

something you can build

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something you can build

by [some1_around](#)

Summary

Six months ago, Shane's intimate conversation and break-up with Rose Landry was recorded and leaked. In those six months, his life had completely upended and everything had changed, for better or for worse. Except for Ilya. He still has Ilya, and he's beginning to understand that he always will.

It's 2018. Shane Hollander has to figure out his new life, in a new city, on a new team, while being out to the world but not by his own choice. Ilya, along for the ride, also has to learn what it means to be connected to a place, to a person, and to his own inner truth.

(Sequel to "something you can fix," set post-Heated Rivalry, pre-The Long Game)

Notes

I received offers for money, offers for babies, offers for blood and life to continue this—like really, I probably got 300 comments requesting a sequel and more than 1000 subscriptions to a completed work, so I think I get the idea! Here you go! (This fic will be longer and have a slightly different pace than the first as a multi-chap but I hope you still enjoy!)

I have read The Long Game, but this fic isn't really inspired by the plot of that one. There are some elements of that canon that might work its way into this story but this fic will have nothing to do with the plot of the long game, so no spoilers/nothing that you won't understand if you haven't read it.

Picks up like a week after "something you can fix" while they are still at the cottage.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

selbindery (on ao3 and instagram!) has bound this entire series and it is so, so wonderful, please go check out their beautiful work of art here and the rest of their account:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DWhgifuFsVr/?igsh=MTlmbDBvbDBmMG55bQ==>

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

“I need to find an apartment in Boston.”

Ilya glanced up at him, blinking sleepily. Shane tried not to stare, but it was difficult. Ilya sprawled over the bed, nestled between pillows and blankets, one arm over his head, revealing the patch of light brown hair in his armpit. Shane was sitting against the headboard, his laptop balanced on his left thigh, Ilya’s other hand lying possessively on his right. He squeezed slightly. “You are thinking ahead again, I see.”

“No, not really,” Shane said, tapping anxiously on the trackpad. His email was open to a new message from his mother, and he had several tabs open researching the Boston real estate market.

It had been a week since Shane received the call confirming that the Montreal Voyageurs had traded him to the Boston Bears, less than a month after he had carried them to the finals for the third year in a row. He had been traded, officially, but Shane had known it was coming since the minute he had been outed to the world. He knew it from the moment he walked into a silent, hostile locker room. He had known it before, during, and after every game, no matter how often he won or how many goals he scored. Montreal no longer wanted him, so they discarded him. Shane Hollander would no longer be captain of his team, the same team that had drafted him. He might not even be a center anymore, or on the first line. He was leaving Canada and his parents and everything.

It had only been a week, but Shane already felt as if he was behind on a quickly encroaching deadline. He had no idea how some players managed to survive being traded in the middle of a season. He thought he would have broken down. “Preseason starts in September, and I’ll want to be there for the whole time, since I’m a new player on the team.”

Just a week. A week of torrential emotional whiplash, torn between shock, elation, and crushing disappointment. The disappointment almost felt ridiculous, because he had known it was coming, long before it happened, had even told Ilya before the playoffs began that Montreal, the team that drafted him, was going to trade him. He had known, but maybe he had still been hoping for something better. So, the feeling of abandonment that sat heavy in his chest might have been ridiculous, but it was very much real.

“So unnecessary,” Ilya groaned. “You are Stanley Cup winner! Skip the extra days.”

“No,” Shane said, trying to push through his inner turmoil. He had to *focus*. Focusing under pressure was perhaps the thing he was best at in the world, as he had tried to prove at the end of last season, after his secrets had been broadcast across the world, outing Shane to his family, his friends, and every player in the league. “I’ll want to be moved in before we start. Which means I have, like, six weeks to find a real estate agent familiar with Boston, an interior decorator, and make an offer and hope it gets accepted—I hate renting, and I don’t want to have to even think about a lease. I’d rather buy something, and I’d like to get it right the first time around.” He sighed, clicking between the tabs for two different developers, scanning their agent biographies. “That’s, like, two weeks to find a place. A month, *max*. I need to get a move on. My mom’s also working on it, of course, but it’s not like she knows any more about Boston than I do-”

“I will help,” Ilya sighed, leaning over to kiss Shane’s waist. He dragged his hand up his thigh, nudging the hem of his shirt up so he could kiss the skin. “You like my house, don’t you?”

Shane glanced at him. He looked back at his computer. Focus, he told himself. “Yes. But I don’t have time to have anything built-”

“I know,” Ilya drawled. His lips dragged lightly over Shane’s skin, almost ticklish, and extremely distracting. “And I didn’t build the house, that’s not what I’m talking about. I don’t think I ever took you to my apartment, no? We had more privacy at my house, it worked better for us. But I have a very nice apartment Downtown Boston, close to the arena—very convenient for my teammates when visiting, and on long nights after games or celebrating. So I do know something about apartment hunting in that city.”

“Oh.” He hadn’t known that Ilya had another apartment, had he? Shane had certainly never been to it. When he was in Boston, they had hooked up in hotel rooms or at Ilya’s house, and he couldn’t remember ever hearing about another apartment. It wasn’t strange, though, not in their profession. Plenty of guys, including Shane, kept multiple homes and apartments year-round, especially the guys who were married or had kids. But there was so much he still didn’t know about Ilya, and this was just a reminder. “Okay. Thank you, then. That would be helpful.”

“Yes, I am always very helpful,” Ilya said, stroking his fingers softly over Shane’s skin and pressing down lightly, just enough to indent his flesh.

Shane coughed. “I probably need to be in Boston for most of August,” he said. “I have—god, there’s a million things I need to do. I’ve never had to figure out visas before, or-”

“I can help with that, too.”

“And obviously I’ve never been traded before. God. It’s just so much. I need to go to Boston as soon as possible, but I’ve got commitments before that, but I need to find a place, find a new trainer, probably, talk to the coaches.” His brain was spinning through an endless to-do list. His phone buzzed as a new email from his mother appeared in his inbox. He scanned her

message about updating his contractual obligations with several of his sponsors now that he would live in the US, and groaned. “So much to do.”

Ilya kept touching him, almost petting his hip. “It will get done.”

“It needs to get done *now*,” Shane said, tapping out a quick response. At least he had a robust management team that was familiar with his packed schedule. His agency hadn’t dropped him after the leak, probably because he was one of their biggest talents, but Shane still felt pathetically grateful for the support. He never could have done this alone. He paused, and smiled softly at Ilya. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Ilya hummed, stretching out his long, muscular body. The sheet draped over his waist and thighs was almost more enticing than if he had been totally nude. “Always will be.”

“Yeah,” Shane murmured. “Um, if you were serious about helping with apartments-”

“Very serious, I am Russian, we are always serious.”

“Well, when would work for you?” Quickly, Shane flipped back to his calendar. “You could always just send me the contact information for your agent, of course—I know it’s your time off too, I don’t want to take that away from you. I’ll probably book a flight to Boston, stay in a hotel or something until I can find a place.” He glanced at Ilya. “What about you? Are you...?”

