close only counts when it's me and you

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by Anonymous

Summary

Ilya Rozanov thinks it's probably best to decline the invitation to the 2017 All-Star Game. It's not swaggering, knothead alpha male bullshit; it's a survival strategy. He doesn't think it'll end well for anyone if he's forced into playing an instinct-driven, blood-pumping sport like ice hockey with Shane Hollander right now, not when Hollander is probably going to bring his new girlfriend to Tampa for the weekend.

But it's Hollander. It's Shane. So of course Ilya doesn't decline the stupid invitation. And of course the game goes sideways.

That doesn't mean it doesn't end well.

Notes

posting anon because my oh my do i feel unqualified for this fic! i was just rewatching the scene where ilya kisses shane's helmet in the all-star game and i was like. 'ok so what would happen if one of the opposing players jokingly tackled shane in that moment. do we think ilya would handle that well.' and then i was like 'yeah probably if it was joking enough, because he's a reasonable guy and the all-star games are a bit unserious by nature.' and then i was like 'but do you think alpha ilya whose instincts keep telling him he's losing the man he loves and everything outside of the two of them is a threat would handle that well' and i was like. 'oh. well no. definitely not'

so that's the fic
(this chapter is ilya and the next chapter is shane's pov and i'm debating on a third chapter back to ilya for the close up but i haven't decided which way yet!)

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Ice hockey in Florida shouldn't be called *ice hockey* at all, Ilya has always said so—pointedly and especially loudly when on the ice with the Tampa Storms or the Florida Privateers. It is unnatural, really, to leave an arena after an hour on the ice only for the outside air to be sticky with heat and moisture instead of crisp with snow. Florida hockey does not have a spine. It is man-made and unnatural, like the new meats they are growing in labs these days for the vegans or the old meats they have been serving at baseball stadiums for who knows how long.

(Hollander likes to point out that the ice on the arenas in Boston and Montreal are just as man-made. A few years ago, while they were still tied together in bed and lying on their sides, he'd grabbed his phone from the bedside table and pulled up a video of a construction crew melting down a rink's ice to install a basketball court underneath it at the end of the regular season.

Ilya told him that if he wanted his knot to go down faster, he could have just kicked him in the balls instead.)

Ice hockey in Florida is, at its heart, a parody of the sport. A shallow imitation without a soul.

This, of course, makes it the perfect location for the All-Star Game, Ilya will give the organizers that much. They have found the perfect soulless place for their favorite little ego entertainment farce, and it is Tampa Bay in January.

He has more than half a mind to not go when he first receives the invitation in December. It'll probably be considered rude to pass on the invitation. People will talk about it, almost certainly. They'll say he is too egotistical, too selfish, too much of a knothead alpha for even a friendly little competition. It would be not good, but this is what good agents are hired to handle, and he pays his agent very well.

And so what if he does not care to fly to stupid Florida in the middle of January for a stupid little event? He has been asked to go to these Games since his rookie year. Another rookie can take his place. He will not be missed. His absence will not be noticed.

Not when Shane Hollander has a girlfriend.

A famous, movie star actress girlfriend.

A beautiful beta of a girlfriend who fits herself into his arms like she belongs there, who rubbed her scent all over Hollander in a some dark and dingy Montreal club while he just stood there and *let her,* who lives in the same city as Hollander and probably wakes up in his nest every other morning at least, whose fans have taken to calling the pair of them *Hollandry* which is maybe the stupidest almost-English word Ilya has ever heard. It sounds like an STD.

It sounds like something Ilya would absolutely hate to catch sight of and so, he is very certain he is going to draft an email to his agent to request that they reject the All-Star invitation.

But then, as if the hockey gods have it out for him personally, the MLH's official Instagram page releases the All-Star lineup a few days earlier than they usually do.

And they want him to play on the same team as Shane Hollander. They want Shane Hollander to be his captain. They will probably want Shane Hollander to be his line-mate, which means they will probably want him to play right wing. Which means they will probably want Shane Hollander to be his centre and his line-mate, and it's so close to everything Ilya wants that he can feel his teeth ache in his gums just thinking about it.

So he should probably say no, still, despite the fact that the rejection will be even harder for Agent Patrik to handle diplomatically, and it will look even worse. It will look like Ilya Rozanov is a hot-headed, petty, territorial alpha who cannot even stomach playing alongside his alpha rival for one friendly game.

And maybe he is a hot-headed, petty, territorial alpha, but it is not for any of those reasons people will think. But then they think Shane Hollander is an alpha, and Shane Hollander has the sweetest omega scent Ilya has ever had the pleasure of smelling, like crystallized ginger and cloves. And Shane Hollander makes the prettiest sorts of whimpers and moans when Ilya puts him facedown on a hotel bed and drinks up the slick leaking from his red little hole. And Shane Hollander wears the most desperate, broken-hearted expression when Ilya pretends and teases that he has decided not to give him his knot, as if Ilya has ever once been able to resist the temptation to try his damnedest to breed Hollander full of his pups.

And so the people who will talk if Ilya turns down the All-Star Game, they are not so smart. And Ilya will pay his agent Patrik a very big New Year's bonus for the headache it will cause him. And Ilya will not go to stupid Tampa in stupid Florida because he knows himself well enough to know that he really is a bit of a hot-headed, petty, territorial alpha, so he doesn't know if he can be trusted with seeing Rose Landry around Shane Hollander.

Once was bad enough. Poking a bear once is something only idiots do. No one's ever left alive to try it a second time

And yet.

And yet.

On January 1st, skull pounding and cheek pressed against the cool marble tile of his bathroom floor, he reaches for his phone and pulls up his email. His house smells awful. He doesn't think he'd feel quite as sick if it weren't for the fact that the smell in his house is making his body rebel against him. Too many different scents; too many omegas. None of them the right one.

He'd thrown a party. A New Year's Eve celebration that had included anyone with even a passing involvement with the Boston Raiders franchise. It had been good to ring in 2017 with his teammates and their families and about half of Boston. It was supposed to make him feel —good. Less—not good.

Now it's just making him sick, and that's terrible. That's the sort of worrying that he doesn't have the brainpower for, because why does sleeping with some stranger omega make his insides want to fuck right out of his body? It's troubling. It's definitely a sign that the last thing he needs to do is put himself in a situation where he sees Shane Hollander sooner than he has to.

Because this is Hollander's fault. It is Hollander's fault he will have to get new bedding just because he can't stand the smell of daisies and vanilla on it. It is Hollander's fault he will have to ask the professional cleaners to stop at his house tomorrow to take care of the rest of the mess. It is Hollander's fault that his second-string goalie introduced him to his sister named Jane and Ilya had to get drunk on top-shelf vodka just to wash the taste of that name from his mouth.

It comes back to Hollander, again and again and again and always.

Patrik, he types. Shaky, only two fingers. Phone held close to his eyes and the phone's auto-correct pulling more than its fair share of the weight here.

I will be at the All-Star game in two weeks. I am on Shane Hollander's line, yes. Tell the organizers I play right wing for Hollander. Can arrive early for promo shots with Hollander if they want.

Happy 2017.

Ilya Rozanov

He reads over the blurry text with half his face smushed against the tile. He deletes the last sentence, about the promo shots, and then he sends the email before he can think twice. It would be a shitty, embarrassing thing to sound too desperate, and he already knows that Hollander has a game against Texas two nights before the All-Star weekend kicks off. There's a very low likelihood of him being able or willing to fly out early when he has an equally low opinion about the All-Star games as Ilya does.

Maybe he'd do it for Rose Landry. But Ilya is not Rose Landry. He is not a beautiful beta actress who kisses Hollander on the cheek in public and takes him onto her movie set and posts pictures of him napping on the couch in her very important movie star trailer to Instagram.

He is not Rose Landry who probably hooks her ankles behind Shane's waist as he fucks her sweetly and runs her hands through his hair without tugging on the ends of it because Shane says he doesn't like it even though he always goes whiny and desperate for it when Ilya's got him braced up on his hands and knees—

But Ilya is not Rose Landry.

Ilya doesn't even know if he's *Lily* anymore.

It's been months since Boston. October November, December. Now it's January 1st, and Ilya is a stupid idiot who is going to poke the bear again, even though the last time left him cold

and alone and shivering in his empty house in the middle of a warm October with a mess of tuna melt ingredients still sitting out on the counter in his kitchen, all because he cannot stomach the idea of January going by without being close enough to Shane Hollander to count his freckles.

By his ear, his phone buzzes.

He groans, long and loud and unlocks the screen to peer at the notification. Next time, he thinks, he'd rather have Meuller's sister Jane just kill him straight. Whatever he's done to himself is much, much worse than dying.

Hello, his agent has written.

I am currently out of the office and will return January 4, 8:00am. Thank you for your message. If you are a current client and need to reach me before then, please find my emergency contact number below.

Best,

Patrik Karington

Ilya squints at the message. He has to read it five times in a row for all the stupid English characters to line up in an order that makes sense. He starts to read it again, debating on whether making sure that he and Hollander play on the same line together qualifies as an emergency worth interrupting a man's holiday time—he's leaning towards *yes*—when his phone buzzes again.

A notification banner from Google swoops down over the top half of his screen, and immediately all thoughts regarding Patrik Karington's holiday fly out of his head.

The Google algorithm knows how interested Ilya Rozanov has been in the developing relationship between Montreal Metros' Captain Shane Hollander and actress Rose Landry. The app thinks he would enjoy reading this breaking news story from Barstool Sports Montreal.

Promising Beginnings: *Shane Hollander Steps Out Wearing New Bracelet After New Year's Eve Night Spent With Girlfriend Rose Landry.*

> *Is Landry, Beta, following the Beta tradition of giving her intended mate a promise bracelet before the wedding? We have thoughts.*

Ilya's gums itch with the need to bite. To tear. Into anything. Something. Someone. To hurt. To mark.

But all the guests left ages ago, and no one he cares about has stepped foot in his house since October, and Shane Hollander is in love with someone else who isn't him. So Ilya's alpha can scratch and bay and throw itself against the walls of his chest and it won't make any difference at all. The only person left wounded and remembering will be Ilya.

His phone buzzes again. A masochist or maybe just a man in desperate search for a lifeboat of any kind, Ilya looks at the unlocked screen.

Dear Mr. Rozanov, Agent Patrik has typed.

Ignore the OOO message, I monitor my inbox on holiday for my hockey stars (don't tell my mate!). I know you all never stop truly take a holiday away from the game. I have just forwarded your request to Linda Owens in the ASG operational department. Should be no problem at all on our end, so consider it done.

Happy New Year,

Patrik Karington

Consider it done. Ilya thinks—maybe, probably—it is time that he does that. Even if it means ripping out the parts of himself that have convinced themselves that they belong in Hollander's care. Even if his stupid heart still perks up at the idea of playing on the same team as Hollander. Even if he fucked his goalie's sister last night just because her name made his breath speed up and his blood sing on pure learned instinct.

He will buy a new house if he has to, just to forget the way Shane Hollander nuzzled into his hand when he stroked his cheek on the couch in the living room. He will fly back to Russia in the summer and this time when the plane lands, it will feel like home again, and he will not think about stupid Hollander in his empty apartment in Montreal and his stupid promise bracelet and his stupid freckles.

All one hundred and seventeen of them.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> the beginning part of shane and ilya's conversation was lifted from the transcription of episode 5! but they deviate pretty quickly because this ilya has no patience for small talk and diversion at the moment

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane thinks maybe he's going to go crazy. It's like he can feel his blood rushing through his veins and even his softest shirts and brand new linen jacket feel rough against his skin. He'd had to force himself to apply the patch to neutralize his scent this morning, stomach rebelling at the feeling of it sticking to the thin skin of his scent gland on his neck. And by the time he made it to his hotel room in Tampa, he'd already needed to change it.

The hypersensitivity has only gotten worse since his arrival, and there's no use pretending that he doesn't know why. His omega knows that Ilya Rozanov is closeby, and it's been throwing a fit ever since the plane touched down. Before that, even. Shane's been off and out of it since the beginning of fucking January, when the All-Star organizers confirmed the line ups for the game and his name was sat nestled right above Ilya Rozanov's, as if it belonged there.

And now—to make matters worse—Shane can't even fucking find him. He isn't at the pool, or at the bar next to the pool. He isn't on the beach in front of the hotel, though Shane has to pause and make polite small talk with a few of the other team's players who are setting up a volleyball game in the bright afternoon sun. He isn't in the hotel lobby or in the restaurant that connects to it, and Shane's seriously weighing the benefits of asking the staff if he could get Ilya Rozanov's room number—hockey business, *Captain* business, you understand—when his phone buzzes with a message.

For a single, stupid moment, Shane's heart leaps up into his throat. They haven't texted in months, Ilya's number and Lily's contact a heavy weight on Shane's phone and in his mind. Shane has known instinctively that Ilya won't contact him first, not after Shane—made a mess of everything. Blurred all the lines they had and made it Ilya's mess to clean up.

He thought, *maybe,* when the news about Rose and Shane first started circulating the Internet. It was perfect chirp materia, if Ilya saw it; he heard enough from his team to know what to expect from Rozanov. But his phone stayed quiet. No *how did a boring someone like you land a woman like that?* No *da, yes, proud of you for finding a girl like I said. Did not expect movie star though.* No *Landry was a surprise, omega we can talk about it next game, yes?*

Which—he hadn't even really wanted, to be clear. He'd wanted to focus on making this thing work with Rose. Wanted to appreciate the sight of her at his games and in his number.

