

## the entanglement of undone threads

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/76856721) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/76856721>.

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| Rating:          | <a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Archive Warning: | <a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Category:        | <a href="#">M/M</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Fandoms:         | <a href="#">Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid</a> , <a href="#">Heated Rivalry_(TV)</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Relationship:    | <a href="#">Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Characters:      | <a href="#">Shane Hollander</a> , <a href="#">Ilya Rozanov</a> , <a href="#">Yuna Hollander</a> , <a href="#">David Hollander</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Additional Tags: | <a href="#">POV Shane Hollander</a> , <a href="#">Post-Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers)</a> , <a href="#">Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Anxious Shane Hollander</a> , <a href="#">Domestic</a> , <a href="#">probably also</a> , <a href="#">Medical Inaccuracies</a> , <a href="#">Season-Ending Injury</a> , <a href="#">not to be confused with career-ending injury</a> , <a href="#">shane does in fact confuse the two</a> , <a href="#">Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Insecure Shane Hollander</a> |
| Language:        | English                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Stats:           | Published: 2026-01-01 Words: 19,659 Chapters: 1/1                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

# the entanglement of undone threads

by [boxysmiles](#)

## Summary

"Ilya," Shane tries. "I'm fine in here."

"Then what is the problem?" Ilya asks, trying to keep his voice light, but Shane can hear the strain in it.

Fuck. The problem is always just... it's always Shane, isn't it? That's always the problem. *He's always the fucking problem.*

Shane's season-ending injury leads him to question the future, and who he is without hockey. He doesn't like the answer.

## Notes

tried soooo hard to squeeze this one into 2025 but alas... happy new year and happy new hollanov everyone !! this one does contain tl; spoilerers so be mindful etc etc

i've said this before but it applies always: please be kind about medical (and hockey) inaccuracies, i tried with them but im really just here to write shane whump. thank u <3

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

One dislocated right shoulder, a mild suspected concussion, and a *very* bruised side are enough to put Shane out of commission for pretty much the rest of the season.

It's still early into it, but Shane has everything to prove: that the Centaurs are a team worthy of the top spot, that Ilya and Shane work better together than they ever have apart, and he is worth whatever the Centaurs have paid for in the harassment from the MLH and cyber-trolls and media and the general public.

The harassment has started to slow, at least. Now, there are more reports about the Centaurs as an actual hockey team rather than articles about Shane and Ilya's relationship and sexualities. But even then, even *now*, Shane knows he still has to show everyone that he's the damn best player out there on the ice, still has to play a good season with the team and with Ilya, and most importantly, he still has to *win*.

But then, well.

It's one bad hit against the boards. One other player crashing into him, becoming an unfortunate tangle of legs and blades, and Shane Hollander's next couple of months at *best* have become a write-off. He can't prove anything at all; other than he is breakably human, that homophobic players can *still* get away with shitty jeers while slamming him into boards, and he has just become *another* tiring headline for the Centaurs instead of a valuable player who's *worth* all the trouble of it.

They scrape through with the win for the game itself, but only barely. Shane isn't really with it — mentally *or* physically — for the end of the game, but the results are relayed to him as he sits in the hospital. His shoulder doesn't go back in immediately, doesn't go back in despite a couple of painful attempts at the arena, so he's been brought to the nearest emergency room to get it put back into place.

The drugs are starting to wear off, bringing him back down from the *ridiculously* high cloud he'd been on when they'd been positioning his shoulder, but it's not so bad. It's certainly better than when he'd felt after getting up after the fall, realising his shoulder was *fucked*. He'd been scared, then. Worried he'd just done something career-ending rather than something keeping him out for a season.

But the pain vanished almost as soon as it finally popped back in, so Shane's terror levels are back at a more manageable level. Now, it's more like an annoyance that burns under his skin. Surgery is on the table, a preventive measure to make sure his shoulder doesn't give out again, which means *more* time that he's out of the line-up. It's frustrating, and no amount of drugs are good enough to ease that kind of sting.

The mild concussion means he can't reach for his phone. One of the Centaurs' medical team members — Bryce, he remembers — has come with him to the hospital, and is relaying information back to the home team and management. Shane's going to end up going back to Ottawa for the surgery and for the recovery period, meaning he isn't going to continue on with the team for their next game. The team is flying out in the early hours, but Bryce puts

out some calls and has Shane staying in the city until they pass the twenty-four-hour mark, and then he can fly home.

"I can stay with you tonight," Bryce offers, somewhat pointlessly but politely, because *someone* has to be with Shane for the next twenty-four hours, even though it's well-known that Shane and Ilya share a room when they travel.

Shane chews on his answer for a moment longer than he knows he should. Than he usually would.

They'd gotten into something of a fight, right before the game. Shane's fault: high-strung and anxious, having the burning need to prove that he isn't someone to suddenly be overlooked just because he's with a new team, just because he's with the Centaurs, just because he's *gay*.

And Ilya had tried to reach for his hand in the changing room, and Shane — having just seen a fan wearing a Montreal Hollander jersey, having been set alight by all of his own thoughts and needs and desire to prove that he was still just as good as he'd ever been — had flinched.

It'd been nauseating, seeing the hurt cross Ilya's face, right there in the changing room. And then Ilya had turned away from him, and before Shane could reach for him and make it right, had thrown his arms out and gotten the attention of the entire room as he did his best to hype them up before the game.

Ilya's response had been a pretty clear indication that there wasn't really going to be any chance of fixing it. Not before the game, not during, and— well. Now it's after, and Shane's in the hospital.

He doesn't remember the moments after the hit, not entirely. His ears were ringing, and his shoulder was alight with pain, and he'd been biting back on pained gulps of air. He remembers getting to his feet and clutching at his shoulder, but he'd been dazed, unsteady. A ref's whistle blew loudly and painfully, and he'd been helped off the ice by the closest one to the bench when it was clear he was out of play. He'd been ushered quickly back, out of sight of the crowd entirely, when it was clear his shoulder wasn't quite hanging right, and he—

Well. He hasn't seen Ilya. Doesn't remember seeing him after the hit, even though he knows he'd been trying to look for the Rozanov jersey on the ice, but he'd been crowded in by the ref and then one of the trainers and then the medical team.

The nausea in his stomach is still boiling over, and he does his best to breathe through it.

Regardless of what happened before the game, Shane knows Ilya won't like it if he sleeps elsewhere tonight. It's after, now. Shane has to fix it, and he's not going to fix anything at all if he suddenly gets another hotel room and has Bryce on concussion watch tonight.

"That's alright," Shane answers, giving his head a small shake and then wincing at the small spark of pain behind his eyes. He thinks it's more of a headache, a daze from the hit, than an actual concussion, but he's on concussion-watch protocol anyway. "I mean, not tonight. But after the rest of the team checks out, then, yeah."

After Ilya has to leave, he means.

Bryce nods. Shane tugs at the bedsheets on the medical bed. They're just waiting on some scans to come back to make sure there isn't any further damage to his shoulder. They've got his arm in a sling for the moment, keeping it close to his chest, and Shane has *all* too many memories of the spill he'd taken back for Montreal in the playoffs.

At least Bryce keeps him updated with some of the goings: his parents have been updated on his injury and will be with the results, the team have left the arena and are now having dinner together, but they're constantly badgering for updates on Shane's condition.

Shane swallows down his questions. The biggest one of them all that sits, tight and constricting, in his throat: *Has Ilya asked?*

Will he be able to keep the nausea down if the answer isn't what he hopes to hear?

He doesn't think so. So he swallows down the knot in his throat with every breath, and he doesn't ask anything at all. They wait until the doctors come back into the room, and they confirm that they're not worried about immediate damage to the muscles or tendons in his shoulder. They are worried about this happening again, though: it's only a matter of time, and they think that matter of time will be soon, considering his career. But for now, they say, his reflexes all look good, and the bruising doesn't look like it's hiding anything else under the surface, so it's mostly all just surface-level damage.

And, of course, a potential surgery, which he knows he will probably have to put his hand up for. He doesn't want the fear of a wrong check, of a bad hit, being enough to displace his shoulder again now that the tendons have stretched.

He'll have to work hard. He'll have to make sure to rehabilitate properly and quickly. And he'll have to work twice as hard to try and fit into the team that he already feels slightly out of step with. They're doing well on the ice so far, but Shane's still getting used to them, and they're still getting used to *him*, and he knows he's going to have to work hard to try and bridge the gap between them. Even harder, now.

With the scans back and someone to watch him during the twenty-four hours, Shane's given the all-clear to leave. His arm is still to be in a sling for only the next day, though he knows he'll be right back in one once he goes for the surgery anyway. He stretches out his fingers and tries to enjoy the movement while he's got it, but it's hard not to think of the betrayal of his body.

The painkillers he's on make the trip back to the hotel relatively pain-free, which he's thankful for. He can tell the skin around his ribs is delicate, his shoulder still aching if he thinks too hard about it, and his ears start to ring like he's just been hit against the boards again if his thoughts get away from him, but it's all mostly buried under a level of decent painkillers. He's going to need something strong to get through the plane ride — especially with the tenderness of his side, he thinks. But maybe it won't be as bad as it probably looks.

It's going to look bad. He knows it. A painting of only pinks and reds tonight, if he's lucky. The worst of it will develop when Ilya is away, at least.

Bryce walks him to his hotel room, and Shane belatedly realises something as he pats down his pockets, awkwardly fumbling with the ice-bag he's been given for his shoulder. He'd gone to the ER with none of his effects — no phone, no cards, and certainly no key-card.

He only has his chest protector, elbow and shoulder pads, because no one had been able to get them off him until his shoulder had gotten back into place. Bryce is holding onto them now in a hospital-provided bag, while Shane walks through the hall dressed in the remaining mismatch of hockey gear.

Bryce pauses and waits for him to finish his pat-down, giving him an eyebrow raise when Shane pats himself down *again* like he's ever carried anything out there on the ice with him. Like the entry for his hotel room is suddenly just going to appear.

"I don't have my card," Shane admits. Sometimes their team members have the duplicate cards, but they haven't crossed paths with anyone else yet for it to have been handed off to Bryce. They'll have to go back down to the lobby to ask the receptionist, or they'll have to meet up with one of the members. Shane's already half-turning, prepared to head back down the elevator and make this stupidly long day even longer.

Bryce is unconcerned, though, as he just reaches out and knocks on the room's door. Shane's mouth opens, half in protest, but the question of *has Ilya asked?* still sits right there, on the tip of his tongue, ready to spill forth with all of his regret and guilt. He swallows it back, and by the time he's sure it's down somewhere in the bottom of his lungs, the door is already swinging open from the other side.

Ilya is standing there, shirtless, with his sweatpants sitting low on his hips. His hair is damp, but already the curls are in ruffled patterns, like he's been tugging restlessly at it. His eyes quickly flitter over Bryce, then look further, landing quickly on Shane, who's still half-turned away from the door.

"*There you are,*" Ilya says in Russian, his eyes giving away his relief.

The nausea does not get better.

Of course, Ilya would have asked. Of course, of *course*.

"I'll leave him in your care," Bryce says, passing the bag of Shane's protective gear over to Ilya. "Remember that he's on concussion watch, so no screens. Please message if you're worried about anything."

"Yes, thank you," Ilya says, switching back to English and giving Bryce a short nod.

Bryce turns and leaves them be, and the moment he's out of sight, Ilya pushes off the wall and reaches straight for Shane, taking hold of his left hand. Shane is already reaching out for him, wanting to fall into him now that they have the time alone. Wanting to apologise for having flinched, wanting to apologise for not having asked if Ilya was worried. But his mouth feels sour, and his throat tight, and he isn't able to say anything at all.

