would tumble out. Some of the fear has morphed into mortification, as he's never practiced something for so long without getting it right.

Troy's situation is different, he tells himself. He doesn't have millions of dollars in endorsement deals on the line, or people accosting him in Montreal grocery stores for autographs, or the pressure of the media dissecting every single play he makes on and off the ice. His life would be miserable if he let the media know anything else about him, let alone this big of a secret. He'd never hear the end of it. He'd never be left in peace.

But, god, he wishes.

"Shane!" he hears his name suddenly, and his head snaps up, looking around to find the other men staring at him. It's obvious his name's been called a few times.

"Whatcha thinking about, buddy?" Hayden says, as he starts doling out burgers.

"Nothing," Shane says, reaching for a plate. He slides on his hockey-banter personality, smirking: "Just that if Calgary wants a cup next year, they're going to have to get past us."

Hayden laughs and clinks his beer against Shane's pop, while the others all protest. Shane catches Ilya's eyes, and all he can think is: *you wanna kiss me on television?; and oh, so in this scenario, you've just defeated me...*

*

Chapter End Notes

Random Facts: Ya'll means All shirts are real, used by the Dallas Stars one year for Pride Night. Hayden's comments on LGBTQ+ issues are inspired/plagiarized from Braden Holtby's comments one year when missing Pride March in Washington for the first time in many years (because he was celebrating winning the Cup--in a pride hat). Other hockey interview comments are for the people I've seen asking for interviews in the show, because I can tell they do not know how boring NHL players really are -- picture "we gotta get pucks deep" on repeat.

"I didn't break up with them"-- real comment from the mother of an ex of mine, who sent me Christmas and birthday gifts for two years post-breakup before my ex finally begged her to stop. Haha.

Cheers for the response, appreciate ya'll!

Chapter 4: 2023-24 NHL Season

Chapter Summary

It's quiet and Shane stares at his hands. "I sometimes wish there was a bit more room to be... me... and not Shane Hollander, hockey player."

"Is there a difference between the two?" Marc asks, and Shane feels his throat tighten; the air feels like it's been sucked out of him.

It takes him a few beats, but finally, he says, in a voice that is just barely not a whisper: "Yeah."

Chapter Notes

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

IV. 2023-2024 NHL Season

You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.

— William Faulkner

*

It's a few weeks into the season when Shane realizes maybe coming out isn't something he can just practice.

The solution dawns on him when he overhears Thériault, of all people, tell one of their defencemen to check out of their practice early and go see George, the team's sports scientist and performance coach. George has been with the Voyageurs for ages; he's employed to help them overcome mental barriers on the ice and Shane's been to see him a dozen times for on-ice issues, when he's needed to unstick something in his brain to make him perform better.

And what is this, if not some sort of mental block?

Maybe he can take the same type of approach. Because it's not like he doesn't *want* to come out, he just can't get over that mental barrier to actually *do* it. The words are stuck.

He spends the rest of their practice musing that over in the back of his mind as he and the rest of the first power play unit cycle through their plays, and by the time he's putting his equipment away, his mind is made up.

He feels more than a little relieved to finally have a solution. Of course, he's not going to talk to *George* about this issue, but maybe he can find someone impartial in Montreal that will be able to give him the same support George would, but for this specific, off-ice, problem.

Just he needs to figure out where one *finds* someone like that— with the right credentials, a private enough office and a willingness to not divulge that *Shane Hollander* is a client. He knows, practically, that the contents of his session would be confidential, but there's always the risk that someone would see him going to a non-Voyageurs affiliated mental health professional and make assumptions.

Shane spends an hour one day on the internet staring at the dozens of names of psychologists in the city, dreads sorting through them all, and promptly gives up.

It's a tad embarrassing, but he pulls his mom aside after a dinner at his parent's place a week later.

"Mom," he says quietly, "I need a favour."

"Anything honey," Yuna says, a palm coming up briefly to cup his face before she returns to stacking dishes in the dishwasher.

Shane tucks his cheek to his shoulder to wipe the side of his face on his shirt. "I was wondering— hoping— that you might be able to," he starts and then mutters the rest of the sentence so quietly that Yuna doesn't hear him.

His mom lifts her head and looks at him quizzically.

"Could you put together a list of psychologists in Montreal," he repeats, sighing, and then adds: "Ones that are both qualified, but also private..."

Yuna stares at him for a moment, pausing with water glasses in her hands. "I haven't noticed you having any issues during the games," she muses a second later. He can see her brain replaying his last few games. "If there's something bothering you, can't you just see George?"

Shane looks at his socks. "It's not about on-ice stuff, Mom."

"Oh?"

Shane sighs again. "I've been thinking... maybe I could— should— see someone, about..."

"About?" Yuna prods, stacking the last few plates and leaving the last pot to soak.

Shane looks at the ceiling this time. Anything but look his mom directly in the eye. "About not being able to get myself to come out... Publicly."

When he looks back at her, Yuna's face has softened. She closed the dishwasher and reaches over to squeeze his hand. "Of course, honey. I'll get right on that."

Three days later, he has a list of six names in his inbox, complete with resumes, areas of speciality, and maps to their offices.

*

Shane picks a name.

In late-November Montreal has a three day break at home, so he makes an appointment with the therapist who has time slots available very early in the day. He arrives five minute before the appointment, with sunglasses on and a solid black ball-cap pulled low on his face; warring parts of him wanting to be there early and exactly on time, just in case someone has the time slot before him. He makes sure he isn't wearing a single piece of Voyageurs branded clothing and even slides on a pair of non-Reebok sneakers, as if someone could possibly identify him by his endorsements.

He needn't have worried: the small office, located in a building in Old Montreal, is empty when he arrives for his 8:00AM appointment. The receptionist greets him warmly and leads him to the therapy office, where he waits alone.

"Mr. Hollander?" the therapist, Dr. Caplan, inquired formally, when she opens the door.

Shane looks up from where he's pacing, pretending to study the artwork. He takes his hat off quickly. "Um, Shane."

"Shane," Dr. Caplan repeats, warmly. She gestures to the furniture in the room. "Please, sit."

"Okay," he says, numbly, and sinks onto a couch. There's a deep red-coloured pillow on it, with tassels, and he starts playing with one of them, absently.

Dr. Caplan sits in the chair to the right of him and crosses her legs. "Welcome. I'm Dr. Caplan. It's nice to meet you."

"I assume you know who I am," Shane blurts out, and then bites his lip. "It's mean..." he trails off awkwardly.

To her credit, Dr. Caplan doesn't look too perturbed. "Yes. Like most Montrealers, I'm familiar with the Voyageurs," she tells him, not unkindly.

"Right," Shane murmurs.

"Were you hoping I wouldn't be?"

He isn't sure he knows the answer to that question. It almost seems unreasonable to assume she wouldn't have known; he's not like some A-List celebrity, but in this town, people know his face. It's on a fucking billboard two kilometres south of here. She probably drives by it most days.

"Um, no?" he says, and it sounds like a question.

The therapist just smiles. Shane watches as she raises her pen, holding it poised above a notebook with startlingly white pages. The notebook's cover is purple, which looks odd in the otherwise red and gold room—*Inferno colours*, his mind tells him, traitorously.

"So," Dr. Caplan continues, when it's clear Shane won't. "Your request was vague on details regarding presenting issues. Should we start with what brings you in today?"

Shane stares at her. Ludicrously, in all of his planning, he'd failed to consider that once he got here, he'd have to say the words aloud in order to actually get the person to help him.

"Um," he says again. His throat feels dry. "Well..."

Dr. Caplan looks at him with gentle, understanding eyes, yet he still feels like he's being watched. Assessed. Judged. Even as she says: "Take your time."

Shane looks from the purple notebook to the red pillow, then at some odd framed print on the wall of a boat sailing through choppy waters. Dr. Caplan's chair has a flower print on it, he

notes, absently. There's also flowers on the desk behind her, but he thinks they look fake. The desk is otherwise bizarrely sparse. She has no photos. The bookshelf has surprisingly few books and shockingly more knick-knacks than he would have thought.

There's a water glass in front of him. He reaches for that and buys time by sipping it. He tries to drag the words up from inside of him.

Sixteen minutes of silence later he says, "I can't do this" and jumps to his feet.

Nine minutes later, once safe in his car, he calls Rose.

"I ran out of therapy," he announces when she answers.

"Back up," Rose says. She sounds far away and he guesses she's getting make-up done. "Therapy?"

"Yes."

"Why were you in therapy?" Rose asks.

"For my problem."

"What problem?"

"My..." he trails off, searching for a way to say it without sounding stupid. "My fucking giant inability to come out problem."

Rose tuts. "Darling, don't say it like that."

"She'll just bill me," Shane muses, ignoring Rose, "I had to put a credit card down when I made the appointment. Probably easiest twenty minutes of her career." His brain is still spinning and his heart has barely come back down to its resting rate.

"Hey!" Rose snaps. "Did you hear me?"

Shane pauses. She must have continued talking. "No?"

"I asked why you think it's a problem."

Shane sinks down in the driver's seat of his car. "It's a problem because... because I lost Ilya," he mumbles, "And I—It's not like I don't *want* to say it. I just need to learn how. It's stupid that I can't."

Rose is quiet for a moment. "I don't think it's stupid to want to protect yourself. You're allowed to have things that are just yours."

"Thanks," Shane replies after a moment, closing his eyes.

*

The Inferno's flight from Chicago gets in at 12:45AM and Ilya is exhausted. He drags himself off the plane and back to his house, opens the door and promptly has a heart attack as he hears *kikikimama* from inside his house.

"Блядь!" he yelps, when a shadowy figure rises from his couch.

"Oh, you're back," the shadowy figures's friend says, and the slasher film pauses.

"What the fuck," he manages, in English this time, and flips on a light.

"Ow," Jessica groans from the couch. Next to her, Lindsay, who initially sat up in surprise, falls back on the couch and pulls a blanket over her face. "I thought you were back tomorrow."

Ilya glares at her. "It is tomorrow— my schedule is on internet," he reminds her, and Jessica shrugs. "Why are you in my house?"

"Your TV is bigger than mine," Jessica says, gesturing to the screen that is currently showing some horror film. Then, apropos of nothing: "What is the capital of Alberta?"

"Edmonton," Ilya replies, on auto-pilot. He shakes his head. "How'd you get in?"

"I used my key," Jessica retorts, sliding up on her knees on the couch so she can look at him over the couch. "British Columbia?"

"Victoria— Fuck. That key was for emergencies," Ilya grunts, dumping his gear by the door. "The codes for alarm were also for emergency."

"I had the night off," Jessica adds, as if that's a real reason.

"Saskatchewan?" inquires Lindsay.

"Stop. I am tired," Ilya grumbles and walks into his kitchen, fumbling around for a glass and some water. Jessica gives him an imploring look, so he rolls his eyes and answers, "Regina," and instantly feels a bit of melancholy settle over him.

"Correct," Jessica determines, sliding back down on the couch.

"I'm going to bed," he announces to the two women after he downs his water. "You sleeping here?" He points to the guest room.

"The movies only half over, Ilya," Jessica says, as she slouches down, pulling half the blanket on top of her frame and points the remote back at the television.

He glares again, but half-heartedly. There's something weirdly pleasing about having his friend and her girlfriend sneak into his house to watch movies on the television he never uses. Even if they are quizzing him on Canadian trivia in the small hours of the morning.

"Goodnight, lesbians," he says, tiredly, and heads to his room, barely catching the protest of "I'm bisexual!" that comes from Lindsay as he climbs the stairs.

*

Shanes tries again.

He selects a new therapist off the list from his mom. This one's a man, whose office is located in Villeray. So further from the Bell Centre, which comforts him somewhat. The office is also a house and it has no signs except for the house number. He climbs the outdoor spiral staircase to the second level to gain entrance to the Dr. Marc Sauvin's office.

"Shane." A slender man with spindly glasses answers the door, before Shane can even knock on the door. The man smiles. He's holding a cup of coffee, the steam wafting off of it in the morning cold. "Come in, please. Can I get you anything?"

"Um, no, thank you," Shane murmurs, following the man into an office. The room is longer than it is wide, with one long wall comprised of just a bookshelf. Opposite the bookshelf is a long beige couch, with orange pillows and a green blanket on top of it, and on the far side

there are two chairs underneath a large window. A small coffee table completes the otherwise straightforward and functional decor.

Dr. Sauvin gestures for Shane to sit, and he does, perching himself precariously on the edge of the couch. The therapist pulls a notebook off of the bookshelf and, when he sits down on one of the chairs, tucks it beside him.

"Well, welcome, to my office. And my house," Dr. Sauvin begins, chucking a little, "We'll meet in this room." Shane smiles, thinly. "How are you today?"

"Um, fine— I mean, I'm good," Shane corrects. "How are you, Dr. Sauvin?" he adds, automatically.

"I'm well— but, please, it's Marc. Please call me that."

"Okay... Marc," Shane tests, as he stares at the bookshelf rather than at Marc himself. Most of them seem to be relevant texts to therapists field of practice, but there's some fiction books on the bottom shelves, as well as six autobiographies of mostly political figures, but also Clara Hughes's *Open Heart, Open Mind*.

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a sports person," Marc says, following Shane's gaze. "I generally just get into it around the Olympics."

Shane huffs out a laugh, a bit relieved. "That's a good time to get into it."

"I prefer the summer Olympics, personally, but I do enjoy watching speed-skating," Marc tells him, nodding in Hughes' book's general direction. "Have you been?"

Shane looks up at him in surprise. "To the Olympics?"

"Yes," Marc clarifies, pleasantly.

"Um, yes," Shane says, a bit baffled, "2014 in Sochi. Just Sochi though— NHL players haven't been allowed to go since." He shrugs, even though it doesn't seem like something to shrug about. It's one of those issues that's a bit of a sore spot, a perpetual thorn in his side. The Olympics are special and unique; there's nothing quite like it as an athlete, and he's never gotten to return. "They're saying maybe Milan in 2026."

"Must be an honour to go," Marc theorizes.

Shane nods. "It is. Yeah. There's nothing really like it— like representing your country... It's pretty amazing."

"Must be a lot of pressure," Marc says, almost under his breath, like he's musing about it instead of asking, but the words are barely out of the therapist's mouth before Shane is nodding.

"Fair bit, yeah," Shane confirms, thinking back to every international competition he's ever played. Montreal is a tough city to play hockey in, but nothing compares to an entire nation living or dying by whether a puck hits the back of the correct net. "But I'm used to it."

"I imagine you'd have to be," Marc agrees, and sips his coffee. "Do you like the pressure?"

Shane opens his mouth to respond immediately— *yes*, he should say. *Yes, I love it.* Because he's a professional athlete. Pressure is what he's trained for. It's what he's built for. His entire life he's lived with the pressure of needing to perform, of needing to train and fuel his body in the best way to enable success on the ice, with the pressure of wanting and needing to be the *best*. It's something he's always lived with. It comes with the territory. He's never paused to think about whether he actually likes it.

He exhales. "Sometimes." A pause as he considers, then: "On the ice, I do."

"And off the ice?"

Shane swallows. "Sometimes, I wish there was a little less." It's quiet and Shane stares at his hands. "I sometimes wish there was a bit more room to be... me... and not *Shane Hollander, hockey player*."

"Is there a difference between the two?" Marc asks, and Shane feels his throat tighten; the air feels like it's been sucked out of him.

It takes him a few beats, but finally, he says, in a voice that is just barely not a whisper: "Yeah."

*

The NHL pauses for a few days over Christmas and Ilya brings Svetlana to see the land he's purchased.

"You own dirt," Svetlana muses, in Russian, standing in her thick winter jacket with her elbow on Ilya's shoulder and looking at his new purchase: nine-point-eight acres of riverside lot, perched on the edge of the Bow River with Mount Yamnuska looming in the background.

Ilya shrugs off her elbow and grabs her hand. His shoes crunch on the snow as he spins in a circle and grins at her, walking backwards as he leads her further into the property, where in eighteen months his house will sit.

"There will be house here," he tells her excitedly, panning his hand across the sky to indicate. "Huge house with three floors. Three bedrooms on the upper level, and separate full suite off main level over a huge garage for my many cars." He winks at her, then throws his hands up, gesturing around the empty space to encourage Svetlana to imagine it. "Main level with a big kitchen and floor to ceiling windows so we can see full mountain, yes? From the kitchen, there will be a walk out to outside. Picture huge outside space, hot-tub, BBQ... a yard with room for Anya to run, and the path down to the river. And lower level will have gym and sauna, and maybe a pool?" He hasn't decided on all the specifics, even after multiple

conversations with the architects. "A giant media space so Jessica can watch her strange indie films. Full bar for me and you. And separate downstairs space with bunk beds, so camp coaches can stay every year."

"Sounds lovely, darling," Svetlana replies, even as she's rolling her eyes at his antics. "So, you are planning on staying here, then? In Calgary."

Ilya grins, spinning excitedly in the place where his house will stand. "Yes. Mostly. We will have this house here and—" he catches himself and cuts off his sentence, slamming the breaks on that train of thought.

When he turns around again, Svetlana is frowning. "We?"

"Nothing," Ilya stammers, "I got caught up—it's nothing. It's just this house. Yes. I'm staying here."

Svetlana purses her lips. "You were about to say then you would have this house here and a cottage in Ontario."

"No," Ilya lies.

"You're building this house for Hollander, aren't you," Svetlana accuses.

"No! Of course not," Ilya protests. Even though that's probably not entirely true, because each time he meets with the architects, or looks at designs or prints or or colours, he keeps wondering what Shane would pick, and if Shane will ever see this house. Ilya's scaled the gym for two, has spent hours pondering whether Shane would like the sauna, or whether he'd prefer the pool. He knows he had him in mind when designing the outdoor space; the walk-out area from the kitchen has space for outdoor dining, and grilling, and he's considering a fire pit. When Ilya approved the plans for the in-law suite, his brain had traitorously wondered whether Yuna and David would ever sleep there. He's eyeing a custom order table for the media area that will be perfect for puzzling. And he'd be lying if he hasn't dreamed about giant Christmas' with all of his people around him, Svetlana, Jessica, Lindsay and all three Hollanders, with Anya running circles around their feet. Maybe even Cliff and Frank

and the rest of the Game Changers coaches families— even Hayden, because Ilya will be feeling generous and full of holiday spirit.

"Ilya," Svetlana warns, placing her hands on her hips.

He sighs. "Maybe. A little. I don't know," he admits. Ilya steps back towards her and grabs her hands again. "I am mostly building it for me. I need a home. It's not like I can ever go back to Russia. So, this will be my home."

"Home." Svetlana echoes, a bit morosely. She releases one of his hands to bring gloved fingers up to touch his face. He presses his cheek into her hand.

"There was nothing for me there anyway," he says, finally, sparing a single fleeting thought for his brother in Russia, who hasn't even called for money in a year, because Ilya is such a disgrace to them. "I already have permanent residency— because of the foundation, and my other charity work. Playing here and in Ottawa, made it easier."

"That's why you have the study books," Svetlana says, thoughtfully, and he nods. She'd spotted them immediately on his kitchen counter, the second she had walked into his house, and had demanded answers— *for citizenship test when season is over*, he had explained, and then Jessica had unhelpfully launched into quizzing him for ten minutes while Svetlana stood there baffled.

"I am a man without a country," Ilya says softly, "You said that."

"Yes, well," Svetlana murmurs, moving to wrap her arms around him. "As far as countries go, you could do much worse."

*

In mid-January, Shane takes a stick to the body off a face-off and stumbles off the ice, holding his shoulder as he grimaces in pain.

"Out. A few weeks, at least," the team doctor says, the next day, holding up Shane's x-rays.

"No way," Shane protests. "We're six points out of a wild card spot."

The team doctor grimaces. "I'm afraid so, Hollander." He at least bothers looking apologetic. "One of the physios will be in shortly to walk you through the initial rehab plan. We'll meet Monday to discuss more."

The team doctor leaves and Shane sits back in his chair, careful not to jostle his shoulder. None of this is good news. At this point in this season, his injury will likely cost Montreal their season. It already wasn't looking great, so unless there's a miracle, there will be no playoffs in Montreal this year.

Marc asks him about it at their next session, following the public announcement that Shane wouldn't be travelling with the team on their west coast swing. "What's it like having a break?"

Shane frowns. "I'm still at the rink most days."

"Okay." Marc pauses, and then chooses a different approach. "How do you feel about not travelling with the team?"

"Disappointed. I want to be out there," Shane says, and while the response is automatic, it's also true. He misses the team, the guys—he missed *hockey*. The game is such an integral component of his life. He feels like a limb is missing without it. "Not playing is horrible."

Marc nods, and when Shane looks at him, his face is patient as he waits for Shane to go on. The notebook stays tucked between his leg and the side of his chair.

Shane sighs and adjusts his position on the couch carefully, his arm still in a sling. "And I hate that I'm missing the Calgary game," he admits. "I'm not sure I've ever missed a game against Ilya..."

It took him a few sessions to tell the Marc the story, but now, almost four months into this, it's out there and a constant part of their conversations. Marc knows that Shane is here for one reason and one reason only— to figure out how to come out. They spend frustratingly little time working on an action plan though.

Marc nods at the mention of Ilya, filing it away without comment. "That sounds like a real loss," he says instead. "And not just the game itself."

Shane looks down at the sling. The pain in his shoulder has subsided gradually, but he's still no where near returning. This road trip will be conducted completely without him, and he's definitely missing the All-Star Game in two weeks, his spot having already been given away to someone else.

"I've played against him every year since I came into the league," Shane murmurs. "It's the one thing, in everything, that is consistent."

"And now you won't."

"No." Shane swallows. "And I hate that it feels... like I'm benched from more than just hockey."

Marc lets the silence stretch. He's good at that. He never rushes to make Shane fill it, never cutting in too early. There's no scratching of his pen as Shane thinks about his next sentence. Eventually, Shane exhales and leans his head back against the couch.

"I want to see him," Shane says slowly, "Last time I was injured, he was there. In my hospital room because he needed to know I was okay."

"Have you heard from him?" Marc asks, picking up his coffee mug.

Shane nods. "A few hours after it happened. He was playing at the time. But he saw the replay. Everyone did."

"Must feel good to know he cares."

"It does," Shane says, honestly. "I worry, sometimes, that by the time I figure out how to say this, he'll have moved on."

Marc's brow furrows slightly. "Say more about that."

"I mean, all of this... coming out... It's all for him, right? If he's not there at the end, then I'm not sure what's it all for."

"Is it?" Marc asks. Shane's gaze snaps to him. "All for him."

"Well, yes. Of course," Shane says, the words coming out sharper than he intended. He winces, then keeps going. "I mean guess I've always figured I'd come out at some point... when the timing was right. After I was done with the game. When it wouldn't mess things up. When it wouldn't be a distraction." He lets out a breath. "But now the only thing *other* than hockey that I've ever wanted, might have slipped away from me."

Marc looks thoughtful. He crosses one leg over the other. "If it wasn't for Ilya— let's say he did move on. Would you want to tell the truth?"

Even if hypothetical, the thought makes Shane uneasy. He huffs out a humourless laugh. "I've spent my entire adult life not telling the truth about who I am."

"Why?"

"Because I want to play," Shane insists, "When I'm playing, I don't have to explain myself. I'm a hockey player. I show up, I do my job, people know where I fit." He gestures vaguely with his good hand. "I don't want to lose that. It's hard to imagine giving people insight into the rest of my life. They criticize enough, I don't need them to have other stuff to pry into."

"Other stuff like—"

"Like the fact if I come out, then hockey is going to stop being the main thing people see when they look at me," Shane replies, closing his fingers into a fist. "They're going to start asking questions about me."

Marc nods slowly. "And those questions feel threatening."

Shane doesn't answer right away. His jaw tightens, then relaxes. "Yeah," he says quietly. "Right now I'm just a hockey player."

"And without if you were more than just a hockey player," Marc says gently, "You'd be more exposed."

Shane nods once. "I don't like it."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Marc replies. "Exposure without control can feel really unsafe."

Shane looks at him then, something wary in his expression. "You keep saying things like that," he says. "Like, you think it's okay that I haven't done this yet."

Marc meets his gaze steadily. "I don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to protect yourself."

That lands harder than Shane expects. He swallows, his throat tight. "I'm not ashamed," he says, almost defensively. "I just—"

"You don't want to lose what you have," Marc finishes.

"Yeah." Shane rubs his thumb along the edge of the sling strap. "And I don't know who I am without it."

Marc lets a beat pass. "We don't have to answer that today," he says. "But I'm curious—when you imagine coming out, what do you imagine losing?"

Shane stares at the ceiling. "Respect," he says. "The room." A pause. "Maybe my place."

"And what do you imagine gaining?" Marc asks.

Shane laughs softly, a little incredulous. "I don't know."

"Think about it."

Another long pause. "I don't know," Shane repeats. "Maybe... not having to lie anymore." He glances back at Marc. "Maybe not feeling like I'm always bracing for impact."

Marc nods. "That sounds like relief."

"Yeah," Shane murmurs. "It does." He exhales. "I just don't trust that it comes without a cost."

Marc doesn't argue with him. "That's something we can keep exploring," he says instead. "Especially now, when hockey isn't demanding all your energy."

Shane grimaces. "Lucky me."

Marc smiles faintly. "We'll go at your pace," he says. "No announcements, no deadlines. Just figuring out what you want, and what you need to feel safe."

Shane leans back, exhausted but strangely steadier than when he arrived. "Okay," he says.

*

Shane makes it back on the ice for the last month and a half of hockey, but by the time he does, Montreal's finished. The Voyageurs limp to the end of the season, finishing far out of a playoff spot.

The Calgary Inferno storm into the post-season, vanquishing each of their opponents in the first two rounds and landing in best-of-seven Conference Final against Edmonton.

It's a rough, ruthless series.

Shane watches on the edge of his parent's couch, jaw clenched tightly and holding his breath half the time Ilya's on the ice. The physicality of the series is brutal. Shane's body tenses along with Ilya's every time he gets checked into the boards. By the time Game 6 rolls around, Shane's certain that Ilya's playing with bruised, if not cracked, ribs, and he's suspicious that Ilya's dealing with some type of ankle sprain. His stride looks off and he's relying too much on his passing game.

He's been in tough, physical playoff games himself, so Shane knows what it's like; what one feels and doesn't feel in the moment. He knows Ilya can—and will—play through whatever pain he needs. That in the moment, no pain is great enough to sideline him. That knowledge doesn't make it any easier to watch.

Next to him, his mom sucks in a breath and his dad swears softly as another Edmonton player lays a hard, clean, hit on Ilya with less than a minute of play, and Calgary up by one.

Shane inches forward, almost standing. Yuna grabs his hand. David is clutching both sides of his chair.

"Come on," Shane whispers.

Dying seconds of the game, and Ilya blocks a shot off his shin-pad, the rebound of which is corralled by an Edmonton player and fired back on the net. Mickey Larson makes a beautiful save off his right blocker and an Inferno defender sends the puck sliding out of their zone.

The buzzer goes.

"Holy shit," Shane breathes and his mom cries out in delight, watching as the Inferno players embrace each other in a flurry of equipment.

Ilya's going to the Stanley Cup Finals.

*

"How's Ilya Rozanov today?"

From the kitchen, Ilya turns an ear to the broadcast that Jessica has playing, even as he continues adding water to his protein shake, before he heads upstairs to nap for hour or so in advance of heading to the rink.

"He's awesome. Wish I was Ilya Rozanov today," Sutton quips to the press, a reporter catching the coach as he's likely heading into the arena.

"So he's going to play tonight?"

"Sure fucking am," Ilya mutters, twisting the shaker bottle shut.

From the television, Sutter echoes his statement, saying, *"He sure will."*

"Looked like he was hurting there after taking that stick to the face," the reporter continues, *"We expecting him to be in top form?"*

Ilya steps out of the kitchen as he uncaps the shaker, watching as his coach's expression doesn't even flinch, still typically unamused.

"Roz is a competitor," Sutter says, dryly, *"It's Game 6 of the Stanley Cup finals. We're down 3-2. It's do-or-die for us tonight, so what do you think?"*

The television dies to black as Jessica flips it off and turns to face him on the couch. "I like him."

"Coach?" Ilya asks, sipping his shake.

"Yeah. Gruff, but funny," Jessica says, picking up her jacket and keys and moving to stand by him. She frowns, and he can see the nurse in her assessing him. "How hurt are you, really?"

Ilya shrugs. His ribs are killing him. And there's not enough ice or tape in the world to keep his ankle from swelling in his skate. The cut on his lip stings if he puts his tongue to it. But there's nothing that could keep him from that ice. "Banged up. But okay."

"Right." Jessica nods, looking unconvinced. "Okay, so I'll get out of your hair, but I came by as I need a jersey. And how do I get my tickets?"

Ilya swallows a mouthful of protein shake and wipes his mouth. "What?"

"My tickets," Jessica says, bluntly, like he's stupid. "For your game."

"You don't like hockey," Ilya feels like he needs to point out.

"Sure—usually. But you're my friend!" she exclaims. "And it's Game 6."

"You're coming?"

Jessica stares at him, brow furrowed. "Me *and* Lindsay. Of course— we talked about this."

"I thought you joked," Ilya admits, although he does now recall her mentioning this to him in passing.

"Do you not have tickets for us?" Jessica asks, and she almost looks a bit hurt at the implication.

"No, no problem," Ilya shakes his head, because management always has spots put aside for him. They put aside space for every player, especially during the playoffs. He just has never had a reason to use them. "I have two spaces in the family box—"

"Okay great," Jessica declares, grinning.

"You really want to come?" he asks, unable to help himself from seeking confirmation.

Jessica nods. "Yeah, of course." She puts her hands on her hips and quotes his coach: "This is, you know, do or die." She laughs, and swing out her hand to taps lightly against his arm, adds teasingly: "I mean if there was a Game 6 of emergency room championships, you'd be there, right?"

He pictures it for a moment: the chaos and blood and bodily injuries everywhere. It would be brilliant. Rougher than their series against Edmonton. Ilya grins. "Da, of course."

"Okay, great," Jessica determines. "Now, I need a Rozanov jersey," she insists.

"Da." Ilya smiles, feeling oddly warm and pleased. "I can do that."

*

Calgary wins Game 6 and the series returns to Tampa Bay for an electric Game 7, that ends in heartbreak for the Inferno. A 3-3 game goes to double overtime, and the puck gets sniped past Mickey Larson, in a heartbreaker goal to cement the game and the series in Tampa's favour.

Shane watches the game half through his fingers, his heart in his throat as he pleads feverishly with the hockey gods to let it go Ilya's way. In a way, he feels more heartbroken at the end than he has with any of his own losses, watching Ilya file off the ice and not being able to say anything.

*

Off-Season, Summer 2024

Don't be afraid of your fears. They're not there to scare you. They're there to let you know that something is worth it.

— C. JoyBell C.

*

They're seated at the same table.

Shane stares at the placards hung over the chairs, a lump forming in his throat. He and Ilya haven't really talked much this season. They haven't had the opportunity, the Inferno left directly after the game in Montreal and Shane missed the second game, as well as the All Star weekend, with a legitimate injury that kept him from playing for six weeks. Consequently, it's been a long season with very little contact and it's been the first year since Ilya went to Calgary, that Shane really has felt that they're actually, definitely, broken up.

But the NHL loves any opportunity to poke at the dying narrative of their rivalry.

It's hard to keep a conversation going when they're in different conferences and barely play each other, so the storyline has died down. Shane only reads a handful of articles a year that mention both their names, and even less that mention them in opposition to each other. In a different world, maybe that would be a good thing. A chance for them to separate themselves from the rivalry and become something different.

Shane takes a deep breath to steady himself and sits down. Usually he's not at these things by himself, one of his parents usually accompanying him, but both Yuna and David are home sick, so he's flying solo tonight. He's not too disappointed though, as he's hoping it'll give him an opportunity to talk to Ilya— to tell him about therapy and his goals for it, and how he's working towards a reality where he feels safe to come out. He's practiced how to tell Ilya these things with Marc for weeks, and he really feels like he's prepared to have that conversation. A conversation that will go infinitely times better than the one in Ilya's kitchen, three years ago.

He's prepared. He has a plan. He's ready.

At least he is until Ilya walks up to the table, a beautiful Latina in a gorgeous terracotta-coloured dress on his arm.

Shane wants to die on the spot.

"Hollander," Ilya greets, as they approach the table.

Shane stands up so fast he knocks his knee against the table and grimaces. Ilya raises an eyebrow, but doesn't comment. "Rozanov," Shane replies, gruffer than he'd like.

"This is Jessica," Ilya says, gesturing to the woman trailing him. She smiles, beautifully, and stretches out a hand.

Shane takes it, hoping his hands aren't as sweaty as his anxiety indicates to him. "Nice to meet you," he says politely.

"You too," Jessica says, and Shane knows he's staring at her. He just hopes it isn't a glare.

Shane sinks back into his seat and barely pays attention as other people at their table, who all make polite conversation and some of whom ask him questions. He responds, he believes, but doesn't retain anything. All he can think is: *girlfriend, girlfriend, girlfriend. Ilya brought a girlfriend.*

His head feels dark and his chest is tense with jealousy. He barely hears the speeches, and is thankful he isn't a finalist for any awards this year as he's not sure he'd process his own goddamn name in time to go up on the stage.

When Ilya's name is called as the winner for the Ted Lindsay Award, Shane's eyes snap to Jessica, watching her surprise and excitement. She embraces Ilya, kisses his cheek and claps enthusiastically as Ilya climbs onto the stage. Shane wants to curl into a ball and cry.

He watches it all happen again when Ilya's name is called for a second time, as the winner of the Hart Memorial Trophy. Jessica's enthusiasm never ceases; she's just as joyful the second time, hugging Ilya fiercely.

Shane's chest feels like it's been punctured, ripped apart, and hollowed out.

*

"So, Shane Hollander," says Jessica, once they're back in his room, even though he paid for her to have a perfectly good one of her own down the hall. However, here she is, flopping down on Ilya's bed, while he strips himself of his suit jacket and rummages through the hotel's mini bar.

"Yes? What about?" Ilya responds, nonchalantly as possible. The question puts him on edge a bit, an unexpected tangent in an otherwise pleasant evening. He's been happy to have her at the NHL awards with him. It's the first time anyone has ever accompanied him to these awards—the first time anyone has ever been here *exclusively* for him.

He collects all the mini-bottles of vodka, gin, as well as the gourmet jerky and popcorn he spots, and then drops his bounty on the bed and falls back onto it. At the same time, Ilya pulls apart the knot of his reddish-brown tie and dumps it on the floor.

Jessica picks up a gin bottle and twists off the cap. Then, casually, she says, "Well, he's obviously in love with you, for one."

Ilya freezes. In the whole year they've been friends he's been careful to never mention Shane to her. It's still a secret. One he'd never betray. She knows he's been through a bad breakup—one he still hasn't quite gotten over—but he's never named names. Jessica's never asked.

Very carefully, he asks, "Why would you say that?"

"Because of the way he looked." Jessica eyes him over the edge of the tiny gin bottle.

"At me?" Ilya can't help himself from asking.

"No," Jessica says, slowly. She pauses, and she's clearly studying him. "At me."

Ilya doesn't look at her. He tries to sound uninterested. "What do you mean?"

Jessica quirks her eyebrow. "He looked at me like he wanted me to spontaneously combust on the spot."

"Ah," Ilya says, staring at the ceiling again.

"Like he has a very good reason to hate me."

Ilya makes a noise, noncommittal. He picks up a vodka bottle.

"Very angry," Jessica says again, looking at him pointedly.

Ilya sighs, sitting up on his elbow. "Angry kitten face."

"What?" Jessica seems startled by the response. She pushes on his shoulder and he pulls away slightly, cracking open the seal of the vodka bottle with his teeth.

"He gets a look." Ilya raises his hand over his face and draws a circle with two fingers. "When he is jealous."

Jessica chuckles. Ilya reaches out and pats a hand against her knee, which she's tucked up under her on the bed, her dress bunched up around and under her thighs. He then drinks most

of the mini vodka and recaps it, dropping it between them.

"So, is he the one who broke your heart?" Jessica asks, softly.

A loaded question, if Ilya's ever heard one.

"I think we broke each other's hearts," Ilya says, equally soft. Sometimes, he thinks they've been breaking each other's hearts since the day they met. Never quite able to find a way to be one hundred percent happy, because something has always been hanging over them: a rivalry, or a secret, or, these days, Ilya's truth.