Wanted to hold her hand in public and let her kiss his cheek and find it easy and natural and not like he was being hollowed out with a dull pocket knife.

But.

She'd never smelled right, and even though she'd offered to let him scent her, he'd never been able to. When she'd met him at that restaurant in Old Montreal and told him gently that she thought she *maybe wasn't doing it for him,* he hadn't even been surprised. It was just something else he'd ruined in the last couple of months.

Too needy for the fucker his body has decided is his alpha; too distant for the beta he'd tried so hard to want.

The text on his phone isn't from Lily, and Shane can feel his chest tightening, his vision blurring which is just such a stupid overreaction that he really doesn't know how he's planning to make it through this game and everything else that's going to come after.

Tony Glibbon has added you to ***East Coast Beast Coast.***

> *I propose some mandatory team bonding: everyone meet at the bar next to the hotel after you've arrived and checked in! It's Florida themed!*

Shane stares at the notification, weighing his options. As much as he wants to be a good team captain and join in on the team bonding, he wants—he needs to find Rozanov first. He can't imagine what'll happen if he waits until tonight, when they're surrounded by all of their teammates and their families before he sees him again.

He needs to—apologize. He'd made it weird, in Boston. He couldn't keep himself straight, his omega in check, and he'd made it *weird.* He'd run out of Rozanov's house and the city like he was under attack, and that was—weird. He's sorry about it and he needs to tell Rozanov that, in private. He needs to reassure Ilya that—if Ilya wanted to, that is—he can do simple. He can do uncomplicated. He isn't about to become one of those omegas Rozanov's probably slept with, the ones Shane's heard horror stories of in the locker rooms, names tossed around like jokes by his teammates, the ones that got too needy and desperate and clingy.

And—well, even if he is already all of those things, even if he can't pretend like he doesn't want to burrow into Rozanov's rose and woodfire scent and never come up for air, that doesn't mean Ilya needs to know that.

Ilya never needs to know that.

His phone buzzes again. A picture this time, from Carmy Rizzakin, #34 for the Admirals. *Rozy's already here!* He sends, and that *is* Rozanov. That's the line of Ilya's shoulders, stretching out a garishly bright Hawaiian shirt. He's sitting alone at the bar, Rizzakin's camera angle suggesting he's at a table further away.

Shane's moving before he can even lock his phone. *Don't leave—can't leave—not until I get there—*

He's out of the hotel, down the hot pavement cooking in the Florida winter sun, dodging tourists and hockey personnel both. He only remembers to slow down when he gets to the swing doors of the bar. It would be so embarrassing if Rozanov caught him rushing to him.

Maybe it would make up for running away last time. But he isn't even sure Ilya's keeping score like that.

Rozanov's scent hits him as soon as he walks into the seating area of the bar. It's strong enough to make his knees go automatically weak. If he weren't so used to the inconvenient but unignorable emotions that Ilya Rozanov triggers in his body, there'd actually be a risk of him falling right then and there in the doorway of the most atrociously beach-themed bar he's ever been inside.

Rozanov's shoulders straighten a moment later, and Shane knows he can smell him. It's always been strange to him, how easily Rozanov can pick apart his scent from the crowd. Shane's on industrial-strength blockers, wears the strongest scent patches his mother can find, passes for an alpha in a sport filled to the brim with sweaty, smelly, pheromone-exuding alphas. And yet Ilya hasn't been fooled for longer than a singular game. It used to drive Shane crazy worrying about it, about how if one alpha can see past all the chemicals he's wearing as a disguise, then maybe others can too.

But no one else ever has. Just Ilya. Just Rozanov.

"I'll have the same as my teammate, please," Shane tells the bartender when he makes it over to the stool next to Ilya's. He sits. He has to. Ilya's scent is stronger this close, like he hasn't bothered with patches or blockers at all. It's either sit or fall down, really.

It's stronger and it's laced with something that makes Shane immediately want to bare his neck in submission. Which would be fucking embarrassing, so he tries to shut off that part of his brain. Focuses on the bar around them instead. There's a few hockey players in the corner, Rizzakin giving him an enthusiastic wave the moment he sees him. It's two levels, open-air. There's a fan twirling lazily in the air above them, and Shane would think it's overkill, but it's January in Florida and the humidity is unignorable. He feels sticky all over. The heat's making him slow. The humidity's making Rozanov's hair curl more uncontrollably than usual.

Shane swallows. It's loud in the silence between them. He thinks—the chairs are too far away from each other. A large part of him wants to drag them closer together, close enough that he can rest his leg up against Ilya's, maybe feel their arms brushing together on the bar top.

Too desperate. Too needy. Too clingy.

He can feel the way his scent spikes up, the anger and agony that he's become accustomed to over the past few months rising in response to his thoughts.

Ilya's head turns sharply towards him. Shane can feel his eyes on the side of his face. The attention burns; it's nowhere near enough, not after so long going without.

He clears his throat and fusses with the sleeves of his jacket. They come down too far for his liking, sit at the heel of his palm. His stylist had assured him it was *In,* but Shane knows he's going to end up getting it tailored.

"So, what, are they out of ginger ale, Captain?" Rozanov asks, and Shane can feel him turn in his seat to face him completely. The bartender hands him the same Corona bottle as Rozanov and places another one next to Rozanov's elbow. It's much easier to watch this happen than it is to turn and look at Ilya.

"I'm feeling a little wild," he replies, wrapping his hand around the bottle and dragging it closer. Armed, he finally gives into Ilya Rozanov's gravitational pull. He turns towards him.

It's mortifying, the way that he can feel his heart slow at just the sight of Rozanov's eyes and quirked mouth and cupid's bow lips. Like after ages of running a marathon, he's finally crossed the finish line. He can finally relax. Dangerous to think of Ilya Rozanov and feel safe. Stupid.

Rozanov seems to be doing his own assessment of Shane, eyes tracing over his nose and down to his neck before lingering on his hands. "You smell it," the alpha finally grunts. Quiet, because they're in public and who the fuck knows could be listening in. *"Wild."*

Automatically, Shane's hand flies to his neck and presses down on the scent patch. It isn't peeling, it isn't miraculously gone.

Ilya's hard, assessing stare follows his hand. His nostrils flare and Shane can see the way his jaw clenches, pressure building in a way that must be hurting his teeth. He looks—angry. Darkly, quietly furious.

Shane's never seen him like this before, and he's beaten him on Boston ice. On Russian ice too.

His first instinct as an omega is to soothe. His alpha—the alpha in front of him, he means—is in some kind of distress, and maybe Shane can help fix it. Or at least lessen the weight of it by leaning forward, dropping his eyes, baring his neck in submission.

So of course he drops his hand and crosses his arms and says, defensively, "You do too."

"I smell wild," Rozanov says. His lips curl up in a sneer.

"You smell *feral,"* Shane corrects, because it's the truth. It's not what a good omega would say, but never once has Shane let himself listen to those instincts and he isn't about to start now when it's *true.* When Rozanov does smell as close to feral as he's ever gotten. Tightly leashed control and the scent of summer roses burning away and leaving behind nothing but smoke and melted metal. There's something different in Ilya's eyes too, something more *alpha* than human.

He looks away, back at the bartop and the bottle in his hand. It's too much, too unexpected. He wanted to see Ilya, to talk with him, but he hadn't thought Ilya would be like *this,* be in some kind of mood even before they spoke about—Boston.

It doesn't make sense. It's the All-Stars Game. It's the least serious competition in the entire game, a weekend made to feel a little bit like practice, a little bit like showing off, and a lot like how hockey used to feel when you were twelve and scouts weren't really watching you from the stands yet. Fun, like a game.

Rozanov smells like a predator, on edge and coiled to pounce, and Shane doesn't know what to do with that. Doesn't know if he can help, doesn't think it's his place. Ilya's probably got a dozen of omegas on speed-dial if he needs to be comforted. Maybe one of them is the reason for his upset anyway.

Ignoring the unpleasant, empty pit that opens up in his chest at the thought, he raises the bottle to his lips and takes a small swallow. It tastes like shit. "So, this is going to be fu—"

"Did you bring anyone with you?" Rozanov demands suddenly, and Shane blinks.

"What?"

"To Florida. For the weekend. Did you bring anyone with you?" The words are staccato sharp; Rozanov's hand flexes on the table top.

Shane pauses. "No, I mean, my parents thought about it, but they've been to these things before, and they're going to Mexico in two weeks anyway, so…I mean of course Tampa isn't the same as Mexico, but my dad has a bad back so they've been trying to limit long flights more lately, and—"

"Hollander," Rozanov says. His name comes out low, limping, scraped across the rocks in Rozanov's voice. Demanding; impatient. "No one else?"

"No one," Shane says, the answer leaving his mouth before he's made the choice to say it. Pulled from him instinctively, to soothe even though he isn't sure what he's soothing. What he's *doing.*

Rozanov's eyes slide over him like a physical touch. It makes Shane's hands tremble. "You are wearing very pretty clothes for no one?"

Shane swallows. "No one," he lies.

Rozanov makes a disbelieving noise, picking up his drink and finishing the first in two swallows that have his throat bobbing and Shane's mouth watering. His scent spikes again.

"Rose Landry has taken you clothes-shopping," Rozanov says, and Shane's maybe more surprised than he should be by the name on Rozanov's lips. But then, he saw them in the club together, Rose and Shane and Miles. Even if he hasn't read any press about him and Rose, he must know something. Even if he never texted to chirp him about it, even if he's spent months being quiet—it shouldn't be surprising that he knows.

They're not together anymore, obviously. Rose and Shane. Not since *I'm not doing it for you* and *Shane, I know you're not an alpha* and *that's okay, Shane, it's okay but I think maybe—you want someone else anyway.*

But they'd decided it'd be easier to let it fizzle out in the press rather than do a whole breakup thing. That's one of things Shane's going to tell him, if Rozanov would just stop—going off script. Stop saying random shit with ten different meanings and inflections Shane can't catch and ignoring all attempts at small talk in favor of an interrogation instead.

"She gave me the number for her stylist, yeah," Shane tells him, frustrated at the diversion. Frustrated when all he wants to say is: "But we're—she and me, we're not—"

"She and me," Rozanov repeats, voice low, tone mocking. "Okay, Hollander."

"Okay, Hollander, *what?"* Shane snaps, turning towards Ilya completely and fighting against the urge to reach out. Hold him in place until he starts speaking full sentences, starts answering Shane's questions, starts looking at him again. Ilya's scent is sour in the air, a forest fire. His eyes are hard when he glances at him and then looks away like he can't bear to look at Shane at all.

"Okay, Hollander, many happy fucking returns for you and your chosen love," Rozanov growls, standing from his chair so quickly that the thing rattles and threatens to tip back.

He's shoving his way past Bealey, #54 for the DC Monuments, a second later, pushing towards the doors like nothing in the world's going to make him stay.

And all Shane can do is sit and blink at his back and wonder when and where Ilya Rozanov learned the traditional congratulations offered to newly engaged beta couples. And why in the world Rozanov is throwing them like sharp knives at *Shane.*

Bealey, #54 for the DC Monuments, shoves up next to him and claps him on the shoulder in commiseration. "Cats and dogs," he shakes his head. "Don't know what they were thinking, putting you two on a team together. Let alone a line!"

"I heard Rozy asked," Rizzakin, #34 for the Admirals, has joined them, leaning up on the bar where Ilya is supposed to be. "Told them he'd drop to winger for our Captain here."

"Ha!" Bealey, #54 for the DC Monuments, says and hits Shane on the back. Friendly tussling, but Shane can't even pretend to go along with it. His script feels so far away from him. He can't tear his eyes away from the door Ilya's gone through. Every instinct in his body, human and omega alike, is screaming at him to follow. To find him. To pin him down if he has to.

It'd feel so good to hold him that it's suddenly everything Shane wants in the world and his hands are trembling around nothing. "I need to go," he says, blinking at the door.

Many happy fucking returns for you, Ilya said. Like the words were poisonous things, yes, but like he believed them. Like he really believed that Shane had—what, gone and got engaged to Rose Landry? They dated for a month at most!

If Shane were going to wear anyone's mark, it wouldn't be a claiming bracelet from a Beta he met a month ago. It'd be—it'd be—

“Rozy’ll come around,” Bealey, #54 for the DC Monuments, says bracingly. “Come have a drink with us, Captain. We want to hear about Rose Landry.”

“No, I—I’m gonna find him. For…team unity,” Shane stands, shrugging out of their hands. “It’s important.”

It is important. It’s maybe the most important thing Shane will do this weekend, this month, this year.

They let him go without much of a fight, which is for the best because Shane can feel the restless urges of his omega under his skin, the biting need to have what is *his* in front of him again. Somewhere private, like a den. But a hotel room will work too.

He catches up to Ilya in the hotel lobby. If pressed, he couldn’t begin to describe the journey from the bar through the street back to the hotel. He can’t remember any of it, can only remember the need and the worry and the frustration and the desperation at his heels. His mind is a cacophony of instinct and barely contained, *wild* want.

Thankfully, he smells Ilya immediately. Near the elevators, but not quite there. Good because Shane isn’t sure he has the presence of mind to be polite, to structure discreet questions for the hotel staff, to pretend that he needs Ilya Rozanov’s room number for anything other than *this*.