Ilya gently pulls him into the room, and Shane lets himself be tugged in. Ilya leads him over to the bed straight away, but Shane pulls back as they pass the bathroom, hesitant. He's still mostly in hockey gear, and he smells of antiseptic and hospitals and just—

He needs a moment under the hot spray, he thinks. To try and let some of the nausea that's low in his stomach dissipate. He just needs a few moments on his feet, thinking about Ilya's hand in his own, and thinking over the best way to say that he's sorry.

"I want to shower," Shane says.

Ilya's eyes flicker to the bathroom as he considers it. Then, as he comes to a decision, he nods. "Okay. Then we shower."

"You've already showered," Shane points out.

Ilya shrugs. "So? If my husband wants to shower, then who am I to say no?"

*My husband.*

And Shane had flinched the moment Ilya tried to reach out for him in that locker room. He'd been unable to voice the question if Ilya even asked about him tonight in the hospital. He didn't even consider that Ilya would already be in the hotel room, waiting for him to come back.

*Would you choose me?*

His own question rings bitterly in his head. It's an old argument. A very fucking stupid one. Shane knows he'd been wrong the second he'd fired back the question at Ilya, but he'd been unable to bite back on the anger, the fear, the insecurity. Hockey was *all* that Shane ever thought he was. All that ever made him important. Shane Hollander was nothing, *no one*, without hockey. Everything he'd done, everything he kept hidden away, had been *for* it.

He knows now, having stood in a meeting room and having picked Ilya before hockey in a heartbeat, without a single beat of hesitation, where his answer is.

He knows he will always pick Ilya first. He will become nothing, will lose everything, just to have Ilya. He knows this, now.

Ilya has picked him, too. Ilya has *always* picked him first.

And Shane—

Shane flinched away in the locker rooms tonight, unable to try and accept the quiet comfort and reassurance that Ilya was trying to offer to him as his husband.

*You can't do that here*, he had thought, when Ilya's fingers reached for him. *I am a player, nothing more, and I will hold it together.*

But then, he couldn't brave asking if Ilya even *asked* about him, there in that hospital room. Ilya would have asked about him, if he were his captain. If he were *only* his captain and

nothing more. And still, blurring that line himself, captain and husband and husband and captain, one and the same and everything to Shane, he couldn't bear the thought of Ilya not asking. So he didn't ask at all.

He's rattled, he knows. It's pressure that's been building, slowly but surely, suffocating him on all sides. The hit against the boards is just a physical manifest of everything, quite literally shaking up his thoughts, reminding him that his body can only go so far. Reminding him that *he* can only go so far.

He tries to bury his thoughts so that the guilt doesn't twist into his expression.

"Ilya," he exhales, like he's trying to sigh but unable to quite commit to the exasperation of it. Even now, he's terrible at playing pretend. "I can shower myself."

He just... he needs a couple of minutes, he thinks. He won't be able to get anything out with his thoughts spinning, with the guilt gnawing so heavily at his lungs, with Ilya standing so close to him. His thoughts will just loop around on themselves, a snake that's wrapped around itself and trying to consume its very own tail.

*Will you please not reach for me? I am a player, nothing more, and I will hold it together. Will you ask me how I am? Would you choose me? You can't do that here. Would you choose me?*

Ilya drops the bag of his gear to the ground unceremoniously. Shane's about to scold him for it on reflex, but Ilya takes a step closer and squeezes his hand tighter, taking up all of his attention and all the words from his throat.

"Shane," he says pointedly.

"Ilya," Shane tries to say, measured. Careful. He has had *plenty* of showers without Ilya, this is not an unreasonable request, he tells himself.

"You are on concussion watch," Ilya reminds him. "And you are injured. If *you* want to shower, then *we* shower."

"I'm really not that concussed," Shane mutters. He still remembers the ringing of his head with his first, the confusion, the complete daze that followed for the following hours. This isn't like that.

"Oh, sorry, are you a doctor now?"

"No," Shane mutters, with a slight roll of his eyes. "But I can stand in the shower for a few minutes."

"Great," Ilya says, then pulls Shane towards the bathroom. For a moment, Shane thinks he's actually about to get what he's asking — pleading — for, but Ilya only steps out to switch on the hallway light, shutting the door partially so that it blocks most of the direct light but still keeps the bathroom somewhat illuminated. He steps back in and flips on the overhead fan, then folds his arms across his chest and waits.

Shane stands there, waiting in turn.

Ilya tilts his head towards Shane. "Well?"

"Well *what?*"

"You wanted shower," Ilya reminds him, gesturing with a lazy flap of his hand to the shower stall. "So."

"Do you want a show?" Shane fires back.

Ilya studies him. Shane holds his ground.

If he folds here —

*Fuck*, if he folds here, then he's going to unspool into a threadbare rope. Frayed and coarse, barely holding it together. He thinks if he lets it all go now, something is going to snap. There are pieces of the rope that are broken, no longer held together, and he's going to be something ugly and unmade when it all spills out.

He knows what Ilya is trying to play into. He *knows*, because he's fallen into this rhythm before. He's barked back, and Ilya has made the call on his bluff. Has let him bark, and bark, angry and upset and hurt, and has taken it all in stride. And when Shane has emptied himself out, when he is hollow, he steps in and firmly takes hold of Shane's stupid muzzle. Holds him, commands him, takes all of Shane's empty hollowness and then slowly builds him back up into something whole once he's sure he's got all the pieces.

Shane's head is spinning, though. He doesn't— he doesn't want that. Not tonight. Not when he flinched, not when he fucking *doubted*, not when he can't keep himself together. Ilya has a game to head out to tomorrow. Ilya has a team that he needs to focus on. Shane is now sidelined for the next few games, for most of the fucking *season*, unable to help or do *anything*.

"Ilya," Shane tries. "I'm fine in here."

"Then what is the problem?" Ilya asks, trying to keep his voice light, but Shane can *hear* the strain in it.

Fuck. The problem is always just... it's always Shane, isn't it? That's always the problem. *He's always the fucking problem*.

"You need to get some sleep," Shane says.

"Yes. So do you."

It is very clear Shane is not really going to get far with this. He lets out a long exhale through his nose, trying not to show his agitation. Ilya cares. Ilya cares *so fucking much*.

Fine, *fine*. He's going to have to get changed, anyway. He needs to get out of these clothes regardless. A shower will almost be a reward for him after it all.

His jersey is going to be a pain. And Ilya is clearly *waiting* for Shane to fold, to let Ilya take over. But he wants Shane to hit the point on his own.

*Not happening tonight*, he tells himself. If he unspools, the result is going to be too messy. He doesn't want Ilya to worry about cleaning it all up, trying to piece together whatever the fuck is wrong with him this week. He can undress himself, and he can wash himself down in the shower. The painkillers he's on mean that he can move without the signals of pain getting through to his brain.

It's easier to ignore it, he thinks, when he's on the ice. When the adrenaline rush of being out there on the ice, when the desire to win, eclipses it all. In this bathroom, with only the smell of hospital antiseptic and the sound of Ilya's breaths, there is no room for the adrenaline. The idea of a fight, of winning, is only tiring to him right now.

This shouldn't be a fight. Shane shouldn't be making this one. But still, he's trying to prove himself. Trying to prove that he can do this, that he will win.

He puts down the toilet seat lid and sits on the edge of it, putting the ice pack in the sink. He reaches down, thankful his ribs are currently in a blissful state of ignorance, and takes off his shoes with his left hand. Tugs off his socks, placing them over the top of his shoes. He doesn't want them touching the rest of his clothes, or the bathroom tiles, even though he'd just been wearing them.

Next comes his pants. His shin guards are probably somewhere in the room, given to Ilya after they'd stripped what gear they could from him before sending him to the E.R. The order of undress feels all wrong, and his fingers itch to pull at gear that isn't even on him.

Still, he keeps going. Tugs off the jock pants underneath, then hesitates as he gets to his underwear.

Ilya has watched him undress plenty. But there's a different weight to his stare now, one Shane isn't used to stripping his clothes off under, and it makes him feel squeamish. Uncertain, for the first time in years.

He decides to skip it, for now. He'll strip them off when he stands, he decides. Maybe he can get Ilya out of the room if he gets most of himself figured out. The sling keeps him mindful about his arm staying still, but he takes it off now, hanging it over the towel rack for the time being.

Taking in a deep breath, he prepares himself for his jersey. The painkillers are *good*, but they're not completely numbing. He knows there will be a twinge of pain as he agitates his ribs, and he wants to try and keep that flash of pain out of his features so that Ilya doesn't catch it.

His fingers curl around the bottom of it, figuring it might be a little less stressful on his ribs to try and pull it up over his head that way, and Ilya's steady rhythm of breaths is interrupted by an annoyed *tch* sound. Shane looks up, and he sees Ilya uncurling his arms, walking forward to Shane.

"I can do it," he defends immediately, fingers tightening on the bottom of his shirt. Ilya doesn't stop walking forwards though, and Shane kicks out a leg, trying to get his foot to act as a stopping point before Ilya can reach him. "Ilya. I've got this."

"Oh my god," Ilya breathes out, clearly irritated now. Shane takes the opportunity to try and rush through getting off his jersey, tugging it up over his shoulders. He's glad, now, for the method he's chosen — he can suck in a sharp, pained breath and twist his face in the hidden darkness of the shirt as he gets it towards his face.

Still, Ilya's fingers thread through the fabric, and he helps Shane get it off when he pauses with the pain. He's more gentle than Shane is with it, though Shane is burning with regret and shame so heavy that he wishes Ilya just let him do this on his own.

"You are so stubborn," Ilya tells him, taking the jersey from his hands and folding it for him. He picks up Shane's pants and folds them up, too, which Shane has disregarded doing as his thoughts have been spinning too much.

Shane considers taking a stance right here, on the toilet seat lid. *No. Leave me alone. That's what I deserve. Go and sleep, Ilya. Let me piece myself back together.*

*That*, he knows, won't get him anywhere. He'd basically be handing Ilya one of his frayed ends and asking him to pull.

"Ilya," he sighs. "I've got it. Promise."

Ilya turns from where he's been placing the clothes down, and then he hisses through his teeth as his eyes flutter down.

Shane looks, too. Mostly still red and pink, where the skin feels more tender. Some purple, where it feels the most. He tries to position his arms so that they're blocking the worst of it as he repositions himself.

"Looks worse than it is," Shane says.

"Looks pretty fucking bad."

Shane shrugs, still mindful to keep the bruising as covered as possible. "Decent hit. It's fine."

The shoulder is actually the worst of it. Fuck, does Ilya know about the potential surgery? Shane hasn't *actually* confirmed anything yet, but he's flying to Ottawa instead of just staying here for an extra day and *then* flying with the rest of the team, so it's probably easy to figure out.

"If it's so fine, then let me see," Ilya says.

"It's just some bruising," Shane says. Ilya levels him with a certain stare, so Shane sighs and sweeps out his left arm — Ilya's going to see it, he knows, so he may as well just give this up for now. At least Ilya won't see the worst of it, when the yellow and the blues and greens start to appear. At least he probably won't be dealing with Shane post-surgery. Not immediately, at least.

But Shane will be off the ice for the weeks following with rehab, and Ilya will probably see whatever pieces Shane has managed to scrap himself together with then.

He lets out a breath, trying to expel the thoughts for now. That will be a couple of weeks away. Shane's just in the worst of it, now. He needs to remember that.

Ilya's clearly unhappy about the bruising, but they've seen it all before. There's little he can do other than ice it.