“I’m not going back to Russia this summer,” Ilya said quietly. He pulled Shane’s hand off the keyboard and brought his wrist to his mouth, speaking with his lips pressed to his pulse. “I have a few appearances I need to make in early August, commercials in LA, but in July it’s just the Prada thing...”

“The Prada thing,” Shane said with a snort, tilting his head back to thump against the wall. “What are our lives?”

“People say we are athletes, but secretly we are models,” Ilya said, kissing his wrist. “You more than me, pretty boy.”

Shane bit his lip. “Yeah... yeah, I have some stuff, too. Not... as much as before. But no one important dropped me, so. I still have Rolex, Reeboks, Montbray... Speedo was actually a little too enthusiastic, honestly. City Seltzer wanted to do something for June—I turned them down, obviously, but I’m filming a commercial in Vancouver right after our vacation.” Shane swallowed. It would be his first commercial since the leak, and he knew if he wanted his life to get back to normal, he needed to start soon, but it still felt looming. He pushed the thought away. “Then Rolex, in New York. Montbray after that, in the beginning of August. That’s it.” He shifted. It was less than he would usually be doing, and he knew why, but it still felt like... a lot.

“Mr. Business Man,” Ilya teased, his thumb stroking repetitively across the inner skin of Shane’s elbow. “Okay, well, so neither of us is that busy, probably, for rest of the summer?”

Shane glanced at him. “I mean... not really.”

“You go to Vancouver to film soda commercial where they douse you in baby oil and make you look sexy,” Ilya said, “and I go to Paris and do photoshoot with hot French girls. Then, when you are done with Vancouver, you go to New York and wear incredible watches and terrible perfume-”

“It’s not *terrible*- ”

“It’s terrible, like cat piss and roses, *yegh*. And I will be in Los Angeles, also covered in baby oil, maybe also regular motor oil, lying on top of Ferraris, probably with fucking jungle cats or whatever the fuck stupid directors come up with. It’s always fucking jungle cats, you know?”

“I know. I really know.”

“And then we’re done. And I go to Boston, and you come to Boston, too, and first thing, you see me.”

“Oh,” Shane said. “Do I?”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed peaceably. “We spend the rest of August in Boston, get all your things in neat little order like I know you like, find a good coach, and figure out how you want to train before preseason. We bulk up together, and train together, and find you an apartment that fulfills all your many, *many* needs, I am sure.”

“Hey! I am not picky, I just like having things a certain way-”

“Literal definition of picky. English is my second language, and even I know this,” Ilya said, yanking on his arm abruptly, hard enough to pull Shane sideways and onto his chest, laptop knocked harmlessly to the mattress. Ilya wrestled with Shane playfully until eventually Shane lay sprawled over Ilya, their faces inches apart, legs tangled together. “Is okay. I love you when you are, uh, high-maintenance, I think is word used for some of the WAGs?”

“Shut up.”

“And is okay that you are picky,” he said, kissing him quickly. “You should have best things. That’s why you have me, after all.”

“Maybe,” Shane agreed, wiggling. “When did you get so good at making plans?”

“Your mom taught me,” Ilya said, delighted, and Shane squawked his disapproval, but Ilya spoke over him, letting go of Shane’s arms now that he wasn’t struggling anymore. He cupped his face, squeezing his cheeks playfully between his palms. “And,” Ilya said slowly, “maybe, while you are looking for an apartment, you stay with me?”

Shane blinked. “Ilya....”

Ilya shrugged, lifting Shane’s weight with the movement. “We can be as subtle or obvious as we want,” he said, like it really was that easy. He slid his hands to Shane’s neck and then down the length of his back, holding his waist. “Maybe I even tell people you are staying with me while looking for a place—what a way to announce our friendship, could be fun.”

“No,” Shane said immediately, even though they had thoroughly discussed the need to change the media’s portrayal of their rivalry. Firstly, in Shane’s opinion, because in the aftermath of Shane’s outing, it would be bad for Ilya’s image if he continued to be antagonistic toward Shane in interviews and on the ice. Secondly, because they were going to be teammates. They wouldn’t even be professional rivals anymore. That was probably the best thing about Shane’s imminent move to Boston—no, not probably. Definitely. He and Ilya would not have to pretend to hate each other in public anymore. They could be honest. More honest, at least. They could be seen together, and it wouldn’t make headlines. It wouldn’t ruin the tenuous balance they had to walk, even in private. They would still have to be careful, of course, especially so that no one would start any rumors about Ilya’s sexuality, but they were going to be teammates.

Helplessly, Shane squeezed Ilya’s hips, a little dizzy by the reminder. He shook his head. “No way,” he repeated. The last thing he wanted was for Ilya to catch any of the blowback Shane was facing if they grew too close, too fast, too publicly. They needed to start as teammates. Eventually, maybe, things would calm down enough that they could openly be friends. But Shane was willing to wait a long time for that, if needed. He wouldn’t let Ilya suffer in the interim. “That’s way too obvious, Ilya. We need to be subtle about this, okay?”

Ilya sighed dramatically. Though his heart was still racing, Shane admired the swell of pecs beneath his own. “Fine, fine, I’ll sneak you through the back door and leave the porch lights off, okay? Shane, no one will know,” he said, tone suddenly turning serious. “No one comes to my house anyway—they go to my apartment. My house is very private, yes? A sanctuary too, like this place, just closer to the city.”

“Sanctuary,” Shane murmured. “Who taught you that word?”

“You, probably. My English is very good now, isn’t it?”

“It’s incredible,” Shane said. “You’re incredible.”

“Shane.” Ilya kissed him. “Come to my house. My turn to ask.”

“Yeah,” Shane whispered. “I will. Um. You won’t, like, get sick of me though? You’re sure?”

“I’d spend all my time with you if I could,” Ilya said, shamelessly honest. Shane’s breath caught. Ilya slowly dropped his wrist and held up his hand, one pinky finger extended. “Same team, remember?”

Shane wrapped his pinky finger through Ilya’s, and they both tightened their grip on each other, on that single, small point of contact. “Same city.”

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Their last week at the cottage was a warm, sunlit blur. They slept in and stayed up late, curled around the fire pit or sunbathing on the dock. They skinny dipped, alone and isolated, and Shane felt a tiny release of pressure somewhere deep inside of him to be naked and outside and still unafraid. They ate dinner with Shane’s parents and finally answered some of their many, many questions about their relationship, and it was horrendously awkward but Shane

could see how much Ilya loved it as he gazed at every picture of Shane hung on the walls, and preened when David called him, “son,” and shoveled Yuna’s spaghetti down his throat like Shane had been starving him all month. They went on long hikes, and Ilya tried to convince Shane to let him fuck him against a tree, and Shane showed greater restraint than he believed himself capable of and refused him, but dropped to his knees the second they were back in the cottage.

They held on tightly. They left bruises. Bites. Rug burn. Things that would heal, but marks they could touch. For the moment.

Fading, but not gone forever.

Ilya kissed Shane across the console of his car when he dropped him off at the airport. “I love you,” he said, knowing Shane needed to hear it. “It is going to be okay. You are going to do great. You are Shane fucking Hollander, and this world will never keep you down.”