This being how he can see, even across the lobby, the way that Ilya’s shoulders tense and straighten when he catches Shane’s scent. How he turns his head—not to look at him directly, but to keep him in his peripherals. How when the elevator doors slide open, Ilya waits. Waits until Shane is there, next to him. His lips are curled into something that is half snarl, half sneer, but he doesn’t move forward until Shane is there first. Lets him step into the empty elevator. Gets in behind him and presses the button to close the door.

“I’m on the fourteenth floor,” Shane mutters, quiet like someone’s listening in.

Ilya grunts. His eyes are fixed forward, hands flexing at his sides for a moment before he shakes his head once, sharply. He leans forward and presses the twelfth button.

There’s no other way to read that than what it is: a rejection. Shane can feel his throat tighten and his eyes stinging. He’s sure Ilya can smell it in his scent, the sudden flash of pain lancing through Shane’s chest as the omega in him cries out in confused despair.

Maybe it doesn’t matter. If Ilya thinks Shane and Rose are-–together. Maybe it doesn’t matter because Ilya was getting tired of him anyway or because Shane accidentally showed all his cards back in Boston before he got control of himself and ran. Maybe Ilya was already close to ending it, them, and Rose was the final straw or the excuse he needed.

Shane’s on the fourteenth floor. Ilya’s on the twelfth. Maybe that’s that then. All she fucking wrote.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Ilya’s jaw clenching, the muscle bulging out in a way that has always made Shane’s mouth flood with saliva, made his heart beat faster with desire.

It makes him feel hollow now, makes his chest twist around nothing. Rejection stings like being dragged over hot coals. Okay. Okay, alright.

He reaches out and presses the fourteenth floor button with fingers that only shake a bit.

"I just think maybe you have someone else you'd, you know," Rose says, eyebrows creased up in empathetic understanding. "Rather be doing this with."

"I don't," Shane replies. Automatic. Insistent.

"Shane," Rose says. That's it. Just his name.

"Omegas don't have to be with alphas," Shane says. His fingers are knotted around each other on the table. His mind is full of flashes: Ilya Rozanov's curls, the press of his bicep against Shane's mouth, the fullness of his cock fucking into his wet hole. "It's the twenty-first century. We can—it's not like that anymore. Betas get with omegas all the time."

He means: that's not a reason. Please tell me that's not why you're dumping me. Please tell me it's not because of me. Because of being—this. I have always hated being this. I've tried so hard not to have it show.

"I know," Rose says and she reaches over. She touches the back of his hand. "I think anyone can be with anyone else. Whoever they want. Nothing else matters if you want them and they want you. Not designations, not social norms, nothing. That's not what I'm saying, Shane."

"Then what are *you saying?"*

Her eyes are kind and a bit wet, like doing this hurts her too. She squeezes his hand. "I'm saying that Rose *sounds a lot like* Roz*, but there's a difference that I can hear when you say it."*

Shane lets out a shuddering breath, shoulders hunching inwards under the weight of the accusation. Even though it isn't, not really. That's what makes it worse. She's so kind. She's so nice and gentle and sweet.

She's not what his body and his mind and his heart want. "We're not…" he trails off. There are more things that he and Ilya Rozanov are not *than that they are. There are a hundred ways to finish this sentence.*

"It's none of my business," Rose tells him. "But if you want to talk about it, you know I'd listen. I'm a great listener."

"You're just pretty great in general," Shane manages, feeling the tell-tale sting at the back of his eyes. "Christ," he adds, freeing his hands so he can rub them over his eyelids. "I wanted it to be you."

Her lips quirk up. She's so beautiful. She's not—she's not Ilya though. She's not Shane's Ilya. "No, you didn't," she murmurs. "Or—maybe, but not as much as you just wanted it to be less complicated with him, right?"

“Yeah,” he admits, with a short, hollow-sounding laugh. “Yeah, maybe.”

Ilya’s hand lashes out and catches onto Shane’s wrist, right around the thin ring of skin left behind as the jacket sleeve shrugs backward.

“Hey,” Shane snaps, defensive and automatic because it’s either that or give into the instinct to push into the touch. Into Ilya, who is suddenly standing much closer than he was before. “Let go of me.”

“Where is it,” Ilya demands, and Shane flinches away from the tone. It’s angry, primal. An alpha’s growl that has no place being in this elevator but that matches Ilya’s haywire, *feral* scent perfectly.

“Let *go,”* Shane protests, ripping his wrist away and bringing it to his chest. Before Ilya can get the bright idea to go for the other one, Shane wraps it around his newly freed wrist and rubs at the slightly reddened skin.

Ilya doesn’t even have the grace to look embarrassed or ashamed. Instead, his eyes are focused with laser-powered intensity on Shane’s hands.

The elevator *pings* quietly and the doors slide open. Fourth floor of the hotel, Shane thinks nonsensically. There’s a spa. Two older women are waiting to get in, chatting happily between themselves and wearing long terrycloth robes branded with the hotel's logo on the right breast pocket.

“This one is occupied,” Rozanov snaps, turning to glower at the women. One of them gives an offended gasp, and Shane’s quick to press his hand against Ilya’s chest—*stand down*—and quick to flash a smile at the other one.

It doesn’t matter much, because Ilya’s already hit the button to close the elevator doors again with an impatient-sounding, “Get the next one.”

“Rozanov, what the *fuck,”* Shane manages around the wild beating of his heart in his throat. That was too public. That was too *obvious.* He’d hate to think what the elevator smells like right now. Aggressive alpha and—and surely, Shane’s scent patch is near to giving up the fight with all the pheromones his body’s been pumping out since leaving his hotel room to track down Ilya. Surely they could smell *needy* omega. “That was rude as shit, what if they know who we—”

“Where is your bracelet,” Ilya demands again, cutting him off in a way that he never does. It makes Shane falter. For all his faults and his general assholery, Ilya Rozanov has never once treated Shane like this. Never demanded things from him, never gripped him hard enough to bruise outside of sex, never loomed over him like he is now, scent filling the elevator with roses and brimstone until Shane feels like he’s choking on it.

“Are you going into rut?” he asks, half-scandalized at the thought. They have a game tomorrow. Rozanov's supposed to be playing in it, supposed to be on the ice this entire weekend. He can't be going into rut. But it feels like the only explanation. The only thing that can explain Ilya’s stony demeanor, his hard gaze, his growling, short words.

“No,” Ilya says succinctly, boxing Shane further up into the corner of the elevator. He ducks his head, running his nose down the tendons in Shane’s neck. Scenting him? “She gave you claiming bracelet. Where is it? Why do you not wear it? How do you expect me to respect—” the rest of the words are muffled, unintelligible, into Shane’s skin.

Shane stares at himself in the mirror opposite them. Ilya’s bulk stretches over his body until all that’s visible is his face and his hands gripping onto Ilya’s ugly Hawaiian shirt like it’s his lifeline. He doesn’t want Ilya to move away, not even an inch. This is what he’s been craving ever since he ran in Boston. This is what he’s needed.

He just also needs it somewhere else. Somewhere less public.

“There is no bracelet,” he tells Ilya because he has to. He feels what the words do to Ilya the way he shudders like they’re physical blows landing on his skin. “I don’t know what bullshit you’ve been seeing, but there isn’t a bracelet.”

Ilya’s head raises from his neck, pulling back and trailing his lips across Shane’s jaw until they’re looking at each other, nose to nose. “There were pictures,” Ilya disagrees. “I saw pictures.” His eyes are dark and heated and they’re pinned to Shane like this is the most important conversation he’s ever had in his life.

Shane’s stomach twists, and his chest expands out as he lets out a ragged exhale. He can’t be that omega, the needy and desperate one, clinging onto an alpha that’s only ever seen him as a convenient piece of hole. But Ilya isn’t looking at him like all he’s good for is his hole. He’s not holding him like that, either, and Shane’s getting confused. His head feels foggy, desire and confusion and frustration all warring together in his chest.

The elevator dings open again, and Shane shoves Ilya away. The alpha’s lips curl up in an automatic snarl, at the distance and at the dismissal maybe. But at least no one’s at the door waiting to step in.

It’s just the twelfth floor.

“Your stop,” Shane says. Breathless and panting as if he’s run a mile in the last two minutes.

When Ilya doesn’t move, Shane’s hand flings out, stops the door from closing. He can’t—he needs more. More than just a lack of action. He needs something verbal.

He swallows. “I’m on the fourteenth floor,” he says, and he wants the words to come out suggestive or at least iron-clad. Like the rejection from before doesn’t bother him at all. They don’t, and he can’t hold eye contact with Ilya either, dropping his face away and grinding his teeth together in frustration. At Ilya, but mostly at himself. Fucking omega. Bleeding heart, clingy and needy. Love like an open wound. Too much and unasked for. He looks at Ilya and sees a finishline and Ilya sees nothing in him more than a game, and he’s still standing here. Waiting for another rejection, expecting the pain of it and bracing himself for Ilya to walk away.

This is his floor. This is where he gets off.

Finally—finally, Ilya moves. His fingers tangle in the front of Shane's shirt and he tugs him back, away from the door.

It slides shut and the elevator jerks into movement again. "Fourteenth, yes?" Ilya murmurs, pressing the words straight into Shane's ear. "Close?"

Shane shudders against him, turns his head to push into Ilya's shoulder. "Yeah, two doors down from the elevators."

"And then you will tell me," Ilya says, sounding confident. More in control, like maybe having Shane pliant and in his arms has leashed him back into coherency.

The doors open with a soft ding and Shane's already got his wallet in his hands, fumbling with the keycard. Talking isn't really what they do; there's so much he wants to say right now, so much he wants Ilya to hear, but that's now at odds with just how much he wants to be under the alpha. Speared on his cock with his face stuffed into the sheets.

He'll tell him anything he wants to hear to get to that. After all, maybe the best thing to do would be to *show* Ilya how good Shane can be. How easily he can keep what they do in bed separate from everything else. Maybe they should fuck—really, they should probably fuck—and then they can talk, and then Shane can show Ilya the door. Casual. He can keep it casual.

The door to his room shuts behind them and Shane's shoes are already off. Ilya's got his back to the room still, messing with the deadbolt and the lock on the handle. It seems like overkill to Shane, but then—no matter what Ilya says, he smells closer to his rut than Shane's ever seen him. Smelt him. Whatever. It's natural for an alpha to want as much protection and defense against the outside world as he can get during rut. Especially when they've got an omega with them, someone who their instincts demand they protect.

Maybe if Shane can prove to him how—casual he can be, Ilya would be open to the possibility of letting Shane help him through it. Partially at least, before they have to fly out for their next games.

"You have no bracelet," Ilya states, turning to face him and putting his back against the door. Shane sits. First down on the bed and then on the chair next to it when it doesn't feel right.

He feels hot beneath the collar. "What is it with you and the bracelet?" he asks, part complaint, part genuine question. He tugs off his linen jacket and tosses it on the bed, raising his bared forearms to Ilya for his perusal. "See? Look. No bracelet."

And suddenly Ilya is there, kneeling at his feet between one blink and the next. That's how fast it feels like he moves, like he's skating on the ice instead of walking on shitty hotel carpet. His hands wrap around Shane's wrists, bringing them closer to his face. Examining them and then just stroking over the skin there, down and up and down again.

It makes Shane shift in his seat. His gut tightens and he can feel himself start to get wet, something like a knee-jerk reaction to Ilya's scent and his touch and their positions. And usually, he thinks Ilya would smirk as soon as the smell of his slick hit the air. Cocky alpha, proud to have made his omega squirm for him.

But all Ilya does is lean forward and press his lips against the veins on his right wrist, eyes never leaving Shane's. "There were pictures," he murmurs, plush lips brushing against his skin every syllable. "On New Year's Day. You were with her. Wearing claiming bracelet. Everyone says this."

Shane blinks, syrupy slow, dizzy and head fogged with arousal and Ilya's scent so unfiltered and so close. "It wasn't—Rose has this niece, she's seven, I think—or eight, I mean, but I think she just turned eight, so—"

"Hollander." Ilya's voice is full of command. Not an alpha's command to force obedience, but just. Structure. Stability. In the sea of Shane's arousal, it's the thing he needs most. "Do I look like I give a fuck about Rose Landry's fucking niece?"

Shane shakes his head. "No, but—it was just a hair tie. A fancy-looking hair tie. For her niece. She asked me to do her hair, I forgot to take it off. We laughed about it when we saw the speculation afterwards."

Ilya hums. He nips at his wrist with his teeth, something short and sharp and vaguely punishing. "I was not laughing."

"Sorry we didn't ask you," Shane mutters, breathless and dazed.

Ilya makes an agreeing noise, beginning to run his nose up and down Shane's wrist. Scenting him. And rubbing Shane's scent across his face in the process. "So you and *Rose…"*

Shane doesn't let him finish. It's a nice change of pace. "There's no me and Rose," he says. "We're not together anymore."

Beneath him, Ilya's movements halt for a moment. A lifetime.

"We weren't compatible," Shane rushes to add. Has to.

"Because you need alpha?" Ilya murmurs, tilting his head until he can catch Shane's eyes again. His hazel eyes burn, even as the black of his pupil swallows up the color.

Because I need you, Shane pushes the words down. Forces them back. "Sorta," he whispers, moving his hips up, off the chair. Desperate for it. Needy.

"Sorta," Ilya repeats in a terrible impersonation of a Canadian accent. "Is quite simple, *kotenok.* Do you want to wear a bracelet from beta or bite mark from alpha?"