"Alright. Shower," Ilya decides. Shane hesitates. "What? Are you modest, now? Hiding something in your underwear I haven't seen before?"

There's a bite to Ilya's voice. The sounds of his words come out sharper, harsher. Like a glint of the light, reflecting off glass, piercing too close to his eyes. He squints against it and tries to keep his vision clear.

Of course Ilya's frustrated. Shane's dragging out this whole process. They've been naked in front of each other plenty of times.

But not like this, really. Not with this kind of anger, not with these sharp edges — and if there ever is, then Shane can let himself bark, try and bite back, and then he can fall into Ilya's familiar cadence, let Ilya strip him down until all the bad pieces of him are smoothed over. Let Ilya guide him to his knees, guide him into forgiveness, guide him into being good, into being the best.

Not like this, though. Not when he's being asked to stand, and the act of showering is nothing sexual, and Shane is all bruises and hurt that can't be fixed tonight. These pieces won't be smoothed over; they're too jagged, microscopic hairline cracks that are going to splinter the moment there's pressure, and there's no way for him to rebuild in time.

He makes himself stand. If he sits for any longer, he thinks Ilya will try and pull him to his feet, and Shane won't be able to resist. He'll fold — crease, first. Then fold. Tear right down the middle as he does.

Too much. It's going to be too messy, too much, when the shattering comes.

He gets to his feet. He puts a hand out on the wall to balance himself as he pulls down his briefs, kicking them off at his ankles, but grabs them before they can slide across the floor and into Ilya's reach. He folds them, puts them on top of the pile of dirty clothes, and ignores Ilya's hand still trying to reach across the space between them.

He straightens up, once again sending a mental prayer of gratitude to doctors and their painkillers, and walks to the shower.

Ilya has seen him naked *plenty*; even more than he has seen Shane in Centaurs gear. He tries to remind himself of this as he steps into the shower and turns on the water. It's not warm enough yet, but he forces himself under the spray, ducking his head under it and letting it pound on the back of his neck.

He hears Ilya's clothes hit the floor. He hides a heavy exhale under the drum of the water.

He wouldn't leave Ilya alone, either, if Ilya just came out of the E.R. with a dislocated shoulder, ribs a colourful rainbow, and a *slight* concussion. He'd take every bitter, angry word that Ilya could level at him, and he'd strip his clothes down too, and he'd get in the shower.

He would, even though he knows it would hurt. It would hurt *so fucking much*, especially if Ilya had flinched away from him.

But Ilya has never flinched. Ilya has never questioned, never doubted, not like Shane has — *is*.

Shane tilts his head back and lifts his hand so he can brush the water away from his eyes. Ilya is here, is in this shower, because he loves Shane. Loves Shane despite his temper and his hurt and his stubbornness.

"Here," Ilya says, and Shane blinks his eyes open from the water to see that Ilya has a washcloth held out. He goes to take it, but Ilya shakes his head and gestures for Shane to step closer to him.

Shane can do it. He can do this on his own.

But he thinks he's argued against Ilya enough, and he fears if he tries to pull back any harder, then Ilya will not let him keep the distance he is trying so hard to keep. It's not folding, not yet. It's a small give, but it's not everything. He nods, and steps out from the direct stream, and Ilya runs the cloth over him. Left hand, arm, shoulder. Over the left side of his chest, then his stomach, and then comes back up to Shane's right side.

The cloth is white, bubbling over with soap. The pink and red bruises do not transfer onto it, though it almost feels like it should. Like Shane's hurt should be something contagious.

"Okay?" Ilya asks, as he runs it over Shane's side, then carefully over his shoulder.

"Okay," Shane confirms. He wouldn't say otherwise, he thinks, but he's being honest right now.

Ilya hums. He washes Shane's right arm, hand, and then his back. Everything lower. He's clinical about it, no lingering touches, no curve to his lip as he teases the washcloth too closely to Shane's dick.

Ilya's done something like this before, for him. A few times. Just a shared wash-up, a clean-up of their activities. Shane has been red and pink before, too, but they're marks he *likes*. They're marks that Ilya brushes over smugly, reverently, but never quite carefully. Ilya's been marked up, too, and Shane has taken his time kissing the path they've created across his skin, a canvas he wants to keep painting forever and ever.

But now, these marks aren't something to be proud of. And Shane isn't boneless, sated, or ready to get on his knees and go for another round. He's tense, a tension coiled low that

refuses to unwind even as Ilya drags the cloth over his chest like he can try and massage out the knots.

Finally, Ilya sighs and nods, and Shane steps back under the water and lets all of Ilya's soapy efforts wash down the drain.

"Do you want your hair washed?" Ilya asks.

Shane shakes his head. "No, not tonight."

If he lets Ilya's fingers sink into his scalp, then he'll unravel from the top down.

"Okay," Ilya says. He, too, is still carrying tension.

Neither of them quite knows what to do with it.

When he's sure that Ilya's not interested in properly getting under the spray, he shuts off the water. Ilya reaches out and grabs a towel, then wraps it around Shane's shoulders. He's about to ruffle Shane's hair with it, Shane knows, so he takes hold of the edges of it before Ilya can lift it.

He'll come undone if he's not careful.

"Thanks," he says.

Ilya's mouth twists. "Right. Okay."

Shane drops his head down and rubs his hair with the towel, rougher than he usually would. He'd typically dry it with the blow dryer, but the noise of it would probably be unwelcoming, so he sticks with just doing his best to wring out the water from his longer strands now. When it's no longer dripping, he wipes himself down, and notes that Ilya has stepped out of the shower and is drying off on the mat.

"I'll get your clothes," Ilya says. Shane doesn't have anything to say in response other than another mumble of gratitude, so Ilya leaves, and all that accompanies Shane in the bathroom is his own breaths, the whir of the fan, and a colourful array on his side that won't wash away.

He puts the towel around his waist and holds it tight, like it's a way to keep all of his emotions pressed tightly and contained, too.

He knows he's being ridiculous. Knows he's being difficult. Ilya — just wants to fucking *help*. It's not his fault that Shane got in his own head, that he ever doubted that Ilya would reach out to him while he was in the hospital, that he wouldn't be waiting for him in the hotel room.

And he *was*. He was waiting there for Shane, like he'd been there all night, just waiting.

*There you are.*

"Fuck," he whispers, dragging a hand down his face. Why can't he let Ilya help?

But that's— that's the problem, isn't it? That Shane *needs* help? Shane had been the one to flinch. He should be the one reaching out between them, trying to patch it all up. But he'd gotten injured, and he worried Ilya, and he fucking *doubted* him. The problem is always fucking *Shane*.

He drops his hand just in time for Ilya to slip back into the bathroom, half-dressed again in his sweatpants, and Shane's folded clothes in his hand.

"Want to sit?" Ilya asks. Shane shakes his head and reaches out for the clothes. Ilya is hesitant for a moment, but he passes over the briefs and the pants. He doesn't have a shirt for him, but it's always a toss-up if Shane will even bother with wearing one for the night. It depends on the bedsheets, sometimes. Depends how cold it is, depends if either of them are just going to strip it right back off again.

Shane pulls on the clothes for the night, then puts the sling back on. Ilya picks up the clothes on the floor and walks with them back to the suitcase, which he decides to put in Shane's after a moment of deliberation.

"Now, sit," Ilya tells him, gesturing to the bed. He rifles through Shane's suitcase some more, eventually coming up with a small tub. It probably doesn't have enough left in it to cover the area Shane's managed to bruise up tonight, but it's all they've got for now.

Shane sits on the edge of the bed. Ilya crouches down before him, getting between his legs, and scoops out some of the ointment. Shane keeps his hands awkwardly somewhere near his lap, moving his arm when Ilya needs him to.

It's quiet. Awkward. Shane shifts, and Ilya's fingers drift down to his thigh like he's about to pinch him for it, but then they smooth out before he can. They truly don't know how to navigate this type of exposure, Shane thinks, even now. But that's not fair, either; Shane's shutting Ilya down, and Ilya doesn't know the way in if Shane won't let him try and find it.

He squeezes his hands together. Stares at the curls on Ilya's head.

He's got a flight to catch, tomorrow. He's already up too late, trying to take care of Shane. Shane can't let him go without at least fucking *trying*.

"I'm sorry," Shane says quietly, forcing the words out. "That I flinched, in the locker room. I —"

Ilya looks up at him. Shane loses his words as he sees Ilya's expression, the devastation across it for a moment before he shuts it off. Shane reaches out before he can stop himself, cupping Ilya's cheek.

Ilya leans into a moment, eyes closing, but then he sighs and shakes his head, dislodging Shane's grip.

"It's okay," Ilya says. "I know."

"It's not okay," Shane insists.

Ilya gets to his knees. "We are not used to it being public. I understand, Shane."

*If you understand, then why did you turn around so quickly?* He bites back, mentally, then feels awful guilt pull it down and squash it before he can even *think* about getting those words on his tongue. *That's not fair. Don't.*

Why is he trying to pick a fight? Fuck. He doesn't know. His head hurts.

But there's still tension in the air, something left unsaid. Shane wants to curl over, wants to put his head in his hands and his palms over his ears and block it all out, but he can't yet. He waits, and waits, until finally, Ilya is the first to give.

"But even in private, now, you..." Ilya huffs in frustration, gesturing between them. He turns off the light, then sits down on the other side of the bed, closer to the headboard than Shane is, like suddenly the game and the entire night has caught up to him and he's entirely out of gas. Shane wants to reach for him, wants to climb across the bed and crawl into his side, but he remains frozen where he is. A stupid, stubborn fixture on the end of the bed.

The tension, slowly, crumbles. When Shane chances a look behind him, he sees Ilya's eyes focused on him, but all the frustration has melted from his body. Now, he just looks tired.

"I'm sorry," Shane says again. He *is*.

"I know," Ilya breathes out. He reaches out with a hand. "But you won't let me help. Then what am I supposed to do?"

"You do enough," Shane says quickly. He reaches out his left hand. *You do so much. Too much. I'm so, so sorry. You always give up so much for me.*

Ilya runs his thumbs over the back of Shane's hand. He tugs Shane slightly, just enough so that he can close the distance and kiss the back of his hand. He seems content to just sit like this, as they are, hand in hand, but Shane eventually pulls his hand back.

"You need to sleep," Shane says.

Ilya pulls a face, but he takes Shane's hand again, and pulls him up with a bit more force. Shane lets himself fall down slowly onto the bed. He realises Ilya's taken the other side of the bed for once, so that the bed is dipping on Shane's left side rather than his right.

He wants nothing more than to curl around Ilya, than to hide his face, to press a kiss to the back of Ilya's neck. But he's constrained to lying on his back and staring up at the ceiling, trying to make himself comfortable despite the unusual position.

"I'm going to get the surgery," Shane tells him quietly, letting the words float up into the air and disappear like small popping bubbles.

"Mhm," Ilya hums. "Will be okay. Many have it."

"Yeah," Shane says, trying to believe in it. He hasn't missed so much of a season since his concussion in Montreal. He's been injured plenty, but he's been fortunate enough to have

injuries that will only bench him for a game or two. Nothing quite to this extent. And it's so *early* into his career with the Centaurs, and they've taken on such a risk having him, and he *knows* it. Ilya's taken on a bigger risk welcoming him into his team, into messing with the *good* dynamics that all the guys have.

And now Shane's out for the next couple of months at *least*.

Ilya's hand searches for his in the darkness. Shane curls their fingers together and counts out his breaths.

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The flight home is a teeth-gritting fucking *nightmare*.

He's on painkillers, but not ones on the same grade that the hospital doped him up with. He's sorely missing them now, as the plane hits turbulence and makes him go sheet-white with pain shooting in his side.