Jessica slides down on the bed so she's on her side, her arms tucked under her head and knees bent. He copies her posture, lying so he's facing her, forehead to forehead, the mini alcohol bottles cluttered between their bodies. Jessica's eyes are big and wide and kind as she asks, "Why?"

For a second, Ilya's startled. He almost wants to laugh or to cry at his friend's comment; he doesn't know whether this stems from her naiveté about his world, or if she's just giving him the opportunity to say it aloud in his own words.

"It's always seemed like I wasn't allowed to love him," he begins, and then he tells Jessica the whole story, from rivals, to sex in hotel rooms, to lovers, to boyfriends, to feeling like he would scream or die if he had to keep their or his secret any longer, and then suddenly, he couldn't.

When he's done telling their story, his eyes are hot and he sees his own unshed tears reflected in Jessica's face.

"Do you still love him?" she whispers.

He nods, cheek rubbing rawly against the hotel duvet. "It's always been him."

*

"Shane Hollander!"

Shane's shoulders jump to his ears and he clutches the handle of his bag tighter as he slowly turns around in the lobby of the hotel, towards the voice he recognizes from the table last night: Ilya's date. Ilya's *girlfriend*. Shane's stomach drops on the spot when he turns to see her directly behind him, her purse tucked under one arm and her hand outstretched. He wants to disappear, or for the ground to swallow him whole, just so he doesn't need to have a conversation with her.

"Hi. Jessica Martínez," the woman—Jessica, he mentally corrects—reminds him and he takes her hand, cautiously. "Lesbian," she adds, lowering her voice a bit.

"Oh," Shane says, and then two seconds later it dawns on him what she is telling him. "*Oh.*"

They're not together.

This woman isn't Ilya's girlfriend. She's just his friend, who came with him to the awards show. Suddenly, his stomach feels a lot less queasy, and his shoulders sink a few inches.

"Nice to meet you again, Jessica," he greets, politely, feeling so very relieved.

"He should have told you," Jessica says, quietly. "I'm just here as his friend."

'Why would he need to?' Shane asks her, just as quiet. He tucks his bag further into his chest, like a shield between him and her.

The look Jessica gives him feels positively pitying. "Shane, I think—"

Shane cuts her off with a shake of his head. "This isn't a good time," he explains, eyeing the hockey world around him. There's two TSN on-air analysts standing not five feet from them; one of the commissioners from the NHL Player's Association was sat in the bar, chatting with another journalist over breakfast. He's pretty sure he just saw Colorado's captain exit the elevator, alongside his wife, and two players from LA are checking out of the hotel at the reception across the room. This place is crawling with NHL players and officials.

Jessica seems frustrated. "Look," she tries again, "Ilya will be down shortly, maybe we can go get breakfast somewhere—"

"I really can't," Shane says, cutting her off again, and he's not even lying. He should be on his way to the airport already. He makes a show of checking his watch. "I have a flight to catch." He pulls the handle out of his suitcase." Tell Ilya I said hello, and I'll see him in Montreal in a few weeks."

"Shane, just wait a few minutes—"

"It was really nice to meet you," Shane tells her, and tries to paste a genuine smile on his face. "Thank you. For clarifying," he adds under his breath, and then he spins on his heel, walks out of the hotel, piles himself in a taxi, and heads back to Montreal.

*

On the final night of the Montreal camp, Ryan tells everyone that Fabian is performing at one of the nightclubs in the Village. A group decides to go and when Ryan asks Shane to join them, he agrees.

Ryan looks surprised, but he takes it in stride. "Okay, great. We'll meet there around nine."

"Great," Shane says, the smile on his face only partly forced. He's nervous, but Marc and him have talked a great deal about how it's important for Shane to become more comfortable in queer spaces, if he's ever going to be comfortable with himself.

When he arrives at the club, dragging Hayden with him, he takes a deep breath before pushing open the door, scanning the club only briefly before spotting Ryan, Leah, Max and Ilya.

"You made it," Leah says, smiling widely, and giving both of them a hug.

It takes him a bit to relax. He watches the crowd more than Fabian on stage, feeling slightly jealous at how at ease and happy the people all seem to be, leaning on each other, kissing, embracing. No shame or guilt seems to have made it into this place, and Shane wishes he could have completely shucked his at the door too. Instead, it just gets shuffled to the back of his mind, as he tries to feel at ease in the club. He wants to be comfortable here; he wants to feel like he belongs in this club, just as much as he belongs on the ice.

"I'm glad you came," Ilya says, so very close to Shane's ear.

Shane jumps, almost taking a step back from Ilya and barely stopping himself. "I'm trying," he admits, looking at Ilya. He's beautiful, relaxed with his drink in one hand, the lights highlighting the curve of his shoulder in the cut-off shirt. Shane takes a breath, stammers out: "I... I'm seeing a therapist..."

Ilya looks momentarily stunned, but recovers quickly enough. "Okay. I'm— Um. Just, good. Good for you," he says, and smiles widely at him.

Shane feels something small lift off his chest, a little reprieve. By the end of the night, it feels like he has a slightly larger space to breathe.

*

Ilya takes the citizenship exam as summer ascends. It's one of the most stressful things he's ever done, and he worries about the results more than he has any hockey game. It's a few weeks later, just after he returns to Calgary following the Ottawa camp, when Ilya receives an email indicating that the results have been posted. He just needs to click the link.

Jessica and Lindsay are with him when he decides to open it, leaning anxiously over his kitchen island, while Svetlana urges him over the phone: "Just click the button, Ilya."

He stares at his laptop. He's nervous. This feels way too monumental and important to be delivered over an application. He's been frozen on the login page for a good ten minutes, but he's nervous to click through—once he clicks that button, there's no going back.

"Tests were never—" he starts and Jessica groans, grabs his laptop and presses the button.

For a moment, the world feels like it has stopped.

Then, Jessica and Lindsay both squeal. "You passed!" Jessica cries, delighted, stepping around the island to throw her arms around him.

"Поздравляю, дорогой," Svetlana says over the phone, almost drowned out by the collective excitement of the two women in the room, as well as Anya who has started barking at the girls' outburst.

Ilya just feels lightheaded. He whispers, "I passed?"

"Yes! Congratulations!" Jessica confirms, hugging him tightly. Ilya's arms feel almost limp around her, as shocked as he is, but he tries to tighten his embrace. Tries to internalize the results. *He passed, he passed, he passed.* His heart is pounding ferociously, and his face feels stuck between surprise and the desire to morph into the widest of smiles.

Lindsay is still scrolling through the application. "Wow, so the ceremony invitation is for end of August."

"Date?" Svetlana asks and Lindsay passes the information over the phone. "Thank you, darling," Svetlana says and then her voice goes fuzzy. "I will find flight."

"Are you going to invite him?" Jessica asks.

"What?" Ilya chokes out. Her hair smells like coconut, and it's grounding.

"Shane, obviously," Svetlana says, over the phone.

Jessica nods at the speaker. "Yeah, are you going to invite Shane to the ceremony?"

"Uh," Ilya says, and it's as she says it that it dawns on him: Ilya needs Shane there. There's no doubt in his mind. As shocking as the test results are, there's nothing that startles him about the realization he wants Shane there. "Da."

*

It takes him a few days to work up the courage to call though.

"Hi," Ilya says when Shane answers the phone. "I'm glad you answered."

"Hi, Ilya," Shane says, and he sounds a bit guarded.

Ilya paces in his kitchen. He's oddly nervous. Even though the worst thing that could happen is that Shane says no, and then he'll just go to the ceremony with Jessica, and Lindsay, and

Svetlana, and maybe Frank and his family, in his corner.

"Hi," Ilya repeats. "I have... I have a question."

"About one of the camps?" Shane asks.

"Um, no," Ilya says. "Well sort of."

"Sort of about the camps?"

He's going about this all wrong. Ilya takes a deep breath and tries again. "I was wondering if you would stay in Calgary a few days longer, after the camp."

"Why?" Shane cuts him off, and he sounds a bit suspicious.

"Not bad thing!" Ilya breaks in. He sighs and spits it out: "I took citizenship test. And Canadian citizenship ceremony is a few days after camp. And I'd like you to be there." He pauses. "If you— if you want."

There's a long pause and Ilya's heart is beating fast in his chest as he awaits Shane's response. He has to sit down, close his eyes, and sink his fingers into Anya's fur.

"You took the citizenship test?"

"Da," Ilya says, thickly. He coughs to clear his throat. "Yes— after playoffs ended. Before awards." He pauses. "I passed."

There's another pause, before Shane asks, "You're staying in Canada?"

Ilya nods, then realizing Shane can't see him adds, aloud, "Yes. Was always plan." He pauses. "Wasn't it?"

"I wasn't sure if that would have changed," Shane says, and his voice sounds oddly small.

"No, I still want to be here," Ilya tells him and hopes his meaning is clear— *with you*. He still wants to be here with Shane. Nothing's changed about that, despite everything. It's always been him. It always will be him. "I want you to come. Will you come?"

"Да, с удовольствием," Shane murmurs.

*

It's going to be a small ceremony, which Ilya likes. There won't be much fan-fare, although the news of his impending new citizenship has leaked to the media. He's seen a few stories about it and has been asked about it a few times over the summer when the media has come by the Game Changers camps to do fluffy off-season stories. He always gives the same answer— He likes Canada, Canada likes him, he'll be happy and honoured to call this country home.

Part of him expects the media attention, even if minimal, to scare Shane away. All week at the Calgary camp he braces for it— for the moment when Shane will come to him and say that he can't be there because of the risk of media exposure.

It doesn't happen.

The day after the Game Changers camp ends, and the other coaches head home, Shane takes his stuff out of the Airbnb Hayden and him were sharing throughout camp, and moves into Ilya's other guest room, as Svetlana's staying in the other.

It's Shane that finds Ilya staring at himself in the mirror, the morning of the ceremony. He woke up steeped in more melancholy than he would have imagined—there's excitement, sure, but an eerie sadness has settled over him as well. He's both gaining and losing something today.

Shane raps on the ensuite door, murmuring, "Are you okay?"

Ilya splashes water on his face, careful to not get it on the dark suit jacket he's already wearing. He presses a towel against his skin. "Da— Yes," he corrects himself, "Just nervous."

Shane takes a step towards him, reaches out, and straightens the lapels of the jacket. "You can be sad," Shane murmurs in his broken Russian that Ilya still can't believe he started—and kept—learning for him. "And happy. At same time."

"Thank you," Ilya murmurs back, in English. "For being here."

"I'm glad I'm here," Shane tells him, his hands smoothing out Ilya's jacket. He reaches into his pocket. "I have something for you. Well, it's from my dad." Ilya's eyes snap up to Shane's, startled. "They're sad they're not here..." he adds, softly.

"Me too," Ilya says, honestly, and part of him wishes he would have just thrown caution out the door and invited the whole Hollander family.

Shane's smile seems a bit sad too, but he doesn't add anything else, just unfolds his hand, revealing a small maple leaf pin. "My dad got it at some sort of G7 related meeting. It's apparently copper from the original Parliament buildings... Can I?" Shane asks, gesturing to Ilya's jacket.

Ilya nods, stiffly. His eyes prickle, as Shane pins the gift to his jacket. He hasn't been sure what to expect regarding the emotion of the day. He knows he has to take an oath, and he's expecting to feel some big emotions then, but this tiny pin has him close to tears.

"I'm sure you'll get something there, but—"

Ilya cuts him off; kissing him suddenly, his hands coming to either side of Shane's face.

"Oh," Shane says, as Ilya releases him.

"I love it," Ilya says, his forehead pressed to Shane's. His heart feels unbelievably full.
"Thank you."

*

"Twenty bucks says he cries," Lindsay murmurs, her arm around Jessica. The two women are seated in the middle of the group of Ilya's friends, near the back of the small room where the ceremony will take place.

"I'll take that action," says Frank Panto, Ilya's alternate captain, who grew up in Calgary and is here along with his wife, Vanessa. His wife, sitting on the far end of their line, sighs. "No way Roz cries."

"I cried," Jessica protests. "It's a beautiful day."

"You were ten," Lindsay retorts. "Of course you cried. And, babe, you're emotional."

"Make it thirty in favour of him not crying," Svetlana raises. "We're Russian. Not so emotional." She's seated between Jessica and Shane, and Svetlana nudges him. "You in?"

Shane considers it for a moment. "I'll say thirty— I think he'll tear up. At minimum."

Ilya does tear up. Shane can see it in his face, as he repeats the words of the oath, and a little bit as the anthem plays. Shane can barely take his eyes off of him, glancing only briefly at Svetlana, who, despite her own predictions, appears to have tears in her own eyes. At some point, Svetlana grips Shane's hand tightly, and he lets her, smiling at her gently when the ceremony draws to a close.

"Congratulations, Captain," Frank says, embracing Ilya after the ceremony. Their hug lasts longer than usual, and the next day, it'll be Frank and Ilya's embrace that will end up in the paper, alongside details of the day.

The rest of them offer their own congratulations, and everyone, minus Frank and Vanessa, head back to Ilya's to celebrate and drink and celebrate some more.

It's easy, by the end of the night, to take Ilya's hand and follow him back to his room, to allow himself be stripped of his clothing and pushed gently into the bedsheets, to let the murmurs of *félicitations* against Ilya's mouth turn into gasps and moans, until they fall asleep, sated and happy and curled together.

*

It takes great strength to pull himself out of Ilya's bed, but Shane does it, leaving Ilya sleeping soundly and creeping downstairs to his kitchen. It's Ilya's first full day as a Canadian, and Shane woke dreaming of waking Ilya up with pancakes and maple syrup.

Shane walks into the kitchen and opens the fridge, pulling out eggs and milk out of the fridge while humming lowly to himself. He's happy, truly content— and while he's not sure what last night really means, he's just happy it happened. They can work out the details later.

He closes the door, pivots, and comes face to face with a woman holding syrup.

"Fuck," he swears, jolting in place and barely keeping the eggs steady in his hand.

"Hello," Jessica says, smiling a bit dangerously.

Shane puts the eggs and milk down, his heart beat slowly coming back to its resting beat. "Do you make a habit of hiding in people's kitchens?"

"Nope," she says, popping the p. She's still smiling weirdly at him as she leans over and puts the syrup on the counter next to Shane's milk and eggs. "For pancakes," she clarifies, a bit mischievously.

"Were you here all night?" he asks. His cheeks suddenly start to heat, and he hopes she can't tell.

She laughs at him. "Yes, but we all slept downstairs. Thick walls," she says, still laughing, and winks. He's somewhat relieved, although he knows he's still blushing. She doesn't seem perturbed. "Seems like we had the same thought," she says, nodding at the ingredients, then leaning down and pulling out a bowl from under the counter.

Shane immediately feels a bit possessive of the idea. And annoyed that Jessica seems to know her way around Ilya's kitchen. He's unreasonably irked at the fact she is lurking in his kitchen at eight in the morning, even if they did sleep here. Shane knows they're just friends, but he's annoyed at their closeness, irritated in the same way that he's previously been with Svetlana: irrationally vexed by these women and their familiarity with his person.

Jessica pulls out a frying pan and places it on the stove, which is when Shane realize he hasn't started moving again and has probably just been staring at her with no regard for the expression on his face.

"Shall we?" she says, adding flour, baking soda, powder and vanilla to the stack of ingredients. Shane must pause for too long, too obviously possessive of his plan. "Or," she says slowly, rolling her eyes and taking a step back. "I can go sit on the couch. As long as you promise to make the rest of us some too."

Shane nods, grateful. He knows he's being really weird.

Jessica shrugs at him and departs, leaving Shane to struggle how to remember to make pancakes. He can't remember the last time he even *had* a pancake, particularly one made without cottage cheese or protein powder, or subbing flour for oats. Regardless, he starts mixing ingredients and gets to work.

He burns the first six and Svetlana ends up bailing him out, but when Ilya comes down, the girls let him take the credit.

"Thank you," Ilya says, beaming, and he tastes like maple syrup when he kisses Shane.

"Is it weird to say I'm proud of you?" Shane murmurs against Ilya's lips, only pulling away when the girls groan, and Jessica snaps: "I'm proud too; just as long as you vote."

*

Chapter End Notes

playing fast and loose with canadian citizenship laws/procedures. oh well. also, this chapter is unnecessarily 10k words, but maybe that will excuse the wait?

thanks everyone for comments & kudos. hearing your thoughts in the comments makes my day, even if i am making you all cry.

Chapter 5: 2024-25 NHL Season

Chapter Summary

“But I love you. And I know I’ve been really selfish, and I have no right to ask this... but please wait.”

“OK,” Ilya says, simply.

“Okay?”

“OK,” Ilya repeats. “I will— I am. It is just you. I want you.” He pauses, takes a step towards Shane, who mirrors his movement. “Always have wanted you. Since rookie year.”

“Summer before,” Shane corrects.

“Summer before,” Ilya agrees, and Shane finds himself crossing the path. And then he’s kissing him; an arm wrapped around Ilya’s neck, his other hand in Ilya’s hair, the water bottle discarded in the dirt, and the mountain a euphony around them.

Chapter Notes

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

2024-2025 NHL Season

Bran thought about it. 'Can a man still be brave if he's afraid?'

'That is the only time a man can be brave,' his father told him.

— George R.R. Martin, A Game of Thrones

•

Originally, Shane’s plane ticket was booked for the day after the citizenship ceremony. He skips it and stays well into September, leaving only a few days before he needs to report to Montreal’s training camp.

Svetlana leaves at the end of August, right before Canada's Labour Day holiday. On her last day, she corners Shane right as he's trying to exit the bathroom, shoving him back into the room, before closing and locking the door behind her.

"Yes?" he ask, as she folds her arms over her chest and stares down her nose at him, only possible because she's already wearing her heels.

Svetlana taps her foot on the ground. "When are you leaving?"

"The bathroom?" Shane says, furrowing his brow. "I was trying—"

"The city!" she hisses, smacking a palm against the countertop. "Ilya said you were supposed to be gone days ago, and yet..." she trails off, using her other hand to gesture in the air in front of her, indicating his presence. "This is fucking with him."

Shane's mouth drops open slightly. "What do you mean—"

"Дыак!" Svetlana scoffs. "Why are you here still? He does not know what this means and he will not ask you, so I am."

"I—"

"Do not make him hide again," Svetlana says, cutting him off, even though she is the one who asked a question, and Shane's mouth snaps shut. "He has built something here—something he's never had before." She takes a step closer to him, jabs him in the chest with one long, painted talon of a fingernail. "Do not make him give that up."

"I wouldn't," Shane says quickly, inching backwards until his calves hit the bathtub. He stares at her shoulder, where the collar of her jacket is popped up slightly.

"Good," Svetlana says, smooth as ice.

Shane swallows. "I know he's happy. I'm happy he's happy."

"He is," Svetlana confirms, looking the length of Shane's body, assessing him. He shifts in place under the scrutiny. "Mostly."

"Mostly?" he repeats, pulse quickening. His voice feels like it's dragged out of his throat. It feels wicked to hope, but yet, he does.

Svetlana purses her lips together. "Mostly," she confirms. "Do not hurt him, Hollander. Not again." She presses her fingernail back into him, between the buttons of Ilya's henley, which Shane is wearing. The point pricks into his chest. "If you do, I will kill you. I am Russian. Don't think I won't."

Shane nods sharply. "I love him, Svetlana. I don't want to hurt him; I'm sorry I ever did."

"You better be," Svetlana tells him, and then she leaves.

He obsesses over her words for two weeks, even as he stays at Ilya's house, and sleeps in his bed, and kisses him, and gets fucked into various surfaces. It's only when Ilya's mouth is attached to his that he stops thinking about her warning, concentrating on how Ilya's making him feel, rather than how he's feels about Ilya. It's not till his final full day there, as the two of them race up a most the way up a difficult climb on a mountain that Ilya's weirdly enamoured with, that Shane works up the courage.

"I'm glad you're happy here," Shane blurts out after he's caught his breath.

Ilya looks over at him from across the path, his face puzzled behind the water bottle he's drinking from, and which he then tosses at Shane. "What?"

Shane catches the bottle, shuffling it from one hand to the other. He stares at the ground, because the words are hard. "I'm just saying, I see what you have here. With this team. In this city. With your friends. And I'm happy for you," he adds. Ilya opens his mouth to say something, but Shane rushes on, "I didn't see it, before, how unhappy you were in Ottawa. And I didn't entirely realize I was keeping you for myself—"

"Shane—" Ilya tries.

"No," Shane continues. "I was. I wanted you. I wanted you close— I needed you close. I made a plan for us that worked for me—"

"Shane—"

"I can't even remember if I asked if it worked for you. And regardless, even if it worked for awhile, then it didn't— at least not for you—and I never adjusted for you because it still worked for me—"

"Shane—"

"I was selfish with you," Shane exclaims. The words feel rawer here, than they ever have in therapy. "Very selfish," he adds, hoarsely, and trails off, suddenly embarrassed at his outburst.

The wind rustles loudly around them. A bird caws in the distance, and Shane can hear the sound of other voices, somewhere lower on the trail. The sun is hot on his face and the words suddenly large and looming, rather than quiet and haunting in the safety of his head. The light he's standing in is blinding.

"Can I talk now?" Ilya asks, bluntly, and Shane snaps his mouth shut, nodding. "I chose to go to Ottawa. Me." He points at himself. "And I was happy in Ottawa, in Montreal—with you. I was just also depressed. I wanted more."

"I know that now," Shane replies, rubbing his fingers nervously on the bottle.

"But I was wrong too," Ilya continues. Ilya drags his eyes up from the ground to look at Shane. "For asking you to make choice, when I knew you were not ready."

Shane's eyes prickle with tears. "I know I still have work to do. On me."

"It was unfair—"

"I needed it," Shane interjects. "It wasn't working."

"Still," Ilya says, his accent rougher than usual, "I am sorry... that I made you scared."

Shane nods, some of the tension easing from his shoulders. He exhales. "I am not sure where we go from here," Shane says, thickly, "But I love you. And I know I've been really selfish, and I have no right to ask this... but please wait."

He says it and then his plea is out there, and he just stares at Ilya, silhouetted by the forest of green, and holds his breath.

"OK," Ilya says, simply.

"Okay?"

"OK," Ilya repeats. "I will— I am. It is just you. I want you." He pauses, takes a step towards Shane, who mirrors his movement. "Always have wanted you. Since rookie year."

"Summer before," Shane corrects.

"Summer before," Ilya agrees, and Shane finds himself crossing the path. And then he's kissing him; an arm wrapped around Ilya's neck, his other hand in Ilya's hair, the water bottle discarded in the dirt, and the mountain a euphony around them.

*

Shane walks into Marc's office upon his return to Montreal with a mission.

"Right, so I drafted a statement," Shane says, and drops the perfectly folded paper with scrawled words on the table in front of Marc. He's obsessed over this too. "I have social media accounts I never use, but people follow... I think I'll just put it out there... and just... turn my phone off, never refresh and deal with things as they come."

Marc picks the paper up and unfolds it. He starts to read, even as he asks: "Deal with it?"

"Any repercussions," Shane explains, pacing. Marc continues reading and lets Shane spiral; lets him burn through the oxygen. Shane starts to unravel the threads of his thoughts, that he's been agonizing over for weeks: "Like, there will be. Questions, post-game interviews that will turn into minefields. Sponsors will re-evaluate. Re-align. Anonymous sources will give interviews. Former teammates that will probably start remembering locker room moments like they were clues. My name's going to 'trend'—" he adds the air quotes, speaking pace quickening "—with speculation and rumours and words that don't belong to me. There will be so much press. Who knows what my team, my coach are going to say... My phone is going to vibrate nonstop." Shane sucks in a breath and sits down in, suddenly feeling short of breath. "Oh my god, I can't do this. If I put this out I won't be able to control any of it..."

"Shane," Marc says, gently. "Take a moment."

Shane puts his head in his hands and breathes deeply, like they've gone over. Tries to push all the excess thoughts out of his head. Slowly the anxiety that has built up ramps down. He looks up at Marc.

"What brings this on?" Marc asks, meeting his eyes.

Shane looks out the window. "Ilya said he will wait— that he is waiting." He rubs his hands over his face. "I can't let him wait forever."

Marc hums thoughtfully and offers Shane the paper. "Read it aloud."

Shane takes it and the paper trembles in his grasp. "I, um," he starts, then clears his throat. "I want to share something personal." He winces and glances up. "It sounds like a hostage video already."

"Keep going," Marc says, calm and neutral.

Shane looks back down. "I'm proud of the life I've built, on and off the ice. I know this may come as a surprise to many, but for a long time I have been keeping part of me a secret: I'm gay. And I don't want to hide that anymore." Marc nods, encouragingly, even as Shane grimaces. "I ask for respect and privacy as I continue to focus on hockey..."

He lets the paper fall to his lap. Marc doesn't speak right away, just leans back in his chair and steeples his fingers, and the silence stretches thoughtfully.

"That's... measured," Marc says finally. "You've clearly thought about this."

"It'll blow up in my face," Shane mutters. "I can't do this, can I?"

"Do you want to?"

Shane hesitates. "Yes... And no." He presses his fingers to his mouth. He itches to control this. Everything he's built is so orderly and controlled, and this seems like it's on the edge of falling apart. He's not sure how to package this up perfectly. "I don't want to lie anymore to my friends... My teammates. People important to me."

Marc nods. "Does that require a public statement?"

Shane lets his hands drop back into his lap. The paper flits to the ground. "No?" And it's a question. "Maybe not."

"Maybe not," Marc agrees gently. "Maybe some alignment. With the people who matter first."

Shane frowns, thinking. "So, my team."

"You've said it's important to you that they know first," Marc reminds him. "So, we've talked about small steps. Agent. Coach. Team. One conversation at a time. See how each step goes. Readjust." He gestures between them. "Like you did this."

"But if it leaks—"

Marc nods. "And it might. But small steps give you leverage— practice the truth without shouting it."

Shane leans back, absorbing it. He worries the hem of his shirt sleeve between his fingers. "And Ilya?"

"You tell him you're moving forward," Marc suggests, picking up the paper and folding it neatly in half. He hands it back to Shane. "Not all at once. Just... forward. Small steps."

Shane's shoulders drop, just a little. The tightness in his chest loosens. He feels a little less like he's going to get swept away. "I can do small."

"No," Thériault asserts, in his office, just before in mid-November, after Shane confides in him his secret and asks to tell the team, "Absolument pas."

Shane's heart sinks into his gut. "Coach—"

"Une distraction," Thériault accuses. His face is hard set, jaw tight and face a furious red. "Not on my ice. This? You keep this quiet. Jusqu'à ce que vous ne soyez plus mon joueur vedette."

"C'est ma vie," Shane protests, but even to him it feels weak. Everything feels like it has collapsed around him. "Coach, if I want to come out, I will."

Thériault leans forward on his desk. His voice is quiet, but threatening, and Shane's insides twist ferociously. "I will scratch you. This is our year— we *must* perform. I will not have any distractions this year."

"Coach," Shane pleads, softly. He's been so careful, so measured. His entire life has been constructed to the most minuscule detail to ensure that he can perform. Everything he's ever done has been for this. "I've always performed—"

"Hollander, I like you," Thériault tells him. "I even hope this—" the word is spat "—works out for you one day. But this is hockey. This game demands sacrifices." He narrows his eyes at Shane and makes a demand: "Sacrifice."

*

"He told me the game demands sacrifices," Shane reports to Marc, pacing down the length of his office. "Sacrifices! Can you believe that?"

His therapist hums from his seat, two hands wrapped around his coffee mug, while Shane paces, muttering to himself. His body feels tense, his head is a minefield, and he needs to expel all the furious energy.

Marc lets Shane pace for a bit longer, before he finally interjects: "Shane, why did you ask permission?"

"What?" The question abruptly ends Shane's muttering, and he stops and looks up.

Marc sets his mug down. "From what you just told me, you went into your Coach's office, you told him you're gay, and then you asked him for permission to tell your team. Why?"

"I told you it's important to me that I don't blindside my Coach and teammates," Shane reminds him, because they've talked about this a dozen times. Shane needs to expand the circle of people who know slowly: family, close friends, team, then everyone else. He frowns, puzzled at the question. "I need them to know first— that's important to me."

"Yes," Marc agrees. "But do you think maybe there's a difference between informing them and asking them?"

It takes a beat to internalize Marc's words, Shane's brow creasing as he considers them. Shane sinks into his regular spot on the couch and puts his head in his hands, mouth pressed against his palm. "I didn't think about it that way," he admits.

"Shane, this is your story," Marc says, his voice soft. It's a common refrain in these sessions; something Marc is constantly reminding him of. Shane pulls the green couch blanket over his lap and crumples it between his fingers. "Only you can— only you *should* control the when, the where, and the how. Nobody else."

Calgary plays in Montreal a week after Shane's discussion with Thériault and the whole thing has made Shane feel like he needs to be extra careful, keeping his eyes on the ice as Ilya slides up to him at the face-off circle, lest something be noticed by his coach. His stomach is tight and nauseous the entire game. The pressure to just be a hockey player is formidable tonight. It's like he's under a microscope, and every time Ilya's near him on the ice the scrutiny feels like it's burning. He feels the furthest from being out than he has in years.

It must show, because in the final period, with the Inferno up 4-1, Ilya slides up to the face-off dot and wonders, "You are off tonight. What is wrong with Voyageurs star player?"

Shane shakes his head. He knows Ilya's just teasing, but the wording stings. "Just play, Rozanov."

"Hollander," Ilya says, a hint of warning in his voice.

"Rozanov, knock it off," warns the referee hovering over the face-off dot.

Shane stares at the dot on the ice. Narrows his focus to the location the puck will drop. Blocks everything else out. Controls what he can.

When the ref drops it, Shane wins it cleanly and passes it back to his teammate, only to have his defender knocked off the puck a few seconds later, which leads to an Inferno a zone entry and ultimately another goal. Shane exits the ice and slams his stick down on the bench boards.

They lose 5-2 and Thériault is livid in the locker room.

Throughout Thériault's tirade, Shane focuses on the logo in the middle of the room, hoping he won't be singled out for anything in particular. He prays nothing seemed amiss tonight with him, that there was no hint of him being distracted. He keeps telling himself that he did everything right, that he controlled everything he could, that the day unfolded exactly how it needed to, up until the point that the Inferno put five pucks in the back of their net— all but one of which he was on the bench for.

He played his part, perfectly.

Yet, dread swirls in his stomach and his head feels terribly heavy, and it's not until Hayden knocks against his shoulder that he realizes Thériault has stopped yelling and departed.

"Are you okay?" Hayden asks, lowly. His friend's face is creased with worry.

"Hate losing," Shane mutters, looking at the floor.

Hayden raises an eyebrow, unconvinced, but Shane just shakes his head at him. He guides himself mindlessly through his post-game rituals and into his car, Hayden's gaze heavy on him the whole time.

Shane stares at his steering wheel for ten minutes forcing himself to do Marc's breathing exercises in a futile attempt to ramp down his anxiety, before finally giving up, turning the ignition and driving himself home on autopilot. He parks his car and makes his way up to his condo slowly, every thought like molasses. His body feels heavy and cold and wrong and horrible, but he has to keep moving because the post-game rituals aren't complete yet. He has things to do.

Shane punches in the code for his door and lets himself in, only to have his knees give out underneath him the second the door closes behind him, and he's safe in his own space.

Someone catches him.

He tenses, and then reflexively relaxes, when the person says: "You are OK."

Shane lets his head fall against Ilya's shoulder. "How are you here?"

"You think I can't tell when you're struggling?" Ilya shifts Shane's weight in his arms. "And you haven't changed your codes."

"Oh. Right."

Shane hadn't thought of that. The realization irritates him. In hindsight, the codes should have been changed ages ago, so only he and his parents had access, because that's all who is allowed in his place. That was stupid of him. No one else comes here, and Ilya hasn't been here in ages. He shouldn't still have a working code. It makes no sense that he hadn't changed them; he's not sure how he forgot to do that— how that slipped his mind. He should get on that.

Shane is too busy fixating on the codes to notice that Ilya has somehow maneuvered him to the couch, until Ilya taps his thighs to get him to sit down. Shane follows automatically, letting Ilya coax him into his lap; he sinks his weight into Ilya, one knee on either side, and lets his face fall into the crook of Ilya's neck. Shane lets out a shuddery breath against Ilya's neck and burrows in further.

"Breathe, Shane," Ilya tells him, one hand skimming under his shirt to find skin. Ilya's hands are warm, he notes, absently.

"Again. Keep breathing."

Ilya breathes steadily and Shane can feel his chest move under him. He presses into Ilya and tries to match it, still thinking about the code and the door and the game and his meeting and promises made on a mountain.

"Breathe, моя морковка," Ilya tells him, and Shane obeys.

He mimics Ilya's breathing for what feels like ages, until his own slowly regulates. The Russian word lets him think of something other than panic as he sorts through his limited language skills to find the meaning. The task becomes a singular focus.

"Good," Ilya murmurs, and Shane can feel his lips in his hair.

Ilya's hands relax on him as his breathing evens out. When it finally does, one hand comes up and grips Shane's chin, lifting Shane's head off his shoulder so he's forced to look in Ilya's eyes.

"You are OK," Ilya promises and kisses him. Shane sinks into the kiss, and is immediately mournful when Ilya pulls back. "Better, yes?"

Shane gives the barest of nods. "Carrot?" Shane checks, and Ilya chuckles, the rumble of it echoes in Shane's own chest.

"Da," Ilya confirms. The fingers of his one hand gently stroke Shane's back. "моя морковка. My carrot."

Shane's laugh is shuddery. He leans in further, so his forehead is resting against Ilya's. "I tried," he tells him.

Ilya's brow knits together. "Tried?"

"Got told to stay quiet. Or not play," Shane tries, everything feeling sort of jumbled. The words aren't quite right.

"Oh," Ilya murmurs and pulls Shane in closer, hugging him tightly.

"I wanted to," Shane tells him, eyes burning. "But—" *everything I've worked for*, he wants to finish, but the thought makes his chest seize up again and the breath doesn't come.

"It's okay, it's okay," Ilya murmurs lowly to him, when Shane cannot finish his sentence. "You do not have to."

Shane shakes his head in the crook of Ilya's neck. "I want..."

"I know this," Ilya promises, and the words are so gentle, so understanding. It threatens to break Shane's heart. "It is OK. You do not have to. I understand."

"I don't think I'm ever be able to do this," Shane says, and Ilya just holds him tighter, not saying a word.

Shane allows Ilya to hold him, until Ilya has no choice but to leave to catch his team's transit, on to the next city. It'll be months before Shane sees him again, and the deep pit in Shane's stomach makes him wonder if anything at all will be different.

*

Jessica and Lindsay are in Ilya's kitchen when he gets home from his road trip, a few days after he's seen Shane, and both women wrap their arms around him immediately after he drops his bag.

"Everyone's journey is different," Jessica cautions, when he tells them the full story.

"Дыпак," Svetlana swears, on the video call.

Lindsay murmurs, "Maybe it's just not in the cards."

Ilya shrugs at the three women, his weird little army of female guardians. "I—" he starts, then shakes his head. "I said I'd wait."

"Ilya," Svetlana protests and Lindsay is already nodding along. "You can't hide again."

Ilya shrugs. "I have hockey. I have you. I have team that I love. That's enough for now."

He hears out their arguments for a few minutes, before letting out a string of Russian curses, and leaving when Svetlana starts yelling at him. He flops on his bed upstairs fully clothed, and is staring at his ceiling when Jessica creeps in and joins him, laying her head on the pillow next to him.

"You deserve to be loved beautifully," she says softly, as to not disturb the silence of his bedroom. Jessica grabs his hand. "You deserve for someone to choose you— to make hard choices for you. Okay?"

He nods, eyes stinging. "OK."

"Just be patient," Jessica murmurs, "I have faith."

"Yeah?"

"One does not try to spontaneously combust someone in public if they're not a little serious," Jessica teases. "I think he'll come through."

*

The rest of the season goes like this.

Shane controls everything he can, to an obsessive degree. He's always been very diligent about the food he eats, his workouts, his sleep schedule, his business entanglements, and the way he spends his already limited free time. He cracks down on everything, schedules his life to the minute.

It propels him through the season.

Food: the exact amount of calories needed, as designed by his nutritionist. Exactly as outlined, not a single calorie more. Food eaten at precisely the right time, not a moment too late. Hydration, constant. His kitchen is a meticulous array of measuring cups, and water bottles, and glass food containers, and protein shakers, all lined up nicely next to his scale and supplements, and everything else he needs to survive.