Shane shakes his head, helpless. He doesn't want either. Not unless it's Ilya, but that's not the question he's been asked. That's not what Ilya wants to know. Shane doesn't *know* what Ilya wants to know, doesn't know what he can say to keep him here in front of him. Touching him. That's what he wants. He'd spend his whole life like this if he could. He wouldn't need Ilya's bite if he didn't want to give it to him. He'd take the crumbs and content himself with imagining the whole meal.

"The second one," he says finally, because it's the option closest to the truth, and saying it makes Ilya's scent flare with the fragrance of roses.

Ilya kisses his wrist again, lingering there at his pulse. Shane can feel it when his traitor-body releases another gush of slick, and he's sure now that Ilya can smell it if the way his teeth press firmly against his skin is any indication.

"Il–" Shane starts to whine before catching himself, pulling back. Maybe the only thing more transparent than calling Ilya Rozanov by his first name would be calling him *alpha.*

And then—terribly, horribly, like something straight out of one of Shane's nightmares—Ilya is on his feet, a meter away and running his hands through his hair as he mutters something in Russian. Shane pushes himself to stand on shaking legs. The distance between them isn't fair, it isn't *good.* It isn't what Shane wants, not what he's been being good for. Hasn't he been good?

"Is bad idea. This. Is not good," Ilya says between his teeth, English twisted and broken more than it's been in years. Beneath the thin material of his shirt, his chest is heaving. Shane loses a few seconds just to watch it rise and fall with the alpha's rough breaths. "If I take you now, I do not think it will end."

Shane blinks dazed eyes up at Ilya. "Well," he manages to say. To correct. "You don't think it'll end well."

Ilya's nostrils flare. "That too, yes. Maybe. Probably." He takes another step away, towards the door. It's terrible. Shane's chest twists with this, with another rejection so soon.

"I'm sorry about Boston," he rushes to say, getting the words out and throwing them at Ilya in a tangled heap. "I shouldn't have run like that, I'm *sorry."*

Please stay. Stay now. We've had bad ideas before. We've been a bad idea all these years. Again. Please, again.

Ilya pauses, eyelids fluttering shut as if Shane's words are a physical blow. "Boston."

"It won't happen again," Shane's quick to add, quick to take advantage of Ilya's stillness. He takes a step forward until he's within touching distance. His fingers fly up with a mind of their own, pushing along the line of Ilya's neck, down and over his scent gland. Roses bloom beneath his fingertips; embers leap into bonfires, and it could be so good. It's always so *good.*

"Hollander," Ilya says, stiff, capturing his hands into one of his. "No. I need—"

"Anything," he promises. It's desperate. It's mortifying. It's worth it, worth it *all* if Ilya just *stays.* Just—stays. Anything Shane can give him, it's his. He can deal with the fallout later. Even if it knocks him down and breaks him into rubble, it'll be worth it. Probably. Maybe.

"Shane," Ilya says. He reaches out and cups Shane's chin. His thumb strokes up, along the edge of his lip. *Shane,* he said. He said, *Shane.*

"Anything," Shane whispers. Begs. Embarrassing. Mortifying. He can only hope Ilya will take pity on him. He can only hope he'll be put out of his misery.

“Shane,” Ilya says again, just his name. His grip tightens and then relaxes on his chin. His words, when they come, are careful. Measured. Russian accent blanketing each one like a morning’s new snowfall. “I want to play hockey with you. On the ice. On the same line. We fuck now, I will not—it will not happen. I am—perhaps you are right. My rut is…close. It wasn’t, yesterday, but now. I do not know. Soon, I think.”

Shane blinks, trying to make sense of the words, put them in order. Figure out cause and effect. “Because of me? Your rut is close because of me?”

Ilya’s lips tighten into a thin line. “Yes,” he admits. “I think—probably. Yes.”

“Oh,” Shane says. Then, “What does that mean?”

It isn’t a rejection. Not if Shane gets under Ilya’s skin enough to trigger his rut. The information makes his chest loosen, makes it easier to breathe. Ilya leaving now—it isn’t a rejection. It isn’t because he doesn’t want Shane. It’s because he wants him *too* much.

“That we are *compatible,”* Ilya replies, and his scent sweetens. Smugness mixes in with the roses. His grip tightens on Shane’s chin, the touch turning possessive. That’s the only word that Shane can think of for it, for how Ilya pulls him forward into a short but heady kiss using only his grip on his face.

Shane feels all the more dazed when they separate. “Ilya,” he mumbles. “Ilya, please.”

Ilya lets out a noise like he’s been high-sticked in the throat.“You are clean player on ice only to fight dirty in bedroom,” he mutters, face twitching into something pained. “No. It is bad idea now.”

“But after the game, tomorrow,” Shane presses, licking his lips. His blood sings in his veins when Ilya’s gaze drops to his mouth to follow the movement of his tongue. “Yeah?”

“Okay,” Ilya agrees, crumbling, weak. Weak for Shane. “Okay, yes. If you still want. If our heads are—clear.”

“Okay,” Shane repeats, letting a smile curl across his face. He couldn’t keep it reigned in if he tried. He feels—elated. So different from this morning. So different from even an hour ago. They have to talk more, obviously. Shane wants them to talk. But—he needs to think about this too. All this new information Ilya has given him. Ilya’s been jealous. Jealous of *Rose.* He hasn’t texted Shane in months, not because he doesn’t care, but because he cares *too much.*

Just being with Shane has brought Ilya’s rut forward, ahead of schedule. Because they’re compatible.

So they need to talk still, more, obviously they do. But. But maybe the conversation is going to look different than how Shane’s been planning it in his head. And for maybe the first time in his life, the idea of diverting from the plan and spinning off into the unknown doesn’t scare him as much as it should.

“Ilya,” he says when Ilya’s back at the door. It’s unlocked now, cracked open.

Ilya stops automatically and turns to face him. There's burning hunger painted across his expression, seeping into his scent.

So Shane says it again. It feels like he's allowed to. Like he's allowing himself to. "Ilya. I can't wait to skate with you tomorrow."

Ilya's smile, when it breaks across his face, is a naked, beautiful thing, and he suddenly looks seventeen again. So bright and gorgeous that Shane can't even blame his omega for its instinctive, knee-jerk thought of *alpha.* He feels much too in love himself to disagree.

Chapter End Notes

my favorite thing about this very long chapter is that it's all happening while ilya's rocking the hawaiian shirt

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> finally i have written the ice hockey fight for the fic i started writing just so i could write an ice hockey fight (i have played fast and loose with the all-star game play and the players on the ice btw)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's as fucking amazing as Ilya knew it would be, and that makes it almost worth everything else. When he skates out on the ice following Hollander, he isn't thinking about anything else but the colors of the jersey on Hollander's back. The way they match Ilya's. The way that Hollander turns to grin at him, quick and secret, the moment their team wins the opening coin toss.

Pike's right next to him the way Pike's been right next to him for years, but it's Ilya he turns to. Ilya he finds on the bench before the game's opening face-off.

It'd been hell to leave Hollander in that hotel room yesterday afternoon. Every instinct in Ilya's body had been scratching, howling, urging him to stay. The omega, his omega, was secured in a relatively safe place. No one had a stronger claim over him than Ilya's, Shane didn't *want* anyone else but Ilya, he'd as good as said it. He'd clutched at Ilya's shirt and shoulders and peered up at him with wet eyes, wearing the most enticing scent Ilya has ever smelled, and he'd begged him—said *anything.*

It'd taken every scrap of control Ilya had to turn him away, to leave the room. He'd wanted to demand that Shane stay there the whole night, order room service, skip drinks with the team, only come out the next morning for the game. It'd felt like the only thing that would calm Ilya's racing heart, his alpha instincts—if he *had* to leave his omega behind, then it was only fair that Shane stay right where he put him. Where no one else could see him, where he'd be safe and protected and Ilya's.

But Ilya has never been that kind of alpha, the overly controlling type that gnashed his teeth and led his omega around by fear and threat. He's spent his whole life looking down on that sort of alpha; it was a terrible thing to realize exactly how much Shane brought out in him. The good, maybe. The bad, too.

At least he hadn't said it. It'd meant a night spent pacing in his hotel room, cold showers every couple of hours and phone locked away in the room's safe so he couldn't text Shane and demand he let him back into his room.

But it'd been for the best. Even if the memory of Shane's eager, sweet and spicy scent still makes Ilya's knees weak even as he gets into position on the ice. Even if he can feel the fog

of his rut creeping over his brain, unignorable and months ahead of schedule. He'd had to leave yesterday so he could have *this* today.

This being the way Shane tenses in the face-off circle, right arm twitching inward as the puck drops and Ilya just *knows* where he'll send it. Ilya's already there, the puck's connecting with the tape on his stick a moment after Shane lets it fly and this—this is the kind of magic on the ice he's been dreaming about since he was a child.

Playing hockey has always made his blood sing, but not like this. It's never been like this.

This feels better than sex; this feels better, almost, than winning the Stanley Cup and it's just an All-Stars Game in fucking *Tampa, Florida.* When he passes the puck to Pike and the winger swings it around the other team's D-Man and punches it through the net, Ilya's heart leaps into his throat like he's just netted the tiebreaker on Game Seven in the last minute of play—not made an assist for Hayden Fucking Pike during the *All-Star Game.*

Shane's there in the next second, slapping his hand on Pike's helmet, then gripping the back of Ilya's jersey and shaking it. His scent's all *joy-pleasure-excitement,* clove and ginger and cinnamon leaking free from behind the wall of his scent patch and making Ilya want to put his nose into his neck and drown there.

"East Coast, Beast Coast!" One of their defensemen, Rizzy from the Admirals, shouts as he skates up and claps Pike on the helmet, knocks shoulders with Ilya and wraps an arm around his waist. Shane's gloved hands tighten on his jersey for a moment, something dark flashing in his eyes as his brows knit together—then it's gone, Shane skating away from their knotted celebration to re-take center ice.

Ilya watches him go. His colors. Borrowed, technically. *All-Star Game* jerseys. But his colors.

Ilya's colors and no claiming bracelet from any beta interloper. No beta at all in Hollander's life. No other alpha either. Just Ilya. Just Ilya and the way Shane had kissed him yesterday in his hotel room, desperate to keep him there with him, like he didn't know he was on the edge of a rut and there was hockey on the line.

Or like he knew, but he didn't care.

They take up their positions again. The puck drops. The game continues on.

The coach pulls lya back thirty seconds into play, tapping Beecher, #9, to take his spot. Ilya rips his glove off with his teeth so he can pick up a discarded water bottle before turning all his attention back to the game.

Hollander's all over the ice, moving between the West Coast's players like they're stationary obstacles to skate around. He dekes past the San Francisco player they've tapped for starting center, dodges one of the bigger D-Men from the Las Vegas team, and sinks the puck into the opposing net like it's nothing. Like it's the easiest thing in the world, and maybe it is when you're Shane Hollander.

It's the hottest thing Ilya's ever fucking *seen,* the way Shane skates to a standstill in the middle of the rink and lifts his arms up to accept the crowd's applause like it's his *due.* Smugger than he usually is, nothing at all like the Captain Canada Ilya's read so much about in the media. But then, half the All-Star Game is just theatrics, players becoming drama kids to keep the masses entertained.

Ilya watches the jut of Shane's chin, the way it doesn't bare his neck so much as *displays* it. The crowd's still cheering. Beecher has skated over, orchestrating a ridiculous bowing motion that has the audience laughing and clapping and jeering, and Shane Hollander is standing center-ice still like a king overlooking his court, untouched mating gland visible from where Ilya's on the bench and it's not so much an invitation as it is a *challenge.*

Ilya knows that down in his bones the moment Shane's eyes catch his. He looks beautiful wrapped up in the same colors as Ilya; he looks resplendent out on the ice with smug confidence radiating off of him the way it never would outside of a game like this. He looks fucking *holy,* crafted by the gods, staring back at Ilya with his lips curved up in a smirk and his bared neck out on display like it's Ilya's to take if only he can catch him. If only he can prove that he's worthy of him.

Ilya grabs at the water bottle again, tipping his head back and squeezing the Gatorade into his mouth without taking his eyes off of Hollander. The arena could go up in flames right now and Ilya wouldn't be able to look away from the omega on the ice.

A hand slaps onto his shoulder. "#81 for #9," the coach directs and Ilya's up. Ilya's back out there. Hollander's called in a second later, "#22 for #24", and Ilya has to pretend to be fiddling with his gloves as they pass each other. If he looks at him now—like this, so close and still flushed with his own victory—Ilya isn't sure what he'd do.

Can't do anything yet until he's proved himself. To the omega, to Shane. The instinct is too strong to resist, even though it fits awkwardly in his brain. Makes him feel at war with himself.

On one hand, no one should ever, ever take an All-Star Game seriously, especially not one held in Tampa, Florida.

On the other hand, his omega wants him to play for him. Intentionally or not, knowingly or not, that's what Shane's triggered within him. The instinct to win his omega's approval. To win his omega's attention and affection, to prove that he's *worthy.*

Maybe if he weren't so close to rut, maybe if he hadn't spent the past three weeks certain that he'd lost Shane forever, maybe if it didn't feel so right to be on a team and on a line with him, he'd be able to think past his instincts.

But he is, and he had, and it does.