He takes a little while longer than he usually would to get off the plane, making sure most of the tension creased into his face has disappeared before he heads to the luggage carousel. Bryce picks up his bag for him and helps him wheel it out, where his mom is waiting for him to come out, taking the bags from Bryce the moment she's close enough.

Everything's been organised for him. They've already managed to get the surgery scheduled within the next two days. Shane's parents have elected to come stay with him for the next week, waiting until Ilya's back home to take over the whole watch-over-Shane duties.

At least Anya's in the car, waiting with his dad, when he comes out. He manages to snap a photo and send it to Ilya before his mom can notice that she's on his phone. He hasn't messaged Ilya much in the last day: he checked in to say he was at the airport, then that he'd touched down, and now the photo of Anya. He's shit at typing with his left hand, there's the concussion to consider, and while things are *okay* between them, he thinks, they're still tentative. Shane is aware that his hurt, with all its sharp edges, is still cutting into the space between them.

The ride back to his house is hardly any better pain-wise, even though he's just tipped back two more tablets. But his ribs are truly starting to let him know how much they do *not* appreciate the hit against the boards.

He was hoping that his mood could at least also be put down to the hit on his head, but the guilt doesn't quite ease over the day, and when he thinks about the fact that Ilya's going to come back home after these games and Shane's just going to be on the couch, dealing with the post-surgery problems, he feels nothing but dread.

He's ushered to sit down the moment that he's in the house, while his mom goes to make some dinner. Shane usually schedules a grocery delivery the day they get home, but he hasn't

thought about it amongst everything, but there's enough food that could last in the fridge and freezers to make do. When it's ready, they all sit at the table, and his mom takes a photo and puts it in the groupchat. He can tell because both his and his dad's phones buzz at the same time.

"You don't need to see it," his mom says, waving her hand when he goes to pull his phone out. "Remember, go easy on the screens."

"I *am*," he complains, tilting his head back in annoyance. "Mom, really. I'm grown. I've done this whole concussion thing before, remember? And it's really not that bad this time, promise."

"And yet you are still my boy. Stubborn to the core," she replies, wagging her finger at him. "Eat."

*Stubborn* sends a pang to his chest. Barbed and too delicate to try and extract, so he just dips his head down. His dad manages to catch his eye, sending him a sympathetic but slightly amused smile, which eases some of the sting.

Their phones don't buzz again, not until an hour later, and Shane realises Ilya has replied.

"He says it looks good," his dad explains, opening up the message before Shane can. "Wishes he was here."

His parents send a reply for him, which is good, because Shane's not quite sure what to say. He wants Ilya here too — being here, all on his own, without Ilya is just... it's *weird*. Wrong. But Ilya needs to be with the team, with *his* team.

Shane ends up on the couch, because he can't convince himself to head for their bedroom alone, Anya in his lap, as he listens to the television. There's nothing interesting going on, though it all sort of fades into noise as he replays, over and over again, the previous night with Ilya. The locker room. Whatever conversation drones on through the speakers of the television barely registers to him.

His dad comes out for a little while, a couple of hours after Shane thought his parents had fallen asleep in the guest room. He passes Shane a glass of water and some painkillers, then sits on the further end of the couch. Shane figures his mom has probably put him up for this, but the quiet between them is comfortable, so he doesn't mind. Anya barely stirs from her place on his lap, and he threads her fingers through her fur and plays a little game of trying to match his breaths to hers. They're shorter, faster, easier to draw in with his bruised sides.

"We've been so lucky as parents, you know," his dad says, disturbing the quiet — like gently sinking a rock into a pond, the ripples slow and pleasant. "And as spectators of this sport. Every time you get out there, we just want you to have fun. To play a good game that you can also be proud of. But most of all, we never want to see you hurt. And we've been lucky, most of the time. Luckier than most parents, really."

"Dad," he whispers, going to sit up, but his dad looks over and smiles, then gestures for him to lie back down.

"Your mom's always had a game plan, you know? From your first ever games, to your first international. And she kept them up, always updating the plan if something happened at one of your away games. All these plans about who'd go and fly out with you, if only one of us could. But one of us was *always* going to be there, no matter what," he says.

Shane gives a small nod. He knows this, for the most part. His parents were always mindful of their leave use at work, planning out things around Shane's hockey games.

"She stopped doing that when you moved to Ottawa," his dad admits. "Because we knew Ilya would be there with you. I mean, she does have plans in the scenario that *both* of you do something, or maybe you're not there, because— well, Ilya's a little more inclined to getting his teeth knocked, so. She worries."

Shane laughs, then, surprised and fond. "Yeah."

His dad reaches out and puts a hand on his leg. He lets out a breath.

"But we've been lucky. Haven't had to use those plans much, you know. We've been relieved about that."

"Until now?"

"Well, for the most part. I know it probably feels overbearing for you, it's just that we've never... All these plans, we still don't quite know how to be there for you. Your mom..." His dad trails off, trying to think of the right words, before he just hopelessly says again, "She worries."

"I know."

His dad taps his leg. "Yeah. And I do too, you know. And I know you're upset about the injury, and I know it's hard without Ilya. But just bear with us for a little, alright?"

"Alright," Shane echoes, voice more hollow than he'd like it to be.

"Don't sleep out here. It's a nice couch, but I promise, the bed is always better."

"You slept on the couch almost every afternoon after work," Shane remembers. He's glad to try and deviate the topic, away from the thought of his parents and all their plans, all their worries.

"Yes. So believe me when I tell you, choose the bed, alright?"

Shane listens, but he doesn't get much sleep in the bed, either.

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The surgery is quick — it feels like the general anaesthesia has barely taken effect before he's walking right back out.

His arm is back in a sling, of course. This time, it's for another couple of weeks.

His mom takes a photo of him the moment he emerges. He scowls at her, and she shrugs all too innocently.

"Ilya was messaging," she says, her focus diverting as he taps away at her phone and very obviously sends the photo to him.

They've been doing their best to message between Ilya's practices — which should have been their routine, together — but now Shane's picking up the phone as he lies on the couch or takes his third walk of the day just to get out of the house. Even Anya has stopped getting excited about the number of them he's taking.

He's been going stir-crazy. It's hardly even been four days.

His mom laughs, tilting the phone back to show Shane the image of a grumpy, black cat that Ilya has sent back that is obviously meant to represent Shane. Shane rolls his eyes and heads for the reception desk to finish off his discharge. She makes sure he's all good to go, and then they head for the car.

"Are you hungry?" She asks, putting her phone away.

Shane's is in his back pocket. His last messages with Ilya sit from a couple of hours ago: Ilya wishing him well on the surgery, telling him that he'd be fine. Shane, riddled with anxiety about the whole thing, just avoided the entire topic of the surgery and sent back *win the game for me*.

He trusts his medical team, of course. Trusts that this surgery is the best decision for his career, even if it's just taken him out of the season for the next six months. So. The whole regular season, really. And if the Centaurs don't make the playoffs this year, then that's kind of just *it*. The whole season, gone.

A new club, a new team, and *nothing* to fucking show for it. Just an answer to all the speculations and the narratives: that yes, Shane Hollander has wasted his peak seasons in a team that turned their back on him, that he won't be able to help build a new team into the playoffs, that he's a waste of money and ice time and not worth the entire scandal around his sexuality.

And *if* the Centaurs make it, and he hopes that they do, then they make it without Shane. Ilya will make it just fine without Shane.

He bites down hard on the edge of his thumb when he catches that thought.

"Shane," his mom says.

"Huh?" He snaps his attention back to the present, where he's currently in the passenger seat of the car. He remembers the question, now. *Are you hungry?* His stomach rumbles and

answers it for him — he's been unable to eat since the morning with the procedure, and his body's kind of out of whack already. "Oh. Uh. Yeah."

"We can stop and get something," his mom hums, a laugh at the edge of her words. "A good post-surgery meal."

"Sounds good," he says.

They stop at a small cafe, mostly based around nutritional meals. Shane picks at a small bowl and sips at a coffee, frowning to himself every time he remembers that he has to pick it up with his left hand.

"How's the shoulder?" His mom asks.

"Yeah, no, it's fine," he replies, giving his elbow a small tap with his left hand. "Like, not much pain right now."

"We'll pick up the new prescription on the way back," his mom says. She eyes him for a few moments, then clasps her hands together and leans back, and he thinks *Oh, no*. "Alright. What's really going on in that head of yours?"

Shane feels his eyebrows furrow as he looks at her. "What?"

She taps her forehead. "Up here. You're a thousand miles away lately. What's got you so worried?"

Shane stares at her. For a few moments, he almost can't believe her question.

"Um," he says, and then raises his right arm ever so slightly, making the sling move pointedly. "I don't know, maybe this?"

She stares back, her gaze levelling coolly at him. "Sure. Why?"

"It's— a dislocated shoulder? A season end for me," he answers, like she doesn't quite know this, like she isn't already on top of all the stats, like she probably hasn't already looked up all the previous players and how long their recovery time has taken. But it's clear, across the board: it's pretty much a guaranteed six-month recovery. Three weeks, at least, and he can get to strengthening to break out of the monotony of having it in a sling, but it's going to be a *lot* of weeks of just sitting around and not getting back on the ice with contact.

A lot of weeks of just sitting around. Unable to do much at fucking all.

She shrugs, some of the edge in her gaze softening. "Only the regular season, but there's still more games."

"They need to make playoffs for that."

She stares again. Then makes a small noise of realisation.

He leans back, now. "What?"

"They," she repeats, then points at him, leaning in now. "Not *we*."

Shane knows his mistake, but he tries to cover it anyway. "I'm not in the lineup. *They* need to play and make the playoffs."

Her gaze is still piercing. He shrinks underneath it, kicking his feet out at the table. It's frustrating, how small he can still feel under her.

"I thought you liked the team," she says.

"I do," he defends quickly. "I do! They're cool guys. And I get to play with Ilya. Of course I like the team."

She sighs. "It's my fault you speak to me like a manager, but..."

"I like them," he says, softer this time. "I do, mom. Promise. They're nice. And a good team. A little messy, but Ilya's done a good job tightening them up, you know? They have a real shot this year."

"They do," she agrees. She picks up her fork again, finally. "But they'd have a better shot with you, of course. Still, it's early season. You'll find your footing with them, Shane. Even if it's not this year, maybe. But as far as I can tell, they like you. They're excited to have you. It's a shame about the shoulder, but it happens. You know this. You've seen plenty of guys deal with the same thing, and they're only half as talented."

"Mom," he grumbles, only so he can finally put an end to this conversation. She smiles at him, and he tentatively smiles back. They finish their meals, and his mom drives them back to his house, where his dad and Anya are waiting for them.

---

Ilya calls him that night.

He puts through a FaceTime request, and Shane props up his phone on his knees, holding it with his left hand to steady it. Ilya's in his hotel room, only just shutting the door behind him as the call connects.

"Hi," Ilya says, features softening quickly. "How do you feel?"

"Operated on," Shane replies. He tilts the phone down so that Ilya can see the sling. "But it went well. Just... lots of sitting around, now."

"Only for three weeks," Ilya says.

"Basically a month," Shane sighs. "Of nothing."

"Won't be so bad. Will go fast," Ilya replies.

Shane isn't quite so sure about that. He's eager not to think about it.

"How was practice?" Shane asks.

Ilya waves his hand. "Fine. Don't worry."

Shane bites down on the inside of his cheek. "Haas needs to—"

"Shane. I know," Ilya replies, eyebrows raising. "I just told you not to worry. You just need to focus on rest. Tell me, do you know the meaning? What have you been doing the past few days?"