Shane didn’t have his confidence, but it was nice to hear anyway. “I’ll see you in Boston.”

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Shane had been to Ilya’s house before. Shane had even visited it a few times since that disastrous, wonderful, panic-stricken luncheon of tuna melts and ginger ale. He had the code for the gate and the front door now, but Ilya opened it when Shane was only halfway down the walk, shirtless as always and looking like he had, in fact, just stepped off a Prada runway.

Shane loved him. He loved him enough to abandon his suitcases and make a run for it.

Ilya caught him around the waist. Shane lifted onto his toes, and Ilya picked him up, muscles firm and bulging and strong enough to sweep Shane off his feet and spin him until he was dizzy.

“I love you,” Shane said fervently, wishing that he weren’t already crying, but god. He *missed* Ilya. It had been less than a month, and Shane should have been used to spending years away from Ilya, but he missed him so much. Every minute in front of a camera, surrounded by sympathetic makeup artists and indifferent sound technicians, had been torture. Shane had barely heard the words of consolation from his brand connections, who wanted so desperately to assure him that they were more than happy to continue working with him. He had barely noticed the looks of disdain or amusement, or the whispers, but he knew they had been there. Watching him. Waiting to see if he was going to break down. But he couldn’t. He had felt rattled and shaky and buzzing, even while wearing a thirty thousand dollar watch and a ten thousand dollar suit, but he never let it show on his face, not while the cameras were rolling.

He had learned his lesson, and learned it well.

Things were so easy with Ilya. Everything felt natural. It felt private and personal, and Ilya had known Shane was gay since before their rookie season—maybe even longer, since Ilya had the most well-attuned gaydar of any person on the planet, or at least anybody in the

league. Ilya had always known Shane, and he had never looked askance at him because of it, or whispered about him in the darkened corners of studio stages.

The same was not true on commercial sets, with budding actors and small-time models who were fascinated by him and his publicity and desperate to make connections when all Shane wanted to do was hide in a dressing room and blink away the spots that blinding camera lights left ingrained on his retinas.

But it was done. He'd had a busy few weeks, but it was necessary. He was getting back into the swing of things. He was trying to make his life familiar again.

Ilya had never stopped being familiar.

He dropped Shane onto his feet hard, panting a little with the effort of swinging around a grown athlete, but grinning. "Idiot," he said immediately, "you made me drop present!"

Shane hadn't even noticed the little gold and black wrapped box Ilya was holding before he jumped into his arms, but he stared as Ilya crouched down and swiped it up, then held it out to Shane. It was smaller than his palm and decorated with the colors of the Boston Bears.

Shane's new team.

Ilya's team. Theirs.

When all he did was stare, Ilya shook it a little. No noise rattled within.

"Come on, take it," Ilya said. "Unless you want to stand on my doorstep all day, because I am not letting you inside first. Don't worry, it did not break."

Instead of taking the box, Shane carefully grasped Ilya's wrist, holding him steady. "What is it?"

Ilya sighed dramatically. "Is not a Rolex, sorry, fancy man," he said, and Shane huffed. "You know best way to find out? *Open it*, Hollander, oh my god, I have to do fucking everything for you, huh?"

Shane carefully undid the silk ribbon, which fell neatly over Ilya's palm. He lifted the lid of the little black box.

A golden key sat inside, nestled in an indented piece of dark gray foam.

"I know you have code for the door," Ilya said. "Can open that way, but back door needs key—this is for the front and back door, and for garage, you need the clicker. I have one for you. It didn't fit in the box. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Shane murmured. "Ilya." He put a hand on the back of his boyfriend's neck and looked into his eyes. "Thank you."

"Is your home," Ilya said, like it was simple. "This is your home. If it is my home, then it is your home too." He wrapped an arm around Shane's waist. "We can make a home together, I

think? Okay?”

“Okay,” Shane agreed, heart racing, scared, a little desperate, and so eager to make it true.

He breathed. Ilya’s house was screened-in by vegetation, but still close to the city. It did not have the fresh, cold smell of Ottawa, or the perfect watery scent of the cottage. But the air was clean, and Ilya was wearing his usual cologne, and Shane wanted to bathe in it.

Shane took his keyring from his pocket and carefully affixed the new golden addition to it. “There,” he murmured. “All done. I still need to get an apartment of my own, but... thank you.”

Ilya kissed him. He kissed his cheek and his chin for good measure. “Come on,” he whispered. “I get your bags.”

Shane let him grab them, studying the unblemished skin of his torso. Usually, both of them were covered in more than their fair share of bruises and bumps, but it was August—hot, warm, a little muggy, and they hadn’t played hockey in months, and they had let most of their marks fade before they left the cottage. No bruises. A blank canvas. A fresh start.

Shane stepped inside, and took off his shoes.

“Is okay,” Ilya said, walking up with the two preliminary suitcases Shane had packed, enough to get him through the beginning of training camp before he could find a place to stay in Boston and move the rest of his stuff from Montreal. “You don’t need to take off shoes. Cleaners come every week, you know? Very discrete, strict contract, I made sure,” he added quickly. “But they keep it clean.”

Shane nodded. He shuffled, socked feet on smooth wooden flooring, sliding. He glanced at the space by the door, where his shoes rested in a beam of light slanting through the window. “Um. I prefer taking my shoes off inside, actually,” he said. “It’s what we always did at home, you know? So it’s what I’m used to.”

Ilya nudged the front door shut with his shoulder. He glanced at Shane’s sneakers, neatly aligned, then nodded. “Okay. We should get one of the little shelves, then. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, feeling relieved and silly and infatuated. “I have one. In Montreal. Maybe I’ll—maybe I’ll bring it here? Is that okay?”

Ilya grinned, something young and awkward alighting on the air between them—earnest and pleased and nervous. It made Shane feel a little steadier, to recognize such familiar emotions on Ilya’s face. “Super okay,” he said, and kicked off his Nike slides. They landed, one upside down, next to and on top of Shane’s sneakers, and Shane couldn’t help the foolish grin that took over his face.

Ilya set his bags down by the stairs and grabbed his wrist to guide him toward the kitchen. “You have already been here, so no point showing you around.” He dropped his hand and spread his arms, and Shane watched the luxurious flexing of his laterals, dotted with moles

begging to be licked or bitten. “I know, I know, is beautiful and huge and worthy of a man like me, you know?”

“A man like you,” Shane scoffed, but god, he knew his smile was ridiculously fond.

“Da, a man *just* like me,” Ilya said, grinning over his shoulder, absolutely aware of the effect he was having on Shane. “I happen to know that you like a man like me.”

“Well. Maybe a little.”

Ilya tutted. “Not so fancy as cottage,” he said, emphasizing the word derisively, “but is a nice place, I think. I like it. Quiet, too, for Boston. Anything you don’t like about it?” Ilya asked, turning on his heels to lean against the counter and face Shane. “We can change whatever,” he said, shrugging broadly and looking around the room like he was surveying it, and not at Shane. “I know the style is very different from your cottage, no wood, not so... I don’t know, rustic? But nice windows. I know you like those. The art can change, too, if you want. More colorful, maybe? Blue? New couch?”