Training: team skates and practices. Physiotherapy to focus on performance maintenance, injury prevention, and recovery. High-intensity training sessions multiple times a week, weight lifting and conditioning. Focus on building power and anaerobic endurance. Yoga, morning and night. Meditation, also morning and night, as an attempt to calm his overstimulated mind. Post-game mobility sessions, pre-game dynamic warm-ups. Rest days filled with game tape and skill work. He doesn't miss a single session, whether mandatory and optional.

Sleep: scheduled down to the minute. Nightly routine followed to the minute detail. Phone on silent overnight, charging in another room. One alarm. Up immediately. Same time, every day, no matter what.

Business: Sponsorship appointments, all scheduled through his mother, that appear in his calendar and he accommodates, on autopilot. He replies to all his text-messages and emails once a day, in a block he's put aside for precisely that, and allows himself ten minutes of scrolling through the news, checking both for hits of rumours on his own name, as well as scanning for what narratives are out there concerning Ilya, and Scott Hunter, and Ryan Price, and any other gay athlete he can think of. He sketches out what he would say in response in his head, if these questions were about him.

Free time: if one could call it that. He call his parents, exactly one hour and fifteen minutes after every game. Weekly session with Marc. He spends at least five minutes a day scratching out and rewriting words on this statement he'll theoretically give one day. And once a week, for a three-hour block, he allows Hayden or JJ to trap him into some sort of theoretically-fun activity.

It's in one of those sessions, as Hayden slurps down an ice-cream in January and Shane is in-between scheduled meals, when Hayden goes: "Dude, this isn't healthy."

Shane watches a drip of ice-cream slide down Hayden's jaw. "I'm fine."

"You're killing yourself," Hayden says, "Your schedule is insane, man."

"I'm busy," Shane says. He checks his watch. "I have to leave in fifteen minutes."

"Oh, am I at my three-hour limit?" Hayden says, sarcastically, rocking back onto two legs of his chair.

Shane bites his lip, but doesn't answer and leaves exactly fifteen minutes later so he can drive himself to his next appointment, some sort of sports-drink commercial, where he lets the woman poke and prod at him and style his hair in some way he'd never, ever, ever wear it. He tries to draw a line when she tries to put some product on his face.

"No," he says, drawing back so his cheeks are out of reach. "I don't..." he waves at the bottle.

The woman pouts, visibly. "It'll really help sell it."

"It's a sports drink," Shane comments, not understanding, and she shrugs.

He ends up letting her do it anyway, and sacrifices eleven minutes of time he's set aside for replying to his messages, at least six of which he knows are from Ilya, trying to scrub it off his face to a degree he deems sufficient.

Shane clenches the side of the bathroom counter. The chaos seems to be getting closer.

Routine, consistency, diligence.

Repeat, repeat, repeat.

*

He controls everything he can.

Marc is concerned. They talk about it every week— about what can and cannot be controlled. The therapist's voice is measured, but Shane isn't stupid. After a few sessions, he can read between the lines well enough.

"It makes me feel safer," Shane tells him. Sometimes it feels like three giant steps back in this room. "Controlling what I can."

"Okay," Marc says, "That makes sense."

"But," Shane tests.

"But?" Marc parries back.

Shane sucks in a breath. He chews on the string of his hoodie. "I can't control everything. At some point, I'm going to have to just... jump."

"Trust," Marc offers, instead. "If you want."

"I want," Shane confirms. "But maybe if I'm perfect... in everything else... the news won't matter as much. I can work hard enough that people will just see the work, and not that I'm..." He shifts uneasily in his chair. "In love with a man."

"Shane," Marc tries, "Do you want people to see *you*?"

"I don't know," Shane says, "I want people to see someone that deserves to be a Voyager..." He pauses, thinks about the months to come. "Someone that deserves to be an Olympian." Another beat. "Captain."

"Tell me something," Marc begins, after a lengthy pause in which Shane can't help but swipe away at his eyes. "Do you believe that you, the honest you, which puts out that statement, who is in love with a man, deserves those things?"

Shane shrugs. It shouldn't be this hard to decide. He lands on, "Maybe."

*

That thought lives with him until the All-Star game, which he goes to, again, with a mixture of frustration, because it messes with his schedule, and relief, because at least Ilya will be there too.

Ilya corners him every chance he gets, coaxes Shane back to his suite, and fucks praise into his body with every thrust.

"How do you deal with it?" Shane asks, out of nowhere, in bed together after night two of the All Star Game.

Ilya looks up from where he nosing into Shane's hip. "Deal with what?"

"Press," Shane clarifies, hands threading through Ilya's hair, "I read the stories."

"Ah, I do not read them," Ilya admits, "Just when asked by reporters."

"Oh." Shane stewes on that for a bit, until Ilya has crawled up his body and his face hovers above Shane's.

"Does not matter what they say, yes?" Ilya murmurs. "You will be same person you are now. Excellent hockey player— almost as good as me— Hard worker. Fierce captain. Good teammate— good person." He pauses, kisses Shane's neck. "Sexy, amazing lover."

Shane shoves a hand in his face, pushes him half-heartedly away. "Shut up."

"Never."

*

Montreal misses the playoffs again.

Shane's not even surprised. At the end he knows he's done everything he could have to drag this team kicking and screaming into the playoffs, but he's one player. Even he knows he can't do it all.

The perfection held throughout the season feels like a farce. He cleans out his locker the day after the season is over and turns that thought around in his mind, over and over again. He's controlled everything about this hockey season rigorously, and yet, here he is, cleaning out his locker and doing post-season interviews reflecting on why the season was a failure.

Why he was a failure.

Everything carefully controlled— sacrificed.. Still a failed season. The hopes and dreams of a franchise hanging heavy on his shoulders.

It doesn't seem like it should be possible, and yet. It is. It doesn't seem fair.

Hayden steers him to JJ's car when the interviews are over, ambushing him by the door and grabbing his car keys and throwing them to Vincent Gagnon, another Voyageur and one of JJ's best friends.

"You're coming with us," Hayden demands, shoving Shane in the back of the car and then running around and getting into the other side. "Off-season. No more schedule," he threatens, as he jumps in the other side.

Hayden clicks his seatbelt shut and JJ starts the engine.

The four of them end up at some pub. Shane reluctantly studies the menu, searching for something that fits in his meal plan, coming up short and reluctantly ordering some sort of salad and compromising with himself that he'll pick out the most problematic parts. Hayden eyes him critically over the menu.

"Terrible season," Vincent mutters.

"Horrible," JJ agrees, accent thick.

"We suck," Hayden agrees, not even sounding that bitter, as he sips his beer.

"Captain?" JJ nudges him under the table, a bit later once their food has arrived. "What is on your mind?"

Shane's been thinking about Ilya. The Inferno have stormed their way back into the playoffs, set for a first round match against San Francisco. They should muscle their way through that one pretty easily, but stranger things have happened in hockey, but Shane has a feeling they'll make their way back to the finals.

"Just summer, I guess," he lies.

"Got big plans, Captain?" Vincent asks, taking a bite of his gigantic burger, sauce already dripping down the side. He wipes it away with the back of his hand and Shane grimaces, internally. "Got some girlfriend you're taking on vacation?"

"I'm gay," Shane mutters. The retort is immediate, a result of him being overwhelmed and irritated, and it shocks even himself.

Hayden and JJ gawk at him, and Vincent's mouth falls open. Shane's attention is on a tiny bit of lettuce that seems to be stuck in his beard.

"Oh," Vincent manages.

Shane stares at his fork. "So, I guess I just said that."

"Sure did, buddy," Hayden murmurs, and JJ nods emphatically. When Shane doesn't say anything, too lost in his own reflection in his fork, Hayden looks at Vincent and adds, a bit aggressively: "Problem?"

"No issue here," Vincent adds quickly, holding his hands up.

Shane feels bare, the words on the table in front of him. He's not sure how they got out from the locked box in his head. "Oh... well... good," he manages, and reaches for one of Hayden's fries.

*

Calgary does, in fact, storm its way to the Stanley Cup final. Ironically, it's Boston they meet there. Shane watches the seven game series on various different couches— his own, with Rose; his parents, with David and Yuna surrounding him; and Hayden's, where he is for the

Game 5, which is in Calgary, and where Calgary has a chance to win it all, up 3-1 in the series.

Shane watches the game half on the edge of the couch, his heart in his throat. Hayden has a pillow pulled over his lap, laid back with his feet outstretched over the coffee table.

"They're going to win," Hayden says, too assured for the first period of play.

"Shut up," Shane mutters, "You'll curse them."

"They're too good," Hayden repeats. He sounds a bit awed. "Jesus, that power play."

"Hayden," Shane warns, covering his mouth with his hand.

"Is that Uncle Lily?" Jade asks, coming into the room and crawling into her dad's lap.

Hayden sighs, resigned. "Yep," he confirms, reluctantly. "He's probably going to win the cup."

"Ooh," says Ruby, sliding onto the couch next to Shane, and the girls stay to watch the first period with them. At one point Ruby pats Shane's thigh and says, with child-like innocence, "Don't worry, Uncle Shane. Dad says Uncle Lily is a really good player," and Shane can't help but laugh while Hayden groans.

2-1 Boston going into the second. The puck drops and one minute and forty-three seconds in, Ilya has a breakaway. Shane can't breathe.

Ilya slows down, drags his toe, flips the puck up high corner, and the puck hits the back of the net. 2-2.

"Fuck," Hayden swears. "That was a beaut."

2-2 Inferno, at the end of the second period. The third is littered with penalties, and the power play unit that Hayden is frothing at the mouth over goes to work. They convert twice on the power play in the third, Ilya scoring one of them, to give the Inferno a 4-2 lead going into the final three minutes of play.

"I can't watch," Shane laments, and continues watching half through his fingers, as Boston's goalie goes to the bench.

"Come on, Roz," Hayden urges, finally leaning forward on the couch, now completely invested. "Let's go."

A minute left, and Shane thinks he feels more stressed now than he ever has on the ice.

"Come on," Shane pleads, watching as an Inferno player makes a dive to swipe a puck out of their zone. Boston collects it for one final push. On the ice, the camera pans past the bench, showing a bunch of Inferno players, standing—poised for elation.

The buzzer goes, and immediately the Inferno are over the boards of their bench, throwing equipment everywhere in celebration. Hayden pumps his fist, and Shane feels his body sag with relief, with joy. His phone buzzes, several times.

"Oh my god," Shane breathes, watching as Ilya disappears in a crimson celebration. He feels out of breath, his heart is soaring.

"Well folks, they've done it. The Calgary Inferno are your 2025 Stanley Cup Champions. This four year old team has done it," the analyst says on the television, as the Inferno hug and cheer and congratulate one another. Ilya and Cliff have each other by the shoulders, shouting things at the other, both grinning broadly.

Another continues, *"Wow. Ilya Rozanov. What a night for him..."*

Shane blocks them out because the Cup is entering the rink. Then NHL Commissioner Roger Crowell is making his speech, the boos in the arena audible on the broadcast, as is tradition. Shane barely hears him.

"Ilya Rozanov, this is your honour," Crowell says on the broadcast, beckoning Ilya over.
"Come on up."

Ilya skates up, shakes Crowell's hand, and then puts his hand on the coveted trophy. Shane watches Ilya take a deep breath, the exhilaration clear on his face, and then Ilya hoists the cup over his head, roaring loudly to the fans, and his teammates.

Every heave of the cup above his head takes Shane's breath away, and suddenly he's twenty-three again and watching Ilya win his first cup, and not being able to tell a soul how proud he is and wanting to so desperately.

"He did it," Shane whispers, tears in his eyes, because he can now.

"He really did," Hayden echoes, sounding unusually fond.

"I wish I was there," Shane says, putting the thought out there into the world.

It's been rolling around in his mind since the final buzzer went, growing stronger when the Inferno celebrated and becoming excruciating the moment Ilya lifted the cup. The thought is relentless now, as he watches the Inferno pass the cup between players and skate around the ice. Every once in a while the camera pans back to Ilya's face, exhilarated and proud and beautiful.

"Out there?" Hayden sighs. "Yeah, dude, rate we're going... gonna be a bit till we win another."

Shane shakes his head. "No... Just... there..." Shane clarifies, his gaze not leaving the celebration. "In the stands."

Somewhere in that arena are probably Jessica and Lindsay, maybe even Svetlana. Shane aches to be there too, to be able to witness Ilya's achievement in person. To be even a little part of it.

"Dude, why don't you just go then?" Hayden ponders, looking over at him, as the cup gets passed to another Inferno player.

"Go?" Shane repeats, his focus still on the screen, where the camera has once again landed on Ilya's beaming face: "*The proud Captain*," the television commentator repeats for the fifth time. "*What an achievement.*"

"To Calgary." Hayden shrugs. "Go celebrate with him. Tonight's going to be a mess, but the celebrations will be just the team for the next few days, until the parade."

"What?" Shane looks at Hayden, perplexed.

Hayden rolls his eyes. "I'm not saying go kiss him on the damn parade float, just... Go to a party. Celebrate with him."

"I can't—"

Hayden throws a pillow at him. "Shane, come on. You clearly want to." He gestures to the television. Shane does, noting that most of the team has their family down on the ice by now, and Ilya is being hugged by Frank's wife, Vanessa. "Look at what you're missing."

Shane does look. His heart aches. Jealousy rolls around in his stomach, angry and volatile. He wishes fiercely he was there.

"As much as I'm loath to encourage any relationship advice from Hayden, I agree," Jacki calls from the kitchen when Shane doesn't immediately reply. Shane blushes, unaware that she could hear them. "You should go."

"I can't just show up..." Shane argues, because it can't be that simple. It can't.

Hayden shrugs off his protest like it is inconsequential. "Why not?"

Shane's mouth opens to object again, but he snaps it closed before any words come out. Hayden raises an eyebrow in a challenge. It feels way too daring, and overly too simple, but the more Shane thinks about it, the less excuses he can find.

"I guess, I don't know why not," Shane admits, and stares back at the celebration, thoughts swimming.

*

"Hi," Shane says, the next evening, when Ilya answers his phone. Immediately, he barrels on before Ilya can say anything: "So, I did something impulsive and maybe it was stupid, but I'm sort of at your house."

Shane looks around Ilya's kitchen and collapses against the island. He clenches his fingers around the edge of the counter and suffers through the long pause on the other end.

"Ilya?" he says, finally, very nervously. He'd gotten on the first flight he could the next day, fretted every minute on the plane, and every second of silence makes him wonder if he's made a mistake.

"What?" comes Ilya's response. "I may be drunker than I thought. Did you just say you're at *my house*."

"Yeah." Shane stares down at his socks.

"In Ottawa?" Ilya asks, bizarrely, and Shane furrows his brow.

"What? No— wait you still own that?" Shane asks, then shakes his head. "Your house in Calgary," he clarifies, then rambles on: "Jessica let me in. I called her. She stole my phone last summer and put her number in it..."

There's a pause. Some loud noises in the background, from whatever after-party Ilya is at. Shane sucks air in through his nose, and steals a glance at Jessica, who is watching him carefully over the back of Ilya's couch, having plopped herself there after letting him in.

Shane turns his back on her and says quietly, "I was watching the game... watching you win... and all I could think was that I wanted to be there with you... to celebrate. So, I got on a plane."

"You are at my house," Ilya repeats, the words are slow and deliberate, like Ilya's testing them out. "You got on a plane."

"Yeah." Shane nods a few times even though Ilya can't see him.

"I do not understand..."

Shane leans against the fridge. "I was jealous."

"Of my win?" Ilya laughs suddenly. "I am very talented. Four year old team and look at us— champions!"

Shane chuckles. "No, not that— well, *yes* that," he admits, because he won't deny it. He's love to be the one out there winning the Cup. "But... also... I was jealous of the families... on the ice. I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to celebrate with you... Can I?"

"Yes," Ilya says, emphatically; the background noise fades a little, like he's entered another room. "I am at Frank's, with a few of the guys, but I will come home—"

"No!" Shane breaks in loudly. He swallows hard, closes his eyes for a moment to centre himself and then, adds, "I was thinking... if you wanted... I would come there."

There's another lengthy pause before Ilya repeats, "What?" And then Shane can hear Ilya shaking his head and he goes: "Drunker I am, worse English gets— what did you say?"

"I said I'll come there," Shane repeats, his heart pounding. "To Frank's."

"Really?" Ilya says after a beat and he sounds unbearably hopeful. Shane clutches his phone tighter, begs himself to stay calm. "Shane, you do not have to do that. I'll come back. Not many people left here anyway."

"Send me the address, Ilya," Shane tells him, trying to force some courage into his voice, even though he's shaking a little bit. He says the words before he can change his mind.

"Really?" Ilya checks again.

"Yes," Shane says, with as much courage as he can muster.

"OK..." Ilya says, sounding bewildered.

"See you soon," Shane promises, hanging up the phone once the text comes through. He sucks in a deep breath and puts the address in the uber app.

Jessica tosses him a hat. "So maybe less..." she trails off and makes a snapping noise, clicking her fingers around an imaginary camera. He shoves the hat on his head, even though the odds are low in this city, and murmurs a thank you. "For what it's worth, I think this is really brave. You'll do great." She smiles and gives him a thumbs up.

Shane tries to smile back. "Tell that to my stomach. I feel like I'm going to throw up."

"You'll be okay, Shane Hollander," Jessica promises.

*

Ilya goes outside to meet Shane.

It's close to midnight, and there's about a dozen people left in the house— Frank, Cliff, Nico, Mickey, a few wives and girlfriends, as well as a couple others from the team. All neck deep in alcohol, but also all people Ilya loves and trusts. Still, he's nervous. He wants so desperately for this to really be happening; part of him doesn't trust it.

Shane takes his time getting out of the uber, and Ilya can immediately tell he's doubting himself. He bounds down the steps of Frank's house and opens the gate, pulling Shane into his arms and squeezing.

"Congratulations," Shane says into Ilya's ear when he hugs him. The sentiment rings true, but Shane's voice seems thinner, more unsure, than usual.

"Thank you," Ilya says, kissing his hair where it pokes out under his hat. The touch makes it real. This is truly happening. Yet, Shane is shivering in June, so Ilya whispers: "We do not have to do this. We can just go home."

But Shane chews on his lip, but ultimately shakes his head.

Ilya just wants to do anything to smooth away his anxiety. "You do not need to do anything —"

"Ilya..."

"We don't need to go in. I am just happy *you* are here."

Again, Shane shakes his head. "No. We can— we *are* going in."

Ilya pulls back, holding on to Shane's shoulders and marvels at him. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Shane says, and through his grip on Shane's shoulders, Ilya can feel him take a deep breath. "I want to do this." He looks up at Ilya sharply, and then timidly: "If you do?"

"I do," Ilya says, grinning. And then he kisses him; some of the tension seems to melt out of Shane. "I can't believe you're here."

"Let's go," Shane determines, and Ilya lets him take the first step, and then takes his hand, leading him into the house.

When Ilya reaches for the door knob, Shane's grip tightening on Ilya's hand to an almost painful degree. Ilya pauses and again murmurs, "We can turn around. Just say the word," but Shane shakes his head vigorously and Ilya pushes open the door.

The group of players and loved ones in the kitchen turn immediately as they enter the room.

"Um," Ilya says, gesturing towards Shane with his free hand, not daring to let go of Shane with the other. "You all know Shane Hollander."

For a moment, it's just quiet. Various looks of shock and surprise on everyone's face. Ilya tightens his hold on Shane's hand.

Frank finds his voice first. "Uh, welcome."

"There was never a Montreal girl!" exclaims Cliff a moment after. He points at Ilya, accusatory, and glares. "*Years*," he growls. "Oh, fuck you, Roz."

Ilya can't help but laugh and pull Shane in closer.

*

Off-Season, Summer 2025

Few men during their lifetime come anywhere near exhausting the resources dwelling within them. There are deep wells of strength that are never used.

—Richard E. Byrd

*

"Roz. Come in here," Sutton calls as Ilya walks past his office with Frank and one of Calgary's prospects, a local kid named Jarome, who Ilya and Frank have been working out with all summer. They're at the rink for exactly that purpose, nothing more, so he's not sure what Coach Sutton could want.

"Ooh," Frank taunts, and then slaps him on the back as they part ways.

"Coach?" Ilya says, poking his head inside the office.

Sutton holds up an envelope. "Here."

"What is it?"

Sutton looks at him like he's stupid. "What do I look like, the mailman?"

"I don't think mailman knows what's in the letters, Coach," Ilya quips, plucking the envelope from Sutton's hand.

He immediately frowns in confusion. The envelope has the Hockey Canada emblem on it.

"Just open the letter, Roz," Sutton complains, when Ilya opens his mouth to ask a question. "Stop staring at it."

Ilya obeys, sliding his finger under the edge to rip it open and pulling out the letter inside. It's on Hockey Canada letterhead and it reads:

Mr. Rozanov,

On behalf of Hockey Canada, we are pleased to invite you to attend our National Teams Orientation Camp, from August 26-28, 2025 in Calgary.

National Teams Orientation Camp is a three-day, off-ice event with players and staff from all three Canadian Hockey Programs (Men's, Women's, Para), and will include presentations, team-building, team meetings and media opportunities in preparation for the 2026 Olympic Games, and Canada's road to gold. The months ahead—

"What," Ilya says, looking up abruptly from the letter, "But I'm Russian—"

"Thought you were Canadian too," Sutton says dryly, leaning back in his chair, assessing. His mouth twitches, just barely, before he schools it back into his regular nonchalance. "You got citizenship didn't ya?"

"Yes, but—"

"Russia sending you a pretty invite?"

"No," Ilya admits, and it still stings. He knew it wouldn't come, but it stings.

"Okay then."

Ilya looks up at his coach. It's hard to comprehend what's happening. This feels like a joke. A pre-season prank. He wants to look around for a camera, see who is getting him on tape marvelling at this. The gifts will be everywhere. "Did you do this?"

"It's a country of immigrants, Rozanov," Sutton says, gruffly. He exhales through his nose, something close to satisfaction hidden in the sound. "Now get out of my office."

*

Ilya doesn't know who leaks it, but by the time he gets back to his house, it has already hit all the media networks. It must be a Hockey Canada representative, hell-bent on getting the entire country, coast to coast to coast, to pressure him into a decision about the camp.

He goes through a Tim Horton's drive-through on the way home and the guy at the window asks him if he's going to accept as he's handing Ilya a double-double. The employee is awestruck over the possibility. "Canada will be unstoppable," the guy says, as he gives Ilya free treats, as if three donuts handed over in the small takeaway bag will tip his decision over the edge.

He will never get over this country's obsession with hockey.

Ilya drops his keys on the counter, lets Anya outside, and sinks onto his couch, pausing only briefly before picking up his phone. There's only one person he wants to talk to about this.

Shane answers on the first ring. "I heard," he says, breathless, without any segue. He's grinning widely on the video, hair plastered to his face.

"I only found out an hour ago," Ilya replies, mouth full of donut.

Shane laughs. "This country."

"Yes," Ilya agrees. He wipes his hands on his sweats and pulls the letter out of his jacket and stares at it again.

"So are you going to say yes?" Shane asks.

"I don't know," Ilya replies. He puts the letter beside his face to Shane can see it. "This feels weird."

Shane laughs. "Does it?"

"Yes!" Ilya marvels. "I didn't think it was—" he stops himself. He wants to say *possible*. Or that he didn't think anybody knew he'd done his citizenship, even though it was publicized. That picture of him and Frank hugging was everywhere, for a few weeks. He finds himself asking: "Did you do this?"

"What?" Shane laughs until he realizes that Ilya isn't kidding. "What, no, Ilya. I wouldn't tell them to invite you— and I don't have that type of pull anyway."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Shane promises. "They just want you. You know how Hockey Canada is. They want to win."

"Oh," Ilya says. For a bit he's been wondering if this was some sort of joke. He can't play for his birth country, and the universe is rubbing that in. *Look at Ilya, the country-less man. Or, one less Russian obstacle for Canada. Or, Russia does not want him, let's embarrass him further.* "This is real, then."

"Of course," Shane says, looking at him softly. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, Russia does not want me."

Shane pauses on the screen and Ilya can see him take a deep breath, the only way he knows he's not frozen. "Well, not saying Hockey Canada is the most progressive of entities, but... they did this. They want you, Ilya."

"Madness," Ilya murmurs.

"You should say yes," Shane tells him, without hesitation. "Come to the camp."

"I am barely Canadian," Ilya says, because even though he took the oath, teared up at the ceremony, and got the papers, it still doesn't quite feel real. He can stay in this country forever— his adopted home— but it can't replace the country he grew up in. He still feels some twisted loyalty to Russia, even if Russia doesn't want him, has never wanted his kind, and would never welcome him back. He will never wear his country's jersey again. He will never stand on the ice under the lights and see his birth country's flag raised and the anthem playing loud, because he won— because he'd earned— that honour. That will always sting.

"You're just as Canadian as my grandparents who immigrated from Japan are," Shane tells him, gently, "As any of the people who stood beside you taking that oath. As any of us who

have been sent invites to camp." Shane's expression is soft. "As me."

"You're *Canada's Shane Hollander*," Ilya murmurs, because though it's been years, he can still hear the commentators from that original matchup, at the first tournament. Where everything—where they— started.

Shane huffs out a small laugh, terribly fond. "You can be *Canada's Ilya Rozanov*."

"That is just weird, yes?"

"This country loves you, Ilya. They want you," Shane says. "Let them want you," he adds, and Ilya wonder if he means something else too. "Come to camp."

"I'll think about it," Ilya promises, the invite hot between his fingers, a daring, tempting offer. It feels a little bit dangerous. Like a puck dangled in front of him, so tempting to snatch, and then deked away.

"Forty-two guys will be there on the men's side," Shane says, like Ilya doesn't know this. Like the letter didn't tell him: *the next several months will bring intense evaluation and difficult roster decisions, as we set our sights on gold in February*. Shane pauses, then, mouth turned up in a small smirk, he adds slyly: "You might not even make the team."

Ilya narrows his eyes at him. "I will make team."

He notices his verb tense too late when Shane laughs, clearly delighted. "See you at the end of month then, Ilya."

Camp begins, a flurry of presentations, team-building, and media. The first day is basically just presentations on everything to tournament logistics and timelines to codes of conduct to professionalism and respect.

And while Ilya might know the majority of the guys at this camp, but he can't help feel like an outsider the whole time. He can feel eyes on him and is sure half of them are wondering what he's doing here, or are annoyed that he's maybe taking one of their spots. It's immensely different than in Sochi, where he was a leader in the room. He knows the guys here, but he's not one of them.

So, he's immensely grateful when at the first session, Shane slides into the seat next to him.

"Alright?" Shane murmurs and Ilya nods, giving Shane a small smile, and then the session begins.

The presentations themselves are easy: sit and listen, watch powerpoint, answer questions when asked; learn and repeat. Most of the first day is easy, consisting of team building and presentations, however, a few players get pulled aside by the coaching staff for preliminary conversations that feel a lot like interviews.

"How you doing?" Jake Turner, one of the Team Canada coaches, asks, when he grabs Ilya coming out of a session and gestures to two seats in the hallway of the hotel.

"Good, sir," Ilya says, politely, sitting down and leaning forward over his knees, clasping his hands together.

"Must be an odd change," Turner says, leaning back in his chair and crosses one leg over the other.

Ilya chuckles. "Yes. Settling in though, sir."

"Glad to hear it." Turner smiles. "I wanted to give you something to mull over."

"OK," Ilya says, sitting up. Something akin to nerves have settled over him. He's not sure what he's going to be asked. A sinking part of him wonders if he's going to be told he really is only here as some publicity stunt and this is his warning that he won't make the team, no matter what he does. Or, worse, he's fucked up already, somehow, but to avoid any unwanted media attention, he's going to be asked to leave on his own terms.

"We want you to consider whether you'd move to the wing for the duration of the Olympic tournament," Turner says, which is not what Ilya is expecting.

Ilya blinks. "What?"

"Left wing, likely," Turner continues. "As you know, plenty of talent here down the centre." He lists some names, ticking them off on his hand.

Ilya's brain whirls for a second. "You want Hollander to centre me?"

Turner smiles again. He nods. "It's a consideration."

Ilya laughs, bold and bright. All he can think is that Svetlana is going to be amused by this. *The fans will love it*, he can hear her saying, over and over again. Ilya shakes his head. "Da— Yes, I can consider that."

Turner slaps him on the back and stands. "Excellent. Always good to have more options on the table."

Ilya nods and bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing again. Once Turner's gone, he calls Svetlana.

*

On the second day, there's a charity golf tournament in Kananaskis, kicked off with a giant group photo encompassing all members of the prospective rosters, before everyone's separated into foursomes and they hit the course.

It's there that the gossip about Ilya really takes off.

"So, he's Canadian now," muses Kayla Suzuki, a veteran of several Olympics for the women's team.

"Yup, did his citizenship oath last summer," Shane says, watching Sam Nurse take a few practice swings before he tees them off of the first hole of the Mount Lorette golf course in Kananaskis. "And he meets the IHFF residency rules. He's lived here since 2018."

Ben Wilson, who completes their foursome, gives him an odd look. "Didn't know you guys were that good of friends."

Out of deeply ingrained habit, Shane tenses, then forces himself to relax. They don't mean anything by it, and he *is* friends with Ilya, he reminds himself, like he's practiced, as he's worked to shed years of hiding his secret. "Yeah, well, we are," he clarifies, and it's instant relief.

"Cool," Ben says, shrugging. He looks back at the course. "That was horrible, Nursey," he adds, as Nurse's shot goes too far left and plops straight into the water.

"Well," Nurse drawls, good natured, swinging the club up so it lays flat over his shoulders, "That's why we're playing best ball."

Ben steps up and hits a pretty drive right up the middle of the course. He shifts out of his follow through position and muses: "Ilya Rozanov playing on Team Canada. If you would have told me that twelve years ago, when we were in Sochi, I would have laughed my ass off."

"Same," Shane agrees, taking his turn off the tee.

With that, they're set to move up the course. Shane's shot almost matches Ben's, which went further than Suzuki's, so it'll be a toss up for whose ball gets played from. Shane picks up his bag and throws it in the back of the golf cart, sliding in next to Nurse, who takes the steering wheel. He doesn't know Nurse terribly well; he's played for Colorado his entire six-year career, and since the NHL has kept them out of the Olympics since Sochi, they haven't had the opportunity to play internationally together. Ben Wilson is one of the only other guys repeating from Canada's Sochi team. It's crazy to think he'll be on the *old* side of this roster.

"Pretty insane that Rozanov's going to take one of our spots," Nurse says, as they drive. "What you think of that?"

Shane shrugs. "I mean, he's got to earn it. Same as everyone else."

"True," Nurse replies. "You think it's some PR stunt?"

Shane looks at Nurse, immediately alarmed—and poised to defend Ilya. "Why? Because he's out?"

Nurse looks confused, turning slightly as he drives to look at Shane in the passenger seat. "No," Nurse clarifies, slowly, mouth twisting a bit, "Because he's a new Canadian—and, like, the news loves that type of story..."

"Oh," Shane says, nerves ramping right down, "Right."

"Dude, you got a problem with him being out and on the team?" Nurse asks him, after a few beats of awkward silence where Shane tries to just stare at the mountain views.

That startles a laugh out of him, and shakes his head. "No. Absolutely not. No—Not even in the slightest."

"Good," Nurse says. "Because that would be pretty shitty of you, given that you're pretty much guaranteed to be Captain."

Nurse pulls up beside either Shane or Ben's ball, and gestures for Shane to take the first shot. He does so, as Ben and Suzuki pull up behind them. Four mediocre drives later, they are back in the carts.

"My brother's gay," Nurse explains quietly, when they pull away and it's just the two of them again. "He used to play, but it got tough and after a while he just quit. He's in real estate now."

"I'm sorry," Shane replies, genuinely. His heart aches; he knows that feeling well. Sometimes he's glad he didn't fully realize the truth of his sexuality before being drafted, otherwise, he's not sure he would have made it either. He's not sure what would have happened to him then, what or who he'd be without hockey.

Or without Ilya, god forbid.

Without hockey? He'd live in Ottawa, so he'd probably be some sort of public servant like his dad. That's a reasonable guess.

Without Ilya? Lonely. Sad. Scared.

Half a soul.

"Yeah. Same. I think he'd be here with us, if he hadn't. He was always better than me," Nurse says. "He quit before Rozanov—before Hunter too. Never made it to the show. I think it would have made a difference, you know. Seeing them." Nurse shrugs. "So, I dunno, I hope Rozanov gets to wear the Maple Leaf. Cool story, in a lot of ways."

Shane nods. "Definitely."

The cart pulls to a halt and Nurse moves to get out. Shane grabs his arm.

"Nurse," he says, before he can think too much, "I didn't ask that because I have a problem... I asked— fuck— I asked as I was scared you did. That you, um, had a problem. Because, well, I'm—" he closes his eyes and says it fast: "Because I'm gay. Too."

Nurse's— Sam's— mouth drops open a little. "Wow," Sam says. "Okay. Wow. Cool— I mean, great." He pauses. "So, not how I thought the day was gonna go."

Shane snorts. "Neither. Um," he says, looking at Sam, "So, not a lot of people know, okay?"

"Right," Sam says, and mimes zipping his lips.

"I'm working up to it," Shane adds.

Sam smiles warmly at him. "Good for you."

Shane scores an extremely average score on the course and gets roasted by the others for coming in last in their group, but goes back to the hotel feeling pretty happy.

*

Golf is weird.

Is this really what Hockey Canada has them doing? As a training? On the "route to Gold"? It's baffling to Ilya. He expresses this on the 11th hole and Hunter MacMillan, who, as a 3-

time Norris winner, is a likely pick for first defence pairing, and Hillary Candace, the likely women's teams captain, laugh at him.

"Roz— can I call you that?" MacMillan asks and Ilya nods. "Dude, this is just about getting us to like each other."

Ilya putts, watches it teeter past the hole. *This is not my sport*, he thinks, a bit frustrated, as Clara Reyes chuckles behind him. "I see," he says, taking an extra shot to tap his ball finally in.

"I take it they do things differently in Russia?" MacMillan inquires.

Ilya nods. "Very." He shoves the club back into his bag, borrowed from Frank, who is unfortunately not here. "No golf, that is for sure."

"First two days are just a lot of logistics and team building. The real stuff starts tomorrow. Coach-player interviews, media, sessions on system installation," Reyes says, "It's much more intense."

Candace scoffs, clapping her perhaps-soon-to-be-teammate on the back. "It's not that bad," she says, as she taps her golf ball into the hole. MacMillan replaces the flag.

"Easy for you to say," Reyes chirps, "You, Hollander and Breton"— the para captain, MacMillan clarifies quietly for Ilya— "have nothing to stress about. You will all be announced as Captains soon enough."

"Pays to be the best," Candace laughs, winking at the rest of them.

Ilya opens his mouth to retort some sarcastic, teasing comment about Shane, but shuts it almost immediately, unsure how that would go over in this environment, where Shane is clearly Captain Canada, and Ilya still feels the an imposter, not entirely sure why he is here at all.

*

"Shane— can we get a few minutes?" Don Armstrong, the General Manager for Men's Olympic team, asks, and Shane nods, following Armstrong into a small boardroom in the hotel, where he and other Hockey Canada officials have set up their operations.

"How's it going, Don?" Shane asks, shaking Armstrong's hand. He smiles at the two other officials in the room, Jake Turner and Paul Harrington, who are both members of the coaching staff, and Josée Fournier, General Manager for the women's side, and a person he doesn't know.

"Good, good," Armstrong says, gesturing for everyone to sit down. "We just wanted to let you know that we'll be announcing the Captains for the three teams by the end of the week, and we want you, Hillary and Breton to sit down for some interview stuff tomorrow, instead of the player interviews."

Armstrong goes on to explain the format, and what is expected from Shane and his fellow Captains. Fournier adds a few things here and there and so does the one individual Shane doesn't know, who identifies herself as a media relations official. Shane nods along.

"Okay. No problem," Shane says, when they're finished. He goes to stand and then pauses, pressing his palms into the armrests of his chair. He looks at the Hockey Canada officials and sits back down. "So," he starts, thickly.

He steadies himself.

They've gone over this. Marc and Shane have talked about and theorized and worked through this scenario dozens of times. Shane can hear the words, the sentences, the practiced verse in the back of his mind. There's a terrifying opportunity in front of him.