He sounds dubious, immediately doubtful that Shane's been doing anything restful. Like Shane's been somehow managing to skirt his parents' gazes and their presence in their goddamn house.

"*Resting*, I don't know. Hanging out with my parents. Reading blogs. Walking Anya. Listening to podcasts."

"What podcasts?"

"Hockey ones."

"Predictable," Ilya hums. "And boring."

Something in Shane's chest, brittle, starts to crack. He breathes in, and convinces himself it is holding, that it is *not* going to shatter.

Shane lets out the breath under the action of a sigh. "Yes, well. That's all I've got. And it all counts as resting, so."

Ilya tilts his head. "How many walks?"

*Probably too many*, Shane wants to admit immediately, with a dramatic tilt of his head and a groan to accompany it. He wants to say to Ilya *I love my parents, and I know they're doing this because they care and they love me, but I am going crazy*.

But Shane hears his dad say *we still don't quite know how to be there for you*, and hears Ilya try and piece together his hurt with an unfinished but clear sentiment, *But even in private, now, you...*

He thinks it might only cause another argument, even if he's trying to settle into their usual banter. He feels like one misstep, one wrong word, will tip them in the wrong direction.

Ilya will take his parents' side on this, he knows, so he keeps his head straight, and his tone serious as he replies, "Just taking Anya out." And then, because he knows it will probably get Ilya quickest off his ass, he says, "I'll send more photos. Are you following the nutrition plan, by the way?"

Ilya, predictably, groans. "Hollander. Please. No nutrition talk while you get Yuna's meals."

"She's made extra for you," Shane says, only because he knows it'll make Ilya's face light up in a beaming smile, looking finally, *properly* happy for the first time this entire call.

"I am sending her a million kisses," Ilya promises. "So many."

"You only get them if you win the game," Shane tells him.

Ilya clutches his chest. "When will people understand that *you* are the asshole, here? You will not even give me a losing... benefit."

He hesitates on the word as he tries to think of the translation.

"Commiseration," Shane fills in for him. "Like, sympathy. And no. Losers don't get any of that."

"So mean to me," Ilya rasps out, like his heart is giving out. "So cruel."

"Then you should win."

Ilya drops his hand from his chest and sighs as he reiterates, "So mean. We will win."

"As long as—"

"Shane," Ilya drags out his name in warning. "I know."

Shane closes his eyes and nods. Right. Ilya is the fucking captain of the Centaurs. He knows exactly all the shortcomings and all the advantages their team has. They've gone over it together plenty of times. Usually, Ilya's pretty receptive and open to hearing it, but...

Well. Shane's out, now. What's he meant to contribute? He's not at the rink, he's not on the ice, he's not there with the team.

Okay. *Okay*. He is spiralling. He knows this. He knows it will be evident on his face in a matter of moments.

"Hey," he says. "It's— I'm sorry, I'm tired."

"Of course," Ilya says, eyes lingering down as he looks over the sling.

"Play a good game," Shane says, and he thinks of his dad: *have fun. Play a game you can be proud of. But most of all, don't get hurt.*

"Always," Ilya replies, with a lift of his lips. "Will be home soon, at least."

"Yeah," Shane says. He's happy — he *is*. He wants Ilya to be home, wants to be back with him.

But Shane has nowhere else to be, nowhere else to *go*, and the weird, fragmented pieces of him that he's trying so hard to stitch together are all that Ilya will come home to. And he doesn't know if he wants Ilya home for that.

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There is really, truly, not much that Shane can do.

One arm in a sling, his side still bruised and mottled and looking a whole lot worse. He thought the worst of it would disappear by the time Ilya got home, but the bruises are only darkening, and he thinks that Ilya is going to see it in all its terrible, ugly stages of yellow and green and blue.

His parents hover. Shane ends up retreating to his bedroom so that he can watch a docuseries about some recently retired high-level pair figure skaters. It's just *something* to watch, something not usually on the plane's watch catalogue, and he pays half-hearted attention to it as he strokes his fingers through Anya's fur.

"I wanted to keep going," the girl says, young, speaking in her mother tongue with the subtitles translating for her. She gestures to her head, and Shane is very suddenly paying attention to her face, now, looking at the way she's trying to smile, but her eyes are wet as she admits, "But... it was one hit too many. They told me I couldn't skate anymore, and that was it."

Shane's chest feels tight. It's like the bruising across his ribs has stretched across, and all those colours have gained weight to them, pressing him down.

He'd been lucky with the hit. He knows. It could have been much worse, and a season-ending injury is *not* a career-ending one.

But what about the next hit? What about the next time that Shane's body gives up on him, and he's told *you cannot get back on that ice, I'm sorry. This is it. You are done.*

What's left of Shane, then? He's been ready to walk away from it once before, angry about the director, ready to choose Ilya above all. But he'd thought, still, in the back of his mind, *we are too valuable to this sport. I won't lose this yet, not when we are too good at this game.*

So what happens when he *isn't* good enough at the game, anymore? When his value is worth more in his legacy and brand deals and has-beens?

"I had to decide what I wanted to do," she says, a tinny voice on the screen as she wipes at her eyes. "My career was suddenly taken from me. My partner, too. My entire life, I'd been working towards this. So what could I possibly do?"

If Shane's career is taken from him, suddenly and jarringly, then *what* is he meant to do?

He's already going stir-crazy at home, and it hasn't even been a week. He's a mess, anxious and irritable, with nothing to do other than watch niche little sport docuseries that haven't been on planes before. He has no other hobbies, very few other friends outside of the sport.

And if Ilya's still in the sport, then... this is what he comes home to, every single time. A partner that fell short of potential promises, a player that should have been *more*. A husband that's boring, that's anxious, that wants to claw out of his own skin.

"I tried coaching, for a little while," the girl says, gesturing around, then shakes her head. "It wasn't for me. I couldn't do it, not that soon."

Shane thinks he could try, maybe. He enjoys the summer camps so much, with the kids. But he knows it will itch under his skin. The desire to be bigger, *better*.

He understands her. He understands this pain that he's seeing. He presses pause, and sees that there is very little of the episode remaining. He lets it play, and he hopes that there's an answer, something that will make his thoughts stop spinning.

But it ends with her sad smile, a montage of her greatest highlights playing, as she says, "I don't really know, still. I'm trying to figure it out."

The credits roll. Shane groans and turns the entire screen off, and tries to convince himself that he's better for having seen the episode. Maybe it's good to know that he's not alone in this feeling, in having the entire sport overwhelm his life, so that if it's taken, there is very little left behind.

He lies in bed for a while, hollowed out and empty. Long enough that his mom knocks on the door and then pokes her head in.

"Hey. The game's about to start," she says. She holds up a bottle of champagne. "Come join?"

"Yeah, coming," he says. She lingers a little too long, watching as Shane gets to his feet, and he tries to make all of his movements as easy and as agile as they've always been. Like his side doesn't hurt something furious, like his chest isn't pressing down on him and trying to suffocate the air from his lungs. He thinks he manages it, but then she frowns as he gets to her feet and puts the bottle behind her back. "Okay, nope, no alcohol for you. Painkillers are in the kitchen."

He groans, but he's relieved for the excuse not to reach for a glass. He doesn't want to think about what the hell his thoughts will become if any of the barriers or filters come down.

Shane settles out on the couch, and he thinks back to a few years ago, now. Watching Boston play after being knocked out of the playoffs, his arm in a sling, his mom pointing out that Ilya had hurt his ribs, and his dad saying it was time to celebrate that Boston was about to be knocked out.

But now, they all watch Ilya, and Shane can tell they're all hoping for a good game.

It's something of a slow start. There are more shots taken on the Centaurs' goal early in the first period, but Wyatt manages to block each one.

"Wyatt's good," his mom says, with an approving nod. "Better than Montreal's."

"Wyatt is only one person," Shane mutters, biting down on his lip. There are more attempts on the goal than he'd like, and if anyone else were in goal, Centaurs would probably be down one or two already.

He gets out his phone, about to text Ilya about it even though he knows Ilya won't see it until after the game, but then stops himself. Ilya redirected the conversation *very* quickly about Haas when Shane tried to bring it up. Ilya is a good captain. He is *very* aware of the same things that Shane is. There's no reason for Shane to make his input. Ilya doesn't need it.

It's proven in the second period. Centaurs tighten up, and suddenly they're pushing the puck a *lot* more to the other side of the rink. Ilya makes the first goal of the game, and all of them settle back into the couch with a sigh of relief as the tides of the game slowly start to head one way.

Shane's earlier thoughts start to circle again.

If Shane loses hockey, if *this* becomes his life, just sitting on the couch and reduced to a spectator, will he be able to cope with that? If Ilya can play, still, will Shane be able to sit with that? Or will resentment fester, ugly and poisoning? Will he be too jealous of Ilya, being able to go out there, being able to show the world that he's so bright, so talented, everything that the scouts and the coaches could ever possibly have wanted from him? Will he be bitter that he's stuck at home, with a body that no longer works properly, or a head that can't take another hit, while Ilya gets to travel and see all the different arenas that Shane could only ever *dream* of playing in again?

And will Ilya continue to cut him off? Will Shane just become something of a boring nag? Just a bitter body for Ilya to come home to, when he's out in each city, getting to have team dinners and drinks and parties and the memories of what he *could* have?

They don't go out, not nearly as much. But the young guys on the team are still full of energy, and sometimes they tag along, and will Ilya miss those days, then? Will he remember what it used to be like?

Shane's heard it happen plenty. So many talks in locker rooms that he's heard. Guys complaining about their wives in a way that makes Shane's stomach sour in a way he could never quite settle with. Guys who had been so in love, slowly becoming bitter over the years. Some not even divorcing their wives before coming to practice with hickeys on their necks during away games.

Ilya wouldn't cheat. Absolutely not. Shane doesn't even spare a thought to it.

But... the bitterness.

If Shane doesn't have hockey, then what *does* he have? What can he offer? He doesn't do anything fun, or interesting, or exciting. His body, maybe, counts: the sex has always been good, but other people are good at sex, too. He's boring. And boring is fine, he supposes, when they have the rush of adrenaline on the ice. When they can come home, and there's something different to their careers, and they can settle into mundane, boring, domestic tasks

for a couple of weeks. But when Shane doesn't have that, when boring is *all* that he is, all that he has, how long until Ilya gets tired of just having *boring*?

How long until he realises that maybe this isn't meant to work out, when it's just the two of them at home together, when there are no hotels or planes or ice rinks? How long until the dream of holding the cup can no longer sustain them? How long until it makes Shane too boring and useless to be worth the time?

They'd chosen each other, long before it had been publicly revealed, he firmly tells himself. They'd gotten the rings, and they made the commitment, and just because the timeline suddenly changed on them does *not* mean that Ilya would have chosen differently.

He could have, though. He could have made his life easier, could have married a woman, could have been *normal*. But still, he chose Shane. He had the easier option laid out before him, and *still*, still, he'd chosen Shane. That's not nothing.

And how long, he thinks, even further in the back of his mind. How long until Ilya starts to remember that he could have it easier? That he could go out into cities, and he could have someone that wasn't a fucking *mess*, that didn't doubt him? How long until Ilya realised he deserved better than what Shane could give him?

"Okay," he mouths to himself, then shakes his head. *Okay*. He is getting too far with his thoughts again. This is too far.

His parents have set out a small platter, and Shane reaches forward on the table and takes a couple of pieces of prosciutto. He strips it down into small pieces, rolls it between his fingers, until he pops the saltiness on his tongue and lets it sit there for a few moments to try and snap himself out of the sour thoughts his mind has turned to.