So when Shane falls back onto the bench but leans his arms up against the barrier to watch, Ilya's already looking at him. The referee's in the center circle, puck held between the centres, and Ilya's eyes still can't leave Shane's. Then the whistle goes, and he's pushing

himself across the ice like it's the Cup hanging in the balance. Like it's Olympic gold on the line.

The first period's a blur after that. He knows he scores, feels the victory surge down his body like he's swallowed lightning when the puck hits the back of the net. Feels the weight of Hollander's eyes on him from the bench like they're a physical brand scorching through him.

He knows the other team scores as well; giving over the point hits him in the gut, makes him want to snarl at the idiot defenseman from the DC Monuments that'd let the puck through.

"Jeez, Rozy," Rizzakin says at one point, slapping his shoulder as he settles back onto the bench. "It's the All-Stars, man, you can take it easy."

But Ilya *has* been taking it easy. He's been taking it easy for eight years, content with having Hollander in his bed when it was convenient for the both of them, content with ignoring each other otherwise. And he'd almost lost him.

It won't happen again. It can't; Ilya isn't going to let it.

"Tell Hollzy that too," Pike leans past Beecher to say, clutching his hockey stick with both hands. "We have a game against Toronto in two days, he's gonna be exhausted if he keeps bringing play-off hockey to the All-Star Weekend."

Shane's up against the boards, battling for the puck against the West's first string left wing. The other team's managed to get a goal two minutes into the second period, and Shane's taken that personally. Ilya can't take his eyes away from the way the omega's lips have curled up into a snarl as he fights back against the weight of the other player.

He has to take a deep breath and then another--and then another after that--to try and wrestle his alpha instincts under control when all he wants to do is jump the boards and rip that player to shreds with his teeth and his hands.

It's just a game. It's not just a game. Shane knows what he's doing. What kind of alpha is Ilya if he can't protect him? But it's just a game. It's not just a game. It's—

"#81, in for #39," the coach yells from behind him, tapping his helmet with the back of the clipboard, and Ilya's over the edge again. The puck spins out onto open ice; Shane's attention swings with it, finds Ilya.

"There's been some aggressive gameplay from the East Coasters," the announcer booms overhead as the players reconfigure, take up their lines.

"It's to be expected," the other talking head replies, and Shane's back is a tense line as the referee holds the puck up into the air. "All that talent, all those egos on the ice. It's definitely making for an interesting—"

The whistle blows; the puck drops. The other team gets it, but Ilya's already pushing past their right winger, cutting hard to the left and slamming the left winger up against the boards

until he can scoop out the puck from the battle and shoot it to where he knows Shane's waiting for him.

He can hear it slap against the tape on Shane's stick and then he's off, following after Shane like he's his true North. The omega swerves around a defensemen, sends the puck sailing over the ice back to Ilya without even checking to see if he's there. Of course he's there; this is where Shane needs him to be.

In the next moment, Shane's open again, free, with a clear shot on net. There's a test hidden in this, maybe. A test for Ilya: does he get closer, try to take the shot by himself, claim the victory? Or does he pass it away, give away the glory to another player, to an omega?

It's not even a question. There's not even a doubt in his mind.

Shane catches the puck agains the flat of his stick and tosses it into right corner of the net as if the goalie isn't even there.

The crowd goes wild, but Shane's already skating towards Ilya, whose arms have come up to wrap around him automatically.

"Look at you, my sweetheart, my sunshine," Ilya mutters in Russian, wrapping his hand around the back of Shane's helmet and yanking him further into his body. He presses a kiss to the side of the visor, then another when he realizes he can get away with it. That this is the All-Star Games, they're on the same team, and no one's ever looked too closely when it comes to celebrations on the ice.

"You're absolutely beautiful," he says, the Russian falling off his tongue like it's the only language he knows. *"Beautiful and mine."*

Shane's grinning back at him, soft and shy and pleased. His scent was strong at the beginning of the game, now it's like a flood around them. He tilts his head up and into Ilya's space, close enough that the words are for him alone. "1417," he says. Then, "Alpha."

Ilya can feel the way his smile turns sharp, can smell the arousal that lashes through his scent at the word, the title. The gift.

Shane smirks back at him, tilting his chin up and slightly to the side. Not obvious to anyone else, not exaggerated enough to catch anyone's eyes but Ilya's.

"Careful," Ilya hears himself warn. It goes against the ferocious need swelling up in his chest. It goes against all his alpha instincts. But he'll offer Shane as many outs as the omega could possibly want. They're playing with fire here; they both are. It's just that Ilya's spent the last three weeks—longer, the last three *months*—freezing out in the cold. Burning, in comparison, is such a better way to die. But he'll spare Shane all he can of that agony, if Hollander doesn't understand exactly what he's offering. If he doesn't realize what he's doing to him. If he doesn't mean anything by it.

Shane's eyes are all pupil when he looks at him, nostrils flaring as he takes in Ilya's scent. It makes his mouth go slack, tiny pink tongue wetting his bottom lip like he can taste him if

only he tries hard enough. He sways forward slightly, like he can't help it, and Ilya's arms raise to catch him. They're standing on a precipice, Ilya can feel the earth moving under their feet, everything shifting and falling either into place or into rubble.

The fog of his rut is at the forefront of his mind. How can it not be? He has this omega, his omega, in his arms. Willing and wanting and won. Smelling like the sparks that ignite an inferno. Smelling like the last few hours of pre-heat.

"Shane," Ilya says, some awareness nudging at him that wasn't there before. They can't--can't they? Aren't they already? Hollander smells like his. Ginger and cloves and hunger that only Ilya can sate. Of course he's on the cusp of his heat. Ilya is hours away from his rut and Shane Hollander is such a beautiful omega, such a good omega. His body knows. His mind does too. He called him *Alpha.* Given him his room number, as if Ilya doesn't remember it, as if Ilya hadn't paced outside the door of it yesterday afternoon trying to convince himself to leave completely. *Alpha.* He called him *Alpha.*

But then—from the corner of his eye—there's movement. Sudden and fast, the defenseman from the West Coast team, skating in with a grin stretched across his face. He tosses one glove and then the other into the air, up in an arc that's theatrical, dramatized. "Hollander, nooo," the defenseman cries. "Curse you!"

And it's a joke, it's theater, it's the All-Stars Game. The crowd is eating this up, the defenseman's scent is light and playful. It's a joke.

But he puts his hands on Hollander.

He pulls him away from Ilya.

And that's not—no. *No.*

Ilya's stick and gloves are gone in a heartbeat. It feels like time itself slows down as he lunges across the ice, pushes past Shane's body to grab at the defenseman and pull him off Hollander, pull him down onto the ice so he can strike at him with his naked fists. His lips are pulled back, a snarl locked up inside his mouth and oozing like a threat through his bared teeth. He hits him once, square across the bridge of his nose, hard enough that he can feel the crack before he hears it. The other alpha's hand jerks up, instinct maybe, gets him across his cheekbone, but it's an unimportant sort of pain. He doesn't even feel it. If anything, it only makes him land the next blow harder.

Hands scrabble at the jersey on his back, tug at him, but the threat's still between his legs on the ice and his omega isn't safe. His omega, his beautiful and victorious omega on the cusp of heat, who'd called him *alpha*, who is his now to protect and cherish and love because he called him *alpha,* he *gave him that, he gave him alpha—*

"Ilya, *stop,"* Hollander's voice is frantic. It's Hollander's arm around his neck, tugging him up. That's the only thing that makes Ilya pause. Other hands are still twisted around his jersey, pulling at him this way and that, but it's Hollander at his side that makes him pause as the world filters back into his vision in stops and starts.

“Jesus Christ, Rozanov,” someone else curses, and Ilya thinks he should recognize that voice. Thinks it belongs to someone he should know, but all he can smell is Hollander and all he can see is Hollander’s face and the bleeding mess of his hands and the hockey player beneath him. The pain across his face lances back into reality sharply, suddenly, but it's not important. The blood on the ice isn't important; neither are his torn knuckles.

He turns himself towards Shane, angles his body up towards him like he is the sun, gravitational pull and all. Hollander is on his knees next to him, but he's quick to scramble up onto his skates, hand still fisted in the collar of his jersey. His eyes are wide and terrified, his face drained of color. For a moment, it's just them—Ilya and Shane, their scents blooming desperate and heady as unspoken, desperate questions hurtle through the air between them.

Are you okay, are you alright, can you stand. Tell me you are alright. Tell me you are mine.

Then rough hands yank him backwards, away from Shane, away from the downed defenseman. Immediately, like he’s lost his center of gravity, Ilya lets out a loud wet growl as he thrashes in his teammate’s grip. Desperate to get back to Hollander. Desperate to find him again. The world tips and straightens for a moment as he fights against the arms holding him back. “Rozy, fuck,” someone says, winded. “It’s just—”

"Hey, fuck you, let him go,” Hollander is there. Hollander sounds angry, sounds savage, voice more snarl than it is words. “I said let him *go!”*

“Shane, whoa now, c’mon,” and that’s—Ilya thinks that’s Pike, arms out and blocking Hollander from Ilya’s view. But he doesn’t know for sure, can’t see anything, can’t process information past the need to get his eyes back on Hollander, his arms around Hollander. Make sure Shane is safe, with him, always.

He manages to wrestle himself back onto his feet just in time to watch Hollander deck Pike across the face and lunge in his direction like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Ilya’s body strains towards him instinctively, hands reaching out to latch around the sleeves of his jersey. But before he can touch him, he’s yanked away.

It takes three players to drag Ilya off the ice; Hollander needs five to keep him there.

Chapter End Notes

all-star announcers watching hollanov do what is basically a mating dance on ice during game time: wow look at all those egos out there what a special all-star game. they really care about giving us a good show :,)
all-star announcers watching an all-out brawl centering around hollanov in the middle of the second period: ...nvm

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

there is porn! and conversation. and anxiety. but like. a lot of porn. and then a lot of sappiness. so, perhaps true to the show?

(this does mostly toe around how shane would feel if his secret designation was revealed/how he'd feel if he were outed (and what outing even looks like in the omegaverse) - i really wanted to get more into that but this didn't feel like the right time and the chapter was already like. 8k. so it's something shane thinks about but tries to compartmentalize away for the time being (which, to be fair, then he's getting dicked down which probably helps with the compartmentalization imo)

enjoy and i hope it's worth the wait and the build-up!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's thirteen steps from the window of the hotel room to the door; it's eight steps from the bathroom to the bed. Walking the circumference of the room takes forty-three steps.

Ilya hasn't picked up his phone. Shane doesn't know where he *is,* can't smell him, can't see him, can't touch him. It's making him lose his damn mind. So. Thirteen steps from the window to the hotel room's door. Eight steps from the bathroom door to the bed. Forty-three steps around and around and around.

In his hand, his phone buzzes once, then twice.

It hasn't really *stopped* buzzing, not since Shane'd turned it on in the locker room. Messages are pouring in. From the team back in Montreal, from his *coach*, from a thousand twitter accounts. Fuck, he can't decide what he wants to do less right now: pick up one of the calls from his mother or read one of the texts from Jackie.

Fuck. *Fuck,* he'd *hit* Hayden. He's never really hit anyone before. That's not the kind of hockey he plays, not the kind of guy he is.

Except that isn't true because he'd thrown himself at Scott Hunter in the aftermath of a Montreal victory, all because Hunter alluded to Ilya in front of him, alluded to *knowing.*

Both incidents have one common denominator. Something about Ilya Rozanov brings out the worst in him, maybe. The parts of him that are ruled by his instincts more than his brain. That's probably—that's probably not good. In general for a captain of one of the best teams in the NHL. For someone with his reputation and all the brand deals his name is tied to. For someone who's spent every moment since his presentation pretending to be a dynamic he isn't.

Letting his instincts run haywire, letting Rozanov get so far under his skin it's like he's constructed a den out of Shane's fucking bones—it's maybe the dumbest thing Shane's ever done. That first time, after they shot the commercial, when Ilya had knocked on his hotel room door and Shane had opened it, that should have been it. Every other time since then, if Shane were *smart*—they never would have happened. It's too risky. It's always been too risky, they've always been playing with fire and Shane's ignored all the consequences in favor of how good it felt to be underneath Rozanov. But he can't ignore them anymore.

Fuck, he'd punched Hayden square in the face and he'd felt *good* about it. He hadn't regretted it at all, would have done worse if someone else hadn't grabbed at his arms and held him back.

Shane stops at the thirty-first step and sinks onto the edge of the bed, running his hands through his hair.

The worst part is that still now, away from the chaos of the game—ejected from a hockey game for the first time in his *life*—he still can't muster up the energy to feel more than a little guilty about hitting Hayden. The rational part of him is appalled at his behavior, has already texted Hayden about five different times to apologize, knows he was in the wrong. Knows *Ilya* was in the wrong.

But the other part, the bigger part of him, feels like everyone else should have just left them alone. That Lanier from the other team should never have laid hands on him in the first place, couldn't they see Shane wasn't anyone else's to touch?

Fuck, what were they even *doing?*

Thirteen years of hiding his omega designation, eight years of skating in the NHL and keeping his secret close to fucking chest, and he loses his goddamn mind to his instincts anyway. In a fucking *All-Star Game.*

Shane's heart tightens just thinking about it, which is really all he's been doing. Thinking about it. The game. Playing with Ilya on his line. Scoring twice, lighting up the fucking ice, and turning to make sure the alpha was watching every time. Feeling like his body was on fire when he saw that he was. Every time.