"Before you make that decision," Shane starts, heart pounding. Part of him, one that will always long for safety, screams at him to stop, but he pushes forward. "You should know that

I'll be making a public announcement this season—"

Shane clenches his fist around the armrest. He can see the panic in Armstrong and Turner's face growing, anticipating the worst. He wonders if this will be it.

"—saying that I'm gay," Shane finishes and then waits.

For a moment, Shane feels a bit weightless. He's not sure if it's from fear or sheer relief. A part of him is terrified, another triumphant.

"I thought this team should know about my intentions, before you make any decisions," Shane adds, when nobody says anything. Armstrong's mouth is open slightly, the shock apparent on his, Turner's and Harrington's faces. The media relations official is bouncing her leg. Fournier is oddly still. "I'm telling you in confidence, as I'd appreciate being able to make a public announcement on my terms."

The room nods slowly at that, and Shane looks to the media relations official, who gives him a sharper, more pronounced nod of agreement, and finally stops bouncing her leg.

Fournier clears her throat, when the silence from drags on too long. "Thank you, Shane," she says, and the smile on her face seems genuine. "I am sure this changes absolutely nothing."

She stands and offers her hand, which Shane takes, and then with a nod at his coaching staff, who still haven't managed to gather themselves or say anything, he exits the room.

*

"Drink?"

Ilya startles at the question, too absorbed in studying the Hockey Canada material in front of him. "What?" he says, looking up at Shane who seemingly snuck up on him.

"I asked if you wanted to get a drink," Shane says, quirking his eyebrow.

Ilya shuts the notebook, albeit a bit reluctant to stop reviewing. "OK."

Shane's gaze drifts to the notebook and then back to Ilya. "You know there's not, like, a test tomorrow, right?"

"There's interviews," Ilya says, pointedly.

Shane looks confused. "Yeah, but they're like... how do you see yourself fitting in, what do you bring to the table, do you think you can execute on a power play unit with these players... not"—Shane picks up the notebook and flips to a page—"recite back to me the power player configuration."

Ilya shrugs, feeling momentarily embarrassed. "I have to learn it at some point," he mumbles, "I have not played these systems my entire life."

"Hey," Shane says, sitting down next to him. His hand lands on Ilya's arm and Ilya's gaze immediately snaps up to scan the room. There's people here—hockey people—and yet Shane doesn't move. "I like that you care."

Ilya nods. His skin feels hot where Shane is touching him. "OK, Captain."

Something uneasy flashes across Shane's face at the quip. Shane just repeats "Drink?" and Ilya agrees.

They end up at some pub nearby, tucked in an out-of-sight corner booth in the back, their knees touching under the table. Shane's quiet the whole way there, barely speaking until their drinks have arrived and the waitress has disappeared.

"I told Armstrong and the coaches today," Shane says, quietly, both hands wrapped around his beer.

"Told them what?" Ilya repeats, licking foam off his lip.

Shane's eyes track the movement. "That I'm gay."

Ilya nearly chokes on his next sip. "You told them?" he asks, and Shane nods. "Shane—wow." Ilya feels a smile spread across his face and knows that he's grinning. He feels immeasurably proud. "I am— Wow. How does it feel?"

Shane gives him a small smile, barely a quirk of his lips. "Intense. I feel..." he searches for the words and Ilya waits. "A bit stunned. Maybe surprised at myself," he adds softly, "But... lighter, I think."

Ilya wraps his feet around Shane's under the table, squeezing his ankles. Shane's shoulders relax a little. "What did they say?"

"Nothing," Shane tells him. He bites his lower lip, dragging his teeth over it slowly. "They were in shock, I think... I'm supposed to do press tomorrow with the other Captains." He pauses, draws in a shaky breath. "Was supposed to. I don't know now."

"Oh," Ilya murmurs and he wants so badly to touch Shane properly.

"They could go back on that. I want this— I want to go. I want to represent my country," Shane says, his voice tight and stressed with emotion; sad that something's might be ripped away from him, but not quite broken. "They could choose someone else."

"They won't," Ilya promises. He wants to promise the world.

"They could," Shane counters and, reluctantly, Ilya nods, because, unfortunately, they both know it's true.

Ilya reaches for him. He leaves his hand in the middle of the table and lets Shane settle his hand over Ilya's. When he does, Ilya brushes his thumb over the side of Shane's wrist. "If they pick someone else, we will both walk out of here."

"You'd do that?"

"Oh, моя любовь," Ilya murmurs, putting his heart on the table, "I would have walked away from hockey years ago for you, if you had only let me."

*

Chapter End Notes

and we thought the last chapter was long. we can blame the a03 outage, because i added 2K of a panic attack during that time frame.

also, upped the chapter count. not really sorry about that.

thanks for comments & kudos! truly excites me, particularly when you all leave a comment.

Chapter 6: 2025-26 NHL Season (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

Shane Hollander comes out in early December 2025.

The news breaks the morning of Montreal's Pride night game, two weeks before the NHL's Christmas break and Team Canada's Olympic roster is set to be announced, and nine weeks before the 2026 Winter Olympics, where Shane is set to be Captain Canada once again. It's immediately everywhere.

Ilya has wished for this for long, but he never let himself dare believe that it would ever happen. The words barely register until his third read and even then he has a hard time convincing himself it's real, even as he reads— and re-reads and re-reads— the simple statement.

Ilya's heart pounds in his chest. He pinches himself to make sure he's not dreaming. It's only after he's done reading it for the sixth time, that he finally types out a message to Jane, sending:

very proud of you

Chapter Notes

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

2025-2026 NHL Season (Part 1)

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.

— Lao Tzu

*

"Since the NHL started participating in the Olympic Games, how many gold medals has Canada won?"

The Hockey Canada media person is quizzing Shane, Hillary Candace, and Vince Breton on random Team Canada facts. It's all part of press that will be slowly rolled out over the next six months, until the Olympic Games begin. The three Captains have been called into a hotel boardroom to do various interviews, quizzes such as these, and, Shane thinks, play a few random games.

Shane glances at Hillary and Vince. "Well, '98 was the first year the NHL went, right?"

"'98 we lost," Hillary laments, slumping a bit in her chair.

Vince rattles off a few dates. "'02, two gold medals there. '06 for our team in Torino— that's the only para one. 2010, Vancouver, two again." Vince frowns and then laughs. "This is tough..."

They hum thoughtfully, then glance at each other and put their heads together.

"I'll keep track." Shane decides, and starts tallying the marks on his fingers as the three of them run through the years.

"Eight?" Hillary wagers when they think they're done. All three of them look up curiously at the interviewer. All equally invested in the answer. All equally planning to add to the total in a few months.

"It's actually nine," the woman corrects. She grins, and the three of them groan.

"Shit, what we miss?" Vince exclaims, looking at the ceiling for answers, as he runs through everything again in his head.

"Thought you guys would have that," she chirps them from behind the camera, she shakes her head affably.

"Well, I was just the numbers guy," Shane deadpans and everyone laughs. Shane smiles into his lap, remembering at the last moment to raise his head to the camera.

He'll work out what they missed later. For now, he'll just appreciate the opportunity to be here, in this room, answering silly questions about hockey, and not discarded on the street, unwanted. When he'd received the revised media timing for these interviews in his email this morning he'd been relieved, sinking back onto Ilya's bed and struggling to hold back grateful tears. Ilya had held him through it, while Shane had experienced what he can only describe as a panic attack from sheer relief.

"Okay, next question," the media official says, when the laughter dies down. "Divide these three tasks between the three of you: give a motivational speech in the locker room, talk to the press after the game, and replace the goaltender."

Hillary turns to Vince. "I feel like you're cool under pressure."

Vince shrugs, laughing, and throws a question at the official off-camera. "We'll keep it tight though, right?"

Hillary, seated between them, leans the other way, and looks at Shane for his response.

Shane pulls his lip into his mouth considering briefly, before asking, "Mind if I play goalie?" Hillary gives him a nonchalant shrug and he adds, "I feel like I could shut the door."

"Okay," Hillary laughs. "I guess I'll give the motivational speech then."

"I think you'd be good at that," Shane tells her and genuinely smiles.

*

Ilya drops Shane off at the airport the day he leaves Calgary, a few days before they each need to report to their respective teams; Shane, once again, having stayed an extra week after the Hockey Canada camp. Now, it's good-bye, and likely for a while.

Shane pauses just before opening the door. He twists in his seat to face Ilya, his expression serious.

"When I see you next," Shane starts, then seems to reconsider his approach, reaching over to grab Ilya's hand. He holds it over the centre console, as Ilya's car idles right there in front of the terminal, alongside everyone else dropping their loved ones off. Shane takes a breath and starts over. "When I see you next, things will be different."

"Even if not..." Ilya starts, because he wants Shane to know that there's no pressure from him, not anymore. He'll wait as long as he has to.

Shane cuts him off with a shake of his head. "No," he says, firmly. "When I see you next, things will be different."

Shane lifts Ilya's hand to his mouth and kisses it. Something shifts in the car: in the set of Shane's shoulders, or the way he's willing to boldly kiss Ilya's hand, or the resolve in the cut of his jaw. When Shane lets go, Ilya isn't ready to, shifting his hand to cradle the side of Shane's face.

"I've made you wait long enough," Shane says, incredibly soft. His eyes are half-closed, focused somewhere on Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya smooths a thumb over Shane's cheekbone. "I'd wait longer."

There's water in Shane's eyes when he finally looks up to meet Ilya's gaze. "I'm tired of waiting. Aren't you?"

"Yes," Ilya agrees, sliding his hand back to tangle in Shane's hair.

Shane inches forward, both hands coming up to frame Ilya's face as he kisses him. "I love you."

"I love you too," Ilya tells him.

Shane holds Ilya's face in his hands, looks at him solemnly, and Ilya feels nervous, like they're on the brink of something terribly important. Part of him wants to grab Shane and keep him here, frozen, in the car forever, as it feels like if he steps out, things will be altered forever.

"I promise," Shane whispers.

Ilya wants to cling to the words.

And then, Shane's pulling away, opening the car door, grabbing his bag, and disappearing into the airport, before Ilya can fully process anything.

*

A week before Montreal's Pride game, Shane has a two days off and he spends them at his parents' place fiddling with his statement, which he's arguably already workshopped to death with his agent, as well as with Marc.

"Are you okay?" Yuna asks, sliding onto the couch next to him on his last night there. She's already wrapped in her housecoat, his dad having long retired to bed.

It's way past his self-imposed curfew too, and Shane knows he should already be asleep, he just can't. This season feels larger than Voyageurs hockey, and he finds himself thinking of

way more important things than his game, and his schedule, and his carefully constructed order.

All of which he's about to blow up.

Shane shrugs, aiming for nonchalance and missing. "Yes... maybe... I don't know," he admits.

His mom pushes a hand through his hair, and waits for him to continue.

Shane stares at a scratch on the table leg, where he hit it with a puck when playing indoors when he was six. There's little damages like that all around this house, a lifetime of fixation on a single goal, a single love. Tiny histories, little love letters, to a game he saw, for so long, as the most important thing in his life. His first love— from the moment he could wobble on skates— and, for the longest time, his only love. Not anymore though.

"If this is my last season," Shane starts to ask, so very softly, as it's hard to get the words out. "If I never get another contract... and if all my endorsements drop me... are you going to be okay with that?"

"What?" Yuna startles. Her mouth drops open and she reaches for his hand. "Shane... of course."

"Really?" he asks, a bit hopelessly.

"Honey, you're my *child*," Yuna insists. "I love you— *we* love you, no matter what."

Shane rubs his other hand over the pocket of his sweats. He swallows, hard. "This is everything we've ever worked for..."

"Shane look at me."

Yuna twists on the couch, her hand coming up to touch his face, and he reluctantly drags his eyes to look at her. He isn't quite sure what he'll see there; he knows his parents love Ilya, but this is his entire life that he's about to change. Everything he's ever worked for.

"Honey, all I want is for you to be happy. I want you to have— I want you *to go after* the things that make you happy," she stresses, looking at him seriously, "For a long time that was hockey. But if it's something different now, that's still all I want for you, okay?"

"Okay," he agrees softly. He swallows, hard, and blinks a few rapid times. "It is. Something different now."

Her gaze softens. "Oh honey, I know."

"I just wanted to play," Shane murmurs, throat dry. He gestures the length of his body, the width of all his differences. "Not all of this."

Yuna nods, squeezing his hand a bit tighter. "I know, baby."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, anxiously rubbing the side of plastic case. "I wish I wasn't so scared. I know what I'm gaining, but..."

"It's okay that you are," Yuna tells him, almost too earnestly. He's spent years being afraid, he doesn't want to be now. He can't allow himself to be now. "Just know we will support you, no matter what."

"I love him, mom," Shane murmurs. He thinks of what Ilya said, quite a few years ago. "I want people to know— I want *him* to know that I want people to know that I love him..."

Yuna squeezes his hand again. Shane's stomach curls with unease and anxiety and apprehension, but also with anticipation. In a few days, his secret won't be a secret anymore.

He's worked so long to protect this, to hide it. It's been so terribly lonely, and scary, to have spent so long protecting this secret, and soon the entire house of cards will fall. The first of his secrets will be out there, for all to see, and speculate about, and everything will change.

"Will you read it?" Shane asks his mom, holding out his phone to her. "I think it's good, but... tell me."

Yuna hesitates, and when she does he pushes his phone firmly into her hand. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he confirms, and then even though he's thirty-four and no longer a child, he holds her hand while she reads his statement, and then blinks back tears when she puts her head on his shoulder and tells him it's perfect.

*

Shane Hollander comes out in early December 2025.

The news breaks the morning of Montreal's Pride night game, two weeks before the NHL's Christmas break and Team Canada's Olympic roster is set to be announced, and nine weeks before the 2026 Winter Olympics, where Shane's set to be Captain Canada once again. It's immediately everywhere.

Ilya has wished for this for long, but he never found the courage to dare believe that it would ever happen. The words barely register until his third read and even then he has a hard time convincing himself it's real, even as he reads— and re-reads and re-reads— the simple statement.

—

Hi everyone. For years, I have believed in the idea that hockey is for everyone. No matter where you are from, who you are, or who you love.

It's with that idea in mind that I finally feel ready to publicly say: I'm gay.

It's been quite a journey to get to the point where I'm ready to say those words out loud. All I've ever wanted to do was play in the NHL. I wanted to be a hockey player. That's all I've ever wanted to be. And I'm honoured to have been able to be that— but now, I also want to be able to bring my authentic self to the rink.

I wouldn't have been able to do this without the support of my loved ones, my close friends, and my agent, who have all known this about me, and have only met me with love and support.

To those few who came before me, thank you. And to those who will come after, I hope I can help make that path a little easier.

Shane Hollander

—

Ilya's heart pounds in his chest. He pinches himself to make sure he's not dreaming. It's only after he's done reading it for the sixth time, and both Jessica and Svetlana have texted him saying *are you seeing this?*, which confirms that he's not hallucinating, that he finally types out a message to *Jane*, sending:

very proud of you

The response from Shane is almost immediate:

Thanks.

I should have done it sooner.

Ilya doesn't know what to write in response to that. It's been long enough, and he's had enough distance and time to reflect, that he knows what he asked Shane to do was unfair. That asking him to choose between what Shane perceived as critical to his personal safety and Ilya himself was wrong. Ilya was just young and scared and depressed and desperate to love and be loved in the sun.

The phone buzzes in his hand, lighting up with another message:

I did it for me.

I meant what I said, I want to come to the rink as me.

But also, Ilya, I did it for you too.

I should have done it a long time ago for you. For us.

Ilya stares at the message, contemplating how to reply when the phone buzzes again in his hand, this time with a Face-Time request.

"Hi," Shane says, when Ilya answers.

"Hi," Ilya breathes, and in an odd way he feels like a teenager, his heart beating in his throat and his palm sweaty holding the phone.

"Um," Shane starts, clearly nervous.

Ilya can't help but laugh. The two of them. They're hopeless. Shane chuckles too; a blush appears on his cheeks, tinging his freckles. Ilya's heart flips.

"Come to my cottage, at Christmas." Shane bites his lip, raking it between his teeth. "Team Canada's roster calls will be made on Boxing Day. We can get the news together."

Ilya's throat is dry, but Shane looks so nervous that Ilya can't keep him in suspense.

"OK," he agrees, "I'll come. I'll find a flight."

*

Ilya arrives at Shane's cottage the morning of December 25.

He drives his rental car here on autopilot, the route long committed to muscle memory. He pulls up, gets out and stands in the snow and cold staring at the house that was once basically his too.

He's nervous. In many ways, he feels like he's twenty-six again, entering the house of a man he's ferociously in love with and not knowing how they'll ever manage to have a future. He remembers climbing the stairs here the first time, wide-eyed and so relieved to finally just have a moment to *be* with Shane, without sneaking around, without stealing moments, without *hiding*.

At the time it felt so big. So monumental. Terrifying in how freeing it was.

And even though it's years later and most of the truth is out, it still feels so big. Part of him wonders if maybe he should get in the car and drive back to Ottawa, like maybe this is still something he doesn't get to have. He feels like he's once again pretending that this is easier than it really is, like there's a way through this that makes sense and holds some sort of happiness at the end.

Ilya's fooled himself before.

His heart is pounding, nerves frayed with apprehension for them both, his twenty-six year old self so young and in so desperately in love, and him, in the here and now, still so desperate.

Shane opens the door, which brings Ilya back to the present moment and the enormity of what's in front of him.

"Are you coming in?" Shane calls to him.

Ilya grabs his bag from the passenger seat and walks up the front steps, like he has hundreds of times.

"Hi," he says, when he gets to the doorstep. He stands just on the entrance way.

"You made it," Shane says, shuffling in a spot. He's in shorts and a teeshirt in the middle of winter. He looks so very soft.

Ilya's eyes flick to Shane's mouth unintentionally. All of the nervous energy that has built the entire way up here seems to have bubbled to the top, and it threatens to explode.

"Da," Ilya says, heart beating so fucking hard he swears Shane could hear it if he tried. He knows that they've talked about this— that Shane promised it would be different— but he still can't bring himself to hope. "I've been here before."

"Yeah," Shane chuckles. "I'm glad you're here..."

Ilya takes another small step forward and Shane opens his door a bit wider.

"Me too," he says, and it feels like a whole other conversation. They've been here before. "But also, maybe a bit terrified, yes?"

Shane nods, once, so slowly, and Ilya wonders if he's thinking the same thing. If he's remembering too.

"Are you thinking of coming in?" Shane asks, eyebrows raising.

"I am thinking," Ilya says, dropping his bag on the step. It lands in some snow. He starts again, way braver than he feels. "I am thinking I just really want to kiss you now."

"Thank god," Shane stammers out. "I mean— yes, me too... please—" and then he gets cut off, as Ilya surges forward, puts his hands on either side of Shane's face and kisses the hell out of him.

*

It's late in the evening when they finally come up for air and a heavy silence descends on them. Shane hasn't felt like this in years; this sense of awkwardness and uncertainty, mixed with just overwhelming sense of *yes, here. This is where I am supposed to be.*

"I love you," he offers, running his fingers through Ilya's curls, the other man's head resting on his chest.

"я тебя люблю," Ilya murmurs back, tilting his head up to look at Shane.

The phrase makes Shane feel just as warm inside as it always has, and he repeats the familiar Russian sentiment back to Ilya, wrapping his arms around him. He lets those words settle for a few minutes, holding Ilya tight to his body. He lets his fingers skim over the loon tattoo on Ilya's arm, before finally asking the next logical question: "Where do we go from here?"

He loves this man, of that Shane is certain. He wants a future. He's equally certain of that. He always has been. From the first time Ilya slept here, and Shane laid awake all night plotting

out how they would manage to be together; a plan that worked, and then didn't, and then was never adjusted. He won't let himself make that mistake again.

"I don't know," Ilya says, and Shane can feel the honesty within Ilya's long exhale. "I didn't think... I didn't let myself believe this would happen."

Shane's face falls a little. "I promised you it would."

"Yes." Ilya is so very quiet. He's holding himself tensely, even as he lays on Shane's chest. "I just did not want to hope... in case..."

Shane sinks his fingers back into Ilya's hair. "In case I let you down. Again."

"No..." Ilya protests, but it's weak, even to Shane's ears.

"It's okay," Shane murmurs. "I did. I know I did."

Ilya sniffs, one of his hands coming up to rub at his face. Shane just holds him, draws him further into his chest, pressing their skin together. Silently wills Ilya to believe him, to trust him this time. Because Shane isn't going to screw this up again. There will be no more secrets, no more hiding, no more being pretending to be anything but each other's.

"We can be something now— whatever we want. No more hiding," Shane promises, when Ilya doesn't say anything further. "I won't hide you anymore."

"OK," Ilya agrees, the arm slung over Shane's stomach gripping him tighter. "That's all I ever wanted."

"я тебя люблю." Shane vows, "I promise, Ilya."

They're quiet in the room for a long time. Ilya finally relaxes on Shane's chest and Shane just lets his fingers run through Ilya's curls, again and again, trying to relax alongside him, even as his brain spins and makes plans.

"Lots of people do long distance," Shane offers, after a while, when his brain won't let him be quiet anymore, "And we'd have all summer."

"And a lot of money," Ilya adds, unhelpfully, burrowing more into Shane's chest.

Shane laughs. "Yes, a lot of money..."

It's not good enough, something inside him is screaming. He needs more than that. Needs more than two games a year, small league breaks, and summers. They've already missed so much time, he needs more than cobbling together time with Ilya, around both their hellish schedules.

Shane closes his eyes for a moment, centring himself, and then lays it out there: "My contracts up next year."

"Montreal will re-sign you," Ilya responds, immediately.

Shane takes a deep breath, dislodging Ilya slightly in the process. "I don't think so," he says, honestly, trying to summarize the weight of the last three weeks, since his announcement, in the weight of one breath. "Things aren't going that well... in the room."

Ilya sits up, instantly more alert. Ilya looks worried. "What do you mean?"

"It's not a big deal," Shane murmurs. Now that Ilya's moved himself off Shane's chest, he slides up to lean against the headboard. "Nobody's openly hostile or aggressive. Just, aside from Hayden and JJ, nobody's exactly... happy about it." He pauses, not sure how to put into words the slow way he's realized he's lost the room. "It's hard to be the Captain of a team when you've been frozen out."

"cyka," Ilya swears. "You didn't tell me."

Shane shrugs. "I'm dealing with it."

Ilya grabs his chin and twists Shane's face to look at him, growling, "That team owes you everything."

He's deadly serious, and immediately Shane nods his head. Ilya's fingers rub against his jaw with the movement. Ilya's anger is startlingly in focus.

"*Everything*," Ilya repeats fiercely, and Shane wants to believe him. "Three cups after a two decade drought. And back-to-back cups? No one has done that since 90s. That is *your* city."

Despite Ilya's grip on Shane's chin, Shane inches forward, straining to kiss him.

"Thank you," he whispers, because it does hurt more than he imagined; that the same men he celebrated three cup wins with have now turned their backs on him. He was their teammate, and their leader, and now he is nothing.

"Is true."

Shane's eyelashes are wet. Part of him wants to bury his head in Ilya's shoulder and hide from it all, but he knows Ilya won't let him.

"It's the room, sure," he continues, voice smaller than he'd like, "But not only that... Two years and no playoffs. They're going to start trading pieces."

"And you think you'll be one of them?" Ilya asks, his anger still clear in the tension of his mouth.

Shane reaches over to smooth out that tension, caressing his fingers gently over Ilya's jaw. "I'm saying, maybe I could ask to be."

"You love Montreal," Ilya reminds him, finally letting go of Shane's face. His hand falls back to the bed.

"Yeah," Shane agrees, and he means it.

Since he was a kid the Voyageurs have been his dream. He's always wanted to play there, always pictured himself in that jersey. It's his mom's favourite team; he grew up idolizing those players, dreaming of one day being one of them. He wished desperately to skate on that ice, to wear their colours, to bear the Captain's patch. He sort of thought he'd one day see his jersey number in the rafters next to his heroes, and it does sincerely hurt to consider that he might not ever get that. It feels a little like a lifetime of work, a familial goal, or a dream, going up in flames.

"And I genuinely thought I would retire there..." Shane continues. "But, you gave up a lot for me—"

"Shane, моя любовь," Ilya murmurs, with a shake of his head, "I would never ask you to do that."

"You're not asking," Shane tells him. He twists his fingers into Ilya's fallen hand. "I'm offering."

And there's a difference. Years ago, he'd said *he's trying to be loyal to me* to his mom, in defence of Ilya leaving Boston. And now it's the same, except Shane is the one trying to prove something. He understands the sacrifice more now; he still wants to make it.

"There's lots of Western teams, all short flights away," Shane adds, while Ilya is still preparing his rebuttal, the warring emotions clear on Ilya's face. "I can ask for a trade."

"Your family. You want to be near them," Ilya counters, and he looks genuinely pained. "I do not want to take that from you."

Shane cups his face with his free hand, traces Ilya's lip with his thumb. Breathes deeply, so sure in what he's saying: "You're my family too."

*

They're cuddled on the couch when Ilya's phone rings early Boxing Day morning. The caller ID is blocked, but at this hour, there's no way it's anyone else.

Ilya freezes. "Is that?"

"Yes," Shane says, extracting himself from Ilya's side as the phone rings a second time. Shane's already gotten his call—he's known since the first six individuals were named to the roster back in September, prior to the NHL season even starting, that he would be going to Milano Cortina. That he'd be going as Captain.

"You need to answer," Shane says gently. He leans forward to grab Ilya's phone off the table and places it in Ilya's hand. It rings a third time. "Ilya. Answer," he prods, and then slides to the other side of the couch. He takes out his own phone and presses his finger to the camera app and starts recording.

Ilya stares at his phone for another long second, and then at Shane, who nods encouragingly.

"Hello?" Ilya says, finally bringing the phone to his ear. "I'm good. How are you?" comes next and then Ilya's on his feet, anxiously pacing next to the living room window, where the snow coats Shane's backyard all the way down the dock and out to the frozen lake.

Shane tracks Ilya's pacing with the camera. He feels nervous and it's not even him on the call. There's a pause, then Ilya glances at Shane and flips the phone to speaker so Shane can hear too.

"I'm making a Team Canada call here," the tinny voice on the phone is saying; a voice Shane recognizes as that of Don Armstrong, General Manager for the men's Olympic hockey team. "I wanted to give you a quick call, as I'd like to see if you'd like to join us in Milan for the Olympics."

Ilya stops pacing, freezing in a spot and grabbing hold of the chair in front of him. His finger knead the material of one of Shane's Voyageurs jackets.

"Really?" Ilya stutters.

"Really," says Don, meaningfully. Shane grins behind his phone. "We couldn't be happier to be making this call."

Ilya looks at Shane again, who just smiles and gives Ilya a cheeky thumbs up.

"I would be so honoured, sir," Ilya marvels, then, stammers out, "Thank you— Thank you so much. I won't let you down."

"We know you won't," Don says. "Welcome to Team Canada."

A few moments later, the call ends. Ilya just stares down at his cellphone, frozen in disbelief.

Shane stops the video and places his phone down on the couch. He gets up from the couch and moves to Ilya's side, sliding his hand onto the curve of Ilya's neck and tussling with strands of hair at the back of his head. Ilya grabs his hip, automatically; he squeezes, like he's checking to make sure he and Shane are both real.

"Congratulations, teammate," Shane murmurs and then Ilya's grinning.

"Holy shit," Ilya whispers and gathers Shane in his arms, hugging him tightly and then kisses him fiercely, again, and again, and again, before squeezing Shane's thighs and lifting him up.

Shane wraps his legs around Ilya's waist and his arms around Ilya's neck, kissing him deeply. Ilya grips him tighter, walking towards the couch and dropping Shane there, unceremoniously. Ilya crawls on top of him.

"Is that any way to treat your Captain?" Shane teases, as Ilya brackets his head with his arms and drags his lips up Shane's jaw. Ilya takes his earlobe between his teeth, biting gently, and Shane moans.

Ilya's breath is warm on Shane's jaw, and heat curls in Shane's stomach, as Ilya says, "I think I know exactly how my Captain wants to be treated."

*

Shane texts him the video later, after the initial excitement tapers off, telling him, "You should send that to the Hockey Canada PR folks. They'll post it so everyone can see your reaction."

Ilya watches it back, a small smile on his lips the whole time. Shane feels so damn pleased—and proud. When the video ends, Ilya looks at Shane, eyes a bit wide, a little hopeful. "Your jacket— your number— is in this. If I send this, everyone will know."

Shane holds his gaze, confident as he says: "Then they'll know."

*

In reality, it's not as simple as sending the video to Hockey Canada and having them post it. The media-savvy PR folks have their jobs for a reason and they spot Shane's number in Ilya's video immediately. What follows is a series of mostly awkward lines of questioning.

"Was this going on when we had our conversation this summer?" is Armstrong's first question, followed quickly by "How *long* has this been going on?" when Shane admits yes to the first question. Shane starts to answer the second one, but Ilya puts a hand on his arm and firmly states that they decline to respond.

From that point, they decline to answer many of the questions posed by Armstrong and the PR team, arguing that it has nothing to do with Hockey Canada or the Olympics. Shane's leg bounces nervously the entire time; he barely makes eye contact with the screen. Ilya is sketched from ice, his jaw tight the entire conversation.

"You knew I was bisexual when you invited me to camp," Ilya points out at one point, to which Armstrong sputters a frustrated, "Yes, but!—" only to be cut off as Shane adds, "And I was honest with you when I didn't owe you anything." Coach Turner, who seems to have been reluctantly added to the conference call, just sighs.

"If you have problem, just cut me." Ilya shrugs, a guise of nonchalance in stark contrast to the excitement he received the call with earlier. Their legs press together as they wait for the response to Ilya's threat.

"Now wait a second," Turner protests, as Armstrong sputters again, nonsensical words of which neither Shane nor Ilya can make sense.

"Calm down, Don," Fournier tells him, having also weaselled her way onto the call. "You're acting like this is the first time one of our national hockey teams has had a couple on the roster."

"Josée—" Armstrong starts, but stops short, like it's just dawned on him. His jaw shuts with an audible click of his teeth.

Fournier makes a satisfied noise. "Honestly Don, Hillary Candace and her partner have both played on the women's team for *years*. They're line-mates. They play on the same PWHL team for heavens sake." She sniffs. She almost sounds bored. "This is hardly novel."

Shane and Ilya watch, completely fascinated, as Armstrong's face reddens and Turner, bewilderingly, snorts and then starts to laugh. Fournier, from her tiny square on their screen, winks at them.

Armstrong deflates. "Turner?"

"All good with me," the coach says, after having been mostly quiet throughout the entire conversation. "None of this changes anything on my end." Turner shrugs. "I assume they're still wanting to win some hockey games."

"Absolutely," Shane says, immediately, and Ilya chips in, "Of course."

In the end, Armstrong relents.

"Okay, post it," Armstrong finally says, turning to the public-relations team and requesting some sort of strategy to handle this. Then, directly to Ilya and Shane, he asks, almost kindly: "If you two are sure. Prepare statements. This discussion is one thing, but the NHL's going to be a whole other story..."

Ilya looks at Shane, deferring to him, and Shane slides his hand into Ilya's, just out of sight of the camera, meeting Ilya's gaze with determination.

"We're sure."

*

Hockey Canada posts the roster announcement, as well as several different videos of players that evening. While Ilya's video is buried between a few others, it's quickly the most viewed, Shane's jacket is identifiable beneath Ilya's fingers even in the photo on Hockey Canada's grid which launches the clip.

Shane watches it once and by the time it finishes, there's already thousands of comments speculating on exactly what the video means. He itches to read them, both out of need, as well as curiosity and fear, but Ilya takes the phone out of his hand and chucks both of their cells on the couch.

"Later," Ilya murmurs happily; and picks Shane up and takes him to bed.

*

Ilya intends on giving them several hours to just bask in the idea that the truth is *out there*, without knowing exactly how it's being received. A few hours in a blissful bubble, just with the thought that *people know*, people know they're each others. He intends to etch this memory into Shane's skin, to breathe their moment into his body, to tattoo their story into the very fabric of Shane's soul with every kiss, every lick, every gentle press of his lips.

However, he fails to account for both the Hollander matriarch's lack of boundaries and fierce protectiveness when it comes to her son, as the videos been up for just over an hour, and Ilya's still sucking love notes into Shane's skin, when there is suddenly shouting downstairs.

"Shane!" the unmistakable voice of Yuna Hollander bellows. Her footsteps are brisk on the main floor, all the way to the base of the stairs. "Shane, have you seen this? Shane!"

Shane freezes under Ilya's hands, and Ilya groans, remorseful already.

"Oh my god," Shane says, and shoves Ilya off of him and half-off the bed, as he panics, leaving the bed abruptly, and grabbing the nearest pair of boxers, which happen to be Ilya's, and drags them up his hips.

Ilya lets his face fall flat on the bed, muttering into the pillow. "We should take away their key."

"Shush," Shane quiets him, as he scouring the room for clothing. He makes a shooing motion with his hands. "Get up."

Ilya raises his head slightly up the pillow, and cocks an eyebrow at Shane, bewildered. "They *obviously* know I'm here."

"They don't need to find us like *this*," Shane hisses, freckled cheeks beautifully warmed. "I should have warned her about the post," he mutters, then hisses at Ilya again. "Get *up*."

"Shane!" Yuna calls again, footsteps on the stairs.

Ilya groans, letting his face fall into the pillow. He doesn't move, even though the sheet barely covers him, thrown across one leg and maybe half of his ass. He was having such a nice time: and now, their bubble has burst.

"And Ilya presumably," David's voice says, evenly, and he must stop his wife, because the ascending footsteps abruptly stop.

Ilya looks up at Shane again, and raises his eyebrows, communicating *see?* with his face and slightly uplift of a shoulder. Shane glares at him, and pulls Ilya's teeshirt over his head.

"I wasn't done with you," Ilya laments, fingers twitching pointless in Shane's direction as Shane is already escaping.

"Yeah, mom?" Shane calls down the stairs.

"We're in our thirties," Ilya reminds himself, and then sighs, again, into his friend the pillow.

Reluctantly, Ilya gets up, pulling on clean clothing because Shane's stolen his and follows Shane down the stairs to where Yuna and David are lying in wait.

Yuna is brandishing her phone in front of her, her other hand on her hip, and her face creased with worry. David stands behind her, almost sheepishly, like he knows he's intruding and would rather be anywhere else. But David has followed his Hollander into this situation despite any wishes he may have had to the contrary, and, standing a few steps behind Shane, Ilya rather knows what that is like.

"Did you review this? Did you *allow* this?" Yuna demands in quick succession, hitting play on the video. She's talking directly to Shane, her protective mother hackles clearly up.

"Yes, mom," Shane says, quickly. The video sound plays quietly in the background, Ilya can hear the shock and awe in his own voice. "We sent it to them..."

"Did you *watch* it?" Yuna insists, and Shane starts protesting, talking quickly to her in low tones. "Do you have statements ready? Do your agents know? Do your teams?"

David looks around the prickly edges of his worked up wife to nod and smile hello at Ilya. "Congratulations, by the way. On the Olympics."

"Oh. Thank you," Ilya replies, from behind Shane, as Ilya's own partner launches into a rapid debrief of their day.

"Not surprised you made the cut. We're lucky to have you," David tells him conversationally, as the other Hollanders' discussion speeds up. Ilya's smile brightens at the praise. "Should be a good team."

Ilya nods in agreement, even though he hasn't even looked at the final roster yet. He's been busy. "I'm excited."

"We started looking at flights to Italy," David tells him, as they both stand there awkwardly while Yuna and Shane's conversation continues. "Go watch some games... show our support. See you boys play."

Ilya smiles. Then, thinking of the gift on his bedside table at the home in Calgary, says, "I never said thank you... for the pin..."

"It was no problem," David says, his lips tipping up in a typically slow, shy, smile. Ilya wants to protest, as it meant everything to him. More than he could ever effectively convey. "We're proud of you," David adds.

Ilya's heart swells. His smile brightens. He would be blushing, if he did those sort of things.

"Yes!" Yuna breaks in, having apparently gotten enough reassurances from Shane to divert her attention elsewhere, as Ilya finds himself immediately engulfed in her hug. "Congratulations." She steps back and squeezes his arm, her other hand on Shane's. Her eyes glint. "Now I have *two* sons at the Olympics. Who else can say that?"

Ilya beams, so pleased that he can't even contain it inwardly.

"I think there's two brothers on the American team—" Shane starts, only to be hushed by both David and Ilya, because it's not a real question.