Second periods end with Centaurs ahead by a goal. It's 3-2, now, and Shane thinks his heart should be somewhere in his throat with how close the game looks to be going into the last period, but he doesn't even think that much about the game.

He continues to snack on the platter board just for an excuse not to talk. His parents talk between themselves, swapping strategies — or, rather, his mom talks, and his dad listens and nods along appropriately with only a small remark here or there.

"What do you think, Shane?" His mom will try and ask, once or twice.

He just pops another dry cracker into his mouth and gives a one-shouldered shrug. "Yeah. You're right."

She narrows her eyes at him, but she leaves him be for now. It's almost a relief when the third period starts, just so his mom's attention ends up focused on the screen. She's sitting on the edge of the couch, getting a little *too* intense about the game, shouting comments like she's standing with the coaches themselves.

Shane's eyes, like they have for the whole game, try and track the *Rozanov* jersey flying across the ice. Ilya's playing hard, making some brutal checks, but he seems determined not

to let the lead slip out from under them. The game holds with the current score, and the Centaurs take the win.

"No overtime," his mom breathes out with relief, tipping back the rest of her drink now that she remembers she's holding it after the intensity of the final few minutes.

It's good for their standings. A nice reminder to the other teams that the Centaurs are becoming more and more of a threat, with or without Shane Hollander on the roster.

Ilya finds a camera and throws off his glove, then kisses the ring on his finger and holds his fist up in victory. Shane's thumb brushes over his own ring. He knows who the moment is for, who Ilya has just dedicated the win to. He can tell his parents are looking at him after the gesture, so he lets a small smile show, but doesn't quite let anything else slip.

*How long, how long, how long?* How long until Shane cannot offer anything at all?

They finish off the rest of the platter, and his parents have a couple more drinks, and Shane aches to try and take Anya out for a walk. But the pull on his ribs and on his shoulder might be a little much with her energy. Thankfully, his dad seems to pick up on it, as he offers to be the one to take the lead.

"Take it slow," his mom reminds them.

His dad laughs as he leashes Anya up. "Trust me, I'm walking at an old man's pace."

Shane rolls his eyes, because his parents are not nearly as slow as they think they seem to be, but his mom seems satisfied enough. They head out together, his dad walking slower than normal, but not enough that Shane feels like he's purposely having to drag his feet.

They're quiet, both of them just watching Anya as she sniffs the ground. For a while, Shane thinks it'll be silent for the entire walk, but halfway through their usual lap, his dad nudges Shane on the left side.

"Have you messaged him?" His dad asks.

It's usually his mom, giving him these sorts of nudges. He wonders how much they've been talking about him these past few days.

"Not yet," Shane admits, guilty. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and snaps a photo of Anya and his dad's hand holding the leash, then sends it to Ilya with an accompanying *good game*.

He decides to leave it at that, and only that. It was a good game. Ilya looked proud of the results, and his smile was genuine as he held up his fist for the camera, and he's unhurt. The Centaurs won, cleaned up their gameplay, and there were no injuries that benched anyone for longer than the rest of the game. *A good game.*

He pockets his phone again, figuring Ilya will probably be tied up in the locker room for a while. But it buzzes almost as soon as he slips it into his back pocket, and his dad hums as

they remain standing in the same spot, Anya still intent on sniffing whatever she finds interesting on the ground.

Realising his dad's giving him time, he sighs to himself and pulls his phone back out.

Ilya hasn't said anything about the game. He's cooing over Anya.

Shane swallows his disappointment. It's not like he gave Ilya anything to work with about the game to respond to, not really. He'd done that purposefully, anyway — because if he said something, and Ilya ignored it, he knew the sting would be worse.

He pockets his phone again, with nothing else to say, and they get moving again.

"Your mom and I will get out of your hair in the morning," his dad says, as they come around to the last stretch. Shane feels a little guilty for the fact that it's clear that he kind of just needs some space, a couple of hours on his own, but he's overwhelmingly glad for it. "But we won't be far. If you need anything, then you just call. For anything. Hear?"

"Yeah. Thanks, dad."

When they walk back inside, his mom has cleaned up the platter, and is cleaning up the kitchen, giving it the kind of scrub down that means she's probably about to clean down half of his house for him.

"It's okay, mom, I can do it," he tries to say, but she levels a sponge at him, and he puts up his left hand in a surrender. He knows when he's lost a fight with her — and he knows he won't be able to put much into his side of the argument. With his good hand still in a sling, he's only got so much movement he can work with, and scrubbing down the bench isn't high on his priorities. "Alright, alright. All yours."

She hums in satisfaction and gets back to it. His dad unleashes Anya, and then shoos both of them out.

"Go wash up. We'll sort out dinner," he says. And, well, Shane knows when he's lost the war.

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Ilya texts him updates, a near-mirror of Shane's own when he'd flown out with his injury: when he heads to the airport, when he boards, when he lands, when he collects his luggage.

He'll drive their car back from the airport, which they've left in the long-term parking.

*Drive safe*, Shane texts, and puts the phone down on the sink.

His parents left a couple of hours ago, and Ilya will now be here in an hour or so. Shane managed to get himself in the shower and has done his best to wash himself down with a body that protests every bend and twist.

Shane looks at himself in the mirror and tries not to wince at the patchwork of colours on his side. He's peeled the bandage off his shoulder, and there's now a red, fresh scar cut into his skin. He'd rather bandage it back up, but he knows it needs to air now.

He hates the sight of it. Just a cut into his skin that showed where his body gave up on him, an injury that cost him the rest of the season, a surgery that has put him on a rehab stint.

It was a necessary cost, a price to pay to ensure he wouldn't have to worry about the shoulder popping out of place again. Still, still. He's off the ice now, out of the season *now*, and Ilya will come home for a week between games for the remainder of the season. Weeks of this, of Shane being unable to get back out there with him, unable to play, unable to do anything but try and rehab and just fucking *hope* his next season isn't as shit as this one.

And that's not to say about the Centaurs as a *whole*. What if Shane comes back, and they don't progress nearly as far as they already have? What if their scores end up worse? What if they don't make the playoffs now, or next season? Whether Shane is there or not won't make a difference.

It's a team sport, sure. But it's always been on Shane's shoulders, carrying the weight of the game. Carrying Montreal to the playoffs, to the cup, carrying the weight of every kid that looks like him, now carrying the weight of every kid that can't quite see the same future in the locker rooms when the boys talk about girlfriends and wives.

He shudders and pushes himself away from the sink, ignoring the pull of pain in his side. He heads for the bedroom and for one of the larger shirts in his closet. Easy enough to pull on, but nothing that's going to slip on his shoulder and show off the brand new surgical scar he's got.

Anya trods after him, a little shadow that's been glued to his side. He's glad for it now, for her presence, because it keeps him moving around the house without thinking that it feels so big and lonely without Ilya in it. Ilya had this place first — theirs, sure, because Shane got lucky enough to have a boyfriend that would move for him, would uproot *everything* for him, just to be closer to the comfort of his own home. This place is Ilya's — his decision, his sacrifice, all in one secluded, secure place.

Shane hasn't really ever had to be here alone. Ilya's always been with him, in this house. Has always been here first.

He shakes his head. Ilya's going to come home, and if Shane keeps letting his thoughts spiral, it's going to be clear enough to see on his face. And then Shane's only kick-starting his own fears: that Ilya will come home to someone that's just a boring shell of a person, carved out with nothing to show for it, and Shane will just become some weird little spirit that's haunting the house and ruining everything.

"Little much," he whispers to Anya, like she can hear his thoughts too. He wants to bend down and scratch behind her ears, but it's an effort trying to get down and then get back up again, so he settles for the two of them just sharing a look with each other. She seems like she's judging him, and he figures that's probably fair enough.

His parents have done a good enough job cleaning up that Shane doesn't feel the urge to try and do it himself. It leaves him with not much to do, though, and trying to sit on the couch and watch something just makes him feel restless. Two more weeks of this, until he's on *light* exercise. Another three months until he can be back on the ice, but another *six* until he can be back in the game and with full contact.

He's going to drive himself mad. He's going to drive Ilya mad. Maybe the games away will be good for Ilya to get some space from him.

*Don't, he tells himself. Don't. Don't try and give him a reason. Just be normal. Don't be something for him to worry about, or something for him to try and escape from. Just... be normal, for once, Hollander.*

He hears the car pull up, and Anya quickly lifts her head from the place on his lap. She stares back at the front door for a moment before she rockets off the couch, almost kicking right into his side as she does.

"Ouch," he tells her, though it doesn't really hurt. She's not listening, anyway. Her tail is wagging so hard it looks like she's about to take off, doing spins in place, excited now that she can tell it's Ilya's car that's just pulled in to the house. "Yeah, yeah. I'm coming. I'm coming."

He manages to get to the front door around the same time that Ilya does, his suitcase in his hand, which he puts down immediately when he realises Shane's on the other side of the door. He takes stock of Shane's arm in the sling, a quick movement, before he steps forward and Shane does too, reaching for him and tugging him into a kiss.

"Welcome home," Shane says, when he pulls back.

Ilya hums, pleased, then pulls him in for another kiss. They can only kiss for a couple more seconds before Anya's whining kicks up a notch, and she jumps up on Ilya to try and get his attention. He laughs and crouches down, drumming against her side happily as he greets her. *My good girl, my beautiful girl, how are you? Have you been good? Of course you have been.*

Anya calms down, and Ilya gets up from his crouch to stand up again.

"Drive is too long," Ilya complains. "Should've bought closer to airport."

"We're closer to the rink," Shane reminds him.

"Did not just drive from the rink," Ilya replies. He looks like he's about to drop his head down into the juncture of Shane's shoulder and neck, but then he jolts and looks up, instead. Shane stares back, slightly confused by the misstep, but Ilya's eyes glance down at the sling around his neck before he straightens himself up.

Right. Shane's injured. Ilya has to be careful. Right, right, right. Injured and breakable. The entire reason Shane came back to their house early, and practically ended his season.

Ilya picks up his suitcase, and Shane steps back and lets him in. It's a weird role-reversal, Shane thinks. He's always been the one on the other side of the door with a suitcase, with Ilya stepping aside to let him in.

They make it to the kitchen. Then to the bedroom. Previously, in all the other times Shane has walked these halls on the other side of this equation, they didn't ever get this far before the suitcase was pushed off to the side, their hands on each other.

But Ilya puts his suitcase down on the floor neatly, even though he has no intention to unpack it right now, Shane knows. Ilya is more interested in sitting on the edge of the bed with a pleased groan, letting his hands take his weight as he tilts his head back.

Anya jumps up with him, and he laughs, getting his hands around her body and giving her a good ruffle. Shane stands in the doorway, not quite sure what to do with himself, but enjoying the sight. He's missed Ilya — more than anything, he knows he's missed Ilya. It's good to have him back home. Finally back in front of Shane, within reaching distance if Shane decides to just cross the room.

But Ilya's caught up with Anya, so Shane keeps himself at the entry of the room, not quite intruding himself into it just yet. It's only when Anya jumps up, and heads straight out with the typical kind of one-track mind for the water bowl she has, that it comes down to just the two of them.

Shane wants. Wants and *wants*. He has always wanted so much, too much.

"Are you hungry?" He asks, because his mom has some meals stacked away for Ilya, and her voice is in his head right now, for some reason. *Remember to tell him they're in the fridge!*

But even knowing what's on offer, Ilya shakes his head. He tends to eat the plane food when it comes around, while Shane usually plans his meals around making sure he doesn't need to rely on them. But then Ilya reaches a hand out, and he says, "Well, maybe."