“Ilya,” Shane breathed.

“I’m not saying you can bring construction crew in and rip out the floors,” Ilya said. “But, you know, stuff can change. What word did you use? ‘Adaptable’? I can be adaptable.”

“Ilya, oh my god.”

“You will be here a lot, that’s all I’m saying,” Ilya said, holding his hands up in surrender. “If you fucking hate the mattress, you should say so now before it gives you a backache and you go creaking around the rink on your first day like a grandpa, and then I’m embarrassed because some very stupid people actually think you are a better skater than me.”

Shane strode forward and captured his hands and his mouth at the same time, interlacing their fingers tightly in the air on either side of their heads. “I, like, actually can’t believe how romantic you can be.”

“No,” Ilya said, but he squeezed Shane’s hands and nuzzled their noses together. “No, I am not this. I am being so fucking casual right now. Opposite of romantic. Just a good host, that’s all. Look how casual I am being about this.”

“So casual,” Shane agreed, smiling like an idiot.

Ilya let go of Shane’s left hand to grab him by the waist, pulling him closer as he widened his stance, letting Shane nestle between his thighs. “So casual,” he agreed, smiling against Shane’s mouth. He ducked slightly to the side and kissed his cheek. “Very casual, how obsessed I am with you.”

“I love you so casually,” Shane agreed, pressed cheek-to-cheek with Ilya.

“My city,” Ilya murmured, squeezing Shane’s waist. “I could not have imagined this. Wouldn’t have dared.”

“No,” Shane agreed. “Me neither.”

“Makes the surprise even nicer,” Ilya said decisively, kissing his cheek again with a smack and then leaning far enough back that he could meet Shane’s eyes. Shane had to resist the urge to chase after him. “But I want you to spend a lot of time here, Hollander, so, seriously, if you fucking hate it, you should speak up. And I already know how weird you are, so, not like you are going to chase me away at this point.”

“I don’t want to change your home, Ilya.”

“But I want it to be *our* home, yes?”

“It’s so beautiful already, I don’t really-”

“Ugh!” Ilya threw his head back. Shane couldn’t resist darting in to press a kiss to his Adam’s apple. He felt Ilya’s throat rumble with laughter and smiled. “Okay, fine. Fine. How about this? You go shopping, or send whatever interior decorator your mother picks out for you. Buy new throw pillows, I hate those ones,” he said, gesturing with his elbows at the couch. “And buy two sets of sheets, your favorites, and they will go in, uh, rotation? They will go in rotation with my sheets.”

“How many sets of sheets do you have?”

“Enough so I never have to do laundry,” Ilya said.

“Gross.”

“Yes, maybe you should just replace them all? I don’t give a fuck, do that, if you want. Buy fucking towels, too, your delicate skin, I’m sure it is very particular.”

“Ilya-”

“And get a dresser. My closet is full, you will need to use guest bedroom—is very big for your boring wardrobe, don’t worry, but the dresser is small. I will show you and you can buy dresser for your neatly folded socks and underwear, okay? And a full-length mirror, to admire your pretty self.”

“Ilya-”

“Cliff broke one of my barstools last time he was here, so there are only three, but should be five. Because he broke one during the finals two years ago, too. Three is way not enough. Replace those for me, please, with your Rolex money?”

“Okay, Ilya, I get the point-”

“I fucking hate that painting,” he pointed, “and that lamp.”

Shane laughed. “I can do something about that,” he promised, rubbing his hands over his shoulders.

“And the garden is fucking terrible, it’s all grass and rocks.”

“I’ll hire someone to redo the landscaping.”

“Good. Keep the bushes high, though. We need the privacy.”

“Yeah, um.” He glanced up, Ilya’s face shuttered by his eyelashes. “Um.”

Ilya squeezed his waist. “Yes?”

“You know those automatic curtains in my bedroom, at the cottage? I know we left them up the whole time, but... they’re nice. Out of the way when we don’t need them, but if we ever *want* more privacy, it’s easy, just the click of a button, so....”

Ilya kissed him. “I love you in sunlight,” he said. “I love fucking you up against the glass. I love when the room is dim and there are only lamps and you turn rose-golden all over. I love in the dark when there are little reflections in your big, glossy eyes. Let’s get your fancy electric curtains.”

Live with me, Shane heard Ilya chanting with every word, and he might have pushed back harder if he didn’t want the same exact thing, desperately and aching. *Live with me, live with me, live with me*. “Thank you.”

Ilya snorted. “Don’t thank me. Your idea, so you can buy them with your money. Okay?”

“Okay. I love you. Thank you.”

“Shane Hollander.” He brushed his thumb over his cheek. “In my fucking house.”

“Are we really doing this?”

“Seems like it,” Ilya shrugged and pulled away. “Okay, I finish house tour now—sorry, *too-er*,” he said, poorly mocking Shane’s Canadian accent, and Shane laughed, “and then we go see my apartment, okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. Let’s do it.”

“*Fuck*, I love you.”

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“Wow. Wow, Ilya. Wow.”

“I know,” Ilya said, leaning casually against the wall in his apartment’s foyer. “Like in all things, I am very impressive. It’s nice, no?”

It was nice. Shane turned slowly, admiring the large, open-concept penthouse. The layout was very similar to his apartment in Montreal, though the ceilings were higher and the living room was sunken. It reminded him a lot of the cottage, actually, more so than Ilya’s house. The floors and cabinets were a matching wood tone, almost a deep burgundy, and the walls of

each room were painted in complementary jewel tones. The lighting was low and incandescent, and though the furnishing was incredibly sparse—the main room seemed a little cavernous with very little filling it up—it felt warm, even with the large windows looking out over Downtown Boston, grey and dense. While Ilya's house was extremely modern and flashy, the apartment was more subdued. Both were still overtly masculine spaces in design, and both were minimalist, the style each of them preferred, and Shane would admit that the aesthetic of the apartment was closer to something he would have designed himself.

"Is three bedrooms, two and half bathrooms, en-suite and walk-in closet from the bedroom," Ilya said, walking up to stand next to Shane beside the kitchen counters. "No personal gym, but one of the bedrooms could be converted, and the building has pretty nice gym. It can be busy, though, so I don't know if you want that."

"Huh," Shane said. "Wow. Man, I'm going to have to look into this developer. Hopefully, there's something for sale in one of their buildings. I love this place."

"Good," Ilya said. "You should buy it from me."

Shane glanced at him. Ilya smiled, broad and goofy, his teeth not quite touching. "What?" Shane asked. "Like... you own a second one?"

Ilya snorted. "No, we are not all real estate maniacs like you, Hollander," he said, touching his shoulder lightly and then heading for the windows. There really was not enough furniture, and the only rug was an enormous plush one in the sunken living room, probably fitted and cut to match the exact dimensions of the floor. "I'm saying you should buy this one. This exact one, in which we are standing, which has made your jaw drop—you know I love to see you with your mouth open."