However, Yuna says, "Is there?", already intrigued, and Shane nods.

David sighs, sticking his hands into his pockets. Ilya wraps his arms around Shane's shoulders and kisses the side of his head, fondly. Then the two of them wait.

"I have dessert at ours," Yuna declares, once she and Shane have looked up at the American roster and confirmed the existence of two brothers. It does nothing to mute Yuna's

enthusiasm. She then squints at them, like she has only just noticed their state of undress, in her hurry to demand answers. "Get dressed. We have so much to celebrate."

A minuscule part of Ilya wants to decline and take Shane back to bed and finish what he was doing. A larger part longs for dessert he hasn't paid for himself and of which he can eat as much as he wants while spread out on a couch surrounded by his family that he has missed horribly.

The latter part wins.

*

Chapter End Notes

the chapters have gone up again, as otherwise the last two would have been a 30K endeavour; I've split it up. This chapter deserved its own space. also I can't take too much credit for the first scene, the questions are plagiarized from a real video with Crosby, Poulin, McGregor, captains of the real Hockey Canada teams.

also, i happened to see on reddit some readers lamenting how much this fic has made them cry (including someone who said they read it and bawled on their birthday?) and expressing their need for therapy, or their personal victimization by being recommended this fic. my sincerest apologies. and you know, happy birthday to that one person. sorry everybody! please feel free to yell at my in the comments (comments make my day!).

Chapter 7: 2026 Winter Olympic Break

Chapter Summary

Shane's never been the hype speech type, that's more Ilya's thing. Shane's heard rumours of the type of cliched crap that comes out of Ilya's mouth as he gets his team amped up for a game. Even now, all day, without either a C or an A patch on his chest, Shane's heard him yapping to their teammates— "I love you, I love you", and "Bring me six goals, I'll get seven". Nonsensical things that just make Shane roll his eyes.

Because at the end of the day, nobody in this room needs hyping up for this match. They've been ready for this moment for years.

"A lot of us have waited twelve extremely long years to get back on this ice," Shane tells his team, their attention completely on him. "To get to this game. Let's not waste it. It's ours, let's take it."

Chapter Notes

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

2026 Winter Olympics Break

January, pre-Olympics

Maybe it did take a crisis to get to know yourself; maybe you needed to get whacked hard by life before you understood what you wanted out of it.

—Jodi Picoult

They release a joint statement two days after the video is posted.

Yes— we are in a committed relationship, and we love each other very much. We are aware there is significant curiosity about our private life, but we hope that people will respect our relationship, give us the privacy we deserve, and, of course, support both us on our respective

NHL teams and with Team Canada, at the upcoming Olympics. We look forward to bringing home Gold.

Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov

*

Ilya had flown back to Calgary after what was simultaneously the best and most difficult Christmas of Shane's life. Best because his secret is no longer a secret for the first time ever, and difficult because the NHL conversation about their relationship had been gruelling. Crowell had been livid, demanding they post statements denying the implications of the video and correct the record.

"Say it was a joke," Crowell had insists, after summoning them to the NHL office in Toronto. "Some sort of Olympic gag, pledging allegiance to your new Captain. *I don't care.*"

Shane had sat there, stomach twisting in anger and misplaced loyalty, listening to the man rant about the stunt they pulled and how it would affect the NHL. Later, he'd fielded questions from various sponsors about his sexuality, and he knows at least two are pulling their endorsements. He's sure others will follow, but the microscope of the Olympics will make it too obvious; they'll back out in the off-season when things are quieter.

In the end, Shane and Ilya had refused to back down, and they had released a joint statement the next day through their agents confirming their relationship, as well as their dedication to the game, the rest of the NHL season, and the Olympics. He'd left the NHL office with his hand in Ilya's and not looked back.

He's made his choice. He won't be made to regret it.

Though it's hard to sustain that resolve when no one on his team will look him in the eye, except for Hayden and JJ.

The first game back is a horror show. Shane may as well be on the opposition, for all his team considers him. On the ice, he does his job, but it's harder than usual—the other team hits him harder, takes advantage of Montreal's more physical players not bothering to stand up for him, and while his teammates include him in the mechanics of the game, they freeze him out otherwise. The goal he scores, midway through the second, is the least celebrated goal of his entire career. After the game, when the loss is in the history books, Shane stares, listlessly, at the logo in the middle of the locker room and wonders if this is how it all ends.

He was such a fantastic player, until he started f—

Shame that he was such a p—

Appears that he couldn't hack it after all that—

Shane can't even bring himself to think all the terrible things they'll say about him.

"Shut the fuck up," Hayden snaps, and Shane looks up at his voice, to where Hayden has one of their defencemen pushed up against the locker.

Shane stands up, automatically, poised to intervene, as the Captain should. He stops, frozen, when the next thing out of the defencemen's mouth is, "Fuck, Pike, I didn't mean Hollander, he's not that type of gay."

Shane blinks, tries to push the remark down to the small part of him where he keeps all of those comments, shoved down with necessary stoicism. For the most part, he's been able to absorb in silence, turn in and double down, and work harder to prove to his team that he's the same person. He's always been this person—their teammate, their brother, their fellow warrior.

"Guess we'd have to ask Rozanov," someone else says, to a chorus of low chuckles.

Shane clenches his fists, the anger firing in his stomach in a quick sharp burst. Ilya's role in this has brought on a whole new level of vitriol; before, at worst, their Captain was gay, which was awkward and uncomfortable and brought their bigotry more firmly into focus. The victim of their casual use of language now had a face, and that made the team uneasy and caused friction between Shane and the rest, for how he now forced them to see their words for what they were, for who they affected. Now, with Ilya, Shane's not only gay, but also has really shitty taste in men, at least as far as hockey and on-ice narratives go.

He opens his mouth to say something, but is cut off by a stern call of "Hollander!" from the entrance to the locker room. He turns, and Thériault is there, glaring daggers at him.

"Come." Thériault demands.

Hayden shoots him a worried glance, but Shane stoically stands and follows Thériault out of the room. Thériault pauses just outside the locker room and pokes his finger into Shane's chest. They're just barely in view of the media area, and Shane can see people lean around the wall to snap photos of the confrontation between coach and captain.

"This," Thériault warns, "This is why I told you to stay quiet."

"They outplayed us coach," Shane intones, taking a line out of every coaches post-loss playbook, "Outworked us, played better— worked as a team."

"Because the other team trusts their leader," Thériault concludes.

Shane frowns. "I'm the same person, Coach," he says, then with a bit of anger slipping into his voice adds, "I'm not going to feel guilty about me. Or about Ilya."

Thériault barely suppresses his sneer. "I should have gone with my first instinct— the league's instinct— and benched you."

"Coach," Shane protests, trying to keep his face even, given that more media people are leaning into the hall to glimpse them. "I've given— I am giving you everything I have."

Thériault frowns at him, disappointment living in his eyes.

Cameras flash.

*

"You don't do boring, do you Roz?"

Sutton's voice disturbs the otherwise quiet workout room, where Ilya is pedalling on the assault-bike, several hours before the Inferno's first game back after the Christmas break.

Ilya laughs and stops pedalling. "Actually, boring is very much my thing," he says, grinning at his own joke.

"Weren't any Swedish princesses available?" his coach asks, dryly. Sutton leans against the wall, arms folded across his chest, one foot tucked behind the other, and assesses him. "You had to choose the most complicated person out there."

"I think Shane's parents once tried to set him up with a princess," Ilya chuckles, looking at his coach through sweaty curls.

"And even then, he chose you," Sutton laments. There's a slight twist of a smile on his lips.

Ilya pushes his hair back over his forehead and smiles brightly. Something lovely curls inside of him, thrums happily. "Da, he did."

Sutton just shakes his head. He leans over and turns up the resistance on the bike. "League wants me to scratch you."

"Coach!" Ilya protests. "You can't—"

Sutton holds up a hand. "Told them where they could shove that. I want another cup," Sutton tells him, motioning for Ilya to restart pedalling. "Doesn't help me to have my best player eating popcorn in the press box."

Ilya's body sags in relief, even as he pedals against the stronger resistance. "Thank you, sir."

Sutton nods. "Post-game interview tonight. Go see Lauren, she will run you through things. Olympics, another cup run, your statement— your love life," Sutton adds, gruff in tone as always. He pats the bike handle once, then shoves his hands into his pockets. "Expect it all."

Ilya's eyes widen. "You're going to let me do press?"

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of history," Sutton calls, and he swans out of the gym as calmly as he'd arrived.

*

"Okay," says Lauren, a member of the in-house Inferno media communications team, as she walks with Ilya out to the post-game press table, fresh off their win over Vancouver. "I'll be in the wings, if there's any questions— and I mean *any*, Ilya— that you don't want to answer, just look over at me and I'll shut it down."

"OK," Ilya says. The drawstrings of his hoodie are in his mouth, as he chews on one of the aglets.

Lauren assesses him seriously over the rim of her glasses. "Just be honest. Everybody here supports you, so, no worries about what anyone is going to think, okay?"

"OK," Ilya repeats, and Lauren gives him a thumbs up and shoos him into the room. She follows, placing herself at the side of the press table so she can call on reporters.

The first few questions are softballs. General hockey questions that Ilya answers easily, offering generic hockey answers. After more than a decade of speaking in his second language and a lot of media training, he no longer freezes when the questions come too fast or have multiple parts, or the reporter is new and unwieldy, or the question is complicated.

He no longer *needs* Shane next to him to take the lead, but does he ever want him there.

"Rozanov, so I take it this is true— you and Shane Hollander are..." Rick, from the *Calgary Herald*, pauses uncomfortably, looking for the right word.

"In a relationship?" Ilya offers, cocking an eyebrow at him. "Yes, we are."

Rick nods and clears his throat. "And how long have you been... involved?"

"A while," Ilya says, carefully. He sticks to Shane and his agreed upon script. "On and off, for over a decade."

There's a rumble amongst the reporters.

"And it's never gotten in the way of competing?" Brett, from the *Inferno 960 Radio*, calls out. In his peripheral, Ilya sees Lauren take a step forward.

"No," Ilya says, shortly. "We're competitors— and professionals. We both want to win."

And I love beating him, and vice-versa, Ilya thinks, keeping his smirk inwards.

"Rozanov— Cale, TSN," another reporter says. "Rumour is that Hollander may have been the reason you signed with Ottawa. Is he also the reason you were exposed in the expansion draft?"

Ilya shakes his head. "I was exposed in the expansion draft because Ottawa wanted to rebuild, nothing more."

"Anything to say about the rumours that Hollander's being driven out of Montreal?" Cale adds, as a follow-up.

"No," Ilya responds. He'd promised Shane he won't weigh into all of this, but he can't help himself from adding, "Just that I'm thankful that my own team has been understanding, and I wish Shane had the same support right now."

"Hayden Pike called the Montreal media lunatics this morning," Cale offers, with a friendly tilt of the corner of his mouth.

"I've never liked Pike more," Ilya retorts, returning the small smile and a few of the reporters laugh.

"Eric here," another reporter interjects. "What do you say to the people saying you unfairly made Team Canada due to your relationship?"

"I say they're wrong," Ilya replies, frowning. "I earned my spot, same as anyone."

"You have to admit it's suspicious—"

"Moving on. Last question," Lauren barks, cutting Eric and his awful reporting off.

A reporter's hand shoots in the air.

"Nate, *Out Sports*," the reporter says, when Lauren points to them. "Ilya, I was wondering if you could you reflect on what it means to you to be competing as an out-athlete at these coming Olympics, particularly when the last Olympics you went to were in Russia?"

It takes Ilya a moment to fully process the question and Lauren instinctively steps forward, before he waves her back with a minute shake of his head.

"Well," Ilya says, slowly, "It is no secret that the Russian Government does not look kindly upon people like me... I have always known that. From young age, knew I was different... and wrong, according to my country. Always known I would embarrass my country, my family, and my team, if it got out just how different I was." A few cameras flash, but everyone is listening to him, and Ilya pushes on, despite his much his heart is thumping. "Took care to make sure things stayed secret. At Sochi Olympics, I was still hiding myself, for many reasons, but yes, one was fear of country. Because I knew that Russia would never accept me."

He pauses, swallows. The room is suddenly eerily silent, a stark contrast to the steady hum of questions that had been filling it earlier. Ilya brushes his hand along his throat, feeling for the comfort that lies there.

"For long time I thought being who I am and being Russian meant that I would either hide forever, or I would end up man without a country... or a man living without the person I love..." Ilya continues, fingers twisting in the gold chain around his neck. "So, I am grateful to have opportunity now to play for

new country. I'm grateful to Don Armstrong and the Canadian coaching staff who invited me to camp and put me on the roster, knowing I am bisexual... and I'm grateful to them and the team for standing by us, as Shane and my news became public."

Ilya drops his hand, threads his fingers together on the desk. "It is great privilege to get to play for team and country that supports me, and supports Shane." He chuckles, and it's a bit hollow, as he adds, "At least I think majority support us. Maybe some people in NHL and on hockey panel can't wrap their heads around us, but I think maybe most people are better, yes? When we bring gold home, they will love us." He flashes a small grin.

"But, most seriously, I'm truly very deeply honoured to get to wear this country's leaf. To play for this team. To be able to tell truth. To get to play hockey and also get to say out loud, that I'm in love with a man. And that man is Shane Hollander," Ilya says, voice catching on the words he's longed to say for so long, and he swallows to clear it. "Not very long ago, this all seemed impossible. So, I will work hard to deserve all of this."

For a moment, the room is just quiet. No follow-ups, no interjections. Nothing. Ilya steals a look at Lauren, who smiles at him gently and gives him a small thumbs up. In the pocket of his shorts, his phone is buzzing.

"Thanks Ilya," Nate from *Out Sports* finally says, very quietly, as if not wanting to disturb whatever piece of understanding has settled here.

"Thank you for question," Ilya replies, honestly.

*

2026 Olympic Break

Courage is grace under pressure.

—*Ernest Hemingway*

Dear Canada,

Is how Shane Hollander's self-penned article in *The Players Tribune* begins, posted the day the men's Olympic team leaves for Milan. They're all dressed in their Team Canada gear, the crowds loud and cheering as Shane, Ilya, and most of the team makes their way through Toronto-Pearson.

The letter continues:

There's a lot of things being said about me right now. Some are fair, some are definitely not. I have a lot I want to say too. But it can wait. For now, the most important thing I want this country to know is this: all I want to do is win.

I've played in a lot of big games. I know what pressure is. I know how to respond to The Moment. I've won three cups, I've won Olympic gold. I know what those big moments feel like. I don't take any of it for granted. It's all I've dreamed about my whole life.

But this is the Olympics. Representing Canada means the world to me, because at my core, I'm a hockey fan. I remember what it's like to be a hockey fan, to watch Team Canada. To be Canadian.

I really can't wait to pull on that jersey. I can't wait to get in that room. I can't wait to get back on that Olympic ice. I can't wait to play more hockey.

I want to bring home that gold medal. I want to make this country proud.

I hope that I do.

Your Captain,

Shane Hollander

*

"Rozanov, switch rooms with me," Ben Wilson demands, appearing at Ilya's door in the Olympic Village. Unlike in past years, NHL players have been put up with the rest of the Olympic athletes, although their arrangements are two to a room, rather than the usual three or four, as there are some perks to being the most expensive athletes at the games.

Ilya blinks from where he's sitting on what he thought was his bed, having been assigned to room with Sam Nurse for the duration of the Games. They've already exchanged numbers and arranged to meet up later to workout. Nurse seems great.

"OK..." Ilya says, a bit wary.

"I'm with Shane," Wilson clarifies.

"Ah," Ilya breathes and smiles.

Wilson narrows his eyes at him. "I don't want to be sleeping and—" he waves his hand up and down, unable to find words. "Just switch."

Ilya stands up and shoulders his backpack. "Shane will be upset. He thinks you like him."

Wilson rolls his eyes. "I *do* like Shane. I also like sleep."

Ilya grins. "I shall switch gladly with you, Wilson. Best Teammate."

"Thanks, teammate," Wilson says dryly, and tosses Ilya his room key. He holds out his hand and Ilya digs his own out his own key and deposits it in Wilson's hand, who steps out of the way so Ilya can drag his bags out of the room. "Have fun," Wilson adds, cheerfully.

Ilya salutes.

Later, Shane returns to his room, stopping abruptly at the door to the room and bending backwards to check the number on the door. "What are you doing here?" he asks Ilya.

"Wilson wanted to switch," Ilya says, stretched out on the bed. He pats the horribly uncomfortable mattress and grins at Shane. "Come here."

Shane's brow furrows. "Ben wanted to switch?" He looks displeased, hurt even, and Ilya's next promiscuous comment dies on his tongue. "I thought he was okay with things..." Shane says, and looks down the hallway, then at the floor. "I talked to everyone..."

"You talked to everyone?" Ilya repeats, confused.

Shane steps in and shuts the door. He looks uncomfortable, so Ilya waits, patiently, as Shane figures out how he wants to respond. He's staring half at the floor, but his eyes dart up once in a while, and finally they rest there, meeting Ilya's, when Shane finally recognizes it's a safe place.

"Yeah, I called the whole team... to make sure, like... everyone knew that I'm still here to win — to lead." He pauses, almost apologetic when he adds, "That you being here— and us being together— didn't change the fact that I'm our Captain first."

He looks so terribly earnest that Ilya sort of wants to squeeze him, he's so fond. He figures that might be the wrong approach though.

"I thought Ben was okay with us..." Shane continues, crestfallen.

Ilya pushes up from the bed and does wraps his arms around Shane, loosely, gently. After everything going on Montreal, Ilya, if he pauses to consider it, probably shouldn't be surprised that Shane has taken it upon himself to ensure every single member of this team knows exactly where Shane's priorities lie, at least as far as this Olympic trial is concerned.

"I think he is," Ilya says, gently, "He just didn't want me sneaking in here and disturbing—"

"What?!" Shane exclaims, predictably outraged. His eyebrows skyrocket into his forehead. "We *wouldn't*."

Ilya pulls back to look at his boyfriend in the eye, quirking one eyebrow.

"Wouldn't we?" he says, with fake disappointment, inwardly smirking.

"No! God," Shane complains. He unravels himself from Ilya's arms. "This is the *Olympics*. We're here to *win*, not to..." he trails off, gesturing absently between the two of them.

"Fool around?" Ilya offers, because he'd definitely been planning to do both.

Every Olympics there's dozens of articles about the sex being had in the Village— and about the sturdiness of the beds. Ilya had definitely been planning to test that out. He's never been here before; in Sochi he'd been stuck in a hotel with the Russian team, segregated from everyone but the team, and, once they lost, his family. He intends on having a different experience here, both on and off the ice.

Shane's eyes widen. "Absolutely not."

"Really?" Ilya threads a hand behind Shane's head, steps in closer so they're chest to chest and Shane is bracketed against the wall.

"Ilya," Shane warns, placing a flat hand between them.

"Shane," Ilya tests, throwing it right back.

"*Ilya*," Shane says more forcibly, as Ilya lowers his mouth. Shane's fingers twist in Ilya's shirt, clenching the fabric in his fist.

"I have two hours before I meet Nurse to see what his Olympic Village gym is like. I'm happy to go tired," Ilya murmurs, lips inches from Shane's. "Want to test this bed out?"

Shane groans under Ilya's touch, and Ilya's already off to a great Team Canada debut.

*

The jersey feels both weird and perfect.

Ilya stares down his chest at the red raised crest of the Maple Leaf, as he waits in the hallway leading out to the rink, moments before Team Canada takes to the ice for their first preliminary round game against Czechia. Ilya can't stop catching his reflection and each time it startles him: the white of the jersey is familiar, but the eleven points of the red Maple Leaf are new, and he keeps having to remind himself that the Leaf belongs on his chest, and he just hasn't mugged some Canadian player of his jersey.

He feels like an imposter in this jersey, even though he's earned it. He belongs here; on this team, playing with these men, on Shane's wing. He's earned this.

"Alright?"

Ilya looks up, expecting Shane, but seeing Hunter MacMillan instead, sidling up beside him. He nods, "Yeah, just..."

"Nervous?" MacMillan suggests.

Ilya laughs lowly. "No."

"Jersey?"

"Feels weird."

"Looks weird," MacMillan retorts, but his tone and face are teasing. He winks, then butts a glove against Ilya's shoulder. "Buck up, winger, we need a win."

MacMillan taps his stick on the ground several times and the team quickly comes to attention, eyes drawn to MacMillan, Wilson, and Shane, the two Alternates and the Captain.

"We got a game to win," MacMillan drawls, to chorus of *let's go!* and more fervent stick tapping. "Don't we, Captain?"

Shane's eyes deadly serious under his visor. "That we do, boys, that we do."

*

"Come on," Shane says, as Ilya throws the rest of his gear into his bag, following their second preliminary match, a tidy 5-1 win against Switzerland. Ilya had netted his first goal as a member of the Canadian men's national team, and had been appropriately crushed by his line-mates, including Shane, who, in his enthusiasm, planted a flash of a kiss on the edge where Ilya's chinstrap meets his skin.

It momentarily stunned him. An entire stadium's eyes— a nation's, a world's— are on them and Shane dares to do that. He'd spared a millisecond to think about how that looked on television, and what the commentators were possibly saying, before their defence caught up and smashed Ilya into the boards in jubilation. Ilya's focus had snapped back into place with the impact, and he'd managed to send a flirty, "Valentine's day gift, for you," in Shane's direction, with a wink, and then power his way through the rest of the game.

They exit the game with an efficient, clean, second win of the tournament, and eyes on the final preliminary game in two days's time, against France. For now, they have a day off tomorrow, and Shane's expressed his determination to explore the Olympic Village tonight.

"My parents will meet us outside and then we can get can dinner or something, I'm starving," Shane says, tapping Ilya's foot with his own.

"OK," Ilya says, standing up and slinging the bag that will come with him for the night over his shoulder. A Team Canada trainer carries the rest away.

"Let's go," Shane insists, grabbing Ilya's hand and marching them out of the locker area. Ilya stares at their hands, still not quite used to this; still marvelling at how quickly Shane has adapted.

"OK," Ilya repeats, and follows.

They make their way through the security perimeter of the arena, and out towards the back to find Yuna and David, where Olympic-organized transport will take them to the Olympic Village. Shane speed-walks through the athletes area, dragging Ilya along by his hand. He's clearly excited to find his parents as they haven't had a chance to connect with them since the tournament begun a few days prior, despite the Hollanders being at both games so far.

"There," Shane says, pointing. He weaves through some people, pausing briefly to wave at some spectators outside the security zone, most of whom are yelling for Shane, however Ilya hears the rare screech of *Rozanov*. He smiles and lifts his hand, and continues to let himself be dragged haplessly through the crowd and towards Shane's parents.

He freezes when he sees them.

"Boys!" Yuna exclaims, embracing Shane quickly. Immediately, she's murmuring to him lowly, presumably some sort of commentary on the game just played.

But Ilya's attention is just on David, who turned around a bit slower, giving Ilya time to fully take in the white Team Canada jersey he's wearing.

Ilya just stares, something twisting in his chest. His throat suddenly feels very dry, and his eyes just the opposite.

David smiles. "Looks good, doesn't it?"

At David's words, Shane and Yuna turn to watch them. The embroidered Captain's C is stark on Yuna's jersey, matching the one sewn onto her own son's jersey. Shane is smiling, brightly.

David turns slowly to show off the back nameplate again.

Ilya's voice is caught in his throat.

Shane's arm comes around him, his lips press gently against Ilya's cheek. "It looks great, Dad."

*

Team Canada coasts through the preliminary round, handily beating everyone in their group. Shane's experienced enough to not get cocky, but he feels good about this team, about this moment, about being back here at the Olympics, after a long twelve years without. It feels good playing hockey again, after a horrible few months in Montreal, with these group of guys and, well, Ilya.

He's not going to lie, having Ilya playing on his wing feels incredible. They *work*, they always have. He knew it back at that All-Star game, the very first time they'd gotten to play side-by-side and it had been magic. Chemistry, as his dad had named it. There's something

incredibly freeing about having Ilya at his side, maybe it's the caliber of player he is, maybe it's just the fact that it's Ilya, but whatever it is, it makes Shane a better player.

He's been loving every moment out there; hockey's felt easy in a way that it hasn't in months, years maybe.

And it's not just Ilya, the team's been great too. There's been some ribbing, some poking at the fact that Shane's going to sleep each night with his boyfriend, some jabs at Ilya keeping their Captain loose and scoring, but most of it hasn't raised Shane's hackles any, and Ilya seems to be taking it in stride.

Plus, he can't deny it: he *is* playing some of the best hockey he has in years. And if the celebrations back in their room are helping with that, he's not going to complain. There's worse ways to celebrate a win than being pressed into a mediocre mattress. They haven't quite broken the bed yet, not for a lack of trying on Ilya's part.

A win means they get a bye through the Qualifying Round, as they topped their group, and consequently have a three day break that, despite having mandatory skates built into their days, should allow them to enjoy the Olympics a bit.

Enjoying each other a bit, he thinks, stealing a glance at Ilya who is talking to Sam, probably making plans for the gym, because just as they have days off it doesn't mean that the job is done.

Shoving his gear into his bag and handing it off to a trainer, Shane moves to Ilya's side, and makes his presence known by pressing against Ilya, who immediately loops an arm around his shoulder.

Sam rolls his eyes, and shoulders his bag. "What are you two up to tomorrow?"

"Watching curling," Shane says, seriously, and smiles. Ilya, predictably, jumps.

"Curling?" Ilya objects, arm still lying across Shane. "No, absolutely not. This is not a sport Russians care about."

Shane looks at him and smiles. "Hate to break it to you," he tells him, tapping the logo on the *Team Canada* branded sweatshirt Ilya is wearing, "But Canadians love curling."

Sam nods seriously. "Second only to hockey."

Shane continues, "And last time I checked—"

"You were Canadian," Sam finishes.

Ilya looks between the two of them. "You are serious," he finally concludes.

"Yep," Shane laughs. "I want to watch!"

Ilya's mouth drops open. "How long is this match?"

"About two and a half hours," Shane tells him.

"And there's several played at the same time," Sam adds, helpfully and Ilya looks dumbfounded.

The next day, Shane does drag Ilya to the curling. They watch several matches of the Women's Round Robin, with Canada versus China on the centre sheet, and unsurprising Ilya gets into it, immediately weighing in on tactics he learned seven minutes ago, and grabbing Shane's arm every time the throw is too hard, or slightly off course. After a few ends, Shane slides his hand into Ilya's and holds his hand still, marvelling inwardly about how much this feels like a date.

A public one. Just the two of them. His fingers threaded through Ilya's. Where everyone can see them.

It feels good.

"They will win, right?" Ilya murmurs, when the Canada-China game goes to extra ends.

"Who?" Shane asks, watching the Great Britain skipper make a sly play on the adjacent sheet of ice.

"Us," Ilya says, shaking their clasped hands. He glances at Shane. "Canada, obviously."

Shane grins, leaning his head momentarily on Ilya's shoulder. Despite being here and being—and enjoying—being on the team, it's not too often that Ilya slips and groups himself in with the rest of Canada's broader Olympic team. The slip is nice.

"Us, eh?" Shane teases and Ilya blushes, shakes his head, and ignores Shane's follow-up teasing.

Later, the two of them meet up with the most of the men's hockey team to attend the women's semi-final where Canada's women's hockey team, led by Hillary Candace, is set to face off with Czechia.

The men's team takes up the better part of two rows, decked out in their team Canada gear, and Shane's even stolen a *Candace* jersey to sport in the crowd. Ilya makes a show of pouting when he sees it, complaining that Shane should have gotten him a *Stacie* one, so he could wear the jersey of Hillary's wife and line-mate. Shane laughs, ducking his head into Ilya's chest despite some teasing from his teammates, and promises to get Ilya one for the Women's final if they win.

Canada storms past Czechia to reach the Final and when the buzzer blows, and in the midst of the wild cheering, Ilya leans over and whispers into Shane's ear: "I want my jersey,

бойфренд."

*

Quarterfinals are against Germany, and Canada wins handily 6-1.

Ilya scores a goal. Ben has one, and a rookie, Max Ruel, scores his first of the tournament.

Shane scores a hat-trick.

Shane and Ilya's other line-mate, Andy Matthews, slides up to them with open arms after the Shane's third goal, yelling, "Whatever you're doing this tournament, Cap, keep it up!" and thumping Shane and his helmets together, affectionately.

Sheepishly, Shane steals a glance at Ilya, their eyes meeting for a moment, like a secret passing between them.

"Even that," Matthews shouts, patting them both on the shoulder, as hats fall around them.

Shane smiles down at the ice, taking off to lead them past the bench for a line-full of fist bumps and congratulations, Ilya and Matthews behind him. He can hear the crowd chanting for him, nothing but support and— it feels good.

He'd forgotten how good it could feel, his name on the crowd's lips and his teammates celebrating beside him.

Later, back in their room in the Village, Ilya makes quick work of stripping Shane of his jacket and presses him against the wall, lips on his neck, as he murmurs, "And how does my Captain want to be rewarded?"

Shane fully shivers as Ilya's mouth traces his body, kissing the hollow of Shane's neck. Shane tips his head back and moans. There's some hollering in the hall and some footsteps racing past their room, reminding Shane that the whole sporting world is outside this door, and for once in their entire lives, Shane doesn't care. He isn't frightened. He just sinks his hands into Ilya's hair and gently pushes Ilya down. Ilya goes easily.

"Three goals deserves three orgasms?" Ilya suggests, mouthing at Shane through his fleece joggers.

"Seems fair," Shane agrees, twisting a curl between his fingers. "That mean you only get one?"

Ilya pauses, looks up from where he's working to spring Shane from his joggers, and raises his eyebrows. "I assisted on all three of yours, *Captain*."

Shane lifts a shoulder in an approximation of a shrug, lets Ilya see it and then guides him back to what he was doing. "Then you can assist."

*

The Women's Gold Medal game between Canada and the USA is played the day between the men's quarterfinal game and semifinal, and despite having an early morning skate, the men's team is planning to be out almost its entirety for the match.

"Where's Ilya?" Ben asks, as they slide into a seat on the Athlete Transportation bus, heading to the game together after a captains meeting with the coaches.

"Meeting us there," Shane tells him, "He met up with Nico Karlsson, who's here with Team Sweden, earlier. Apparently the Inferno did this pre-Olympic video where they had to pick a

sport they'd play if not hockey... Ilya picked speed skating. Karlsson is trying to prove he's an idiot."

Privately, Shane also thinks Ilya's ridiculous for having picked speed skating, and he can't keep the bemused smile off his face as he relays the story to Ben.

When he looks back at Ben, the other player is studying him. "This is a good look on you, Hollander."

"What is?" Shane asks, confused at the comment. He looks down at the *Candace* sweater he's wearing, as if it holds the answer.

"No," Ben tuts. He waves a hand over him, gesturing. "This. You look happy."

"Oh," Shane says, and blushes.

"No, dude, it's great," Ben interjects, before Shane can say anything. He pauses, then shrugs and adds, "We're friends so I can say this, but... you've always been a bit of a hockey robot."

Shane frowns, opening his mouth to protest the characterization, but Ben waves him off.

"It's not a bad thing, just ever since we played together in minor hockey, you've been eating, sleeping and breathing hockey. And you're a great player to show for it, but," Ben pauses, considering, "But like, this week? Man, you're playing some of the best hockey of your life and you seemed to be enjoying doing it."

"I've always had fun playing hockey," Shane interjects. "I'm not a robot.."

Ben chuckles. "This is a whole other level of fun. Come'on, admit it."

"Maybe," Shane admits reluctantly.

"It's *good*," Ben stresses. "What's the point in getting paid big bucks to play a game if you don't find joy in it?" Ben laughs and Shane cracks a small smile. "And I don't know if it's Ilya, or maybe just having a team of guys who aren't being assholes," Ben continues, and Shane, once again, opens his mouth to protest, poised to defend the Voyageurs, but Ben waves his comment away. "Dude, everyone knows the Voyageurs are having issues."

Shane adverts his eyes and stares at the empty bus seat in front of him. He won't throw his team under the bus, but he's not about to argue with Ben either. He's not oblivious, even he can see the difference between these players here and back on the Voyageurs.

"And Ilya, he..." Ben clicks his tongue, as he hums over the right words. "Humanizes you? You've always been this untouchable hockey god—"

"I like god better than robot," Shane retorts. Ben chuckles and nudges his shoulder against Shane's.

"He makes you seem kinda normal. Just having like a... person," Ben finishes.

Shane can't help but let out a sharp laugh. "I feel like a lot of people would disagree with you."

Ben shakes his head. "You gotta get out of Montreal."

Shane shrugs. "It's my team."

"Vancouver would take you." Ben nudges him again. "Come on, it would be like minor hockey, me and you again."

Shane looks out the window of the bus. "It's on the list."

It's an admission he hates making, even quietly and even if it's only to Ben, who's known him since he was fourteen and still dreaming of the NHL. It's a hard truth to get out; that his time with the team that drafted him is probably over. And it's going to end ugly. This was never how he wanted to cease being a Voyageur.

"So there's a trade list," Ben murmurs.

"Yeah," Shane says, thickly, "There's a list."

The rest of the bus ride is in silence, but Ben gives him a warm smile as they disembark and head into the arena, clapping him on the back before Shane slides into the seat next to Ilya and Sam, and Ben joins Andy and Hunter in the row behind them.

"How was the speed skating?" Shane asks, as he sits down.

Ilya immediately slings his arm around the back of Shane's seat. "I think, for now, I will stick to hockey," he replies and Sam snorts. "But I learned that many speed skaters train in Calgary at Olympic Oval there, so who knows? I can be another Clara Hughes, multi-sport Olympian, you know her?"

Shane nods, shifting into the curve of Ilya's arm, despite the chair digging into his side. "Yes, I know of her. Her other sport was cycling though, not another Winter sport." He pauses, thinks of the book on Marc's shelf that he borrowed after one of their first sessions, which feels long ago now. He feels like a different person. "I've read her book."

Ilya hums with enthusiasm. He's wearing the *Stacie* jersey that Shane had painstakingly procured for him, and he chats idly with Sam and the others around them between plays, thumb running up and down Shane's neck the whole time.

There's some eyes on them sure, throughout the game. Shane knows a few photos were snapped, assumes the one of Ilya kissing him after Hillary scores a short handed goal, their *Candace* and *Stacie* jerseys in full view, will show up in various Canadian media stories the

next day, a side story as a nation celebrates the women's success. He just can't find it in himself to care.

*

Semifinals lead to a tough match-up against Sweden. It's their most challenging match to date, and the Swedes pose a formidable challenge, capitalizing on their power play twice—two times more than any other team has all tournament.

"Stay out of the box," barks Coach Turner at the second intermission, with Canada up 3-2. He eyes Ilya and Wyatt Hughes, the only two players with penalties tonight. "No stupid penalties and we have this."

Hunter takes a penalty, three minutes into the third period.

Ilya scores short handed, which pushes Canada past Sweden and into the Gold Medal Game.

Ilya kisses Shane right there on the ice, the enthusiasm rocketing through him. More than once this tournament; he's caught himself trying to compare this experience to his experience with Team Russia in Sochi, but he can't. There is no comparing. This is so far past his wildest dreams.

•

Shane's never been the hype speech type, that's more Ilya's thing. Shane's heard rumours of the type of cliched crap that comes out of Ilya's mouth as he gets his team amped up for a game. Even now, all day, without either a C or an A patch on his chest, Shane's heard him yapping to their teammates— "I love you, I love you", and "Bring me six goals, I'll get seven" and "My first Canada-USA match, I hear these are crazy? I can be crazy". Nonsensical things that just make Shane roll his eyes.

Because at the end of the day, nobody in this room needs hyping up for this match. They've been ready for this moment for years.

"A lot of us have waited twelve extremely long years to get back on this ice," Shane tells his team, their attention completely on him. "To get to this game. Let's not waste it. It's ours, let's take it."

"Let's get it boys," Ben shouts.

"Love ya', Cap," Hunter teases, with a wink.

Shane laughs and adds between all the noise, the hoots and hollers build, "I love you all."

*

Gold medal match.

Overtime. Sudden death.

Ilya's never skated harder in his life. His legs hurt. His muscles are exhausted. His heart is pounding with the effort. He's breathing so very hard. He feels like he's been out here for hours; that this shift has lasted for ages.

He doesn't stop.