He's on his feet again. Eight steps from the bed to the bathroom, thirteen steps from the window to the hotel door.

He wants to see Ilya. Technically, he probably can. It's not like he's been barricaded in his room. He was ejected from the game, sure, led out through the other team's tunnel when it became clear having him around Ilya constituted a *safety issue.* But it's not like he's been *jailed* or anything. He can leave his room at any time. No one's come by to knock on his door and tell him differently, no hotel staff or NHL stakeholders or All-Star organizers or anyone.

But he doesn't want to leave. This—it feels safe here. Something in Shane's chest aches at the idea of leaving, even if it means finding Ilya.

Shane doesn't know where they took Ilya. If he came back and finished the game, if they were both scratched, if he's still at the rink for some reason or if he's back in the hotel, pacing his room two floors beneath Shane's and wanting him too.

But Ilya *knows* Shane's hotel number. If he's here in the hotel, why isn't he here in Shane's hotel room? They'd said *after the game.*

It's after the game. And sure, it was somehow the best and worst game of Shane's entire life and it ended as badly as one can end a hockey game, but it's over.

Maybe it's all over, Shane doesn't know. He hasn't been able to watch the footage from the game yet, see what people are saying online. He knows how it felt though, remembers how his body moved. Like a possessive, territorial, *feral* omega. Snarling and spitting and fighting to get back to his alpha, to Ilya, as if there'd been a real, actual threat to him on the ice.

Fuck, maybe it's all over. Shane sinks down onto the edge of the bed again, and then slips off it to sit on the ground. He rests his forehead on his knees and tries to take a deep inhale. All he manages are shallow breaths that do nothing to soothe the aching in his body.

He doesn't know what came over him. Ilya being close to his rut shouldn't have triggered anything in *Shane,* save for ideally several orgasms at some later date. But the truth is, he'd felt more animal than human during the entirety of the All-Star Game, the weight of Ilya's eyes like a searing brand on his back. If Ilya hadn't skated towards him and caught him in his arms after that goal, then Shane would have. He wouldn't have remembered all the reasons why he shouldn't—*couldn't.*

And now maybe it's all over. Maybe everyone is guessing, maybe everyone knows. Scent-patches, especially the ones he uses, are strong, but they're not titanium tough. He wouldn't be surprised to find out he'd been bleeding pheromones the whole game. Not to mention all the videos there must be of Ilya and Lanier, Shane and Ilya, Shane and *Hayden.*

Oh fuck, he punched Hayden in the face.

And Ilya isn't *here* so maybe it's all over. Not just the secrecy, not just pretending to be an alpha in front of the entire world. But Shane and Ilya. Maybe that secret's out too. Maybe that's over as well.

Shane doesn't know which reveal makes his heart hurt more, which is so fucking stupid he can't think about it.

He's on his feet again.

Thirteen paces from the window to the door. Forty-three paces around the whole room.

He wants Ilya. He *won* Ilya. Or—Ilya won him, he doesn't know. The words are jumbled up in his brain and he can't think straight, can't begin to untangle the massive knots his instincts and his actions and his desires have made of him.

His phone is in his hands, and it's ringing. *Mom Calling* the display reads, but it's not what Shane wants. He can't answer questions right now. He wants to demand answers himself.

He wants Ilya here.

The omega in him doesn't want to text him, doesn't want to beg for his attention. Or maybe that's just Shane? He doesn't know. For years and years, one has not been the other, but now it feels like they're in the middle of a civil war that Shane's *not* prepared to fight.

Ilya knows his room number. If he wanted to be here, then he'd be here. The issue is black and white. If the alpha wants him, the alpha will come to him. That's the way of things. That's how things are done. And Shane should just—stay here. Where it's safe. And wait.

But fuck that.

He pulls up his text thread with Ilya. It's been months. The last message is Shane's: *On my way!*

Then nothing.

Shane stares at the text, flexing his hand as he tries to parse through the roaring in his head. There'd been—good reasons. For after Boston. He'd had good reasons to stay away. It'd been—he'd been—terrifying. It'd been terrifying.

But it hadn't been scary at all, on the ice today. When he was scoring goals, knowing Ilya was watching him. When he was on the bench and drinking in the sight of Ilya crushing the competition. When he was in Ilya's arms and celebrating a goal. It hadn't been terrifying at all.

Maybe texting now would be—too needy. Too desperate. Too clingy. Too omega.

But fuck it, he won Ilya. Ilya won *him.*

Jane: *did you not hear me on the ice?*

Ilya's response comes immediately. Shane doesn't even have time to turn from the window to the door.

Lily: *say it again.*

Shane's mouth is dry. Are his hands shaking? It's a good sign, that Ilya is responding. It means that maybe this isn't all over. That he can have this, despite losing everything else.

His phone buzzes.

Lily: *please*

Jane: *1417.*

Lily: *not that*

Shane shudders. He doesn't so much as sit down at the edge of the bed as he does collapse onto it. He can hear the words in Ilya's voice, the hidden command. It's like he can feel the weight of his eyes on him as if he's actually in the room with him instead of—wherever he is.

Jane: *alpha.*

Lily: *fuck*

Lily: *do you undrstand whatwil l happen*

Lily: *if i come to oyu*

The texts are fast. The spelling is atrocious, like Ilya feels half-out of his mind as well. Like he thinks it's stupid, to be putting his fingers on a virtual keyboard when he could be putting his hands on *Shane.*

But Ilya's asked him a question. It feels like an impossibility to answer, especially over the phone. *Do you understand what will happen?* If Ilya comes to Shane's hotel room? They'll have sex. Shane will help him through his rut if it's started. They'll talk about—they'll come up with a gameplan. For the aftermath.

He rubs at the sensitive skin of his scent gland. He'd had to tear the patch off the moment he got back into his room. It's just as weird to have his neck bare though, and it's like he can feel the memory of Ilya's hands on his neck even though the alpha so rarely touches him there. It's not--casual. It's not done.

Do you want to wear a bracelet from a beta, Ilya had asked him just yesterday afternoon. *Or a bite mark from an alpha?*

It'd still sounded like a hypothetical then, but Shane doesn't think it's much of one now.

Do you understand what will happen?

Jane: *are you in rut?*

Lily: *yes.*

Lily: *what do you want*

Lily: *to happen.*

Shane exhales and stares down at the screen. He wants—so much. So easily, so intensely that it's become a part of him. He just looks at Ilya and he wants. What do you want. Yesterday, nothing he thought Ilya wanted to give him. But today—after that game, after that fight—he thinks…

Lily: *only what you want, i would never do anythng more thn what you but*

Lily: *do you understand whta itll do to me if i*

Shane furrows his eyebrows, trying to parse out what the fuck Ilya's trying to say. He must be taking too long, or maybe Ilya's rut just makes him impatient, because it's not ten seconds later that another text appears on his screen. This one, at least, Shane knows automatically how to answer.

Lily: *shane.*

Jane: *names.*

Lily: *i thnk is very too late to be worried about nmes in text messages, omega*

Omega. The word makes Shane's heart race, even though he's never liked it before. Even though no one's ever really called him that before, except for doctors in a clinical setting. Maybe that's why Ilya affects him so much; he's had zero exposure to alphas who are looking to fuck him, and so he has no natural immunization built up against him. He's easy for it. For Ilya.

But he knows—he knows that Ilya doesn't just want to fuck him. Today has proven that. If nothing else, at least he knows for sure that Ilya's alpha wants to…mate him. Claim him. That they're *compatible.*

He just isn't sure about what *Ilya* wants, outside of whatever his rut is doing to his head.

Jane: *i want*

Lily: *?*

Jane: *to not talk about this over fucking text, ilya*

Lily: *names.*

Shane throws the phone onto the bed in disgust. He's paced from the window to the hotel door to the window and then to the door again. He pauses there, hand lingering on the doorknob. He could go to the front desk, ask for Ilya's room number. Maybe they haven't heard about the game. Maybe they'll give it to him without a fight.

But he has a feeling, something sparking in his stomach he doesn't know how to name. Instead of stepping out of the door, he pulls it open and closes it over the extended deadbolt.

Then he walks the thirteen steps it takes to lean against the window and wait.

He smells Ilya before he actually sees him. It's an impossible scent to miss, and he recognizes it in his bones. Bonfire and roses. Ilya must not be wearing a scent patch, or his rut must be strong enough to override one. Ilya doesn't bother to knock either. When he arrives, he slips through the door and shuts it. Bitter irritation spikes in his scent and across his face as he throws the deadbolt latch back against the door and pushes it firmly shut.

He fiddles with the locks for another second, checking the deadbolt, checking the handle.

“There’s a chair here too,” Shane says, deadpan, crossing his arms. “If you want to move it up against the door and do a real barricade situation.”

Ilya throws him a dirty look, but at least he lets go of the locks. He turns around.

He doesn’t step any closer.

Shane looks over him immediately, instinctively. There’s a darkening bruise across his cheek. Lanier must have gotten at least one hit in then. At least it wasn’t his nose. At least he didn’t knock out a tooth. He can’t imagine Ilya doing well in a dentist’s chair like this. Not when everything about him screams *alpha in rut.* He’s glistening with a thin sheen of sweat; his clothes look like they’ve just been thrown on, and his gray sweatpants are doing nothing to hide the hard ridge of his dick; his chest is moving up and down rapidly like—

“Wait, did you *run* here?”

“I took the stairs,” Ilya says, which isn’t an answer.

“Was the elevator broken?” Shane asks, appalled. It’s only two floors so it’s not as if Ilya’s run a marathon for him, but the mental image feels ridiculous all the same: Ilya, stinking of rut, taking the stairs two at a time with his cock already hard and aching.

“The elevator was too slow,” Ilya replies curtly. His eyes rove over Shane’s face and body, like he’s taking stock, doing his own inventory. Fucking absurd. They’ve only been apart for a handful of hours. It’s not even *dark yet*. But Shane wants to strip Ilya of his clothes and put him up on the bed, run his hands over all of him to make sure no one’s touched him, no one’s hurt him in the intervening hours.

Last they saw each other, they were being held apart on the ice.

Now no one’s here but them, and the distance between them is vast. Or, it is twelve steps and that feels suddenly like the width of the ocean.

“Why—”

“Are these the questions you did not want to ask me over text, Shane?” Ilya asks, crossing his arms. Mirroring Shane’s posture, except Shane’s pretty sure the stance doesn’t make *his* biceps stand out so enticingly. He loses a moment staring at the distended lines of Ilya’s veins and his muscles, all on display just for him.

Thank God Ilya’s words are irritating enough to pull him out of the foggy mindset he’s slipped into.

“You didn’t text me,” he says. It’s not really what he wants to say, but it’s the only thing he can think of. It’s a good place to start. Ilya didn’t text him after the game. Ilya hasn’t texted him since October.

“I didn’t know if you wanted to be texted,” Ilya replies. Like it’s that simple. As if his eyes haven’t stopped pressing into Shane since he stepped inside the room. Like his scent isn’t still

filling up every inch of air around them and making Shane feel—loose and wet and desperate for it. For him.

Shane can feel his chest move with the force of his sharp breath. “I *always want—”* he cuts himself off and turns his head away, rubbing over his chin and his nose. Ilya’s scent is too strong. It’s making it hard to think.

How can he say it? How can he tell Ilya that every time his phone lights up with a text, he wants it to be Ilya’s—*Lily’s*— name on his screen? That that’s what had scared him so badly in Boston, that that’s why he’d run? It’s terrifying to want something as wholly as he wants Ilya, especially when he’s only just now figured out that maybe Ilya wants him back in some comparable way, that maybe Ilya will not kick him to the streets for catching feelings. For wanting more.

It makes him terrified, to even think about coming clean and fessing up to all the longing that’s built up inside of him for years. He’s hid being an omega from the media and he’s hid being gay from his parents, but this is his third secret: he’s been in love with Ilya Rozanov for longer than he knows what to do with. And it terrifies him.

But it’s not nearly as scary as being on the ice during that second period, watching Ilya fight, watching Ilya be tugged away and not being able to go to him. That had been so much worse than this fear.

Maybe they’re all the same, really. Maybe Shane’s just been scared of losing Ilya for ages now and calling it different names.

Shane shakes his head and drops his eyes to Ilya’s feet. He hadn’t bothered to put on shoes. “I always want you to text me,” he admits, shoulders slumping down. “Unless you’re right next to me. Then I just don’t want you to leave.”

Ilya’s nostrils flare; his scent does too. “I needed you to ask for me,” he says slowly, like he is speaking through glass and trying not to cut his gums. “I needed you to—know me. No. Tell me. Tell me that you wanted me.”

“Of course I want you,” Shane snaps, turning his head back to glare at Ilya. “I was practically throwing myself at you yesterday! Did you forget that, or do you only listen to me beg when I’m down on my knees?”

But Ilya just looks frustrated, shaking his head and running a rough hand through his hair. “I’m sorry,” he bites out, eyebrows dark, jutting lines over his hazel eyes. “Is hard right now, to remember English words. It is all—jumbled up. In my head.”

And—oh. That takes the wind out of Shane’s sails. He deflates. “I…yeah, okay. I’m sorry. I’m just…tense, I guess.”

He moves from the window four paces to the edge of the bed and sits. Rubbing his hands over his thighs, he looks back at Ilya and gestures to the spot next to him. It’s too easy to fight with all this distance between them. They’ve always spoken clearest when they’re touching.