"Ilya."

"What? Fuck, it's a joke. Not the buying part—I think you should buy it."

"It's your apartment," Shane said, feeling stupid.

"I barely use it," Ilya said. "Place to crash after games and practices, you know? And I think you will still let me do that, won't you? Or would you ban me from your home forever?" he cooed, pursing his lips wide as he spun back to face Shane. With the bright gray skyline of Boston behind him, his face was in shadows, but it did nothing to disguise his grin. "Come on, Hollander, haven't you heard of housing crisis? What, you want the two of us to have three fucking houses in Boston when we will always be together at one? Other two sit empty? I don't think you want that."

"Ilya," Shane said, throat a little tight. "What are you—I mean, how would we even explain that? I'm suddenly living in your apartment? The guys might want to come over eventually, or it would be... suspicious. They would find out."

"Fuck, I say I sold it to you, duh," Ilya said, leaning against the window and tucking his hands into his pockets. "I will say that Hollander knows I have good taste and he asked 'what

should I buy,' and I was bored of stupid apartment in Downtown because I hate the neighbors or there is nowhere to park, so I sold it to him. No fucking biggie."

"No biggie," Shane repeated, eyebrows creeping higher and higher up his forehead. "This morning, you basically asked me to move into your house, and now you're saying you want me to steal your bachelor pad? Ilya."

"I am not a bachelor," Ilya said, and Shane's shoulders immediately slumped at the way he pronounced the word and the sentiment behind it. Ilya noticed and smiled. "See? I don't need bachelor pad. Do you need one?"

And honestly? "No."

"Right," Ilya said, pushing off the glass. Shane met him on the steps leading down, one stair above Ilya, and wrapped his arms around his shoulders as Ilya's settled comfortably around his waist. "I know is fast. I get it. But we are in the same city now, and if we have two places, then we can still have time alone when we need it, no? I promise, I won't come here if you don't want me, even if I have to drive all the way out--"

"I want you here," Shane said quickly. "I want you. It is fast, but it's not too quick." He laughed. "When have we ever gone too fast?"

"Well, you have been known--"

"Shut up." Shane kissed him for good measure. "Just shut up."

"So mean to me," Ilya purred, hands sliding beneath Shane's shirt.

"It, um." Shane knew he was blushing. "It... we would have to be pretty careful about our story. If any of the guys..." He looked away, out the window again, and swallowed. "If the team ever has a reason to come over here, or anything. We would just have to be careful."

"Of course they will come over," Ilya murmured, cutting to the heart of Shane's insecurities right away. His hand slid further up until it settled in the warm nook between Shane's shoulder blades. Ilya flattened his palm, fingers spread, and pressed Shane down into him, and Shane felt a part of him settle just a little bit more. "You will win them over with your boyish charm and pretty freckles."

Shane rolled his eyes. "No, I definitely won't do that."

"Irresistible," Ilya declared, sweeping Shane off his feet abruptly, startling a wild, free laugh from him. "Can't help it," Ilya said, easily swinging him into his arms in a bridal carry, stomping across the carpet to drop him on the couch. Shane reached up and pulled him down after, but Ilya was already clamoring on top of him. "We can be careful," Ilya said, kissing Shane twice. "We can keep the bedrooms locked or whatever. But we can also be friends, Shane. Right? We talked about it. We can be normal friends, doing very normal things, like having two toothbrushes and an empty drawer for our secret lovers."

“I thought you said you were going to buy me a whole dresser,” Shane said, sliding his fingers through Ilya’s curls.

“You have to buy the dresser,” Ilya corrected, grinding his hips against Shane’s until he gasped. “But how about this? I give you the apartment for free.”

“What? No fucking way-”

“You are so boring,” Ilya said, but he didn’t stop the movement of his hips, and he kissed Shane’s next objection off his mouth. “I don’t care. Either way. I don’t give a fuck. You are here, in my city. How could I give a fuck?”

“I’ll buy it from you,” Shane insisted, but he kissed Ilya back eagerly. “Just, you know. To be normal. Not boring. *Normal*.”

“You are not normal at all,” Ilya objected.

“Shut up.”

“No.” Ilya caught his wrists and pinned them above Shane’s head, and for some reason, maybe just relief, it made Shane laugh. Ilya laughed too, but he pushed closer, smile sharp and threatening. “Fine. Buy the apartment from me, I don’t care. But first, before we do that, we should make sure you really like it, yes? Give the bedrooms a... test run, I think?”

“The bedrooms...” Shane breathed, “the bathrooms... the kitchen... maybe we start with this couch?”

“Good idea,” Ilya said, grabbing his hips and rolling them over and kissing Shane until he felt dizzy.

He liked the feeling, he decided.

Chapter End Notes

I liked the show’s dynamic of the Bears/Raiders, with Ilya’s “I love yous” and his friendship with Cliff, so I’m more inspired by that than the book. In TGL, Ilya implies that the Bears would not have had a good dynamic regarding sexuality or positive locker room vibes – not to spoil anything but I am willfully discarding that. This is my world!

Edit: listen guys, i know that Russian people always take their shoes off in the house—but Ilya in The Actual Show tells Shane not to take his shoes off and doesn't take his own off when Svetlana shows up at his house okay!! I didn't make it up. I get it, I know, Russians Do Not Do This, but please stop commenting this lmao, just head-canon that he's been hanging out with slobbish american pro athletes for too long lol

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Real hockey has found its way onto my tiktok feed, which I guess is lucky for me. I credit Connor Bedard and Connor McDavid with the inspiration for some of Shane's goals/moves on the ice (am i a hockey fan now? I did play one season of ice hockey... when i was eight years old... it was destiny, but it was not helpful for writing this fic)

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

“Alright, guys, listen up. We’re not jumping through any hoops here, and we’re not going to ignore the elephant in the room. You all know Shane Hollander.”

“Hi,” Shane said, and regretted it.

He was already dressed in gear, having arrived earlier than the rest of the team to take promotional photographs for the Bears’ social media pages; he felt distinctly overdressed and ungainly in his pads, which did not feel nearly as protective as they should have.

It was all brand new gear. It smelled like plastic packaging and faintly of metal, something cloyingly synthetic—fake. It didn’t smell *right*. And the strap of his shoulder pads dug uncomfortably into his neck. Usually, he would have asked Hayden or JJ to adjust it for him, but they weren’t here. Obviously. So Shane swallowed his discomfort and hoped his smile didn’t resemble a grimace.

Coach LeClaire continued as if Shane had not spoken, and it probably would have been better if he hadn’t. His speech was clear and to the point: “Hollander had some pretty spectacularly bad press last season that was in no way his own fault. Montreal was stupid enough to let him go over it, and Pittsburgh was dumb enough to agree to a trade that has brought him to us, and we aren’t going to fucking waste this opportunity. Hollander is your teammate now. All of management, ownership, and staff expect you to treat him like it. We’re turning Montreal’s loss into our win—and could anything feel better than that, really?”

The veterans all responded in unison. “No, Coach!”