Ilya pushes hard on the forecheck, his body colliding with the American defender just to the left of the net, below the goal line. Face to the glass, he wedges his stick in, pushing the puck off the defender's stick and drawing it back towards him, trying to create space.

And he just *knows*.

He doesn't think. He doesn't question his instincts. A twist of his wrist and he draws the puck back away from the boards and the defender. His stick connects, passing it hard on a diagonal towards the front of the net.

He doesn't even have time to look.

There's a slice of a skate on the ice, a rushing of air and a simultaneous slide of a pad across the surface, and then Ilya hears the horn and the roar of the crowd.

"Shane Hollander wins it for Canada off an incredible, gutsy, no-look pass from Rozanov," the commentator will say later, when Ilya watches the replay so he can actually witness Shane's golden goal.

In the moment though, all he hears is an elated crowd and all he feels is the press of his teammates around him, as he is crushed in a flurry of red and white.

*

When Ilya was thirteen, a year after his mom died, he realized he'd one day have to leave Russia forever. He'd looked at a boy, thought some inappropriate things, and then those thoughts never went away. He knew his family would never support him, his country would never allow him, and, therefore, he knew that one day, he'd need to leave. He'd have to say goodbye, to the only home he'd ever known. The NHL was a way out, a ticket to a more tolerant land, and he seized it, intending to never look back.

He never thought it would turn out like this.

All of these thoughts come racing back to him as the Olympic officials shake his hand and place the gold medal around his neck, lying flat over the Maple Leaf crest that lies there. He gets choked up just looking at it, a few tears escaping his eyes and staining his cheeks.

It feels like a dream.

A part of him wonders when he is going to wake up back in his bed in Russia.

But then he looks over at his teammates— at Sam, at Ben, at Hunter, at Andy, at Wyatt, at Max, at Coach Turner, and all the rest, but particularly at *Shane*, beautiful and beaming and utterly euphoric, and he knows this feeling is real. He made this all happen.

This jersey, this medal, this life; it is all real.

And it's his.

*

Hours after the medals have been awarded and the locker room celebration has spilled out into the Olympic Village, the team dispersed in various little groups, Shane and Ilya slip back onto the ice, just the two of them in their sneakers and *Team Canada* gear, with their medals hanging around their necks.

Shane laughs and chases Ilya towards the middle of the ice. The arena is eerily quiet, absent of all the spectators and media and the two teams. It's just them on the ice. Alone together.

Looking out at the empty stands, it dawns on Shane that this is likely the last time the two of them will ever wear this jersey, at least as players. Surprisingly, Shane's okay with that. They may not see the next Olympics, but they have years left of playing, and then, whatever the rest of their lives hold. Because he has that now too: the rest of their lives.

Once in the middle of the ice, Ilya spins him, then pulls Shane into his arms, swaying slightly, as much as the ice allows him to. He hums a few bars of the national anthem under his breath and Shane laughs.

"The anthem, really?"

"Best song of the day," Ilya tells him, grinning, then takes a step away from Shane, looping his arm around Shane's neck instead and tucks Shane into his side.

Ilya puts his medal between his teeth, stretching his other arm out with his phone. Shane copies him, medal held between his teeth and lifts one finger on his other hand. Ilya snaps the photo, then lets his medal fall to his chest, and takes several other snaps of him kissing Shane's cheek, before Shane lets his medal drop as well and just adjusts to kiss Ilya fully, medals clinking between them.

"Happy?" Ilya murmurs against his mouth.

"Yes," Shane answers, unbearably honest, because he is. He's not sure he's ever been happier.

*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all the people that reached out and said I had messed up here and things got cut off. I hope all of you make it back to re-read because you missed so much gold.

Happy Olympics! Kudos and comments mean the world to me and I read all of them (even if I haven't had time to reply to everything yet).

(Also; this does read like a HEA, but there is more coming).

Chapter 8: 2025-26 NHL Season (Part 2)

Chapter Summary

News of Shane's trade request breaks a week before the deadline.

It's all anyone can talk about. The media is obsessed; Montreal fans are furious.

"This is unheard of," says Eli Friedson, a panelist on Hockey Night in Canada, shaking his head at the three other panelists. "Trading a player of this caliber? Fourth on the list of all-time points leaders for the Voyageurs."

Rob MacKenzie nods. He leans forward and presses one digit into the panel's desk. "This is the stupidest decision that Voyageurs' General Manager Hugh Kent has made in eight years with the Montreal."

"You don't trade franchise players," Friedson agrees.

"Especially not after they've just won Olympic Gold," Jennifer Botter, the lone female panelist, remarks.

Chapter Notes

This really was supposed to be the final chapter, but I got carried away. So, there will be this one and ONE MORE AFTER.

(And yes, I could have left it after the last chapter— many of you thought that was the last!— but we couldn't leave Shane in Montreal could we).

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

2025-2026 NHL Season (Part 2)

Before [The Trade Deadline]

There are far better things ahead than any we leave behind.

*

Jessica is waiting in his kitchen when Ilya walks in to his house, back from Milan, exhausted and jet lagged, but happy in a way he's not sure he's ever been before. The Olympics felt like a salve on years worth of angry burns, soothing both his heart and his soul. He's no longer the young man that left the Sochi Olympics angry and alone: he's transformed. His life's transformed.

The gold medal feels like proof.

"Let me see!" Jessica cries, flying at him immediately when he steps over the threshold. She hugs him quickly and then waits greedily as he pulls the Olympic medal out of his bag and hands it to her.

She squeals.

"Oh my god, Ilya," Jessica marvels, placing it around her own neck after pausing for permission and he gestures for her to do so. "This is incredible."

"It is pretty cool," Ilya admits.

She smacks him. "Pretty cool?"

"OK," he says, hiding behind his own forearms from the fury of her fists. "It is very cool."

"You won gold," Jessica recaps, and he mouths *I know* at her and rolls his eyes, because he was there. "Olympic gold. As an out-bisexual male immigrant athlete on the same team—same line!— as your boyfriend, that is *incredibly* cool. Unheard of. Monumental. History making."

"I see you've been listening to the commentary," Ilya remarks, dryly, as Jessica takes off to look at herself in a mirror with the medal hanging around her neck. He moves to the kitchen, pouring himself water and waits patiently as she presumably snaps a few photos to show people around the hospital the following day.

Jessica has removed the medal when she emerges from the bathroom and she gingerly hands it back to him. "It is really amazing, Ilya. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Ilya murmurs, accepting the medal and placing it gently on his kitchen counter. It'll go in the trophy room later. Somewhere special. Maybe moved to the now-fully constructed Bow River house in the off-season, or maybe to Shane's cottage, where it could be displayed with Shane's own.

"Oh!" Jessica exclaims, clapping her hands together. "I have more stuff."

The crazy woman takes off again, returning moments later with an art portfolio folder and setting it down on his counter. She opens it carefully and inside are dozens of newspapers clippings and photos, each with Ilya or Shane's name, or both, in bold letters. Some clippings have photos.

Ilya reaches for one, picking up a large photo of the moment where Shane kissed Ilya's cheek, right after his first goal as a Team Canada member. It's blown up and printed on matte photographic paper, the CBC logo visible in the corner, indicating where it came from. Lindsay must have done this: she works at the CBC's Calgary office, but not in anything related to the Olympics, so to get this she must have pulled some pretty big strings.

"We only clipped the flattering articles," Jessica notes, and then taps the edge of the photo. "This photo was everywhere."

Ilya's eyes sting. The photo is beautiful. He looks elated—as he was, he's not sure a goal has ever meant more to him—and Shane looks at ease and smiling. The crowd behind them, slightly blurry as the camera is focused on the ice, is on their feet, shadows of raised hands banging on the glass in celebration. Their line mate, Andy, who had the secondary assist, is on Ilya's other side, arm outstretched to hug him.

"I— we don't have many photos of us," Ilya admits, voice catching slightly.

"I know," Jessica says, squeezing Ilya's hand. "This should go in the house, right? When it's finished being furnished. Lindsay thought so, that's why she asked for a copy."

Ilya's not sure how to reconcile this type of gift with the usual indifference he's experienced; other than the Hollanders, he's not sure anyone has ever gotten him anything so personal. It strikes a deep chord. The photo is definitely going somewhere prominent.

"Thank you," he manages, looking up again. Jessica is beaming; her enthusiasm all for him. It's almost overwhelming. "This means a lot— to both of us."

*

It should be impossible to come back home with a gold medal around one's neck and still be an outsider in the locker room, but here Shane is.

It's such a stark contrast to the Team Canada room that Shane feels off balance in his return to his normal, sat in front of his locker post a loss, waiting to see if Thériault and the team PR officials are going to throw him to the media wolves. Again. His return to the Voyageurs has pulled starkly into focus that this is his job, something he does for money, and no longer something he enjoys doing. One the ice, Shane perfectly executed well practiced, expert motions; but there wasn't a moment during this NHL game that he felt free or like he was flying or like it was truly a joy to be out there.

This is work.

He's not sure when hockey became work, and not his dream. This year, last year, many years ago; he couldn't say. Shane just knows he's had a taste of what it's like to love playing again, and he wants that back.

"Hollander, TSN is waiting for you," a team official tells him, and Shane reluctantly stands, shoulders his burden and heads out.

Hayden, one of maybe eight Voyageurs to actually congratulate Shane upon his return, sends him a worried look, as Shane shuffles through the locker room and out to the press area.

"Shane," greets the reporter when Shane takes up his place against the wall, flinching only slightly when the first microphone is shoved too close to his face. "Welcome back, and congratulations."

"Thank you." Shane manages a smile.

The reporter nods. "Walk us through this loss. How does that feel, fresh off Olympic success? A bit of an adjustment?"

Shane forces a chuckle. "The Olympics were a great experience, and I'm grateful to have had a chance to play with that team; the caliber of play—"

"Including your boyfriend," the reporter interjects.

"Yes," Shane agrees, tightly, waiting for the punchline to drop. "It was a great experience," Shane continues, when the reporters don't interject further. "But I'm glad to be back in the room with these boys," Shane lies, and tries to feel like he's not.

"Well, let's hope you can bring some of that Olympic success here to Montreal," the reporter says.

Shane gives her a thin smile, and tries not to feel nauseous. "That's the goal."

*

A few days after Shane returns from Milan, he's sat in Marc's office, deep in a conversation about what it means to have a dream.

"I've always wanted to be a Voyageur. I can't remember ever wanting to be anything else," Shane tells Marc. He plays with the bottom of the Voyageurs branded shirt he's wearing, creasing the hem. "The Voyageurs were my mom's favourite team. She got me my first jersey when I was two or something. I had branded sticks. Laces. We went to so many games. I grew up worshipping the Voyageur players. I wanted to be them. I wanted to be out there, on that exact ice." He pauses for a moment. Unfolds the logo at the bottom of the shirt and stares at it. The M stares back. "That was the dream."

Marc hums thoughtfully. "I wanted to be a paramedic."

Shane looks up at him. "Why aren't you?"

Marc shrugs. "Realized I didn't like blood much. So I adapted. Shifted my focus slightly," he explains. "I'm still helping people."

"You mean I can still play hockey," Shane infers, crossing his arms over his chest, hugging himself a bit. "Just somewhere else."

"You already know that," Marc reminds him, because Shane has told him there's a trade list.

Seven western teams that Shane has waived his no-trade clause to go to; four of which are contenders for the Cup, and three which are close to Ilya but which are objectively terrible. Not unlike when Ilya went to Ottawa, Shane would be a big fish in an incredibly small pond. Playing pointless hockey, at minimum for this season and next, and maybe for the rest of his career, depending on how future contract negotiations went and who was willing to sign him.

But four are contenders. If Montreal can work out a trade to one of them before the trade deadline, Shane will go happily. He'll go happily regardless, just to be out of Montreal's room and be closer to Ilya.

So, yes, he can, theoretically, play hockey somewhere else.

"I do," Shane agrees, but finds himself frowning anyway.

Marc notes it. "Does that upset you?"

Shane shrugs. "Maybe— I don't know." He thinks about it, then reframes: "Yes, a bit. I mean, there was a cost to all of this."

"There usually is," Marc agrees.

Shane looks at his hands. "But, weirdly, I think maybe I no longer mind paying it?"

Marc arches an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I did lose the room, maybe the respect of some of my teammates," Shane says, slowly, unsure. "But I'm a great player... I always have been, I still am. Nothings changed, and some people on my team, they don't see that." He pauses. Breathes in deeply. "Other teams will. The team at the Olympics did."

"I'm glad, Shane," Marc tells him, smiling.

Shane smiles back, though it's aimed shyly at his feet. "And I have Ilya, he loves me. I love him. That means more to me... than my endorsements, or my contract, or this logo, and even my captaincy. And I still got to play at the Olympics. I still won gold."

He clicks his tongue and wrings his hands in his lap. He goes silent for a long moment, but Marc nods encouragingly, and, finally, Shane continues, "I had fourteen great seasons in Montreal, and one awful one. I won three cups... I hate that it's ending this way, but I'll be okay... I want something else now."

"Dreams can change," Marc asserts.

Shane nods. "Yeah, they can."

He understands that now. His dream has changed. It's no longer a jersey hanging in the rafters of the Voyageurs arena. It's no longer even fully focused on hockey. It's no longer a dream put on hold, resigned to waiting for a quiet retirement, where he can finally live it away from prying eyes. His dream is now. It's Ilya. If hockey's part of that, it'll be because it works for them both.

"I have something for you," Shane says finally, bending down and digging into the backpack that's been sat at his feet the whole session. He pulls out a small bag and holds it out. "Here."

Marc takes it and peeks into the bag. Shane's filled it with some of the swag he received in the Lululemon haul they were given before the games, including two *Team Canada* branded tee-shirts, a toque, a scarf, and the tiny *Tina* Olympic Mascot he was gifted.

"We got so much," Shane argues, automatically, when he sees Marc open his mouth.

Marc smiles, shaking out the teeshirt to look at the design, the words *Team* and *Équipe* above and below the red maple leaf. "I was just going to say thank you."

"Oh." Shane blushes. "Well... no, thank you." Shane rubs his hands up and down his pants. "This would have been very different... I mean, I wouldn't have any of this without you."

Marc gently folds the teeshirt and places it back in the bag. He loops the scarf around his neck and Shane thinks he looks pleased. "This was all you, Shane."

Shane shakes his head. "No... You deserve so much credit..."

Marc tilts his head to the side and hums thoughtfully for a moment. "I'll take ten percent."

Shane finds himself smiling, dipping his head down to look at his lap, before looking back up at Marc and smiling some more. "Okay. Ninety-ten."

"Ninety-ten," Marc agrees, smiling at the toque in his hand.

*

"No word yet?" Ilya asks a few nights later, the trade deadline fast approaching.

Shane shakes his head in his box on Ilya's phone. He's leaning against his headboard of room, glasses perched on his nose, and his phone clipped into a stand, perched precariously on the bedspread. "No."

"Teams are idiots," Ilya proclaims, leaning against his kitchen counter, his own phone propped up against a cereal box. They're both in their own space, their respective teams' benefiting from several games at home. Ilya shoves his now finished dinner plate to the side, leaning forward on his elbows. "You won *gold*, there will be interest."

Shane bites his lip. "Maybe not ones that are willing to pay the price that Montreal wants."

"Bullshit," Ilya curses.

"If it doesn't work out... it's only another season until I'm a free agent," Shane says, but he looks apprehensive. "I can do another year—"

"You *can't*," Ilya stresses, slamming his palm down more forcibly on the counter than he means and Shane winces, eyes darting away from the screen. "You can't stay there, моя любовь."

Shane lifts one shoulder in an approximation of a shrug. "I'll go where they trade me, or I'll deal here for another year. I gave seven options, any of them will do—"

"No," Ilya interjects sharply. "You deserve to go to the best."

"Ilya." Shane sounds resigned. "I just want to be near you."

"Shane," Ilya rejoins. "You can have both."

"I might not have a choice," Shane reminds him. He runs a worried hand through his hair, eyes adverting to a few centimetres above the right side of the phone, which won't do.

"Look at me," Ilya demands and Shane does, eyes automatically snapping back to the screen. "You are best player in world. You just won— just led team to Olympic gold. *Any* team would be fucking lucky to have you."

Shane seems to reluctantly nod. "I hope you're right."

"Montreal is probably just getting too many offers," Ilya posits, and winks.

Shane's lips tilt up in a small smile. "Hope so."

Ilya smirks. "There's only one team coming out of the West this year anyway."

"Which ever one I'm on," Shane interjects, before Ilya can be more specific and the remark is quick and witty, so Ilya laughs. Shane almost sounds like himself, even if he still looks resigned to whatever fate holds for him, rather than determined to design his future, which is not what Ilya wants for him. He deserves better. He deserves the best.

Ilya studies Shane's expression. Makes an impulsive decision.

"Where's your medal?" he asks suddenly, and Shane's nose scrunches up in confusion. Ilya just calmly arches an eyebrow and waits.

"In the other room," Shane replies, finally. His words are slow, his regular mix of apprehension and cautious excitement in response to whatever Ilya's got planned.

"Go get it," Ilya orders. "Clothes off, medal on." He pauses, thinks for a second. "The glasses can stay."

Shane's expression slackens; his eyes lose focus and his tongue darts out to wet his lips. Through the phone, Ilya watches him scramble to yank his shirt off, disappearing momentarily from frame.

When he returns and obediently slips the medal around his neck, Ilya tells him: "Seems like you need another reminder of *who the fuck you are.*"

*

"Roz, come in here," Sutton calls.

Ilya stops mid-sentence in front of Sutton's door, halfway through his part of the debrief Nico and he have been giving to Cliff and Frank on their Olympic experiences, Nico having brought back the bronze. The other three abandon Ilya immediately with wide, faux-shock filled eyes. Cliff draws one hand across his throat to indicate Ilya's potential demise, as he backs away and loud-whispers, "Good luck, buddy. Was nice playing with you," and Nico laughs, adding, "Will be sad to see you traded away," drawing a finger down his cheek as a pretend tear track. Frank winks at him and says, "I promise to be a worthy successor."

Ilya sticks his tongue out at them and enters the office.

Sutton is seated in his chair, leaning back with his feet on the desk, oddly relaxed, and perched on the front of Sutton's desk is Chris Conway, General Manager for the Calgary Inferno. Conway has half his weight on the desk, his right leg bent at an angle, slightly lifted off the ground, and his arms are crossed across his chest.

"Coach. Chris," Ilya greets and the other men nod.

Conway clears his throat. "So, rumour is that Shane Hollander is looking for a trade," Conway says, and behind Conway, still relaxed in his chair, Sutton raises one interested eyebrow. "I assume you're aware of that?"

Ilya nods, carefully. His relationship with Shane is no secret anymore; the press has been steady since Christmas, and only intensified during the Olympics. The question is a formality.

"You guys talked about where he should be traded?" Conway continues.

"Not specifically," Ilya says, again very careful.

Their relationship is new territory for the NHL, and there's strict rules around player tampering—how those rules would extend to Ilya in this type of situation is very much a grey area. So while Ilya knows Shane has requested a trade, they've been careful not to

discuss his negotiations in any detail. It's basically out of Shane's hands anyway; Montreal will, much to Ilya's annoyance, decide Shane's future.

Conway gives him a satisfied nod. "So, we're pushing for a second cup here— we want a repeat."

"Thinking Hollander could help with that," Sutton adds, gruffly, playing with the arm rests of his chair, sliding one platform up and down.

Conway ignores Sutton, continuing, "If we were, theoretically, to make a trade for Hollander, would we have a problem, here? Professionally speaking."

Ilya's temper flares. He opens his mouth to argue, but before he can get a word out, Conway is shaking his head.

"No problem with the relationship, Roz," Conway clarifies in a rush. "Just want to know if you can work together."

"We did at the Olympics," Ilya tells him, hackles still a bit raised.

Conway nods. "Of course. But this would be more than eighteen days in a foreign country," Conway goes on.

"Of course," Ilya echoes. He tries desperately not to let a grin spread over his face. "Won't be an issue. We can work together. If you don't think Hollander will be most serious, you don't know him." A smirk escapes. "And I am most professional Captain in league. Promise." Ilya makes a show of drawing an X with his finger across his heart.

Sutton rolls his eyes and Conway barely suppresses his own smirk.

"Good," Conway manages and then looks at him, assessing. "And if I'm spending significant assets to bring Hollander over here at the deadline, we're not looking for a rental."

Ilya's pulse quickens. "OK."

"I want him to sign here," Conway needlessly clarifies, meeting Ilya's eyes. His expression is even, but there's a seriousness to his tone that makes Ilya stand up a bit straighter. "And I don't want any NHL official poking his head in here saying that my Captain put any pressure on my acquisition, *partner* or not."

Ilya nods, briskly. "Yes, sir."

"Okay then," Conway says, pushing off the desk with a little hop. "So, this conversation, stays in this room." He points to Ilya. "You. Boundaries. No talking trades with Hollander until this is settled, lest we be accused of tampering. Don't even going to speculate how that would turn out." Conway looks over his shoulder at Sutton. "Best start thinking about how to use these two," he adds, and walks out the door.

Ilya is elated. The second Conway rounds the corner, he bursts into a huge smile.

Sutton rolls his eyes again, then mutters a few things under his breath. Louder, he says: "You and your boyfriend better get focus on getting me another cup, I won't have my team turning into—" Sutton looks at the ceiling, snaps his fingers on one hand hanging down at his side, as he looks for the right reference, looking at Ilya when he finds it. "—Love Ice Rink."

Ilya bursts out laughing. He mockingly salutes Sutton. "At your service, sir."

*

"Did you ask for a trade?"

Hayden and JJ corner Shane after a morning practice. Most of the guys have already left, only a few hanging around doing various different cool down rituals. It's only them in this corridor.

"Did you?" JJ piles on.

"Um." Shane's gaze shifts to Hayden, who looks confused. Betrayed even.

"Rumour is you have," Hayden says, quietly.

"Hayden..."

Hayden shoves his hands in his pockets. "Is this about the guys? They're being assholes. But we can fix this," Hayden says, talking fast. Beside him, JJ nods enthusiastically. "Tell management to trade those fuckers. Together we can force Thériault out of here. Come on, we've been together since we were rookies, you can't abandon me."

"Us," JJ corrects.

"Sure, us," Hayden amends and then looks pleadingly at Shane. He pauses, studies Shane and then his eyes widen. "So it's true then."

Shane gives a small nod. "Yeah."

"Wow," Hayden says. The word is tight and angry. "I see."

"Hayden..." Shane tries again, as Hayden just shakes his head. "It's not about you two..."

"Is this to be with Rozanov?" JJ asks, voice mostly curious.

Shane shakes his head. "Not entirely."

JJ nods, solemnly, but Hayden just shrugs and throws up his hands, marching away quickly. Shane watches his best friend—potentially one of his *only* friends—retreat down the hallway, hands shoved deep in his pockets and hunched over; clearly upset and angry. And hurt.

"I should have told you guys." Shane's stomach churns a bit with guilt, even though he knows there's nothing to feel guilty for. It's his career. His life. Players get traded all the time. Maybe not *franchise* players, but, regardless, trades are normal. That is this industry. "I just can't... This room..."

JJ pats him gently on the back. "Je comprends, mon ami. Hayden will too." JJ pauses for a second. "I am sorry, Captain. I wish..." he trails off, but the sentiment hangs there. Shane knows what he means.

"I wish too," Shane murmurs and gives JJ a hug.

Shane leaves an hour later, after cooling down on the bike and re-taping a few of his sticks as his own unique brand of therapy. Hayden's waiting by his car when he walks out, leaning against the hood and studying his feet, drawing circles in the parking garage dust with the toe of his boot.

When Shane walks up to him, Hayden doesn't look up, but does say, quietly, "I thought we were going to play together forever."

"Me too."

"We were supposed to spend our entire careers here," Hayden goes on, still staring at the ground and moving dirt around with his toe. "They'd retire your number and we'd sneak up

there sometime and scratch mine into the bar yours is hanging from. Or something."

Despite everything, Shane laughs. He slides in next to Hayden and leans against the hood too, shoving his hands into his pockets. "How would we even get up there?"

"We'd figure it out," is Hayden's response. Then he sighs heavily and nudges Shane gently. "I know this organization has been assholes."

"Yeah," Shane agrees. He rakes his teeth over his bottom lip, nervous as he adds, "Hayden, I can't stay here... I'm—"

"Miserable. I know," Hayden fills in.

"Yeah."

Hayden finally looks up at Shane. "Maybe not teammates, but still friends right?"

Shane's throat tightens. His eyes prickle. He pushes his shoulder into Hayden's, leans against him slightly, so relieved. "Always."

*

News of Shane's trade request breaks a week before the deadline.

It's all anyone can talk about. The media is obsessed; Montreal fans are furious.

"*This is unheard of*," says Eli Friedson, a panelist on *Hockey Night in Canada*, shaking his head at the three other panelists. "*Trading a player of this caliber? Fourth on the list of all-time points leaders for the Voyageurs.*"

Rob MacKenzie nods. He leans forward and presses one digit into the panel's desk. *"This is the stupidest decision that Voyageurs' General Manager Hugh Kent has made in eight years with the Montreal."*

"You don't trade franchise players," Friedson agrees.

"Especially not after they've just won Olympic Gold," Jennifer Botter, the lone female panelist, remarks.

"It's no wonder the fans are angry," MacKenzie laments. Several social media posts appear on the screen behind them, indicating exactly that: the Montreal public is incensed that their Captain and star player is likely being traded away. The room might not be behind Shane, but it appears the public is.

Ilya watches, enthralled, as the panel argues. In his hand, Svetlana laughs. He put her on speaker when she called to tell him to flip on the broadcast, on a rare Saturday night when he's not playing himself and is instead trapped in a hotel room in Colorado.

"You have to imagine the request for this comes from Hollander himself," Kyle Simpson, the last member of the panel, muses. *"Montreal's hand is being forced."*

"Can you blame him?" Botter retorts, as Ilya and Svetlana say the exact same thing, aloud in their respective rooms. *"Word is that room is toxic right now."*

"Hollander threw a curve ball at them," Simpson argues.

"He threw the truth at them," Botter counters.

"Fuck Montreal," Ilya mutters, and Svetlana adds her agreement.

On the screen, Friedson leans onto one elbow, gesturing with the other hand. "*I have a feeling this is going to make the Western Conference even more of a heavy hitter,*" Friedson remarks, referring to how four Western Conference teams sit at the top of the NHL league standings.

"Do you know where he asked to be traded to?" Svetlana asks him, in Russian.

"Net," Ilya replied immediately, and picks up the remote to turn up the volume slightly, as the panelists launch into their theories.

Svetlana tuts, continuing in their native tongue. "How do you not know?"

"Don't want to be accused of swaying him," Ilya reminds her, and even though there's no video, he can imagine her rolling his eyes. "And this is his choice. Not mine."

"*Top contenders?*" MacKenzie is asking.

"*No official confirmation on what seven teams Hollander has okay'd, but you have to imagine Vancouver, Las Vegas, and LA are in the mix,*" Friedson theorizes.

"And Calgary," Svetlana adds, on speaker phone.

"*And Calgary,*" Botter adds, on screen.

"Ah-ha!" Svetlana exclaims, delighted.

"Sveta," Ilya warns, because he refuses to get his hopes up. Even if Conway said they were going to try. He won Olympic gold with Shane, he got to play with him in Milan. Having him close will be good enough. Having him on the team seems to be good to be true.

And either way, this is Shane's choice. Even if Ilya wants Shane on the same team again, there's no guarantee that's what Shane wants, or what he'll get. Ilya can compete against him for the rest of their lives just as easily.

"What? You said!" Svetlana cries through the phone. "You said they were trying."

"I don't even know if he'd want to sign with Calgary. It might not be on the list," Ilya tells her, as the analysts on screen go on, talking about the pros and cons of Vancouver, Las Vegas and LA. Ilya can't help feel that Shane would hate Las Vegas, but the other two seem like strong possibilities. They're contenders, although not if Ilya has anything to say about it. And they're close-ish. They could manage.

Svetlana laughs. "Darling, he wants to be with you. *Finally*. Calgary is on the list."

Ilya hopes so. But hope is dangerous, so he hopes carefully.

"*You can't imagine the NHL would allow him to end up in Calgary,*" Simpson comments, frowning ugly on the screen. "*Would there not some sort of conflict of interest?*"

"*Why?*" Mackenzie interjects. "*They're professionals.*"

"*I know they played together at the Olympics,*" Simpson continues, "*But two men in a relationship, playing everyday on the same NHL team... That seems like a problem the NHL won't want to have.*"

"Shut the fuck up Simpson," Svetlana mutters.

"*Come on Kyle,*" MacKenzie chides on the program. "*This has been debated ad nauseam throughout the Olympics...*"

"Hillary Candace and Lynn Stacie play together full time in the PWHL for Montreal's own Victoire. How is this any different?" Botter argues.

For a second, the panel is silent, before Simpson says, *"I just don't think the NHL is prepared for it."*

"No one is. A world in which Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov end up on the same playoff roster will be a scary day for the rest of the NHL, and only because of how formidable they'll be," Botter interjects, speaking over her male colleagues.

"A-fucking-men," Svetlana chants and Ilya cracks a smile.

"I agree," Friedson says, and the music queues to go to break. *"There's no world where Calgary's not in this, trying to get those two men back on the same team. We saw what they did together at the Olympics—"*

"It was magic," Botter finishes.

"And you know Conway and his crew in Calgary want to push for a repeat," MacKenzie chips in.

"Question is," Simpson posits, *"Even if they are in it, do they have the assets to make a case? Montreals not going to let Hollander go for peanuts."*

"That remains to be seen," Friedson agrees.

"We'll be back, with more on this and then a return to Montreal-New York. Admirals up 3-2," MacKenzie announces, and then the program goes to commercial.

Ludicrously, Svetlana starts laughing. Ilya stares at her name on his phone as she cackles, waiting several minutes before his friend finally gets a hold of herself.

"Why are you laughing?" Ilya frowns, muting the commercials.

"Because, darling," Svetlana laughs. He hears a rustle on her end, her jewellery jingling as it's brought too close to the phone. "You, failed son of Russia and Golden Canadian boy, are about to get everything you've ever wanted."

*

Two days before the trade deadline, Hugh Kent, General Manager for the Montreal Voyageurs, and Gordon Jeffries, Montreal's President of Hockey Operations, ask to speak with Shane.

"You're giving me a choice?" Shane asks, baffled, sitting in a room with Kent and Jeffries; his agent, Farah, joining them by video call.

Kent rocks slightly back in his chair and nods. "It seems like the least we could do Shane."

Both men look slightly uncomfortable, but also resigned. The media attention has relentless. Shane is exhausted. He can't imagine how Kent feels, given that the media has been shining a spotlight on his management skills, and, aside from a few outliers that still want Shane out of the league entirely, most have come down firmly on the side that Montreal has mismanaged his situation. Not to mention the public response, which has been even more critical of the situation that has led to the presumed departure of their captain. Shane's been pleased to see how much Montreal has turned out in support of him; it's enough to still justify affection for this city's occupants. Turns out, even if the player is gay, trading that player after he's led his country to Olympic gold doesn't make the General Manager look good.

"This isn't how I imagined your time here ending," Kent says, and Shane thinks he looks genuinely remorseful. Or maybe it's the stress.

"Neither, sir," Shane admits anyway.

"You've been a great player for us," Kent continues, and he sounds honest.

"One of the finest I've worked with," Jeffries adds, leaning against the wall behind Kent's desk.

"Thank you," Shane says, automatic, even though it doesn't change anything. It doesn't change how the room, or, probably worst of all, his coach has reacted. It doesn't change that he wants different things now; that the dream of being and retiring a Voyageur has been eclipsed by something else.

Kent gives him a wry smile. "Nothing I can say to change your mind?"

"No." Shane shakes his head. His mind's made up. It has been for months. But, as an olive branch, he adds, "I do wish this was different." He pauses, musters his professionalism, and the remaining shards of the truth. "I have loved being a Voyageur."

Kent nods, solemnly, and then places two sheets of paper on the table in front of Shane. He must have emailed them to Farah too, because his agent leans closer to an adjacent monitor, tongue tucking into her cheek.

"The offers are comparable," Kent explains, gesturing to the two papers.

"Obviously, we prefer this one." Jeffries leans forward and taps one of the papers, and Shane takes note of the offer, acknowledging the guaranteed 2027 first round pick in this offer, rather than the conditional 2027 one, contingent on whether he re-signs. Of course Montreal wants the sure thing.

"But it's his choice," Farah interjects, reminding them. Or testing them. Shane's not sure.

Kent is already nodding before Farah finishes her quick remark. "Yes. After everything that's transpired..." Kent trails off, folding his hands in front of him on the desk. "It's your choice, Shane."

"I feel confident we can get good deals with either of these teams," Farah tells him, and Shane gives a quick nod of acknowledgment towards the video screen.

Before him on the table are the two offer sheets, and Shane notes absently how many assets are going to Montreal in either of these trades. It seems insane; he's almost thirty-five years old. How he is still worth this much is crazy to him. A small part of him feels inclined to pick the one Jeffries has pointed to, a sense of duty towards the team that drafted him that he isn't sure will ever go away.

But there's a familiar voice in his head, one which keeps saying *you're Shane Hollander; you deserve whatever the fuck you want*, and he lets himself believe it. He deserves to go where he wants, not where the Voyageurs want him to go. He's spent his whole life choosing the Voyageurs. Choosing hockey. Doing all the things that were expected of him, in the exact way they're expected.

He deserves to choose himself this time.

If he allows himself to think that way, it's an easy decision.

Shane lays his hand on a page. "This one."

*

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to anyone who really wanted this to be the end. One more to go.

As always, thanks for reading, for all your comments and kudos. I read every one of them and they mean the world to me, so thank you to everyone who leaves them.

Chapter 9: 2025-26 NHL Season (Part 3)

Chapter Summary

"Okay. Fair. As long as when I do, you say yes."

"I will... if you get me another Cup," Ilya says, smiling, and crowding Shane against the kitchen counter.

Shane loops his arms around Ilya's neck. "You drive a hard bargain."

"Is what I want," Ilya murmurs.

"Which?"

"Both. All of it. Everything. We can have everything," Ilya answers, and kisses him.

Chapter Notes

Well, on this sad day, please accept this final chapter of nearly 15K words as something to soothe the hockey soul.

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

2025-2026 NHL Season (Part 3)

After [The Trade Deadline]

Everything you've ever wanted is on the other side of fear.

— *George Addair*

*

"Calgary traded for me."

Ilya stares at Shane's excited face filling the screen of his phone, early the morning of the trade deadline.

"What?" is all Ilya can manage.

"It's going to break any moment now." Shane is breathless.

Ilya places his phone against a water bottle on his kitchen counter and takes a seat on one of the high stools. The conversation feels like it's happening in molasses; he's not sure the words are really reaching his brain. He doesn't reply for a very long time.

"Ilya, did you hear me?"

"Calgary traded for you." Ilya tests the words. They don't seem real. Or possible. Maybe he's still asleep.

"Yes!" Shane confirms, excitedly.

"Calgary. My team?"

Shane rolls his eyes. "No, the Heat. I took a demotion to Calgary's AHL affiliate."

Ilya ignores the sarcasm. His heart is beating out of his chest. Everything is falling into the exact place he wanted, and it's hard to believe. "You're coming here. To Calgary. To the Inferno... to me."

"Yes," Shane stresses, grinning broadly. "Ilya, this is really happening."

A smile slowly spreads on Ilya's face, matching Shane's own. "I can't believe it."

Shane ducks his head, hair bobbing in and out of frame as he laughs. "Better believe it, Captain."

"Oh, how the tables are turned," Ilya chuckles.

"Have turned," Shane corrects, automatic, and Ilya just scoffs—*Whatever*—and continues grinning.

"You are coming to me." Ilya beams. There's a wetness in his eyes, and when he looks at Shane, he can see the same glisten there.

"Yeah, I am," Shane confirms. "Montreal gave me a choice."

"Choice?"

"Calgary and Vancouver, similar offers," Shane explains. "I chose Calgary."

"You chose me," Ilya says, quietly, reality setting in. Vancouver is formidable; if Ilya's honest, they may be the favourites for the Cup, over Calgary. They have a better record. And a stronger goalie. With Shane, they'd be unstoppable. And Shane could have played with Ben. If Calgary ends up playing Vancouver in the playoffs, it won't be easy. There were so many reasons to pick Vancouver.