Shane smiles. It's nice to see Ilya's wants, his desires, laid out plainly. He wants Shane, right now. It's clear to see. He pushes himself off the doorframe and walks over, stretching out his hand, and Ilya gently tugs him down so that he's sitting on the edge of the bed too.

But now that he's sitting, Ilya doesn't really... *do* anything. The *want* doesn't become anything hungrier or consuming. He just looks at Shane, studying him with the late afternoon light.

Shane resists the urge to squirm. He's not so sure he wants Ilya to try and look so closely. He leans over instead, a little bit awkward with the sling, but he's not going to let it stop him, and Ilya obligingly kisses him. Shane thinks, *okay, maybe, maybe, maybe this is normal, and we can pretend the injury isn't there, and everything will settle back into the right places.*

But then Ilya pulls back. As he goes, he tugs Shane's lower lip between his teeth, but it's more of a playful motion than it is a tease of anything going further. Shane tries to read his expression, tries to see if there's *any* way in, but Ilya isn't showing any indication that he's interested in anything to do with sex.

"How does your shoulder feel?" Ilya asks.

Shane tries to make sure his next blink is very normal. Tries to make sure it's a barely-there motion as he leans back and tries to gain a bit of distance, just so Ilya isn't looking so closely into his eyes.

"Yeah, it's fine," Shane says.

"Pain?"

"No, not really. No pain," Shane confirms. It's not really his shoulder that's the brunt of his pain receptors — it's mostly his ribs, still. He is trying *very* hard not to give that away. At least his shoulder is somewhat easier to ignore, even though the sling just makes things a whole lot more awkward.

"Good," Ilya says. He yawns, then, and stretches his arms back. "Nap?"

Nap. *Now?* They haven't even done anything. Ilya usually only crashes out once he's burned some of the hunger under his skin, once some of that *want* has finally come to the surface, and they're able to both flop back on the bed, making up for all their distance and time apart.

But it's hardly been a week, he supposes. They've gone longer, for a whole lot more of their life. Ilya's home now, with Shane already waiting for him, and maybe it's not so consuming. Maybe Ilya really is just that tired after everything, and Shane expecting Ilya to want to jump his bones is perhaps relying too much on a routine that they don't have to follow anymore.

Shane's tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip, but he pulls it back before Ilya can track the motion, the usual anxious tell he has.

"I'm not tired," Shane says, because he's not sure he's going to be able to lie still on the bed with his thoughts spinning like they are. "But you can."

"Shane," Ilya complains with a whine, and Shane feels some of the strange rejection start to soothe over as he sees Ilya's pout.

"I won't be able to sleep," Shane says. Ilya's pout turns into a more exasperated expression of annoyance, but he finally sighs.

"Fine. Go out there and do all the fun things you've been up to," Ilya huffs, and folds back onto the bed before he can catch Shane's expression.

It's an obvious jab. They both know Shane hasn't been up to much other than watching things that Ilya probably turns the television on to groan about and fall asleep to. Shane is... Well. Boring. Not at all fun.

"You're the one taking the grandpa nap," Shane says, trying to get an edge in the conversation and an edge against his thoughts.

Ilya grumbles and swats at the air. "Yes. You are rubbing off on me. Old man habits."

Shane makes a noise somewhere in the back of his throat, like this is just their usual teasing, and he's just making a disgruntled sort of noise. Because this *is* just their usual ribbing. This is just Ilya's usual teasing. Shane knows better than to take it to heart.

Anya stays with Ilya in the bed. Shane is left to the rest of the house on his own. He peers in the fridge like he suddenly has an appetite, but while he's there, he decides which meal Ilya will probably prefer to have tonight and pulls it out of the stack. He takes a lap around the kitchen bench, counting out his steps, the ends up circling back to the couch.

He turns the television on, keeping the volume low. He logs into his profile and scrolls through all the suggested offerings.

Boring, he knows. All so boring. Even *he's* bored of them.

He doesn't end up clicking on any of them. He scrolls, and scrolls, and he thinks.

What if this is what it's like? What if this is all that Shane really is?

Shane can't connect to Ilya about hockey, right now. He can't connect to him with sex, either.

But without hockey, without sex, what is left of Shane Hollander? When you strip away these pieces, the two lenses he has always had the most understanding of himself in, then what's left?

Something ugly, he thinks. Something unravelled, unmade, unwhole. Something scared.

He drops the remote down on the couch and lets his head fall back. The bedroom is far enough away that Shane can't even hear Ilya's deep, even breaths, or Anya's little snores. He can hear nothing but the pounding of blood in his ears and his own ragged breaths.

There's something clawing inside of him. Something awful and jagged, like it's made up of all the splintered pieces of him. Something taped together, trying to *hold* together.

He stares up at the ceiling of the house, where there is no pattern, where there are no ridges, where everything is smoothed over. Just plain and boring.

How does he fix this? How does he take hold of whatever's inside of him and shove it back down? How does he take it apart and try and hide it? He doesn't know if he can, but he thinks he has to. Ilya has already made so many accommodations for him. How much more can Shane ask of him?

Ilya has a team to captain. A team to take to the playoffs. Shane has a couch to sit on and documentaries to get through before he can even work up to light exercise again.

He hasn't hit play on anything at all by the time he hears Anya get up sometime later, a warning that Ilya is probably up and moving. He doesn't really get the chance to stir before Ilya wanders out, scratching his lower stomach as he yawns. He looks soft. So, so wonderful.

When he notices Shane on the couch, he heads right over, putting his stomach close to Shane's head. He then folds over, putting his head *close* to Shane's left arm but not quite on it.

Shane reaches up and pats his back, then runs his fingers through his hair.

"Still tired?" Shane asks.

"More tired," Ilya grumbles. "Bad idea, nap."

"Mhm."

"What're you watching?" Ilya asks, lifting his head up. He squints at the screen. "Ah, yes. My favourite. The home page."

Shane exhales and tries to pull Ilya down again.

*Boring, boring.*

All these ugly, jagged pieces of him. He doesn't want them. He doesn't want Ilya to have them.

"Come sit," Shane encourages, patting the couch beside him. Ilya groans, but he moves around to the other side of the couch and flops down on it.

They've walked through the kitchen, through to the bedroom, and Ilya has slept. Surely, surely, this has gone on long enough. Shane can only stand the difference for so long, the knowledge that things have changed, that this will be their future.

Shane has thought too much about the future, he decides. It's time to focus on *now*, on what he can do now.

He leans over and kisses Ilya. Ilya squints his eyes open with a confused hum.

"I haven't brushed my teeth," Ilya says, with a crease between his brows.

Shane presses into it with his thumb and then traces a line across Ilya's eyebrow, trying to encourage the tension to melt.

"It was just a nap," Shane replies. It's really not anywhere near as bad as morning breath. He leans over and kisses him again, and Ilya's confused hum finally settles into something more pleased.

The sling is still awkward, but Shane ignores it in favour of propping himself up enough so that he can kiss the side of Ilya's lips, to his cheek, down to his jaw.

He's gorgeous. He truly is. If Shane were to ever lose him—

He won't. He *won't*.

He'll be good. He'll be so fucking good. Good now, good in the future. He'll piece himself together and he will be *something*. He will be something good for Ilya to come home to, even if he doesn't know how to.

Ilya shifts, the muscles of his thighs working, and Shane knows he's on the right track. He takes Ilya's earlobe between his teeth and gives a little tug, then smooths it over with a kiss. He traces down, nose and lips brushing against Ilya's neck, following one of the veins down.

"Shane," Ilya breathes out.

Shane starts to move, then. He pushes back from the couch, steadying himself as he starts to drop his knee the short distance down to the ground. One of his arms is down, but he can do this. He knows he can.

"Shane," Ilya says, suddenly. Like all the warm, gooey softness has suddenly hardened into something crystalline and sharp. He reaches out and grabs at Shane's arm, trying to bring him back up on the couch with a frantic sort of energy. "What are you doing?"

Shane frowns at him. He thinks the answer is pretty obvious — he has done this plenty of times before. Ilya has never once stopped him before, not unless he's too close, or he wants to fuck Shane more than he wants his dick sucked. But he can tell it's not quite one of those times. Still, he answers with a confused, "Sucking your dick?"

"No, no," Ilya says, the answer firm. Shane has frozen with the flood of shame, the rejection quick and swift. Does Ilya not — not *want* to? Not want him?

This... this hasn't happened before. Not for years, and years, when Ilya tried his best to get him out of the hotel bed in Vegas.

But even then, even *then*, they'd slept together. So what does it mean for Ilya to stop it *now*? Before they can even do anything?

"I..." Shane tries, struggles, and then gives up. He tries to pull his arm free from Ilya, because he needs — fuck, what does he need? Space, he thinks. He needs space. Somewhere alone, where he can try and tie all the fraying knots together, to try and sew them all back up on his own. A patchwork of mess, one he's always managed to keep together on his own for so long.

Ilya doesn't let him go, though. He's looking at Shane with that confused expression again.

"Your— shoulder. Your ribs," Ilya says gently, the tone he sometimes takes when he's trying to bring Shane back from the edge of a panic attack.

Fair. Shane's probably close to that edge, if he's not already there, he thinks. Of course, Ilya already knows it.

"They're fine," Shane replies. Thinks it might be enough — if Ilya's only concerned about that, then Shane can fix this. "Really."

But Ilya doesn't let his grip loosen. He tries to tug Shane up again, though Shane still doesn't go. He's stuck somewhere between, half off the couch, half on.

And then Ilya reaches for his shirt, and Shane recoils then, pulling out of Ilya's grip. Ilya manages to redirect him to fall back on the couch rather than onto the floor, but Shane's hardly grateful for the handling right now.

"Let me see," Ilya says. He doesn't make another reach for the shirt, but his eyes are on the hem of it, waiting for it to be pulled up.

"I said it's fine," Shane insists.

"Then if it's fine, I can touch?"

Shane stares for a moment. Then he glares. "You won't let *me* touch, so no."

"Because you're hurt," Ilya says, voice carefully measured.

"I have been hurt plenty," Shane tries to keep his voice on that same level. This is a reasonable, logical discussion. Shane has a completely reasonable, logical point of view. "And *you* have been hurt. And we have fucked plenty anyway."

Ilya raises his eyebrows and tilts his head. "Really? In this same way?"

"My ribs are *fine*. I'm fine. I want to."

Ilya's eyes flicker down. "No. I don't think you do."

"Fucking— yeah, well, rejection is a good boner-killer."

Ilya shakes his head. "You were never hard."

Shane groans. "How did sucking your dick become about *my* boner? Ilya. I'm fine. The ribs are fine."

"Then let me touch."

"Fuck off," Shane grumbles at him.

He knows his argument will crumble the second that Ilya reaches out for him. Knows that he'll flinch against the pressure that Ilya will apply, because he's likely already picked out all of Shane's sore, tender points. He's too used to doing it out on the ice, against the opposing players. He's too used to doing it to Shane for so many years.

Ilya puts his elbow up on the back of the couch and rests his chin on his fist. His eyes drag over Shane, but Shane is restless, upset, and eager to get out of his gaze. He goes to stand, but Ilya reaches out and tugs him back down.

"No. Stay. Talk. Something's going on in your head. A *lot* of things," Ilya says. "So. Talk."

Shane could probably get off the couch, if he tried. Ilya won't actually risk injuring him further, and therefore Shane could win the sort of weird wrestling, tug-of-war they have going between Shane staying and going. But where would he go? Into the bedroom, which has always been Ilya's bed first? The side that Shane carved out so, so slowly over his few and far visits?