Ilya was the lone exception because he, of course, yelled, “I think the fuck not!”

Shane had planned to ease himself into interactions with the Bears. He wanted to meet a few of them before camp began, at least meeting Ilya’s closest friends on the team. But his plans had fallen to the wayside as Shane prioritized official meetings with the managers and owners of the Bears, the coaches, the medical staff, and the very enthusiastic social media managers who were bubbly and a little teary-eyed and overly empathetic. He had spent an entire afternoon with the trio of young public relations analysts, talking about boundaries and posting schedules and (Shane fought down a shudder) Pride nights.

All that work, combined with the irresistible warmth of Ilya's bed (their beds, actually, as they traded time between the apartment and the house), had made Shane far less productive than he might have been otherwise. So he had actually found some time to relax in the final weeks leading up to preseason: the beginning of the ten-month gauntlet of professional hockey. Shane's first year on a new team. His first year in America. All his routines, his comfort zones, dismantled and left in the dust.

Starting over.

In the TD Garden locker room, already dressed for the first practice of the season, forty buff dudes who all had something to prove to the world stared him down.

Maybe that was ungracious. Ilya was in the mix, grinning like a lunatic, and god, this was going to be so fucking hard, because Ilya could get away with his manic, inappropriate and European habits, but Shane wasn't allowed to smile back. How unfair.

Coach LeClaire clapped Shane on the shoulder. "You know Rozanov," he said dryly. "He's a good captain—he'll get you situated. Try not to murder each other, okay? We're paying you boys more than enough to act civilly."

"Yes, Coach," Shane said. His lips felt numb.

Ilya took this as permission to break ranks, and he practically skipped forward, slinging an arm over Shane's shoulders. For once, with Shane in skates and Ilya barefoot, he was taller, but Ilya's grasp still felt natural and affable. "Did you see how we fucking played in All-Stars last year?" he said, close to Shane's ear but speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. "We will have no fucking problem between us, Coach!"

"Good," LeClaire said briefly. He nodded and looked at his team. "I expect the same from all of you. Get dressed and get on the fucking ice."

He left. Shane wondered if he should follow, but Ilya was still holding onto him. "Come on," he said, words rolling from his still-smiling mouth. "You have cubby next to mine. Rookies are still piled out and down the hallway, poor fuckers," he said, laughing in their direction as he dragged Shane across the dressing room and shoved him to sit.

"Wow, you two really are buddy-buddy," Cliff Marlow, who Shane knew was Ilya's closest friend on the team, said. He leaned forward, dark eyes intrigued. "Rozy mentioned that you guys got along better these days, but I'll be honest, I thought he was pulling my fucking leg."

"I mean, yeah," Shane said, forcing himself to speak a legible sentence. He was glad he wasn't getting dressed with the other guys, but it made him feel very awkward to be fully geared up as the rest of them began stripping down to their Under Armour. "Our rivalry was never really what the league made it seem. I feel like we've always gotten along off the ice—honestly, we haven't really ever hung out, though, so..."

Maybe that was too much. He shifted. Ilya took over. "Fucking league wants a story—what is word, Hollander? Narrative?" Shane glared at him. Ilya laughed. "Like we can't just fucking play hockey, we also must be enemies." He sniffed. "Not true. Just media bullshit."

“Well, that’s good to know,” said Victor St. Simone, a tall and broad right-winger with a heavy French accent. “My fiancée has been gossiping all summer since the trade was announced. She thought you might turn the locker room into a dogfight ring.”

Ilya snorted. “With *Hollander*? Hollander, how many fights have you ever been in?”

“Um... two? In the NHL, I mean.”

All the Bears seemed to find this uproariously funny, even the rookies. Hell, the rookies had probably been in more fights than Shane. He hoped he wasn’t blushing.

“I am not going to fucking fight Hollander—what would be the point?” Ilya said, strapping on his kneepads. “Besides, it would be no good. I want him to score some fucking points so I do not have to carry this team all the way to the playoffs again.”

“Shut up, Rozy,” said Kane, a defenseman Shane knew was an exuberant partier from Ilya’s stories. “You didn’t fucking carry anyone.”

“No? Want to check scoring record?”

“I don’t need to, I already know Hollzy beat you,” Kane quipped back.

The room was loud, filled with chatter, both in their section of cubbies and spilling out into the hallways and showers. There were almost twice as many guys present on the first day of training camp as there would be on the final roster, rookies and players from the AHL who would either find a spot on the team or be moved down to the other leagues if they didn’t make the cut. Boston had a pretty solid team, but one of their players had retired the previous year, and two more had been traded to Pittsburgh. Shane expected the competition would be fierce throughout training, maybe even fiercer because of the team and the city they were playing for.

Shane wasn’t sure how he would fit into that dynamic.

Cliff cleared his throat and spoke up. “So.” Shane glanced at him, two cubbies down. Cliff was fucking massive, one of the biggest dudes in the league, and he permanently sported a thick beard no matter the season, but he was smiling at Shane. His grin was broad and showed off a row of bright white, probably new, veneers. “I just think we should get it out of the way, you know? So, can I ask what the fuck happened last season? With Montreal, I mean.” Shane wondered if the freezing of his expression was obvious, but Cliff kept talking, oblivious to the bucket of ice water he had poured over Shane’s head. “Like... obviously we know the broad strokes, but why the fuck did Montreal trade you like that? You were playing like a *monster*, dude, it was so fucking impressive.”

“Playing like a Bear,” Kane said quickly, baring his teeth. Shane would have been alarmed, but he had seen the Bears exchange that same expression with each other on the ice many times over the years. He hoped it was some kind of compliment.

“What the fuck you think happened, Marly?” Ilya said. As soon as he spoke, Shane realized that it had been several seconds too long since he should have responded for himself. He

glanced down, momentarily startled by the color of his shorts and socks. He wondered if he would ever get used to the change from blue and red to gold and black. “Montreal are fuckwad idiots, that’s what,” Ilya said very loudly, and Shane knew that everyone in the dressing room was listening in already, but Ilya’s captain voice only made it more apparent. “They hate winning, apparently. Don’t want star player to carry them to any more championships. Good for us!”

“You saying I’m a star, Roz?” Shane asked. The words felt like they came from far away, but at least he didn’t slur through them.

Cliff and Kane laughed, and Shane was grateful for it. Ilya just grinned. “Compared to Montreal? Huge fucking star. In Boston? Eh, you’re okay—maybe fifth or sixth best player.”

“Whatever,” Shane said, rolling his eyes as the team chuckled. But the interest still lingered in their expression, and it was focused on Shane. “Nothing really happened,” he told Cliff, because Cliff was Ilya’s best friend; even if Ilya wasn’t out to him, Shane knew he wouldn’t be genuine friends with someone who was homophobic. And maybe Cliff had a point. Maybe ignoring their obvious curiosity wouldn’t help anyone. “Montreal Management was furious over the leak, of course. They didn’t want that kind of attention on them at that point in the season, I guess. It... distracted a lot of the players on the team. Our dynamic fell apart. I guess they decided they needed a new captain to get things back on track for the new season.” That new captain would almost certainly be Abbot, part of the three-way trade that had brought Shane to Boston. Abbot was from the draft year after Shane’s and Ilya’s, and he was a good player and a good fit for Montreal. Shane wouldn’t be humble and falsely claim that Abbot was as strong a player or a shooter as himself, but with the way his team had deteriorated around him, he could see how Abbot might be able to straighten things out.