"I chose *us*," Shane corrects, gently. "I chose Calgary because I want to win a Cup with you. I want to play with you. I want you. I want us. But this is for me too... This is what I want."

"You deserve everything you want," Ilya gets out. His voice feels like it's stuck in his throat.

"We both do," Shane adds, and he's still smiling, although it slowly morphs until something more unsure, before he adds, almost shyly, "So, should I be looking for a place?"

Ilya looks at his kitchen counter, where the keys to the new Bow River house are sitting. He's only had them a few days, as the designers just finished putting everything in.

"Um," Ilya says, looking back to the video chat, "Is it weird if I tell you... I maybe, sort of, built you a house?"

And then it's Shane's turn to stare into the camera, baffled. Ilya blushes when Shane just goes, "Excuse me, what?"

*

Maybe it was foolish, but for some reason Shane expected Ilya to meet him at the rink in Colorado before his first game as an Inferno. He gets traded to Calgary at near the end of the team's road trip, arriving the morning of a game. However, instead of Ilya, it's Cliff Marlow leaning against the door waiting for him when Shane exits the boardroom where he had his meeting with Chris Conway and a few other Calgary officials.

"Our saviour is here!" Marlow calls, theatrically, opening his arms wide. A part of Shane is afraid that the man is going to hug him, but Marlow only postures for a second, before extending a hand and shaking Shane's. "Welcome."

"Hey Marlow," Shane greets.

"Cliff." The other man chuckles. "You're my teammate and about to shack up with my friend, you should probably call me Cliff."

"Right." Shane tries valiantly to keep his face schooled. He bites down on asking about Ilya's whereabouts.

"But honestly, saviour jokes aside, Colorado has had our number all year. You've come on a good day for us," Marlow tells him.

"Right." Shane nods. Ilya had said something similar. Shane's itchy for the chance to jump in and contribute immediately, so he can prove to Calgary and everyone in this organization that they were right to trade for him.

Someone else coughs and Marlow jumps, like he had forgotten another person was standing there, behind him. Marlow throws a thumb over his shoulder. "Oh. This is Jarome Schuchard. Rookie. He wanted to be part of the welcoming committee."

"I am a *huge* fan," the nineteen-ish year old rookie— Jarome— tells Shane, taking his introduction as his cue to talk. "I have—*had* posters of you."

Suck-up, Marlow—Cliff— mouths and rolls his eyes.

"Oh," Shane says, placing his hand in Jarome's outstretched one. "That's nice."

"You're incredible," Jarome gawks.

Shane forces a smile on his face, looks at Cliff over Jarome's head, who is just struggling to keep from laughing. "Ah, well, thank you."

"You're the best player of your generation. That goal at the Olympics? And, wow, there was that one a few years ago, where you pushed through four defenders? The guys and I on the Heat watched that goal about a thousand times," Jarome continues, enthusiastically. "And Coach says I might get a chance to play on your wing—"

"Okay, let's go," Cliff cuts Jarome off and starts to walk away, gesturing for them to follow.

Jarome falls in step behind them, muttering, "I cannot believe I'm going to play with *Shane Hollander*."

Shane quickens his step, catching up with Cliff, and leaning in, murmuring, "He does realize he played this whole season with Ilya, right?"

Cliff snorts. "Maybe the shine hasn't come off for you, but trust me, after sharing a locker room with the guy, he may be the greatest hockey player to ever come out of Russia, but, turns out, he's also just a loud fucker."

Shane forces a laugh, but there's something about Cliff's words that give Shane pause. Because, he hadn't thought of that... what proximity to each other would do. What if the shine does come off? Not of Ilya, Shane knows that's absurd. Ilya's always been bold and beautiful and larger than life itself, it would be impossible to tarnish the soft edges of his brilliance. But what if being here and being together finally removes the shine *from Shane*, and Ilya suddenly realizes he doesn't know why he was waiting at all.

"Shane Hollander!" someone yells, and there's a few wolf whistles as Shane steps into the locker room. The entire team turns to look at him, but Shane's eyes land on the only person that matters.

Ilya turns slowly, from where he's deep in conversation with two of the other Inferno players, who Shane recognizes as Ilya's line mates. He pauses the conversation mid-sentence and then, in front of every single one of their teammates, Ilya captures Shane in a giant, tight hug.

A deep sense of relief settles over him and Shane's suddenly not worried at all. This was right. This decision. It was so very right.

"Get a room, Cap," one of the Inferno players jokes from the corner, over the sound of another long whistle.

It sounds lighthearted enough, but even so, Shane stiffens. But Ilya just swings around to face the direction of the comment, looping a possessive arm over Shane's shoulders in the

process.

"It *is* my fucking room."

*

They win Shane's first game as an Inferno.

The jersey feels weird, but Shane settles into it. He catches glimpses of himself in the red and black jersey, with the raised crest of a flaming C. It's strange, but it grows on him almost immediately. He's always imagined that wearing a new team's jersey would make him feel like an imposter, but it rather feels like it's meant to be.

Maybe it's looking across the bench and seeing Ilya wearing the same jersey that makes it feel a little more right.

Unlike the Olympics, Coach Sutton doesn't shift Ilya out of his position. Shane plays at centre, on the second line, with Jarome on his right wing, and Johnny Goudreaux on his left, giving the Inferno two frighteningly good top lines. However, Sutton throws both Shane and Ilya out there on the first power play unit and that's where Shane buries his first as an Inferno, thirteen minutes into the game.

"Good job. I love you, I love you, I love you," Ilya chants, giving fist bumps to each player as they exit the ice after the final buzzer. He grins at Shane when he goes by, last in the line. "I love you most."

*

"You built me a house," Shane marvels, a few days later, back in Calgary, as Ilya unlocks the door and leads him in by the hand into the house he built.

"Da," Ilya says, happily, "Let's go in."

And then he leads Shane through the three floors. The main one has the kitchen and living area, with what must be twelve foot ceilings and a retractable glass door that provides a walk out to the backyard space. Ilya excitedly leads Shane out there, motioning to the hot tub, fire-pit and the BBQ, as well as a path that leads directly down to the Bow River. Anya runs around them barking excitedly, and Ilya leaves her outside when he ushers Shane upstairs to show him the three bedrooms on the upper level, each with expansive views of the mountain and their own ensuite.

"Yes? No need to crash with bell boy now," Ilya says with a wink. He pulls on Shane's hand again, barely giving him time to take in the sheer size of what is *their* bedroom, before Ilya's pulling him into the large upper hallway lined with book shelves, and then sliding back one of them to expose a full in-law suite, previously hidden from view.

"For your parents," Ilya explains, and Shane just looks at him, speechless, as he takes in the hidden suite, complete with an ensuite, kitchenette, and separate entrance. "Good, yes? Come on... More to see."

And then he's pulling him down two flights of stairs and into the basement to show him more things: sauna, gym, cold plunge pool, yoga room, media room and bar, and a room at the back filled with a futon and bunk beds, which Ilya explains is for whoever, but mostly their camp counsellors.

"Who is Mr. Real Estate now?" Shane teases just to make Ilya blush, as he rattles off design features and pulls Shane from room to room by the hand.

When Ilya's done leading him through the house, they end up back in the main kitchen. For awhile, Shane just stands there, taking the whole thing in from a spot in the massive kitchen, the light pouring in from the floor-to-ceiling window—the mountain behind the property stretches out like a painting, impossibly big and clear. Its unbelievable. The whole house is unbelievable.

"When did you start building this?" Shane asks suddenly, turning to face Ilya.

Ilya shoves his hands deep into his pockets and rocks back on his heels. "Um," he starts, "I bought the land..." and then mumbles something Shane doesn't quite catch.

"Bought the land when?" Shane prods, and watches Ilya's face get a bit guarded.

"2023..." Ilya mumbles, offering up the answer anyway. "Right before season started."

Shane stares at him. "We weren't together then."

Ilya just shrugs.

"We wouldn't really get back together for..." Shane trails off, does some quick math in his head. "Another year, if you're generous. Two, if you only count from our press release."

Ilya shrugs again. "I count differently."

"Oh, they teach you to count *differently* in Russia?" Shane puts forth, shaking his head. "You're insane. I still hadn't *come out*."

Again, ludicrously, Ilya just shrugs. In the backyard, Anya barks, chasing something. Shane stares at the mountain.

"You bought land and you were building me a *house* in a province I didn't play in and you didn't even know I would *come to*, when we *weren't* together, and you *couldn't* know if I would *ever* actually come out, and actually *be with you*," Shane recaps, just to make sure they're understanding this situation the same way.

"I figured it would happen one day," is Ilya's insane answer.

"*One day?*" Shane repeats.

"I hoped you would come. One day," Ilya explains.

"You said you didn't want to hope," Shane counters. As that's what he had said, in bed at Christmas in Shane's cottage; Ilya hadn't wanted to hope, in case it didn't come true. Hope is dangerous, hope requires unfathomable courage.

Ilya shrugs again. "I didn't want to hope it would be *now*, but I thought... one day... And I would wait. House would still be here."

"You're such an idiot," Shane says, sliding one hand over his mouth. "This house is ludicrous. You built *a fucking house*."

Shane spins in a small circle, taking in this kitchen again. The bespoke craftsmanship of the cabinetry, stainless steel appliances, the sheer size of the kitchen island, and the pendant lights that hang over it, soft and warm against the natural light already pouring in. On the other wall, in the living room, is a large framed photo of the two of them, which Shane recognizes as one that made the rounds during the Olympics, of Shane kissing Ilya's cheek after his goal. Shane leans against the counter, running a hand over the waterfall edge.

He feels overwhelmed.

"I don't understand. Am I in trouble for building house?" Ilya asks, sounding utterly bewildered, "I can sell if you do not like—"

"It's fucking beautiful, you idiot," Shane snaps. He has to force himself to take a deep breath; for some reason the words are coming out sharper than he intends. It's just so ridiculous. He's entirely overcome. Nothing has ever been certain with them, and yet, Ilya built a house.

"Then I am confused," Ilya replies. He leans slightly against the closest wall, a fireplace directly to his left. "You sound angry, but you say you like—"

"I do like it," Shane exclaims, fiercely, interrupting, "But what would you have done if I didn't come out... if these past few months hadn't happened?"

Ilya frowns at him and then looks out the window. He gestures towards the incredible view. "Live here? Stare at mountain? I like house too..."

Shane follows the direction of Ilya's gesturing hand. He's quiet for a moment, staring at the looming mountain. Something swims into focus. "Is that the same mountain? That we climbed after your citizenship ceremony? Where I asked you to wait for me?"

"Da," Ilya says, carefully.

Shane blinks at it. They'd scrambled up that mountain just over a year ago, after Ilya's citizenship ceremony and right before the 2024-25 season started, when Shane had finally started feeling like there was through and out for him. The hike had challenged both of them with its difficulty and rough terrain, and they hadn't even gone all the way to the top, given how challenging the chain section of the hike can get. But it had been beautiful, and one of the best days of his life, and now they have the rest of their lives to make it to the summit.

He's going to look at that mountain for the rest of his life.

"You had this land before I even asked you to wait," Shane says, finally. His voice feels like it's breaking. "You built me this and I wasn't ready to be here for you for years." He pauses, lets that sit there for a moment, before adding, quietly, "Even when you were in Ottawa, I wasn't really there for you."

"We have been through this, what I asked before expansion draft was unfair..." Ilya reminds him, and Shane nods tightly. "I knew you would get there. So, I bought land, built house. Played hockey. Made some friends. Became citizen. Won Cup. Kept busy." He shrugs again for about the thousandth time. "I was waiting."

Shane's voice cracks, and his eyes are wet when he says, "I'm not sure I deserved that much faith."

Finally, Ilya moves towards him. His hands come up to frame Shane's face, thumb brushing over his cheekbone, where tears have escaped. Kisses him softly. "You did, my Любимый, you did."

Shane's not sure he'll ever believe that, but he's also not sure what use it is to dwell on it. They're here now. They got here—he got here. Despite everything, all the challenges, they made it.

"The house is beautiful, Ilya," Shane admits, and watches a slow wide smile grow on Ilya's face. "I love it. You're very romantic, you know..."

Ilya nods. "I have been told this. Not by you, but others have said this, yes."

Shane smiles, tucking his face into Ilya's neck. "Oh, lots of people comment on that at nineteen?"

"Da, so many," Ilya teases, and Shane laughs. "But none that mattered. Would not have built house for anyone else."

"Good," Shane murmurs.

"Now, we have many houses to spend the rest of our lives in," Ilya announces, and Shane laughs again, because they do. Ilya owns two in Calgary, apparently still owns his Ottawa house which is just blocks from Shane's parents, and Shane has both his cottage and his Montreal penthouse. They'll keep most of them, Shane decides. "Get married at cottage is best, I think."

Shane pulls his head back, eyes wide. Ilya doesn't even notice that Shane startles, barely looking at him as he grins and gets caught up in his planning.

"You want to marry me?" Shane asks, quietly, and he doesn't understand why he sounds surprised.

Ilya looks back to him and nods, slowly. "Just as soon as you ask me."

"I'm asking?" Shane laughs.

"As you said, I have already been very romantic..." Ilya says, gesturing to the house. His smile teasing; Shane wants to kiss it from his face, swallow Ilya's laughter with his tongue. Breathe in his happiness. Forever.

Instead Shane just nods, up and down half a dozen frantic times. He can feel his eyes getting wet again. "Okay. Fair. As long as when I do, you say yes."

"I will... if you get me another Cup," Ilya says, smiling, and crowding Shane against the kitchen counter.

Shane loops his arms around Ilya's neck. "You drive a hard bargain."

"Is what I want," Ilya murmurs.

"Which?"

"Both. All of it. Everything. We can have everything," Ilya answers, and kisses him.

*

Like in Montreal, Shane's on the quieter side of the locker room, but unlike in Montreal there's no expectation for him to loudly lead, as Ilya, Cliff and Frank have that covered. Shane can sink into the background a little, take his line-mates and his rookie under his wing, and just play hockey.

The shift isn't only on the ice. It's in the spaces between drills and games, something else is taking shape. A familiarity and the beginnings of friendships that make the room feel lighter. He finds himself liking being with the team, and not just with Ilya; there's others that he feels like he can fall into step with.

For the most part, everything seems to be falling into place. Ilya. Hockey. A incredibly beautiful house. A chance to have a future. Shane feels genuinely good about his decision, if only the media would leave him alone.

"OK?" Nico asks him, standing at his locker next to Shane, in advance of his first practice at the Saddledome.

Shane nods, pulling the Inferno practice sweater over his head. "Yeah."

Nico smiles, knowingly. "When I got traded from New York, where I got drafted, it felt very overwhelming. New team, new city..."

"It's a bit that, yeah," Shane says, except it's more.

He's happy here. He won't regret his choice, but he'd be lying if he claimed that the articles being written saying he abandoned Montreal for Ilya didn't irk him. The ones that refuse to see Montreal's culpability in this, and instead lay the blame firmly at Shane's feet, saying that he chose a boyfriend over his draft team, over his responsibilities as Captain, and over his legacy. All the articles that question Shane's loyalty, as well whether the rest of his career and his legacy is tarnished because he chose love over hockey.

"Press?" Nico guesses, looking at him with kindness in his eyes, and Shane nods. The defenceman shrugs, lacing up his last skate. "Fuck 'em. We have saying in Sweden, *den enes*

bröd är den andres död," Nico explains, "Is not always nice saying." He hums for a second. "Essentially... one can gain from misfortune of another, or... Montreal's loss is our gain."

"So fuck Montreal, essentially," Shane surmises.

"Exactly," Nico agrees. "We are good team, it's not like you are slumming it," he adds, and Shane flinches a little bit, hiding the reflex by tightening his skates. "Who cares what the press say. Best not to read. So, you found yourself place where you get both hockey and your loved one? Most of us have this." Nico chuckles. "Win Cup, prove everybody wrong."

Shane smiles. It sounds simple, put like that. "Good plan."

"You and Ilya should come for dinner," Nico concludes, tapping his stick blade on the floor as he gets to his feet and prepares to head to the ice. "Frida would like that."

Shane gets to his feet too. "I'm not sure we've ever had dinner with another couple," Shane admits, and then thinks for a second. "Well, other than one very awkward one with Hayden Pike and his wife."

Nico laughs. "First non-awkward one then."

"Deal."

"Now," Nico says, "We should get on the ice before we have another first— first time a Captain yells at his boyfriend for being late to practice."

Shane huffs out a laugh. "He wouldn't."

Nico chuckles, like he knows something that Shane doesn't. He shakes his head at Shane. "Oh. You have many things to learn about your älskare."

Out on the ice, Ilya does indeed bark at them the second they step onto the rink. "You're late!" Ilya calls, sliding up next to them and rapping Nico's shin-pads with his stick.

"Barely," snipes Nico, clearly used to this. Shane follows Nico to the middle of the ice, where Sutton is standing, motioning everyone to join him, and then getting them into line formations.

Ilya spends the entire practice barking out orders and corrections to anyone he sees fit—including Shane. The first time it happens, Shane stifles a laugh, but takes it in stride. The second time it happens, when Shane's pass is slightly late hitting Jarome's stick, Shane just dials up the intensity.

Next run of the lines, Shane absolutely blows past the defence pairing of Nico and Jaroslav Švancar and tips one up off his stick, batting in high slot. The move gets a reaction from the entire team and Shane can't help the smirk that's on his face as he slides in next to Ilya.

"That better, Captain?" Shane teases, only to receive a scowl from Ilya, next up in the drill. His eyes carefully rake down Shane's body, and Shane can't help feel a bit smug.

Especially when Sutton calls out, "Got some competition out here. Better be careful Rozanov, someone's coming for that top spot."

*

"You're intense," Shane marvels, grinning at Ilya as they walk out of the rink. "You might give hype up locker room speeches and tell your teammates you love them, but at the end of the day... You're the intense type of Captain."

Ilya shoots him a confused look. "All captains drive their teams."

"Yes, but... You snapped at me." Shane grins. "You barked at Cliff. And Nico. And corrected like six other guys sequences. You're nice and nurturing to the rookies, but the rest of us..."

"I am winner," Ilya says gruffly. He's not completely sure where Shane is going with this. "I want to win."

"You weren't like this in Ottawa, or so said Troy," Shane muses, looking up thoughtfully at the clear Alberta sky.

"Was different there," Ilya huffs. "Different team. Different expectations." Ilya shrugs. "Is this surprise?"

Shane slides in between Ilya and the drivers door, hooks his fingers through Ilya's belt loops and holds him there. "Maybe a little? You weren't like this at the Olympics either."

"Was not my team," Ilya says. His fingers trail gently up Shane's arm, but he finds himself frowning. "There everyone star player. Nobody needing me to push. Here? They do." Ilya's thumb presses into Shane's wrist. "Is problem?"

Shane shakes his head. "No, definitely not. Just not what I expected," he tells him, and Ilya opens his mouth to counter. Shane raises a hand and places a finger over Ilya's lips to quiet him. "You just surprised me."

Ilya's frown softens, eyes searching Shane's face. "Bad or good surprise?"

Shane pulls him closer by the belt loops and his lips brush the corner of Ilya's mouth, slow and deliberate, right out there in the middle of the parking lot.

"Good. I like that I'm still learning things about you."

"Are you going to re-sign here?" a reporter asks him after Shane's first home-game as an Inferno. A 6-1 win over a much inferior Carolina team.

Shane smiles politely. "I'm just focusing on this playoff push—"

"Really?" the reporter interrupts, and Shane blanches. "Word is you and Rozanov have moved in together, so isn't it likely that you'll re-sign here to continue your relationship?"

Shane's heart rate kicks up a notch. "I have not made a decision yet, but I—"

The reporter presses, "What is Rozanov's opinion?"

"That seems like bordering on some personal conversations that should be between my new star player and my Captain, Eric," Sutton interrupts, leaning against the doorway and peering down the corridor to where Shane has microphones shoved in his face.

"Right, but Coach—"

Sutton almost looks bored as he interrupts again, "And hopefully, at some point, Conway, I suppose."

"Coach."

"We got a regular season to close out, Eric. And hopefully"—Sutton raps twice on the wall—"some playoff games. That's the focus here. Stop harassing my players."

"It's journalism," Eric, the reporter, snipes.

"Potato, potahto," Sutton retorts, gruffly, and motions for Shane to follow him.

Once they're safely down the hallway, Shane looks at Sutton and murmurs his thanks.

Sutton pauses near the door to his office, and says, almost thoughtfully, "He's an ass."

"They all are, sometimes," Shane admits. This far into his career, he's used to reporters and is even used to the always too personal questions that they ask. It's not new territory, but this is. Ilya is. He's still not used to answering questions about their relationship, and even less used to answering questions about their future.

And re-signing in Calgary is part of that. He hasn't had those contract conversations, with the team, or with Ilya. They're just settling into this, the idea of being together on a daily basis. He figures they have time to figure out together what Shane should do next. A decision they can make together over the summer, with consideration to what is best for both of them.

"But that one's a special breed," Sutton retorts. He's quiet for a second, and Shane can feel his coach's eyes on him, assessing. "For the record, I'd be glad to keep both of you, if it won't break the bank."

Shane tilts one side of his mouth up. "Appreciate that, sir."

*

They settle into living with one another surprisingly quickly.

Ilya gets a small thrill from it all. It's not like being at the cottage, all those summers he spent living on sun-drenched memories, or like stealing time together when Ilya was in Ottawa: Shane's here. Permanently. Ilya relishes in the reality of that: in the sounds of Shane in the house, his warmth in their bed, his things next to Ilya's, all in the same space, coming home after games and falling asleep together.

It's not exactly *easy*. Shane's made some big, important changes in his life, but at his core, he's still Shane. Still rigid, scheduled and slightly neurotic, which means the kitchen becomes health-food central and half the time Ilya can't see his own supplements through the line up of Shane's gadgets. Further, Shane's still strict with food and Ilya finds himself holding his tongue on occasions. And despite sleeping in the same bed, Shane's routine at night is just as rigid as it was on his own, so while Ilya's not expected to hold to his schedule, Ilya's phone does get banished to another room overnight. However, there is some compromise, as Shane does lighten up on the sponsorship appointments, which creates some free time between their professional commitments with the Inferno.

The first snag happens on early on a Saturday morning after a game, when Shane, long out of bed, passes through their bedroom, drops a kiss on Ilya's forehead and murmurs, "Okay, I'm heading to the rink."

Ilya stretches out an arm and grabs Shane's wrist. "Skate is optional. No need," he murmurs. "Come back to bed."

Shane's hand tenses under his grip. "No, I'm going."

"Shane," Ilya urges, "Is optional. They do not need us." He pulls on Shane's wrist. "Bed. We can do workout here, and then again downstairs... later."

Shane shakes his hand free and Ilya looks up to see Shane biting his lip. There's a shift in the air, and Ilya slowly pushes himself to a seated position and looks carefully at his boyfriend, who is now standing uncomfortably next to the bed.

"I don't see it as optional," Shane starts.

"But it is," Ilya insists. "Come on. You've been here three weeks. Less in home. We have barely done non-hockey things—"

"Because it's the season," Shane insists.

Ilya shrugs. The bed sheet drapes around his lap as he shifts to the side and tries to draw Shane towards him. A few well placed kisses will draw him back into bed, Ilya's certain. "I usually miss weekend optional skate. Coach is not expecting me—"

"Not expecting *you*," Shane stresses.

"I figure he thinks package deal." Ilya reaches for Shane's hips, and watches, bewildered, as Shane takes a giant step back.

"Ilya," Shane says. He's looking mostly at the floorboards. "I don't miss skates. Even optional ones."

Ilya frowns. "OK."

"I don't believe in optional," Shane clarifies.

Ilya laughs. "That is ridiculous."

Shane frowns. His forehead creases and his posture stiffens, arms crossing over his chest protectively. He widens the gap between himself and Ilya, and repeats, "I'm going to the rink."

He looks so uncomfortable that Ilya decides not to argue the point, shrugging his shoulders, shoving the sheet off himself and getting to his feet. "OK," he says, taking a few steps towards Shane and kissing him quickly on the side of the head. "Give me five minutes and we will go."

He's already wandering into the closet, busying himself gathering clothes when he hears Shane take in a sharp breath and say, "No."

"No?" Ilya retreats out of the closet and looks at Shane, surprised.

"You said you don't go to this skate," Shane recaps. He's still looking at the floor. "I don't want you—I don't want..." His mouth snaps shut and then he sighs, dragging a hand over his face. "I don't want you to change your routine for me."

"OK..." Ilya says, completely bewildered.

"You don't go to this skate," Shane repeats and Ilya shakes his head, confirming no. "Then don't go. I will go."

"Without me?" Ilya asks, surprising even himself with how confused he sounds. Shane nods once, sharply, and Ilya murmurs a small, "OK..."

"I'll see you later," Shane promises, and then before either of them can say anything else, he promptly leaves the room. Moments later, Ilya hears the car start, pull out of the driveway and drive away.

For a long few minutes, Ilya just stands there.

This feels familiar: the sound of a car in the driveway pulling away from him when their conversation hits an impasse. It hurts a little, because Ilya would have gone with him. It's not like he couldn't skate today, he just usually doesn't, not when they have a Friday night game and a Sunday afternoon one. It would be unusual, but not unheard of, for him to show up. He would have gone. He would have gone for Shane.

It takes a few minutes to gather himself because old feelings he thought he'd worked out all come rushing back: abandonment, frustration and the feeling of sinking into a depressed pit in his stomach. The slight pang of a headache starts; his mood dips. But he pushes all those old feelings down and tries to remind himself that it's just a skate, he knows when it ends, and Shane said he'd be back. He *lives* here. There's no other house or city for him to rush back to, except for the ones they share.

He keeps reminding himself of all this as he sets about his regular routine, running with Anya, lifting some light weights, and yoga, an activity he still hasn't admitted to Shane that he has taken up, but is bound to slip out now that Shane is living here.

A few hours later, he's relieved when he hears the door, the drop of keys, and then the sounds of Shane looking for him.

"Yoga?" Shane says, scrunching up his nose, when Shane finds him in the yoga room, lying on one of the mats.

"Da," Ilya says, pushing up to his elbows and looking up at his boyfriend.

Shane cocks an eyebrow. "You have teased me relentlessly about doing yoga for years."

Ilya ducks his head sheepishly, raking his lip through his teeth. "I may be hypocrite." He pauses, watching as Shane shakes his head and gives him a tentative smile. "How was skate?"

"Good," Shane replies. He moves slowly, like Ilya is the skittish animal, and sits down on the floor, brings his knees to his chest and tucks his arms around them, his feet touching Ilya's. "I hope I didn't make you feel like I abandoned you."

"Only briefly," Ilya admits. Ilya looks at their feet, sucks in a breath before he forces out what he's been thinking about, what he needs to ask for: "I need you to not drive away from me."

"Okay," Shane says, voice rough, his foot slides to gently touch Ilya's, apologetic. "I won't. I'm sorry."

Ilya nods, and they fall into silence for a few moments, before Shane sighs. He purses his lips, and then, very steadily, like he practiced the entire ride home, says, "There is a part of me that came to Calgary because you're here and I want to play with you, but that's not the only reason I'm here. And I don't want to be reduced to being Ilya Rozanov's boyfriend."

Ilya pulls a face. "And me going to optional skate with you does that?"

"Yes," Shane says quickly, then, slower, "Maybe. I'm not sure. But people... reporters and the public are already assuming I'm only here because of you, and I'll obviously re-sign here because of you."

"Stupid," Ilya asserts, pushing up into a full seated position. "You have not made decision."

"I know. I figured we'd talk about it in the off-season," Shane says, and Ilya nods along. "But whatever I do... I want it to be *my* decision. You have a say, obviously, but it is about me. This is my career."

"Are you regretting coming here?" Ilya asks, voice smaller than he'd like.

"*No*." The response is immediate and fierce. "Never. I want to be here." Shane pauses, and Ilya can see his throat work to swallow, as nerves bubble up. "It's just... I probably only have a few years left, and at the end of them, I don't want to be remembered as the guy who signed with a team to be with his boyfriend... I want to be Shane Hollander, three-time—"

"Four time," Ilya corrects, as by the end of this season it will be four, if Ilya has anything to say about it. They're both going to lift that Cup.

Shane smiles and amends, "I want to be remembered as Shane Hollander, four time Stanley Cup and two time Olympic Champion..."

"And first ballot Hall of Famer," Ilya adds, and Shane laughs, reaching out to tangle their fingers together.

"I like that our careers, our history... and our future are always going to be entangled," Shane promises, squeezing Ilya's fingers between his own. "But we're different players. Practices,

workouts, optional skates, maintenance stuff... all of that is important to me. It's all part of my routine. But I know that not all of that stuff is part of yours."

Ilya nods. "OK."

"I just don't want either of us to change the things we've been doing our whole careers, just because we're on the same team now," Shane adds, and then frowns. "Does that make sense?"

"Da," Ilya agrees, marvelling a little at how easy this feels, sitting on the ground hashing things out, instead of operating in the grey space of things left half-unsaid. "It does."

Relief immediately passes over Shane's face. "Good. Okay, good."

"I like that I will be a footnote in the great story of Shane Hollander," Ilya murmurs, pulling on Shane's hand, who crawls up beside him, and they tumble awkwardly to their sides so they're intertwined onto the yoga mat. Ilya kisses him just to reestablish that they're okay.

Shane laughs. "I think I love you enough that I can probably afford you at least a chapter."

*

In early April, Calgary hosts Montreal for their final meeting of the season.

Shane would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous. In truth, there's an agonizing pit in his stomach. He never imagined that he would be taking to the ice and facing that jersey, that team. Those players. *Hayden*. Ilya eyed him sideways all morning, but just kissed Shane firmly before they left the house, his lips on Shane's a promise that no matter what happens, they're going to get through this game. Together.

The vibe in the locker room is different too. He can see it on all the Inferno players faces, some level of understanding that this game is different. There's more riding on it: for their Captain and for Shane. It goes unmentioned, but there's a thick intense undercurrent in the room, something that says: *this is different. This is the biggest game of the season. This means something.*

This game is a statement.

When the puck drops, the game is immediately something vicious. There's an undercurrent of hatred that's being driven by Ilya's line and Ilya himself, who takes it to the Voyageurs team like they're the enemy, not an opponent. The same intensity echoes up and down the Inferno's line up.

Ilya buries the first goal nine minutes into the game and is subsequently cross-checked in the middle of the ice, way too many seconds after the whistle is blown. It sends the Inferno to their feet and then to their first power play, which Jarome makes use of, putting the puck in the back of the net to put the Inferno up 2-0.

The Voyageurs answer a few minutes later with a goal that should be goaltender interference, but doesn't get called, and ties it up at the beginning of the second with a power play marker of their own.

The game continues that way—ruthless. Emotions escalate every period.

Shane is on the bench, a few minutes into the third, at the exact moment that Ilya completely loses it.

Chad Reimer checks Ilya into the boards and the referee immediately blows down the play, calling Reimer for an illegal check to the head and pointing him towards the visiting team's penalty box. Reimer is slow skating away from the boards, head still turned towards Ilya and mouth moving.

Shane watches from the bench as Ilya snipes something back, and then Reimer laughs and shouts something else. It's too far to hear exactly what, but Ilya's gloves are on the ground in

the next millisecond.

And then the two are entangled, fists flying.

Shane, along with the entire bench, stands. He's not sure whether to watch in horror, or in fascination, or in some other messed up mixture of emotions. There's no question in Shane's mind on what has transpired.

Ilya grabs Reimer by the collar and yanks him off balance. With his left hand locked in Reimer's sweater, Ilya unleashes a rapid series of short, heavy punches that snaps Reimer's head back and drives him down to the ice. Even as Reimer falls to his knees and then onto his back, Ilya continues swinging until officials piled in, trying to wedge themselves between skates and flailing arms.

Cliff and Hayden have moved in too, and succeed in momentarily grabbing Ilya and Reimer, respectively, off each other, but then Reimer snaps something else and Shane swears that Cliff just lets go.

Ilya collides back with Reimer, knocking Hayden to the side. Simultaneously, Cliff is pulled back by another Montreal player, Voynov, and a barrage of right fists collide with Cliff's face.

The whistle blows sharply, barely heard over the roar of the crowd. The noise is explosive. It seems to take ages to restore order, before Ilya's finally dragged off Reimer and Cliff's disentangled from Voynov, and Hayden is pushed back by a linesman.

The penalties are dolled out to the booing of the crowd; Ilya, Cliff, Reimer and Voynov all assessed five minutes for fighting, and Ilya is subsequently ejected from the match, and ironically issued a two additional penalties for instigating and unsportsmanlike conduct. Shane watches as Ilya skates off, entirely un-remorseful, raising one foot off the ice and his arms into the air. The crowd is thunderous.

"Gonna be a long kill, boys," Sutton says, gruffly, as he sends out the penalty kill unit for a the Voyageurs four minute power play. "Hollander, get out there."

Shane scores shorthanded. He swears Hayden smiles from the opposite bench.

*

Ilya ends up with a multiple penalties and a game misconduct and spends the rest of the game twiddling his thumbs in the locker room, straining his ears to hear the sound of the crowd, so he can keep track of who is winning.

"You're an idiot," Shane tells him, when the game is done and the team files back into the locker room.

Ilya stares up at Shane, standing in front of him, gear still on, hair plastered to his forehead, looking beautiful. His mouth is set seriously, but there's a glint in his eyes that Ilya thinks betrays Shane's satisfaction. Ilya can't help but grin up at him; they'd won, at least, so Ilya can't find anything to be remorseful about.

"He deserved it," Ilya replies, in Russian, knowing Shane will catch most of it. His speech is clipped and angry, still heated. He'd tried to calm himself down sitting in the locker room during the third period, but this conversation is working him up again. "You didn't hear what he said."

"Doesn't matter," Shane replies, in English.

In English this time, Ilya hisses through gritted teeth. "I am not going to listen to that shit about you."

"You have to," Shane tells him. He takes his helmet off and pushes his hair out of his face, mouth still a firm line.

Ilya opens his mouth to argue some more, but the locker room's door swings open with a clang and everyone's heads swivel to their coach. Shane backs away, sitting down in front of his own locker and they all wait.

"Good two points," Sutton tells them, gruffly. He looks at his clipboard. "Frank, Mar, Jarome, you're wanted for post-game." He frowns, then turns. "You," he says, rounding on Ilya and pointing with his clipboard. Ilya freezes, a defence forming on his lips. "Are very lucky I like you."

Sutton exits the room, and the entire room starts laughing and heckling him, several jerseys hitting Ilya in the face.

*

They enter the house after the game, having barely spoken the entire drive back.

Ilya isn't sure what is going through Shane's head. The guys had given Ilya a rough time over the major, teasing him relentlessly for getting into that fight. He's not a fighter. He has less penalty minutes for fighting in his *career* than some of the guys on the team have this season. Tonight tripled his season total of penalty minutes and he'd taken a quite a few chirps for the timing of such a fight; all good natured, as everyone *understood* why, and Ilya doesn't regret it.

He's just not sure what Shane is thinking. Shane had sat there through all of it, mostly stoic, and went through the movements as they cooled down, showered, and made their way home from the rink.

Ilya leans against the counter, as Shane drops his bag at the front door and slowly walks over to join him in the kitchen. He still hasn't said anything.

"I am not sorry—" Ilya starts, but Shane cuts him off, stunning Ilya by kissing him deeply, then promptly sliding down Ilya's body and onto his knees.

Ilya thinks he's probably forgiven.

*

The Inferno go on a tear for the last three weeks of the regular season, the game against Montreal lighting something inside Ilya. He hasn't played hockey like this since he was in his early-twenties, on the way to Boston's first Cup. Something's set him aflame.

"It's even better watching you in person," Shane pants into his mouth, after a particularly excellent game from Ilya. "So much better than the replays."

"Get off often to my highlight reels?" Ilya murmurs, teasing apart Shane's thighs.

"Not anymore." Shane grabs his hair, forces Ilya's head where he wants it. "Got the real thing now."

*

Next [Playoffs]

fortes fortuna juvat / fortune favours the brave

— *Virgil*

*

"Well, the Calgary Inferno are your Western Conference regular season champs, and will enter the playoffs as the top seed in the West," the Sportsnet broadcast reports, running in their bedroom.

"Just unbelievable how they've surged since the trade deadline," another panelist says.

"A Shane Hollander trade deadline acquisition will do that for you," the first panelist says, chuckling, as the broadcast launches into dissecting replays of the final regular season games, played the night before. Shane stills, pausing returning laundry to the proper drawers, and watches as TV-Ilya tips a shot from the point into the net, securing the win for the Inferno in their last regular season game.