He can't drive anywhere, not with his arm in the sling. Well, he can. But it's really not recommended. And Ilya will definitely take the keys from him if he tries. He'll drive Shane wherever he wants to go, but...

Where else *can* Shane go? He won't ask Ilya to drop him all the way off at his parents'.

He sighs. Sits. Ilya watches, and he waits, but Shane doesn't know what to say.

"You're upset about the injury," Ilya guesses.

Shane can't quite look at him. He stares off at the wall. There are textures in the paint. Strokes of the brush that they've chosen to go with.

"It won't get better if you are stupid," Ilya says. "Like by trying to suck my dick."

Shane frowns at the wall. "That's— weeks."

"So? We have done months," Ilya fires back quickly. When Shane's stare remains on the far wall, he says a little more firmly, "Shane."

"I know," Shane grits out. He knows a few days, a couple of weeks, isn't going to spell the end of everything. Shane's shoulder and ribs will heal up, and Ilya will be home, and they can make up for all the time they haven't been able to touch properly.

"Then why?" Shane stares at the wall. Ilya reaches over and cups his chin gently, then slowly turns his head until they're looking at each other. He waits until Shane meets his eyes, and he asks, "What have you convinced yourself of, *my love*?"

The Russian endearment makes one of those stupid, large fragile pieces in Shane's chest start to crack.

"It is only a couple of weeks," Ilya reminds him gently. Shane gives it away with his expression. Ilya studies him, the frown back on his lips. "No?"

"Light exercise in a couple of weeks," Shane recites. "Ice time in two to three months. No games until *six*."

"Okay?" And then, when Shane narrows his gaze, he drops his fingers from Shane's jaw and waves dismissively. "Six months is nothing. One season, not even the whole season. You'll be back for the playoffs."

"With a team that's found their footing already," Shane snaps. And then sucks in a breath, and wishes he could take it back. He lets out a breath, curls his fingers, and looks away again. "That's not— sorry. No."

"The team will not suddenly forget how to skate because you are out there," Ilya replies, a touch of wariness, like he knows he hasn't quite followed the comparison correctly.

Shane deflates further. "No. But I'll be coming out there, messing with the dynamic."

"You are not *messing* with anything," Ilya refutes, voice strong again. "The dynamic will change, but better. It will be better."

"You can't guarantee that."

"I can," Ilya replies, without any hesitation. "It was better with you. Will be better again."

But Shane can't figure out quite where he fits into the dynamic. It's Ilya's team. It's not quite Shane's — not right now. Certainly not now, when he's sidelined, out for the season.

Shane pushes himself back until his back is firmly pressed against the couch, and he can bring his ankles closer to his body, knees coming up to form some sort of barrier against him and this conversation.

"So I come back from six months, at the end of the season. And take the spot on the roster that's gone to a guy who's had it all season," Shane mutters.

Ilya shrugs. "The team wants the best for the Centaurs. Shane Hollander *is* the best."

"I'll be coming off an injury."

"Coming off a *surgery*. To fix the injury. You will have strengthening. You will be back in shape by the time you are back out there."

Shane pulls at a piece of lint on his pants. "And what if they don't make the playoffs? I'm not — I'm not saying that will happen. But. Then I come back, and this season is gone."

"Then we will have next season."

Ilya's easy retorts are grating on him. It's not that easy, to just wave his hand, and dismiss the entire season. To just say *oh well, next year*.

What if it's *not* next year? Or the year after that? What if Shane can't prove anything at all?

"And what if I get hit again?" Shane refutes. "What if it's something else, next time?"

Ilya makes a noise of consideration, then clicks his fingers, like the answer is just so simple. "Then you rehab the next time, too."

"And then I waste *more* money, more spots on the team that could go to another guy."

Ilya frowns at him, his eyes scanning Shane's face, but he says with ease, "Not a waste. Centaurs are not paying your actual worth anyway. Maybe, by next rehab, we will have a bigger cap. Then we can *actually* afford the best player."

"That's not—" Shane breathes out, frustrated. He feels like he can't say *anything* right, all of his words tangled up somewhere in the knotted mess of his chest. He feels like Ilya's batting it away all too easy, like Shane's throwing him easy, soft pitches.

"Then what?" Ilya prods. "Shane, injuries happen. It is not 'taking a spot'. It is just the game. Happens every season."

Shane knows this. He *knows* this. The pre-season is rife with players coming back into the roster after injuries. The fear isn't that, he knows. It's not *this* dislocation, not truly, that has him so worried.

It's the next time that this happens. It's the next time, the *last* time, that he's ever injured in the game. What he becomes, then, when he can't get back on the ice for the next pre-season.

"What if I can't rehab, what if that's just— *it*?" The words tear out from him, ugly and awful. He curls into himself, breathing hard, tucking his head into his knees. He ignores the protesting of his ribs and his arm pressing against his body.

All he can hear are his own ragged breaths, the creaks and aches of his body. All of his thoughts, spinning. All that he'll be left with, at the end of it. A body that's fallen apart and a mind that won't be able to cope with that.

Ilya's hand lands on his neck. His fingers press into the skin, trying to rub circles into it. Shane holds onto it like an anchor, trying to grip onto *something*.

"If you retire, then you become WAG," Ilya says. Just as calm, just as steady, just as easily.

Shane snaps his head up, then.

"A WAG? Ilya, I can't—"

"Will be a very pretty one."

Shane's head is spinning. Ilya's response has him so stumped that he can't even fathom a proper response, other than, "I can't even *be* a fucking WAG. Wives and *girlfriends*, Ilya."

Ilya pauses, then shrugs and sounds out, "W.H.A.G. Still same."

"No. Christ, Ilya. I'd be..."

"Be...?"

"Awful. I'd be— jealous, and awful, and. Boring. Something you shouldn't come home to. I don't know. Fuck."

He ducks his head down again, knowing how ugly his words are going to hit, knowing how terribly they're going to land.

"Ah," Ilya says. His hand flattens on Shane's neck, pressing the weight of his palm down into it slightly. "Okay. Okay. So you are worrying over something impossible."

Shane bites down on a terrible, mangled bark of laughter. "It's really not."

"No, it is," Ilya argues, firm. "You will never be awful—"

Shane gestures loosely to himself, cutting into Ilya's argument. "I'm awful *now*."

He knows he is — something bruised and sour, mottled and angry and anxious.

Ilya's fingers press down into his skin, but then he slides his fingers around until he's tipping Shane's head up. "Look at me, Shane. *Sweetheart*. Look."

Shane drags his eyes up to meet Ilya's. Ilya's hand brushes over his cheek, his thumb stroking underneath his eye.

"You are not awful," Ilya says. "You will never be awful. Never to me. I will always, *always*, want to come home to you. Whether it's now or ten years. Whether you are injured or retired or old and grumpy. I will always come home to you, and I will always be happy to. *Always*."

Shane gives a small shake of his head. Ilya's fingers do not move from his skin. He waits for an answer, and Shane spins the words in his mind. Eventually, he whispers, "You can't promise that."

"You can't promise, either. Would you like to bet? I will win," Ilya says. His fingers tap on Shane's skin. Carefully, he asks, "Shane, you know we will not play hockey forever, right?"

Shane blows out a breath. "Of course I do."

"Then what do you think of? When you think of the future, when we are both retired? What do you see?"

"Us," Shane whispers. He always has — has *always* wanted Ilya, has always pictured Ilya. Even earlier in their relationship, when they thought they'd only ever be able to come out after retirement. Pictured the two of them, living together, finally married, finally finding peace with each other.

They've gotten it earlier than they thought they'd be able to. He's glad for that — he *is*. He wouldn't even try and take it back or change anything. The vision is slightly different, now, than it used to be, is all. Now, it's just more and more years of peace, more years of marriage.

"You picture me, right?" Ilya asks him.

Shane's fingers come up and circle Ilya's wrist. "Of course. Always."

"Then why do you think I do not picture you? Always?" Shane closes his eyes. He lets Ilya hold him as his next breath makes his entire body shudder. Ilya says, quietly, "I want to come home to you, and your podcasts, and your bad music taste, and your books, and your strange documentaries. Because it is *you*. You are boring, and safe, and good, and the most wonderful thing in my life. You are *home*, to me. I will always want you, no matter what. Even if you are angry about an injury, or upset about retirement. Whatever it looks like, whatever it might be."

"Ilya," Shane chokes out.

Ilya tuts and moves across the couch, coming closer. He presses a kiss to Shane's head.

"I will understand the anger. The upset. Imagine if I had to retire before dinosaur Scott Hunter," Ilya says, with a laugh, though Shane can hear the watery edges. He looks up, and catches the wetness of Ilya's eyes, even as he tries to crinkle them into a smile. "I would be so mad. I would be insufferable."

"Maybe," Shane whispers, because Ilya is insufferable *now*, able to take all of Shane's upset and all of his cracked edges and smooth them out. Able to somehow hold onto every piece, and coax them back into a proper shape, into something that feels more stable and whole.

Ilya's smile lifts, and he kisses Shane's cheek. "Yes. But you would love me anyway."

"Of course." As easy as breathing.

"Of course," Ilya echoes, and kisses Shane's lips. "Of course."

He leans back, pushing a strand of hair from Shane's face. Shane looks in his eyes, then lets his head fall forward until he's able to rest it on Ilya's shoulder.

"We will deal with it," Ilya says, voice still quiet, as he rubs a hand over Shane's back. "The shoulder now. The return in six months. And anything and *everything* after that. Whether it is winning a cup, or a retirement. Whatever it is. Hockey or not hockey. Together. Yes?"

"Yeah," Shane replies. He breathes in and lets Ilya hold him, and lets himself hold Ilya as best as he can, even with a shit shoulder and a sling and a sore side. Ilya adjusts, making it easier for the two of them to curl into each other, even on a couch that's probably still too small to hold them lying on top of each other like this.

Shane feels like pieces of him have unravelled, have come undone, but those pieces are in Ilya's hand. And he's careful as he ties them back together, gently passing them back to him, or letting him pick them up when he's ready. He knows, always, that he is safe with Ilya.

"The next time you feel like this, you'll talk to me," Ilya says. "Please. I know how hard it is. You know I do. But... try. And I will try too. And we will be okay."

Shane nods against him. "Okay."

"Yeah? Deal?"

"Deal," Shane promises. If Ilya will try, then Shane will too. He will try as long as Ilya asks him.

"Okay. And the moment that your ribs can handle it, I'm carrying you into the trophy room," Ilya decides.

"*Ilya.*"

"You have forgotten just who the fuck you are, I think."

Shane breathes out. "I think I've always been like this, actually."

He can tell Ilya is regarding him, fingers in Shane's hair, carefully brushing through it. "Maybe. Carrying too much. Thinking too much. But you are Shane Hollander. The best hockey player in the world. *And*, more importantly, you are my husband. I know who I married. I want every little last piece. I agreed to it. I agreed to it *long* before the wedding. And I will agree to it forever."

Shane reaches around until he finds Ilya's hand that isn't stroking through his hair, knowing instinctively which one it is. He traces Ilya's ring, and he recites, "I shall love, honour, and cherish you."

"Gross," Ilya recites as well, right on cue, with that same watery laugh.

Shane loves him so much. And knows that he's right — whatever the future brings, Ilya will be right there with him.

And they'll be alright.

## End Notes

ofc a big thank you again to sea for always being the greatest help and support !! and juko for giving this the early push + help it needed ! mwah <3 <3

and to everyone for reading, once again a happy happy new year!! i hope it is filled with much love and warmth, and this new year brings even happier memories (and even more yaoi) <3

[tw!](#)

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