But: “Maybe no,” Ilya says.

Shane tries not to flinch, but something must flash across his face because Ilya’s stony expression cracks and his hand twitches at his side, like he wants to lift it and put it on Shane’s body.

“Maybe no because I am in rut and you are in pre-heat,” Ilya corrects. Then carefully, breathing shallowly through his mouth, he adds, “And if we share a bed now, we will share a mating bond before the sun sets.”

The words make Shane’s own scent spike up in the air, bruising with guilty desire. “I’m not in pre-heat,” he says, shaking his head. It’s the truth. His heats are always in the summer, safely ensconced between July and August so they cannot interfere with a deep Cup run or training for the pre-season. They’re definitely not in the middle of the season in January.

Ilya’s eyebrows raise and then furrow even tighter together. “Hollander, you smell like a fucking—cinnamon bun. You are in heat, da?”

Shane jerks his head, immediate denial. “No, it’s always in August—”

“You are in heat because of me,” Ilya says, speaking over him in a way that would usually have Shane baring his teeth in irritation. Now, he sort of just wants to—roll over. Show his belly. “You triggered my rut, my rut triggered your heat. The game today—did not help.”

“The game today.”

“Da,” Ilya’s scent is all smoke now, rich and dark and woody. “Showing me your pretty neck on the ice and calling me *alpha.* Your body thinks it is time to entice a mate. It is very pretty body, but very stupid if it does not know I have been enticed by you for many years now. You do not need to smell like bakery to tempt a mate.”

The words—the tone—the smell all make Shane want to squirm. Make him want to push further up the bed and present.

He has to focus on his breathing to calm the instincts raging inside of him. Even then, it’s like spraying a misting water over an inferno. Sort of pointless. All he does is buy himself the ghost of a few seconds. “And you don’t want that.”

Ilya has the nerve to look taken aback. “Do not be stupid,” he says, which is at least enough of a dismissal to make Shane bristle. “It is maybe only thing I want. *You* do not want that.”

“Don’t tell me what I don’t want,” Shane bites out, crossing his arms. “You don’t know that.”

“You don’t want a mate, Hollander,” Ilya snaps back, like it’s easy. Like that’s it. Like this is a fundamental truth that Ilya recognizes about him, that he knows it in his bones. “You don’t want to be an omega. You don’t want to be in heat. I know these things! I know *you.”*

Shane pushes himself to his feet and glares back at Ilya, who hasn’t moved an inch further into the room. He hasn’t moved away either though. His back is ramrod straight against the

door, and every so often, his nostrils flare out and his mouth opens the smallest bit—like he's scenting the air. Like he can't help it.

"I—maybe, alright," he hears himself admit. "Maybe you're right. I—it's complicated. Being an omega in the league. It'd be easier if I was—but I'm not. I mean, I'm an omega. And I guess…*maybe* I'm…approaching my…heat." He huffs and runs his hands down his face. The words aren't coming out very easily for him either, and English is his first language. "Fuck, I don't even want to think about—what people are saying," he admits. "And what they—think they know. I wish it'd been more private. I wasn't thinking, it was like…it was all instinct. And it felt good. I wanted that, on the ice. Before the--end. But I wish now—maybe not the All-Stars Game. In Tampa."

"Fucking Tampa," Ilya agrees. His body is leaning forward slightly, like he can't help himself. It makes Shane want. It makes his mouth go dry.

It's just a tiny movement. Ilya can't have swayed more than a few centimeters, but it feels monumental. It gives Shane the courage to wet his lips and say, "You asked me yesterday if I wanted a beta bracelet or an alpha's bite."

Unconsciously, his hand wraps around the wrist that Ilya had grabbed in the elevator, the one he'd kissed so reverently while kneeling on the floor in this room. Ilya's eyes track the movement and linger there, focused and possessive, like he's double-checking to make sure that Rose Landry hasn't broken into Shane's hotel room and given him a *Cartier cuff* since the game.

"And I said…"

"The second one," Ilya quotes. His gaze travels up Shane's chest, back to his face. *"Sorta."*

"Yeah," Shane breathes, and he rubs at the back of his neck automatically, sheepishly. He freezes a moment later when Ilya lets out a punched-out sort of whimper. Shane's scent, unmasked and intensely dripping with—yeah, with the beginning notes of *heat*—waft into the air between them. "When I said *sort of,* I meant. Just you. Not any alpha's bite. Any other alpha. Just, um. Just you."

Ilya's body tenses. The back of his hand, the one holding onto his elbow and keeping his arms locked tight against his chest, flexes. Turns white as he grips at his skin. As he holds himself back. "You do not want a mate, Hollander."

Shane nods, agrees. He doesn't. Not—not right now, not when the question of whether or not the world even knows if he's an omega is still so up in the air. Not when his life is on the cusp of changing in a hundred different ways. He doesn't want a mate on top of that. He doesn't want so many adjustments, changes, so close together. Despite the way he can feel himself grow wetter with desire for just that.

But he's trying to be honest with Ilya, with himself, so he says, eyes looking at the hotel door above Ilya's shoulder. "Not right now, but…I think…I mean. It's been eight years. And I'm…I love you. So if I ever do want a mate, later, it's not going to be anyone if it isn't going to be you, Ilya."

"Shane," Ilya whispers, like the word's been punched out of him.

But Shane's on a roll now, so he continues recklessly: "And I *want* to—um. Help you with your rut. Because you smell really good and I've missed you for months now, I've missed you since I left your place in Boston, and I want to feel you in me, like, yesterday. So I guess the question is if you can—if we can help each other with the cycles we triggered. Without mating. Because I really, really want to do that."

He really, *really* wants to do that. Ilya's scent is making it hard to think again, brain submitting to the fog of what—yeah, is absolutely recognizably *heat* now that he's been given the name for it. He stumbles backwards to the bed, sitting down on the mattress the moment he feels it against his calves.

"And if you can't," he adds, even though the words kill him because they're so far away from what he wants, "then maybe you should go now so I can try to remember where the fuck I packed my dildo, and we can—text. After my heat's done."

"Dirty player," Ilya says, and then he's moving. The only word that comes to Shane's mind to describe the way Ilya walks from the door to the edge of the bed—seven strides—is *stalk.* He stalks towards him, like he's a predator trapping his prey.

"That's not a yes or a no," Shane breathes, pushing himself back further on the bed. And, because he's a dirty fucking player who wants Ilya to touch him more than he wants the Stanley fucking Cup right now—which is probably a thought he'll feel insanely guilty for later—he lets his legs fall open, thighs straining against the thin material of his joggers.

"I will not bite you," Ilya promises. He puts his knee on the bed; his hands fall down just beside Shane's ankles. "I will not mate you."

"Good," Shane says, agrees, ignoring the small spark of disappointment that flares to life in his stomach at the words. "But you said…."

Ilya smirks at him like he knows exactly what he's feeling. He crawls the rest of the way up the bed, all long, unbroken lines of hard muscle. Roses bloom in the air and Shane instinctively tangles his hand in the front of Ilya's shirt so he can't go anywhere without taking Shane with him this time.

"Da, I know what I said," Ilya murmurs, nuzzling his face against Shane's jawline and then down to his neck. His lips linger against his scent gland, and his tongue darts out to lick at him there like he can taste him.

Shane's absolutely boneless beneath him. Maybe it's stupid, to literally put his neck up against the mouth of an alpha in rut and trust that they have enough control to keep their word.

But it's Ilya. And Shane trusts him with this. With all of him. He's trusted him for longer than he's loved him, and he's loved him for ages.

So it's nothing at all to tilt his head up into Ilya's grasp. To move his hands around the alpha's chest until they can settle on his back and drag him closer.

"As long as it does not mean nothing," Ilya whispers, the continuation of a conversation that Shane is quickly running out of brain space for. He pulls back just far enough to press his lips against Shane's scent gland, like it's something to be worshipped. "I could not do this today if you were going to—if it did not matter to you. When it matters so much to me."

Shane's breath catches in his throat at the words. The way Ilya's voice trembles when he says them, like even in a low tone they threaten to break him. He turns his head away from Ilya's face, wriggles his body out from under the alpha so he can lean halfway up against the pillows of the hotel bed with Ilya balanced on top of him, boxing him in.

"It matters to me," Shane promises him, catching Ilya's cheek with his palm and making him look at him. "Ilya, *alpha. Alpha.* I'm not taking that back. I'm not…"

"Running," Ilya supplies. His eyes are dark. The word is a knife through Shane's heart. A reminder.

"Running," he agrees softly.

Ilya scans over his face, like he's looking for the lie. "Da," he says finally. "Okay."

"Okay," Shane repeats, and his hand tangles into Ilya's hair. This is where it belongs, he thinks. "Kiss me?"

Ilya's lips are on his before he can take another breath. The kiss is heady, hungry. They'd kissed yesterday, but only briefly. It'd not been enough. Shane thinks maybe no amount of kisses will be enough to staunch his ever-growing *need* for Ilya, and he's quick to open his mouth under the alpha's assault, push his head up into the pressure of his lips until Ilya's hand clamps down on his neck to keep him still.

He whimpers at the feeling of it. Ilya's palm is rough, calloused and dry. His fingers flex around the column of his throat, fingers rubbing against the edge of his scent gland. Ilya's own scent cascades around him, threatening to drown him in the smell of *aroused, happy alpha.*

And that's *it,* Shane's gone, Shane's brain is officially checked out. He wraps a leg around Ilya's thighs and bucks up into the ridge of his cock. Fuck. *Fuck.*

He's moaning and *dripping,* so wet already he knows he should be embarrassed. But it's impossible to think about that, when Ilya makes a delighted *crooning* noise Shane's never heard before, breaking their kiss so he can force the tee-shirt over Shane's head.

As soon as it's off, his shoulder flexes under Shane's hand, ready to throw it off the bed.

Then the worst thing happens. Ilya pauses; Ilya sits up. "Do you need a nest?" he asks, staring down at Shane as if his answer is the most important thing in the world. It makes him shudder, being the focus of all that attention.

It doesn't help his own focus though. "What?" he mutters, staring at the way Ilya's lips have reddened from the kissing.

"A nest, omega, do you want a nest? For heat," Ilya gestures to the mattress around them, hand still wrapped in Shane's black shirt. Which is really Ilya's shirt, though maybe—hopefully—Ilya hasn't noticed that yet.

What Shane really wants for his heat is Ilya's hands back on him and his cock inside him. He tries to convey that with a frown, but Ilya remains unmoved, message lost in translation.

"Omegas nest during heats," Ilya says like this is very common knowledge. "I can grab clothes from my room, if you need this."

"I definitely don't need you leaving this room," Shane argues immediately, grabbing at Ilya's hips to keep him in place just in case. A very unpleasant thought occurs to him. "Wait, how many omegas have you shared a heat with?"

Ilya blinks. "I think we are getting off topic, *kotenok,*" he says. "Maybe then we go no nest, for now."

"That's not an answer," Shane bites out. He feels a snarl building in his chest at just the thought of it, of Ilya with another omega. Sharing their heat. Laying in their nest. He wants to sink his teeth into something. Into Ilya. It's like being on the ice all over again and watching someone else put their hands on his alpha. They don't have a right to touch him, none of them do. He's *Shane's.*

Shane's shirt gets tossed behind Ilya's shoulder; then he peels off his own tank which is similarly discarded. And finally—finally, Ilya's weight is back on top of him, crushing him into the mattress as he connects their mouths together.

Shane bites at his bottom lip, harder than normal. He can feel Ilya's smirk against his mouth. It makes him all the more wild to have him naked and against him. He rips his head free so he can attack Ilya's neck with his teeth—avoiding his scent gland but covering the other side of his neck with biting kisses that he hopes bruise.

His. His his his. If that's what Shane's gotten from ignoring his instincts, Ilya sharing heats with other omegas, then he's never going to do it again. Not when Ilya is his. His his his.

"Ah, *kotenok,* you are going to leave a mark," Ilya murmurs, sounding fucking thrilled about it.

All Shane can muster in reply is a short, sharp growl of agreement. His hands find the waistline of Ilya's pants and push at it pointedly. Thankfully, his alpha gets the message, and Ilya's weight is gone only for the length of time it takes to kick out of his sweatpants.

Something lands beside Shane's head. A foil-wrapped condom. A whole sleeve of them. Yes. *Yes*.

It's so close to everything that he wants that he's afraid he's going to come right then and there and Ilya will never let him live it down.

He makes some sort of noise—a keen or a whimper or a whine—he doesn't know, something embarrassing, something that demands his alpha's attention and his alpha's hands back on his body, and that's what he gets, along with Ilya's mouth closing possessively over the nub of his nipple. Teeth scrape against it, hard and unforgiving, and it makes Shane cry and buck up into Ilya's mouth.

"Sensitive," Ilya mumbles, moving down and pressing kisses to Shane's stomach as he goes. Is joggers are kicked off, a two-man effort that almost ends with them being ripped completely in two by impatient hands.

"Beautiful," Ilya whispers, kissing a birthmark on Shane's inner thigh. Shane's cock is right there, straining and dripping with want.

"Ilya, please," he begs, unashamed and mind foggy with desire. He thinks he's going to die if Ilya doesn't get his mouth on his cock. And this is supposed to be his *pre-heat?* It's going to get *worse?* This is going to *kill* him.