It just sucked.

“Right, right,” Cliff said. “Well, that’s fucking stupid. We could Google this, but you are probably the best-performing player in the rankings to *ever* get traded like that. Like, I literally bet you are the best one.”

“Thanks,” Shane said dryly. “That’s super comforting.”

“Okay!” Ilya shouted. “Fuck, why are we taking a million years? Rookies don’t even know how to tie their skates yet! Fuck, get a move on!” He, too, was dressed in black and gold. They matched, Shane thought. Same city, same team, same colors. His gloves weren’t on, and Ilya put a hand on Shane’s shoulder. “I know you got a big fancy tour of the arena and practice rink, but I will make sure you don’t get lost,” he said, pulling him up. “Too embarrassing for your first day, I think.”

“Thanks,” Shane said.

He let Ilya guide him from the locker room and down the hall, letting his loud voice wash over him with meaningless chatter as the rest of the team trickled out behind them, as they walked through dim hallways until they finally emerged from the tunnel into the rink.

Shane breathed the cool, familiar air. It smelled like every rink he had ever played on. Ilya pushed his shoulder and Shane stepped onto the ice.

And everything cleared.

+++

Shane flew. It was easy, almost casual. For a moment, his brow furrowed, wondering where the offense was. As if in answer, Carmichael appeared in front of him as the puck criss-crossed between Shane's moving stick, and he pirouetted neatly out of the way. He had trained alongside figure skaters, once. Those skills often paid dividends in games or scrimmages like this. With ease and grace, ankles bowing to the side, one foot lifting over the other—and he had to lift higher, accounting for the height of the blades and the bulk of the boot—he turned his back to Carmichael for a single second before he was facing forward again, a neat little spin that didn't slow him down. The net was in front of him. The puck had never left the cradle of his stick.

Shane scored off of his admittedly weak backhand. The goalie, one of the rookie drafts, blinked, wide-eyed, through his thick helmet.

"Fucking hell," Carmichael said, coming to a hard stop next to Shane, panting for breath. "What the fuck was *that*?"

"Huh?" Shane asked, confused. He looked between Carmichael and the net, wondering what had gone wrong. He had scored.

"He put the fucking puck in the net, Carmichael," Ilya said, skating up with a wild, boyish grin on his face. He grabbed Shane's helmet and, for a moment, Shane thought he was going to kiss it again, but Ilya just gave him a friendly shake. "You wouldn't know anything about that, I know, but it is technically how one plays hockey."

Carmichael grumbled something, but did not seem legitimately annoyed. He turned toward the rookie goalie, offering a few pointers.

"Very good goal, that," Ilya said, something warm and soft in his voice now that they were standing alone on the ice. "Even if Davies was better, I think you still might have stunned him."

Shane glanced at Ilya shyly. "Don't be mean to the rookies. But... thanks. Where were you, by the way? I didn't have anyone to pass to."

Ilya gestured, more with his shoulder than his arm. "Held up by Varkov at the blue line. Not that it mattered. You didn't have eyes for anything except puck."

"Not true," Shane said, offended. "I was scanning the ice, but there was no one—"

"Was Pummel, over there," Ilya said, nodding to another one of the rookies, or maybe he was an AHL guy. Shane wasn't sure, but Ilya seemed to recognize him. "He was open. You didn't see. Risked the backhand even though angle was bad."

Shane blinked. “Oh.”

Ilya shrugged like it didn’t matter. “You are very good at assists, we know this. But on this team, you will need to get better. You are used to playing with Montreal, where mostly it was best if you kept the puck for yourself-”

“I beat you in assists last season, and every season, asshole.”

“I have more improving than you to do, yes,” Ilya admitted easily. Shane’s eyes were drawn down to the prominent C on the front of his jersey. He had never played with Ilya as his captain before, he realized. “But we should both improve. This is very good team, more strong scorers than just us. We will have to work on it. Both of us.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” LeClaire said, stopping next to them. He clapped Shane on the shoulder, a recognizable manic glint in his eye. “Excellent play, Hollander, excellent. The backhand was a little slow-” Ilya snorted, and Shane glared at him “-but that footwork, my god. That’s what we need right here.”

“Again!” Ilya shouted, skating back to the center of the rink. “Again!”

Their scrimmaging teams lined up, Ilya in the middle against Aliue, the opposing center forward who had played second-line for Boston since Ilya was made captain, and Shane to his left. The position still felt unfamiliar, but it did not feel wrong. It did not feel like it would be unfamiliar forever.

Aliue barely won the face-off. Shane followed him on a tear, a half-second faster than Ilya because Ilya had been focused on the initial puck drop, while Shane had been braced for the aftermath.

The players fanned out across the ice, a mix of machine-like veterans and panting newbies, and Shane, instead of following directly at Aliue’s heels, skated wide and fast to the side, eyes never losing the sliver of black that flashed between the silver blades of skates.

The play went quickly after that. Ilya stole the puck from the cradle of Aliue’s blade and swung it to Pummel far down the ice, then Pummel lost it to Carmichael, who returned it to Aliue, now wide open in the neutral zone, before Pummel was pinned in by an enormous nineteen-year-old defenseman near the blue line.

Shane was the only other player in the neutral zone. And he was faster than Aliue.

The play unfolded in Shane’s mind two seconds before he executed it.

He skated in fast, stick extended far in front of his body as he came at Aliue from the side. Shane reached, and reached, and knocked the puck backward, off of Aliue’s stick and rocketing between his wide legs. Shane’s stick weaved between his ankles, moving opposite to his body as he caught the puck from underneath Aliue’s body and turned hard, cradling it, to bolt down the ice.

“The fuck!” he heard Aliue yell, sounding more astounded than offended, but Shane wasn’t listening.

The other scrimmage team scrambled to change directions with the play abruptly. Shane’s wild turn had slowed down his speed and they were able to force him toward the side of the rink as he flew over the blue line. Carmichael and Varkov closed in on him from the front and the back, about to box Shane into the barriers.

Shane glanced up. Across the rink, Ilya smiled at him, just a flash of teeth.

Shane turned wide, turning 270 degrees as he spun himself to a stop before he could collide with Varkov and stretched his stick out, carrying the puck outside of the reach of Carmichael’s stick before a quick, hard flick of his wrist sent it skidding all the way across the ice, straight to Ilya, who caught it in one second and whipped it into the goal the next, before the goalie had time to turn.

“Holy fucking shit!” Cliff’s distinctive voice hollered from the bench as he and the other players banged their sticks into the side, filling the empty practice rink with raucous noise. “Holy fucking shit!”