The two points had vaulted them just above Vancouver in the standings. Now, in two days time when the playoffs start, Calgary will be host the lowest seeded-Los Angeles team in the first round.

Shane can't wait.

"I was thinking we should make a bet," Shane muses, moving to stand at the door to their bathroom as Ilya brushes his teeth, the broadcast still running in the background, now dissecting Calgary's playoff odds.

Ilya spits. "Bet?"

"Well, it's been awhile since we could compete directly against each other," Shane explains, and Ilya immediately turns around, toothbrush hanging loosely from his mouth. His eyes light up with interest. "So, I propose... most goals in each series."

"You will lose."

Shane snorts. "Doubtful."

Ilya laughs and rinses, tossing his toothbrush back into the joint container. "What are we betting?" He raises his eyebrows. "Fun sex things?"

Shane shakes his head, although he's absolutely not opposed to it. "I was thinking dinner."

"Dinner?"

"What's the fanciest restaurant this city has on offer?"

Ilya thinks for a moment. "Probably Eight," he says, referring to exclusive top-tier restaurant. All Shane knows about is that the restaurant is consistently ranked one of the best in Canada, and it's almost impossible to get into.

"Okay, I'll figure out how to get a reservation," Shane tells him, thoughts already spinning on how much he's willing throw his own weight around for this. Pretty willing, he thinks. After a lifetime of never doing so, it's time. For this. For Ilya. "Person with the least goals in the series pays."

Ilya smirks, but he looks pleased. "You trying to date me Hollander?"

"Yeah," Shane replies, easily, because he *is*. They've skipped all those steps. Dates in obnoxiously exclusive restaurants is what he wants, and, even more so, what he wants to give Ilya. "I am."

"Get ready to pay," Ilya says, brushing past him and kissing him quickly, minty fresh. "I'm an expensive date."

*

Round One against Los Angeles goes five games, and Calgary comes out victorious.

It's a low scoring series.

Shane and Ilya are neck and neck thought most of it. Ilya nets the only goal in Game 1. They're both held scoreless on Game 2— the only game of the series that the Inferno lose. Shane gets a power play marker in Game 3, while Ilya gets an even strength goal. In Game 4, Shane scores a beautiful breakaway goal in overtime to even up his competition with Ilya, and put the Inferno up 3-1 in the series. But in Game 5, Ilya scores the playoff series winner, and the goal that ultimately clinches their bet when Shane fails to get another one in the final nine minutes of play, and not for a lack of trying.

The bench celebrates, and Shane does too, but not before aiming a smile and laugh downwards into his gloves as the buzzer goes.

Nico clocks it. "What you laughing about?"

"Oh. Ilya won our bet," Shane laments, fondly.

Nico waves a glove at him and shakes his head affectionately. "Whatever you two get up to in your free time, leave me out of it."

Shane laughs and jumps over the boards.

"I want wine pairings," Ilya says, when the whole team is on the ice to celebrate. He doesn't touch him, seemingly unsure of Shane's boundaries here, so Shane ultimately goes to him, kissing him quickly before the team raises their sticks to salute the home crowd.

*

Round Two, as Ilya predicted, is against Vancouver.

The first thing that happens, before the first puck even drops, is Ben Wilson skates past Ilya and bemoans on his way by, "I can't believe he chose you over me." Ilya barely restrains his laughter as he bends over the face off dot.

He wins the draw anyway, because *yes*, Shane did.

Four minutes later, there's a full line brawl and Ilya finds himself back on the ice and squaring off against Ben, thinking, *so, that's the type of series it's going to be*.

And it is. Chippy, scrappy, mean, and deliciously hard on the body. The series goes the whole seven games, with Calgary winning the series off a classic Shane Hollander goal: Shane speeding past the defenders and tucking the puck top-shelf right over the goalie's shoulder. Ilya watches it happen from the bench, not at all embarrassed on how turned on he is at the effort nor of how much he *wants that beautiful man*, until he has to go out there and skate thirty seconds later.

At the end of the Vancouver series, Calgary wins 4-3 and Shane does too.

"That was unbelievably hot," Ilya says of the series clinching goal, later that night, as he divests Shane of his clothing.

Shane lifts Ilya's shirt over his head, and says, coyly, "Was it?"

"You know it was." Ilya laughs and kisses him, running his hands up and down Shane's back, before dipping lower. "The whole world thought it was hot. They all wanted you. Except no one else—only me—gets to have you."

Shane moans. "Yes, yours. Only yours," he murmurs, between frantic kisses.

"Whole world knows you're mine," Ilya proclaims, needing to say the words out loud. It still seems too impossible to be true.

"*Yes*," Shane breathes out, hands tangled in Ilya's hair.

Ilya pulls back slightly, if only to hear Shane whine. "So, dear winner, where are we booking this dinner?"

"Riviera," Shane gasps, squirming on Ilya's lap. "Already booked. Day before we leave Ottawa for the cottage."

Ilya laughs into Shane's neck, then runs his tongue over Shane's collar bone. "I'm getting that two hundred dollar seafood tower."

"Get whatever you want, you're paying."

*

"We should up the stakes," Shane determines, out of nowhere the day before the Western Conference Finals start.

"Mm?" Ilya is barely listening, he's too busy leaning around the hallway of the arena, listening to a bored Sutton give some reporter a runaround on why he's not playing Ilya and Shane on the same line— "gotta spread you talent around," Sutton's saying, "otherwise they might figure out we've swindled the whole league."

"Ilya."

"Da?" Ilya turns. "Up the stakes. How? Sex thing?"

Shane rolls his eyes. "I was thinking a vacation."

Ilya studies him. It's not like he doesn't know what Shane is doing, booking dinner dates and pitching vacations. He's making up for what he thinks they lost in all those intervening years, when Ilya was hidden away in Ottawa and, then the years after, when Ilya had wanted more and Shane wasn't ready. All of these bets are the things Ilya had asked for, and Shane wasn't

ready to give. He's giving them now, putting tiny promises in their calendar. Each is a declaration of a new beginning. Of a future.

There's a part of Ilya wants to tell Shane it's not necessary, as they have the rest of their lives for this, but the other part of him just *wants*.

Ilya bites. "Where would we go?"

And *when* is a separate question, as they still have the camps. Three weeks of their summers that are usually booked up for The Game Changers; Ilya wonders if Shane's thought about that, and then immediately corrects himself because of course Shane has, and also, there's dozens of counsellors at this point. They could hand the camps off to anyone they wanted. Ilya has to admit that even Hayden would do it.

"I don't know," Shane says, cryptically, so Ilya knows he has some idea. "Winner picks, loser buys?"

"Deal," Ilya agrees, without hesitation.

*

Calgary wins the Western Conference Finals against a speedy Colorado team in five games. It's a fast series and, unlike Round 1 against LA, an incredibly high-scoring one.

Neither Shane nor Ilya leads their team in playoff goals this series; that honour goes to Jarome, the rookie, playing in his first year in the NHL and first playoffs. Ilya is ecstatic for him after every game, and Shane feels himself falling even deeper in love watching Ilya encourage the nineteen year old.

For themselves, Ilya nets four goals in the series, and Shane, despite tweaking his shoulder during the series, ekes out five, bringing their private competition to 2-1, in favour of Shane.

It's Nico though that gets the series-clinching goal, and when the final horn sounds closing out Game 5, Shane is ecstatic. They're going to the Stanley Cup Finals. They did it— *he did it*. After the year he's had, it just feels like pure fucking relief, and a little bit of a giant *fuck you* to all the nay-sayers, to all who questioned him, to anyone that thought he couldn't be this, couldn't be Ilya's and also the best in the world.

In a way, it's also a bit of a *told-you-so* to his former self; a declaration to who Shane once was saying *look, this is possible, we made it possible*.

He can no longer imagine it any other way, watching with pride as Ilya step up as their Captain to accept the Campbell Bowl, as the Western team advancing to the Finals. Ilya looks pleased, but determined, shaking hands with all the officials and then... picking the trophy up.

Shane marvels at that later on their drive home. "You picked up the trophy."

Ilya scoffs. "I also picked up Prince of Wales trophy when I won with Boston. There is no curse."

Shane shakes his head, a part of him believing deeply in the curse. In fate. In something being pre-determined, weaved in thread. Something that calls out, a destined, magnetic pull. A recognition of something, a soul, a journey, that was meant to be yours.

"I never touched it. Not a single time," Shane muses.

Ilya pulls up to a red light, shifts in his seat to look at Shane directly in the eyes. "Любовь моя," he says, very seriously, "We make our own fucking luck."

*

Ilya's eating his breakfast the morning after the Western Conference finals end, when Shane tosses a notepad at him. It smacks him in the chest and Ilya has to scramble to make sure it doesn't fall into his food. He lifts it up and there, scrawled on the note pad, are flight and hotel details for the vacation Shane has won himself.

"Iceland?" Ilya reads.

"Yeah," Shane confirms, shrugging. Then his face morphs and he looks instantly defensive. "Do you not want that?"

Ilya shakes his head. "Net... I was just expecting... villa in Italy. Or south of France. Or something like that."

"We could do that," Shane says, quickly.

Again, Ilya shakes his head. "No, no. This. We can do this. It is what you want."

Shane bites his lip, crosses and then uncrosses his arms across his chest. "I just thought... we have hidden out in my cottage enough. A villa somewhere like that would just be more of the same. So, maybe we could, like... have an adventure..."

He looks immediately embarrassed, his freckles stained beautifully by a blush. Ilya pulse quickens at the suggestion. It excites him. And even if it didn't, he'd be helpless to deny Shane for how hopeful he looks as he explains his idea.

"An adventure," Ilya repeats, smile growing on his face. He's going to book all of these things on Shane's list and more. It's going to cost him a small fortune. He doesn't care in the slightest. "I think I'd like to have an adventure with you."

*

Ilya stares at the eight tickets in his hand.

Eight tickets for Game 1 and Game 2 of the Stanley Cup Finals, Calgary versus Tampa Bay. A rematch, for a series played a few years ago. One Calgary should have won. Tickets for eight people who are coming to both games to watch Ilya and Shane play. *Eight people.*

He's not sure he's *ever* had eight people come watch him play. Not in fifteen years in the NHL.

"You good to go?" Shane asks, jogging up to him from one of the trainer's room.

"Da," Ilya replies, then looks closer at Shane. He's been nursing an aggravation to his old shoulder injury since Game 3 of the last series against Colorado. "How's shoulder?"

"Fine," Shane tells him. His tone is stoic, but his face says something different, so Ilya reaches for his bag, pulling Shane's things over the opposite shoulder to his own. Shane rolls his eyes, but lets Ilya take his belongings. "It'll get us through another four to seven games."

"OK," Ilya agrees, "Better be. I do want Cup."

"Oh, and you think I don't?" Shane retorts, elbowing Ilya gently with his good arm.

Ilya laughs. Of anyone on the team, Shane probably wants the Cup the most, on a season-ending quest to prove something to a bunch of nay-sayers everywhere, as well as the entire Voyageurs franchise.

"You got the tickets?" Shane asks, and Ilya nods, flashing the eight tickets to prove it, before returning them to his pocket. Shane grins. "Great!" A pause and a Shane sighs. "There are going to be so many people in our house."

Everyone should be arriving today and moving into their Bow River House for a few days—Yuna and David, Hayden and Jacki, Rose, Svetlana, and, unwilling to miss out on being part of the group, Jessica and Lindsay. Ilya and Shane will be staying there for one night, before they'll disappear to the inner-city house for the duration of the playoffs, so none of their guests can interfere with Ilya and Shane's—but mostly Shane's— pre-game rituals, and so they're closer to the rink. They'll move back to the Bow River house full time when the season concludes, before heading to Shane's cottage for a few weeks.

Shane might be fretting about the intrusion, but Ilya's not. A deep sense of contentment fills Ilya when he thinks about all those people being in that house. Yuna and David in the in-law suite. Hayden and Jacki in one of the main level bedrooms, and the women all camping out in the bunk beds downstairs. Anya running around bothering all of them. All these people— and Hayden— that Ilya loves around him, supporting him.

"Not sure I've ever had this many people come see me play," Ilya admits, quietly, as they make their way towards his car in the secured back parking lot behind the Saddledome.

"I mean most of them are here for me," Shane teases, opening the passenger door of Ilya's Aston Martin DBX, a car that Shane still complains about for its opulence, but at least it's an SUV.

Ilya glares at him as he slides into the drivers seat and starts the engine. "Four will be wearing Rozanov jerseys."

"That's exactly half."

"Pike isn't going to be wearing Inferno colours," Ilya argues, reversing out of his spot.

"Jacki might make him," Shane says, leg flexing as he pushes an imaginary break when Ilya reverses too fast for his liking. "And maybe I'll tell my dad he can't wear your jersey."

"I'll just give one to your mom," Ilya counters.

Shane laughs. "She wouldn't."

"Don't be so confident, Hollander," Ilya sasses, reluctantly signalling to please Shane, despite nobody being behind him as he pulls out of the lot and turns onto Olympic Way. "Your mother loves me."

Shane stretches his good arm out to rest against the back of Ilya's seat as he pulls onto 11th Ave to cut across downtown and head out of the city. "You are her favourite son," Shane murmurs, fingers trailing gently across Ilya's neck.

When Game 1 of the Stanley Cup finals does roll around, it is 4-4, with Hayden and Jacki donning *Hollander* tee-shirts, David staunchly refusing to abandon his *Rozanov* jersey, and Yuna, Rose, Svetlana, Jessica and Lindsay falling to pre-determined allegiances.

Ilya's okay with that.

*

Shane's parents are the first to arrive and Shane watches Ilya literally bounce around the house showing Yuna and David everything. His parents appropriately *ooh* and *ahh* at the correct points and Ilya's smile grows tenfold as the tour goes on. David is just as excited about the custom puzzle table as Ilya is, and the tour almost stops completely so the two men can get to work on some 50,000 piece puzzle Ilya found, before Yuna asks to see their room.

Shane rolls his eyes. "Oh, it's not just a room, mom."

Yuna gives him a quizzical look, but Shane just shakes his head and gestures for her to follow Ilya, who is already bounding up the stairs. It's only when he gets to the second floor that he freezes and grabs Shane's arm, hissing into his ear, "Towels, I forgot..."

"Okay, okay," Shane murmurs, and Ilya just gives him a panicked look. Shane chuckles softly and kisses Ilya's cheek. "I'll go get them." Ilya nods sharply, but doesn't look even a little bit

calmer. "They'll love it. Just chill a little, okay?"

And then he departs, leaving Ilya to show his parents around the ridiculously beautiful suite he's built them. Shane'll be lucky if they don't move in full time.

"You have everything you need?" Ilya is asking Yuna as Shane returns. "You like?"

Yuna laughs, brightly. Shane leans against the wall, hugging the towels he went to fetch to his chest and hiding from view as he listens to Ilya and his parents talk.

"It's lovely, Ilya," Yuna tells him.

"We can change things," Ilya says, quickly. There's a note of anxiety in his voice, and Shane hides a small smile in the towels. "Paint colour— I just do what designer says, we can change."

"Ilya," Yuna laughs, and Shane hears her grab Ilya's hand, who had been fumbling in his pocket for his phone, likely pulling out pictures of paint swatches. Shane's seen them half a dozen times in the lead up to this visit. "The colour is beautiful."

"Really?"

"Yes, Ilya," David chimes in. His voice is a bit further away. Shane thinks he's coming out of ensuite, tucked at the back of the room. "Are these floors heated?"

"Yes!" Ilya replies, "You like? There is button to turn off—"

"Ilya," Yuna stresses.

"Kitchen is small, yes, but—"

"Relax, son, we like it," David cuts in.

"You do?" Ilya sounds so unsure, and Shane aches with it.

"Yes," Yuna repeats and Shane recognizes the smile in her voice. He's having a difficult time suppressing his own. "Of course."

Even from where Shane is standing, he hears Ilya audibly exhale. He hadn't realize how nervous Ilya had been about Shane's parents seeing this place he's built, clearly with them all in mind. It makes Shane's heart do something twisty.

"I just want you to be comfortable," Ilya says, "I want it to feel like yours... Not like guests..."

"Ilya," David says, and Ilya stops speaking immediately.

"We love it," Yuna tells him. "The suite, the house... it's all beautiful."

"OK." Ilya lets out a deep breath. "Because you're Shane's family... and I love your son... so much... and I want him to like it here, and so, I want you to too..."

"We do," David confirms, and whatever Yuna says in reply is muffled by her presumably hugging Ilya.

"OK, because I do love him, very much," Ilya says, softly, and Shane's eyes well with tears, enough that he wipes the corner of his left eye with the towel he has just brought up.

"Oh, sweetheart," Yuna murmurs, just barely audible to Shane's ear, "We have always known that."

*

Dinner is boisterous.

Ilya fucking loves it.

There is so much food, so many people, so many voices talking over one another, so many hands everywhere. Reaching over one another and calling for items that are too far to be passed over. Ilya has Shane to his right, David and Yuna on the other side of him, and down the table stretches everyone else: Jessica and Lindsay, Hayden and Jacki, Rose, Svetlana, Cliff, Nico and Frida, and, all the way down at the other end, Frank and Vanessa, who round out their group.

Including himself, *fifteen* people surrounding this incredible large table that he'd questioned himself about when he bought, wondering how the hell he'd ever fill it. And yet... here he is. Surrounded by utter chaos.

And chaos it is. At one point, Jessica reaches too far over Hayden, knocking a pitcher of water over. The liquid cascades down the table, running towards the edge and tipping into Yuna's lap.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry," Jessica gasps. Immediately, both her and Lindsay reaching to start cleaning up.

Yuna slides her chair back, grabbing a napkin and dabbing herself. "It's just water, honey."

Jessica laughs awkwardly, but Yuna just smiles and laughs herself, so Ilya laughs too, not awkwardly in the slightest, just incredibly amused and happy. At the same time, Shane passes Jessica and Yuna dish towels, and reaches across the table to help mop up the mess. Shane

stares on a bit stoically, lip between his teeth, until Ilya pulls him back into his chair and whispers into his ear, "Ничего страшного."

It's nothing to worry about, Ilya conveys to Shane with his words and a brief caress of his thumb over Shane's cheek. Shane glances at him, and relaxes slightly at the words, and then more when Ilya places his arm over the edge of Shane's chair, hand resting on Shane's shoulder blade.

"So, Tampa in six, right?" baits Hayden to break the moment, and the entire table jeers. Ilya whips a dinner roll at Hayden's head, narrowly missing. It's followed up one that comes from Shane's hand, which does hit Hayden squarely in the forehead.

"Thank god we traded for someone who can aim," Frank quips, and everyone, including Shane, laughs.

Ilya can't stop smiling, looking around at all these people, loud and happy. *His people*. He's in heaven.

*

After dinner, when everyone has finished eating and Ilya's on his eighth explanation of some details of the house, this time showing Rose the cinema space he's built for himself and Jessica, Shane follows Svetlana outside.

"I told Ilya once that I hoped Jane knew how lucky he was," Svetlana says, apropos of nothing, when Shane comes up to lean against the railing next to her. Mount Yamnuska looms before them, partially shadowed in the early evening light.

Shane takes a deep breath, sighs, and admits, "He didn't, I don't think." He pauses, puts all the meaning he can into it when he adds: "But he does now."

"OK," Svetlana says, voice a bit thick. "Because, our Ilya, is very special."

"I know."

Because he *does*. He didn't see it before, how much their situation was hurting Ilya. How untenable it was for him. How Ilya both needed and deserved more— how *Shane* himself needed and deserved more, even if he was denying it. He lied to himself for so many years. But it's different now. So much is. He finally knows what he wants and he's willing to grasp it. To hold onto it.

He's not a different person, he's just an unburdened one. He loves Ilya. He wants everyone to know it.

Svetlana looks at him, her face serious. "He's the most important person to me in the whole world."

"Same," Shane says, so very honestly. "Svetlana, I love him. I always have. I'll spend the rest of my life making up for the past few years... I want to spend my life with him. To marry him." Shane pulls his eyes up to look at her directly. "I mean, I'd like to."

Svetlana arches a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Are you asking my permission?"

Shane huffs out a laugh. "No. I mean... well." Shane swallows hard. "Maybe?"

"Maybe he says." But the slight twist of her lips betrays her amusement.

"I guess," Shane stutters, "I guess maybe I am."

"He deserves the best," Svetlana warns.

"I know," Shane says. He laughs, a bit wetly. "I'll give him whatever he wants."

Svetlana raises a hand to her face, wiping it over her eye. "идиот. Finally." Shane finds himself smiling, even as she lets out a breath of exasperation before stepping in to hug him. "OK. You can—you must marry him."

Shane hugs her back. "I want to."

She's nodding into his shoulder. There's a wet spot on his shirt. "Maybe win some hockey games first though?"

Shane breathes out another laugh and swipes at his own cheek to brush away some escaping tears. He squeezes her once more and then starts to release her, just as the patio door slides open.

"What is going on out here?" Ilya asks, stepping out onto the patio with Rose and Hayden behind him. "Sveta, он мой."

Svetlana touches Shane's cheek. There's tears in her eyes. "Of course, darling." She laughs, then, she baits Ilya: "We are just talking about how Shane here thinks he'll definitely outscore you this series."

Ilya stares at them both, mouth slanting into an annoyed frown. Shane wants to laugh, because Ilya doesn't even know what Shane wants to bet this time. He's going to want to win, but even without this knowledge, Ilya's competitive streak comes out.

"Like fucking hell he will."

*

"Shane, you dated *Rose Landry*?" Jessica squeals, later that night, the sun just a sliver in the sky. She slaps her hand against Lindsay's knee.

The eight of them are gathered around the fire pit in the back yard, Nico and Frank having departed, along with their wives, and Shane's parents having retired to their own suite, leaving the younger folk, as his dad had termed it, on their own. Aside from Shane, everyone has a beer clutched in their hands— or in Svetlana's case, vodka— and Shane keeps looking at all their faces through the flames, sat on a bench with Ilya on one side and Rose on the other. They're all wrapped in blankets and the conversation is light-hearted, and every time Ilya laughs, Shane thinks to himself *how did I deprive him of all of this for so long? He's so beautiful like this; laughing, happy, arms wrapped around me, and surrounded by all these people who love him.*

He'd hate himself for how long it took, but it doesn't seem worth it, to pull back from his own happiness. He'll just let himself enjoy being here, now, in this moment they've finally reached.

Even if the conversation has devolved into whatever this is.

"He did," Rose laughs, at the same time Shane mutters, "Briefly."

The fire flickers over Ilya's profile, as Ilya grumbles, "Not *that* briefly."

Jessica shakes her head in amusement, smiling down at her beer. "Incredible."

"Yup." Hayden sighs, lifting his hands, beer in one, out to the sides. Next to him, Jacki rolls her eyes. "Shane had what many men have dreamed about—"

"—And women," Lindsay interjects, and Rose blushes.

Hayden points to Lindsay with his non-beer hand. Nods his agreement with wide eyes. "And women. And it was wasted on him."

"Hayden," Shane groans, tucking his face into Ilya's shoulder, who chuckles and wraps his arm tighter around Shane's shoulders.

"Just telling the truth, buddy," Hayden chirps, and Cliff claps thrice in agreement.

Rose takes pity on him. "Shane was a lovely boyfriend," she tells everyone, reaching over to squeeze his knee. "We just weren't compatible. I even tried to set him up with my dear friend Miles after—"

"Who the fuck is Miles?" Ilya snaps and Shane just pats him, placatingly.

"—that's how lovely he was," Rose finishes. "But he and I didn't fit."

"The sex was bad, wasn't it," Jessica concludes, after a moments pause, the fire crackling between them. She makes a giant show of looking sadly at Rose.

"*Jess*," Lindsay scolds, when Rose looks startled, before starting to giggle. Shane buries his head further into Ilya's shoulder to hide himself from view, as Hayden, Cliff and Svetlana burst out laughing.

"I'm just asking!" Jessica protests, throwing her hands up innocently.

"It probably was," Hayden laughs, and Jacki tries to hush him. "Such opportunity, wasted."

"I'm *gay*," Shane protests, aiming for irritated but the words come soft, easy. Simple. Not even a slight uptick of his pulse. He presses a smile into Ilya's shirt.

"We know," Jacki and Lindsay chorus.

"You're a terrible friend, Hayden," Shane continues, and Hayden just shrugs and grins at him.

"Let's just say I wasn't what Shane wanted," Rose says, ever polite, and some of the group chuckles.

Rose just looks over at Shane, shaking her head and pursing her lips in amused, soft smile. Shane reaches for her and Rose places her palm in his hand. She's beautiful in the light of the fire, and Shane is so lucky to have her. She's been his rock throughout all of this; allowing him to come out, loving him anyway, supporting him through the first year of Ilya and their separation, and everything in between.

"I wasn't what Ilya wanted either," Svetlana pipes up, from Ilya's other side, bundled in a blanket Ilya fetched her. She laughs. "Although the sex was never bad."

"Sveta." Ilya says her name like a swear word, and then rattles off a bunch of quick Russian phrases that Shane doesn't catch, and nobody else understands.

Shane tries not to feed the flicker of jealousy in his stomach at the reminder of their history, resting easy in the fact that Ilya's hold on him doesn't slacken, and the fact that Shane knows where Svetlana stands on them. She knows he's Ilya's; and Svetlana is too, just in a different way. But it's Shane slotted into Ilya's side firmly. His place cemented, chosen.

"Da! Yes, yes," Svetlana is laughing, "Shane *obviously* has something you want more—"

"*Sveta*," Ilya warns again.

Svetlana rolls her eyes, and snipes back in more quick Russian that Shane doesn't understand except for the words *calm* and *darling*. When she turns back to the group she continues in English. "I was just going to say, I think from the moment Ilya here met Shane"—she pushes Ilya lightly on the shoulder—"there hasn't been room for anyone else."

Shane smiles at that, feeling Ilya huff under him in a small protest, albeit a weak one.

"Probably true for Shane too," Hayden adds, like the traitor he is. "He was obsessed with *Lily*."

"Lily," Jessica repeats, giggling. Lindsay loops an arm around her to still her. "And what was Shane?"

"Jane," Svetlana volunteers.

Lindsay laughs. "Subtle."

"Ilya was obsessed with Jane too," Cliff chips in, helpfully and Ilya flips him off. "Texts always made him blush."

Ilya, predictably, is outraged. "*I do not do this* blushing thing, Marlow!"

Even though he does, and Shane can vouch for it, how beautifully he flushes, all the way down his chest. He smiles, but doesn't volunteer the information. Some things are just for him.

Jacki laughs again, taking a sip of her drink, then adds, "Shane did turn down every single friend I sent his way. Hayden had a list."

Hayden nods sagely, like he had shouldered a great burden. "I did."

"Amazing," Jessica surmises.

Hayden sips his beer and then shrugs. "In hindsight, I was an idiot—"

"Hindsight?" Ilya chirps, and Shane elbows his boyfriend gently in the side.

Hayden pauses to glare briefly at Ilya, but it's half-hearted and Ilya just laughs. Shane closes his eyes, relaxing into Ilya's hold.

"Shane was always sneaking off in Boston. And then in Ottawa..." Hayden sounds exasperated, but there's an undercurrent of fondness there. "Not sure how we didn't see it."

Cliff lets out a bold laugh. "Trust me, dude, I know how you feel." He shakes his head and snaps his fingers once, sharply. "When Shane showed up at the Cup party last year, a whole lot of things snapped into place."

"Now it makes more sense why Shane tried to murder me," Jessica comments.

Shane's eyes fly open. "What?"

"Two years ago, at the NHL awards." Jessica leans forward, her beer sloshing over the rim of her cup as she does. "You tried to kill me," she raises her other hand to her temple, adding, "With your mind."

"I did not!" Shane protests, to a chorus of laughter. Even Ilya laughs, rumbling beneath him.

"I knew you were in love with him immediately," Jessica adds.

"You did not," Shane repeats, because it can't have been this obvious. Not a chance. So many years of hiding, of pretending, of not letting his love show, there's no way this woman found him out in one evening.

"I did!" Jessica insists.

Ilya laughs. He squeezes Shane. "She did actually."

"And I didn't even know who you were," Jessica continues.

"The fact you didn't know who *Shane Hollander* was," Cliff mutters, shaking his head.

"I— I..." Shane stutters over top of Cliff's comment. "I thought you two were together!"

"Oh, buddy," Hayden laments, at the same time Jacki and Lindsay let out a more supportive, "Oh no."

"So angry," Jessica says, drawing two fingers down in front of her face and twisting her expression into something Shane thinks is supposed to imitate his own. Svetlana laughs so hard she spits out vodka. "So jealous."

Shane tilts his head to look at Ilya. Finds himself admitting, "Yes. I was."

Ilya just laughs and pulls Shane against his chest. Shane can't stop thinking about how beautiful he is here, in the glow of the fire. And he is Shane's. He always has been, in a way, since they were nineteen and idiots, and let fate escalate.

"It's so obvious now, it's hard to believe we all missed it," Hayden chuckles, sipping his beer and looping an arm around Jacki. He kisses the top of her head.

Rose smiles gently into the fire. "I mean, if you think carefully, the truth's probably always been there, if you wanted to see it."

*

Later that night, with everyone now asleep in their house, Shane curls into Ilya's body in the massive bed, most of it empty for how closely intertwined they are, and murmurs, "Happy?"

Ilya nods into Shane's hair. "Is probably best day of life."

"Better than winning the Cup?"

Ilya hums thoughtfully. "Win me this one. I need reminder so I can compare."

*

"So, what are we betting this time?" Ilya asks the next day, standing in the primary bedroom of the inner-city house, having returned there mid-afternoon. The first game is tomorrow, and Shane's determined they both get an undisturbed night of rest. Ilya's half convinced Shane's not even going to sleep in the same room as him.

Absurdly, Shane blushes.

"Um," Shane starts, and then goes to one of the bedside tables and pulls out another piece of paper and pushes it into Ilya's chest.

Ilya looks down. It's a list. A list of—

"Sex things." A slow smile grows on Ilya's face.

Shane can't look at him. He straightens the corner of the already made bed, as he mutters, "List of things... I would be open to trying..."

"Good bet," Ilya determines. More than half of these things require purchases. Some are underlined. Others have notes next to them. From this Ilya determines he's going to be a winner either way. Ilya and the paper take a few steps across the room, grabbing Shane and pushing the other man on the bed. Ilya crawls over him, bracketing Shane's head with his forearms, paper still grasped in hand. "Very good bet."

Shane blinks up at him, already doe-eyed and hazy. "Winner picks?"

Ilya agrees with a kiss.

*

"Shallow men believe in luck," Sutton says, pacing in the locker room a few minutes before Game 1 of the Stanley Cup Finals. "I don't believe in pure luck. Strong men believe in cause and effect—they see the opportunity around them, and they seize it." He pauses. "Let's seize this, boys."

And they do.

*

It's the Stanley Cup finals and it's pressure, but it's also *fun*. Skating hard, battling in the corners, fighting to put pucks in the net.

It's a hard fought series: every goal and every game is a battle. But there's something in the air that feels like a promise, like something yet to be written, but so close to being defined.

Every night is its own war. One game goes to overtime after three straight penalty kills that leave their legs burning and their lungs raw; Ilya ends it by tipping a rebound he barely sees through traffic. Another swings on a single mistake, a turnover at the blue line causing a breakaway the other way, which forces the Inferno to have to try and claw their way back into it, and failing to.

Each game is a frenzy. There are heavy hits that rattle the glass and send the crowd into delirium. There's a shift where Shane is hemmed in for nearly three minutes, stuck defending, diving to block shots and trusting that their goalie will stand tall behind them. The crowd is deafeningly loud at every game. At home, the crowd is the seventh player burning bright. On the road, the boos rain down every time the Inferno touch the puck.

Ilya and Shane trade goals like it's a private conversation. Shane wires one short side in Game 2; Ilya answers with greasy net-front tap-in during Game 3. As the series goes on, and late in the games, Sutton shortens their bench and Ilya finds himself out there on Shane's wing and he's not sure he's ever enjoyed his job— or his life— more. On one of these shifts, Shane tips in Ilya's shot from the point and they celebrate chest to chest, helmet to helmet, completely breathless.

In Game 5, Shane roofs one on the power play with Ilya on the bench, taking the lead in their private bet. He skates past the bench pointing at Ilya, *your turn*, the gesture says. The taunt takes Ilya's breath away, and the competition drives him to make a run on the breakaway, pushing past two defenders just to get the shot off right as he falls. It goes in. He's unbearably smug that evening, kissing Shane and murmuring his own praises in Shane's ear, *you will be so lucky to propose to such an amazing hockey player*.

At the end of Game 6, the series is tied and heading home to Calgary, and it's 4-4 in their own personal scoring race.

Ilya can taste it. Victory and the rest of his life, it's waiting for him.

*

Game 7. Stanley Cup Finals.

On home ice.

This is the game that every player dreams about.

Shane dreamed about it every night for years as a kid, tucked into his bed with his parents in the other room. He pretended to be here when he was starting out in Timbits Hockey, imagined it all the way through his minor league career and in every game on his road to the NHL.

He's visualized it his entire life.

Contemplated the tension, the intensity. Considered how he'd lock in, how he'd focus, how he'd shut everything else out and not be afraid of the moment. He'd traced out the plays, practiced his shot, his passes. He'd conceived of the sounds— the crowd, the horn, bodies crashing against the boards, the blades on the ice. The beautiful sound of the puck hitting the back of the net. He'd envisioned lifting that trophy above his head, after seven long games of hard, painful, work. He's thought about this every waking moment, every dreaming moment, every practice, every game, every *everything*.

Because even though he's won Cups before, never like this: this is Game 7.

This is the moment.

It's what he's dreamed about his whole life.

It's different, than Shane imagined.

The jerseys red, rather than blue. The crowd is chanting a different name, although it's still deafening. The logo in the middle of the ice is a flame, rather than the stylized M that he used to picture. His parents are somewhere in this rink, although one of them is not wearing his name on their back. He's not wearing the Captain's patch on his chest.

The player sitting on the bench next to him, half leaning over the boards in anticipation of the next line change, is his *boyfriend*.

So, yes— it looks a bit different.

Although Shane figures everything in his life looks a bit different than he dreamed, in a way. Because dreams change; one just needs the courage to let them.

In the end, things are similar too. Still the same sounds— the crowd, the horn, the blades on the ice. Still the same feelings— grit, determination, and a fierce desire to win. Still this low hum of need in his stomach, a need to bring it home. Still the same, intense desire to *win*.

He wants to win the Stanley Cup, just as badly as he ever has.

You're meant to be here, says an old hockey quote, said after one of those games that people will remember for a century. Fate threads a strange needle: a draft day, a commercial, an all star game, followed by fifteen years of secrets and much work and a kiss on the ice that makes one believe in possibilities, all in pursuit of a love so magnetic, so courageous, that it persists, despite everything.

It's all led to this.

"Rozanov, Hollander," Sutton calls, from behind him. "Let's go."

The two of them push off the bench, throwing a leg over the boards. Despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins, Shane spares a brief second to glance at Ilya, who meets his gaze head on.

Ilya winks at him.

And then they're over the boards and on the ice, and the puck is on Shane's stick, and he feels deliriously light.

And they're both flying.

*

Here is the world.

Beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Don't be afraid.

— *Frederick Buechner*

*

But that night as I drove back from Montreal, I at least discovered this: there is no simple explanation for anything important that any of us do, and that the human tragedy, or the human irony, consists in the necessity of living with the consequences of actions performed under the pressure of compulsions so obscure we do not and cannot understand them.

— *Hugh MacLennan, The Watch That Ends the Night*

(Inspiration for [Courage by the Tragically Hip](#))

*

Стали они жить-поживать, да добра наживать

— *Russian Fairy Tale Ending*

(They began to live, and live well).

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for reading and thanks for coming on this journey with me! Comments and kudos are appreciated, but truly, if you enjoyed this at all, I'd love to know why and what stuck out to you, so please leave me a comment! I do plan on making the time to reply to every one on this last chapter.

It has been fun to write this; so thank you everyone! I've appreciated every kudos, every kind comment, every subscription, and every bookmark.

► Optional Drop-Down Authors Rant/Commentary on the Fic & Hockey

End Notes

I'm not reliable on this platform, but come find me at [@veilofimagination](#)

Works inspired by this one

[The Wrong Kind of War](#) by [Rebo758](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!