"Mine," Ilya declares, licking a single line from the base of Shane's cock to the tip as he pushes his hands beneath Shane's legs, forcing them to spread wider. It makes Shane's thigh muscles spasm with the need to buck up. Even just his hot breath along the head of his cock feels too much. "Da?"

"Da, da, yes, da, yours," Shane says. Mindless. He thinks he begs some more. He thinks it must work because Ilya's mouth descends around his cock, taking him to the root in one swallow even as the tip of Ilya's middle finger slips into his hole.

He forgets what happens after that for a little bit, white noise flooding his brain. All he can see and touch and smell and think about is Ilya, is *alpha,* is *mate.* He can feel it when Ilya grows bold—or impatient—and pushes in two fingers at once, stretching him with a renewed sense of urgency. Shane doesn't know whether to push back into the fingers or up into Ilya's mouth. All he can really do is squirm on the mattress and beg.

"Here, here, omega," Ilya is murmuring suddenly, pulling away from his cock and rising up onto his knees and pushing his slick-soaked fingers into his mouth. Shane sucks at them gratefully, running his tongue around the whorls of his fingerprints and drinking up the taste of his own slick. The sight he makes has Ilya cursing in Russian, and then the alpha doesn't really stop speaking, words Shane can't understand falling against his skin as Ilya tears open the condom and slides it over his cock.

His cock. Fuck, Shane wants that in his mouth too, wants Ilya to push him down onto his knees and then knot his mouth. He wants—he wants Ilya to come across his chest, rub it into his scent glands and his skin so there's no way people can smell *omega* on him. So people will only ever be able to smell *Ilya.*

"Flip over, baby," Ilya rumbles, removing his fingers from Shane's face and stroking down his sides instead. "It'll be easy to knot you on your knees."

“You can just say *present,”* Shane finds the brainpower and breath to say. “That’s what your alpha brain wants, isn’t it?”

That earns him a swat on his flank that does little to deter him. It also earns him a hard kiss that can only be taken as encouragement. He thinks maybe Ilya loves his smart mouth, the way he loves it when Ilya’s a bit of an asshole.

Like he is now, when he grabs Shane’s hips and yanks him partially into his lap, the head of his cock nudging against his wet, aching hole. “Показывать,” he growls, eyes flashing. Shane’s entrance clenches around nothing, releasing another gush of slick at the sound. He lets out a high moan, hands scrabbling to touch Ilya’s shoulders, run his fingers through his hair.

Ilya’s teeth find his neck. Carefully, still, just to the right of his scent gland, where it’s safe. Where it’s allowed. Then he bites down.

Shane’s orgasm crashes into him like a tidal wave. He seizes up around nothing, tugging at Ilya’s curls and shaking into his arms as he surrenders to the sensations only his alpha can pull from his body.

He’s barely finished, cock giving one last weak spurt of come, before he’s being spun around and put on his knees. There’s a pillow for him to press his face into that wasn’t there before. His alpha is so attentive. So kind. “Показывать,” Ilya says again, his voice tight with tension and rough with arousal as he grabs ahold of his cock and presses it against Shane’s entrance. “It means *present.* Maybe first Russian word you should learn. Very important.”

Shane pushes his cheek against the pillow, turning his head so he can look back at his alpha. So he can watch the way his face sharpens with hunger as Shane arches his back into what he thinks has to be the classic omega breeding position.

And—isn’t that a thought, being *bred—*

But if it’s a thought worth turning over in his head or not, it doesn’t matter. Ilya’s cock pushes into him in the next moment, too fast and too much and so fucking perfect that it makes every single thought in Shane’s head scatter like he’s just experienced his very own big bang event.

He’s making noises. Maybe even words. He doesn’t know. All he knows is that Ilya’s cock is where it belongs and it’s making him see *stars.* He can hear Ilya’s voice behind him, groaning out something that might be his name or might just be a string of swear words in English and Russian and any other language Ilya’s picked up in the Boston Raiders' locker room.

But it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters except the way Ilya’s cock fucks into him, bullying him open like it’s his *right.* And the way it makes him feel like he’s flying, untethered and floating above everything.

He was scared of this? What the fuck is there to be scared of?

Ilya’s hand finds the side of his face and pushes it around at an angle that’s almost uncomfortable. Except then his lips are on his, tongue fucking its way into his mouth and it’s

perfect.

It's especially perfect when Ilya's frantic pace slows and he can feel the beginnings of his knot pressing against his entrance. There's more effort now, between each thrust, to force the knot back into Shane's hole after every time it leaves. Ilya breaks the kiss to rest his forehead on Shane's back, hand falling from his face down to his cock to tug at it lazily. Shane doesn't need much. He already feels close to coming again, even if his own body feels separate from him, like his pleasure is something he's seeing in a mirror and distantly recognizing as his own.

The fog spreading in his mind and threading through his thoughts doesn't stop him from reaching the crest of another orgasm though, weakly spurting come onto Ilya's hand and the bedcovers beneath him. He trembles through it, whining when he starts feeling oversensitive. Ilya coos again, something that starts soft and sweet and ends with a low, guttural growl as he shunts his knot past the ring of Shane's entrance and starts coming himself.

It's—maybe a while before Shane's brain reboots. He doesn't know.

The next thing he knows, he's on his side, Ilya's arms clamped tightly around his chest and hips, lips trailing along every part of Shane's skin he can reach. "Beautiful," he feels more than hears the word, Ilya's mouth rubbing it into the back of his neck, just below his hairline. *"Moy lyubov.* Beautiful, Shane. *Gorgeous."*

Shane smiles dazedly, pushing his ass back into Ilya's knot. God, it feels amazing. *Endorphins,* a part of his brain whispers. *Your body is releasing endorphins to ease the pain of the knotting. It's an evolutionary failsafe.*

Whatever. Endorphins fucking *rock.*

Ilya's fingers petting through his hair also rocks. Maybe more than endorphins. "You are okay?" he murmurs, voice rough with his accent, like the words have been pulled from deep within his chest and translated into English against their will. "I did not hurt you?"

"I'm fine, I'm good," Shane tells him. It sounds like this is important to Ilya, the assurance. That makes it important to Shane. They share things like this now, maybe. Hopefully, at least. "I feel great. I feel like you killed me."

"That is very different thing from feeling great," Ilya points out, and he's smiling. Shane can tell that he's smiling from the way his lips feel against his shoulder. But also from the way he smells like rosebuds and cedarwood and the way he presses Shane tighter to his chest. Not restrictive, just…sure.

What a beautiful thing, Shane thinks nonsensically. He'd thought he knew most every way he could love Ilya after so long practicing. But this is new. Being held by him, being able to scent his happiness and feel his smile against his skin—it's new and novel and it's beautiful.

Ilya kisses one of the scars on Shane's back. That's also new. They don't usually—kiss. Without intention behind it. Shane likes it though. The only part he doesn't like is being turned away from Ilya and unable to kiss him in return.

“You are quiet,” Ilya observes a few seconds later, shifting in the bed so he can prop himself up on his elbow and peer down at him. The movement makes the knot tug at his rim, and if it didn’t still feel so good, it might have started to hurt.

Fuck, maybe Shane should think about getting knotted before every game if the endorphins and shit feel like this every time. He’s pretty sure he could take a hit from the biggest enforcer on the ice and still pop up feeling like a fucking daisy.

Ilya prods at his side with one hand, leaning closer so he can nuzzle into Shane’s neck. “Say something, Hollander,” Ilya demands gently, biting at the lobe of Shane’s ear and tugging at it. Probably just because he can. Like maybe he’s learning all of these new things about Shane too. "I want to make sure you are with me."

Shane opens his eyes into slits and lets his mouth quirk up into a small smile of his own. “I can’t believe you ran up the stairs to get here. In rut.”

There's a second of silence. “You can be quiet again,” Ilya decides, nipping at his jaw and then relaxing back against him, boneless and content like the cat that got the canary. Or—the omega. Whatever. “Maybe I am just more romantic than you, Hollander.”

“Yeah, because your no boxer-briefs, hard dick in sweatpants, sleeve of condoms in your pocket, and out-of-breath look really screamed romance,” Shane says, pressing his own fingers up to his mouth just so he can feel the edges of his smile. He wonders when he’ll stop smiling. He wonders if maybe that’s the endorphins too, but he doesn’t think it is.

“What did the man tell Meg Ryan?” Ilya says, running his fingers up and over the muscles in Shane’s thighs. “When you want to spend the rest of your life with a person, you want it to start as soon as possible, yes?”

“When did you watch *When Harry Met Sally?”* Shane asks, flabbergasted. He tries to turn over to look at Ilya’s face, but the alpha’s arms keep him still. “Ilya Rozanov, do you watch romance movies?”

“I watch many movies,” Ilya sniffs. His hips shift up against Shane’s ass, the knot still tying them firmly together. “I am very cultured and our plane rides are very long so I have many options. Unlike you, who I think just watch game tape. And documentaries. Probably about Canada.”

Shane’s iPad is, in fact, filled only with videos of his own play from the most recent season and the current one. And most of his teammates’, various clips slowed down and isolated so he can analyze what they need to work on during practice. And, in a very secret folder that’s been untitled since its creation, Ilya Rozanov’s game tape.

For many, many reasons, Shane decides not to say this.

“I told you,” Ilya says, sounding smug. “I am romantic.”

“Fuck you, you just wanted to get your dick wet,” Shane mutters, catching Ilya’s hand and brushing a kiss to his knuckles to take any sting out of his words.

“I wanted to get my dick wet,” Ilya agrees easily. *“And* I wanted the rest of my life to start as soon as possible so I could begin to spend it with you. Both are true.”

“Whatever,” Shane says. It’s easier to say than admit that the words have him blushing scarlet, like maybe Ilya really is a secret romantic.

Thank Christ those romantic tendencies are balanced by his alpha's inherent need to be an asshole, because it’s only a moment later when Ilya adds, slyly, “And how could I ever choose another omega over you?”

Shane opens his eyes again to stare suspiciously at the wall. He knows a trap when he sees one laid out in front of him with flashing neon signs.

“You punched Hayden Pike for me,” Ilya says, grin in his voice. “The biggest and scariest alpha in the league. You are, hm. My hero.”

“Oh fuck off,” Shane snaps, reaching behind him to land a punch on Ilya’s flank. It does nothing to stop the alpha’s laughter, but then—even when it’s at him, it’s one of the most beautiful sounds Shane has ever heard. “Fuck, I’m going to have to grovel for ages. Hands and knees, the whole thing. I can’t believe I did that.”

Ilya isn’t laughing anymore. “We are not speaking about you on your hands and knees for Hayden Pike,” he decides, tone immediately sour and stiff. “I am going to be sick. You are making me feel sick, omega.”

“You brought it up,” Shane argues. “You know how many babysitting nights he’s going to squeeze out of me before he lets it go? Probably, like, a month’s worth!”

“Hm,” Ilya says. “That does not sound so bad.”

Shane huffs. It’s easy for Ilya to say. He’s not the one Hayden’s four children like to use as a swingset, hair stylist, pet dog, vending machine, open wallet, etcetera.

But then Ilya shifts again, more intent behind the gentle nudge of his hips as he tugs his knot shallowly against Shane’s entrance. “Sounds like practice,” he murmurs, and all the breath Shane’s managed to get into his lungs vanishes in an instant.

“Practice,” he repeats, tongue heavy and clumsy in his mouth. “Practice for what?”

“The rest of our lives, maybe, *kotenok,”* Ilya whispers. “Here, I will show you.”

And he does.

In the morning, they will shower off the worst of the mess from the night before and strip the bed of its dirty sheets. While Shane calls for room service to bring them a clean set—left carefully and quietly in front of the door with no contact made between them and the outside world—Ilya will lounge on the armchair by the window and read aloud some of the headlines published in the aftermath of the Tampa All-Star Game.

It is a wonder it didn't happen sooner, Barstool Chicago will write; *All those big superstar egos on the ice, two alphas were bound to go into opposing ruts and try to attack each other. We should just be grateful that Hayden Pike was able to hold Hollander back from attacking Rozanov and Wilson Beecher got the better of Rozanov, or else those two alpha star centres may have really turned up the temperature on their already legendarily heated rivalry.*

They'll laugh about it by the afternoon, after Ilya has finished feeding Shane bits and pieces of a charcuterie tray by hand and Shane has managed to trick Ilya into drinking a whole to-go cup of green smoothie sludge delivered to the door by a bruised and mortified Hayden Pike who held the cup in one hand and pinched his nose with the other. They'll wonder how many people can actually watch the frankly embarrassing videos from the arena and believe the official narrative that the hockey league has decided to push, believe that Rozanov and Hollander were doing anything but trying desperately to tear through everything in their paths in order to get to one another. Not to lay hands on the other, but just to cling. To have, to hold, etcetera.

But it won't really matter. Not immediately. Not for days. Maybe not even for months yet. There's a whole world you can live in within plausible deniability. Especially when there's someone you can share it with; and especially when there's love there as well.

Chapter End Notes

post-heat shane remembering that he begged ilya to come on his skin and rub the mess in during his heat: heat makes you say crazy things. wow. gross. that's so not happening. forget i said that. never happening in a million years lmao crazyyy
ilya: haha yeah
ilya, remembering that shane also said he loved him and he wanted to mate him and he'd never leave him during his heat: wait can uyo mYbe be more specific please. shane plesae. shane? shnae plse

End Notes

be nice it's russian baby's first hangover :(

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