“Let’s fucking go!” Ilya practically roared, slamming one gloved fist to his chest violently as he crashed across the ice and straight into Shane. They slammed into the barriers together, not rough enough to hurt, and Shane had had more than enough time to brace or just get out of the way, but he was panting with exertion, and he let Ilya press him against the wall. “Let’s fucking go!” Ilya shouted again into his face, cheeks ruddy, hair sweaty beneath his helmet, smelling like exercise and man, even in the cold air of the arena, looking aggressive and joyful at the same time.

Shane wanted to kiss him.

“Alright, alright!” LeClaire said. “Don’t fucking injure the guy before camp has even begun, Roz, let him up.”

“Whoo!” Roz hollered, knocking his own helmet off as he turned his face toward the ceiling.

“Hollander,” LeClaire said, voice steeped in so much audible admiration that Shane almost wanted to look away. It was so different from Theriault’s tone, which had never really left the realm of focused intensity and petulant disdain. “That was excellent. Go take a breather, get some water.”

“Yes, Coach.”

Hands clapped hard on his shoulder as Shane swung himself over the barrier, almost knocking him off balance with the force of their magnanimous congratulations, and Shane did his best to smile and nod through the flood of noise.

Aliue, skating past on his way to the other bench, paused and shook his head at Shane. “That was almost rude, what you just did,” he said, as wide-eyed as the rookies. “Stealing the puck from *literally* between my feet. But I’m too impressed to be mad about it.”

“Thanks,” Shane said.

Ilya raced for the bench and practically threw himself over it, almost planting his blade on the wall and landing with a hard crash on the rubber mat. “Fucking wicked!” he declared. “Fucking, I can *smell* the fucking Cup! Boys!”

A cheer rose from the bench. The veterans and returning players collided with their captain in a clatter of sticks and padding, yelling and speaking over each other, a joyous mass of muscle and noise. Shane tried to linger on the outskirts but was not quite successful.

Ilya shook his gloves off and leaned forward, wrapping a hand around the back of Shane’s neck. From the outside, it probably looked no different from the European captain’s usual shows of tactile but macho affection, but Shane alone could feel the thumb that slid beneath the back of his helmet and stroked, once, through his hair. “Fucking brilliant, Hollander, fucking brilliant.”

“Thanks,” he repeated, breathless, and hoped that no one was looking too closely at his eyes, his mouth, or the way his gloved hands reached for Ilya instinctively.

Their team won the scrimmage.

“Hollander and Roz can never be allowed to play together again,” Cliff declared as they all spilled back onto the ice for their coach’s final words. “No one else will learn fucking anything.”

“You have got to play on a line together,” Carmichael said, skating side by side with Shane as they headed for the center of the red line. “I thought you would maybe center the second-line, but wow, fuck.”

“We’ll figure out lines over the course of preseason,” LeClaire said loudly, speaking over the excited chatter of a successful first day of training. “No need to worry about that now. First off! Let’s fucking give a round of applause to our new guys on the ice, yeah, let’s hear it!”

Shane, feeling winded and sore after an intense return to practice, took a knee as he listened to the Boston coach talk to the rookies and AHLers. LeClaire was loud and, unlike a lot of the coaches in the league, he was clearly from the city his team played in. His Boston accent was thick and aggressive, and so was his coaching style, littered with jokes and references that got the players laughing and banging the ice with their sticks. It was surprisingly casual, compared to Montreal camp, which Theriault had always run preseason like military training, trying to weed out the few players good enough for the team from the assembled mass. LeClaire was clearly attentive, but he wasn’t half as strict as Theriault had been, and he passed his speech easily between himself and the other coaches and Ilya.

Shane had a hard time listening, but he tried to at least look focused. It was harder to do when Ilya started speaking. All Shane wanted to do was watch the sweat of his upper lip bead and run down around his mouth, gaze catching on each swipe of his tongue to catch a stray, salty drop—but eventually, the speeches were over, and Coach LeClaire called the practice to a close.

He rapped his knuckles hard against his iPad, then pointed at the team. “Alright, boys, Hollander—I don’t want to see any vets here until next week. I’m happy you showed up for the first day, but we need to focus on our up-and-comers. Take a breather, be here fresh and ready to go for the rest of camp next Wednesday.”

“Yes, Coach,” Shane and the rest of the established Bears said, pulling themselves to their feet. Shane felt a little nervous about this declaration, because he had been planning on attending all the team training days, but he wasn’t going to disobey. And, logically, he knew that his play was absolutely on par with Boston, and the coaches would have a lot more work figuring out which of the new players deserved a spot on the roster for the preseason games. There would be plenty of time for Shane to figure out what position and line he would be in, although he did not envy himself the empty days stretching ahead.

He would just have to train off the ice, probably. At least here, in Boston, Ilya could train with him.

But that thought reminded him absurdly of Hayden, who had always been Shane’s summer training partner, and he had to quickly redirect his eyes down to the top of his skates.

Once again, the color of his shorts and socks surprised him.

He filed off the ice with the rest of the Bears, their hands frequently landing on his shoulders and neck and helmet. It made Shane more than a little uncomfortable. Even before everything, Montreal had not fostered a very touchy locker room atmosphere, and maybe that had been indicative of the team’s deep-rooted toxicity (an over-awareness of other male bodies, a fear of being perceived as ‘too comfortable’), but it had also aligned more with Shane’s comfort levels than he ever realized. Boston clearly did not have the same standards, however, and Shane felt himself get tenser with each casual brush, each touch of a stranger’s hand, gloved or not, as he was herded and directed down the hallways to the dressing room.

They were off the ice, and the sudden, beautiful clarity that had washed over him when practice began was already fading.

Ilya caught him by the biceps just outside the door. “Good play,” he said, holding him back as the others filed in. They got a few looks, but Shane reminded himself that this wasn’t weird. Ilya was his captain now. Ilya was allowed to talk to him in public. “Very good play. I told you, we are going to be winners, you know? Today just proved it.”

“We didn’t need to prove it,” Shane said, trying for a lighter tone. “It was pretty obvious, I think.”

“Obvious to everyone,” Ilya agreed, suddenly serious as the door swung shut, “except Montreal. It *should* have been obvious.”

“Well, it wasn’t,” Shane said. He pulled away, then regretted it. When he gave Ilya an apologetic glance, Ilya nodded easily, offering forgiveness without a word. “Talk later, okay?” Shane breathed, still feeling like his shoulders were around his ears.

It was strange. As soon as he stepped off the ice, it all came roaring back in.

“Come,” Ilya said, and he banged the door open dramatically, letting out another loud whoop. “It’s fucking our year!” he roared to his devoted acolytes, and they whooped and hollered back, drumming on the hollow wooden cubbies they were nestled into. “I want to see another fucking banner in those rafters!” Ilya screamed, and Shane watched, almost frozen near the door, as spittle flew from his lips. “I want to hold another fucking cup over my head, want to see *my* fucking name on it—all our fucking names! It is fucking time! Time *we* fucking earned it!”

Shane’s captaincy had never looked like this, he thought. He had never yelled. He had never screamed. He had certainly never got so worked up that his face turned bright red in a way he had never seen Ilya’s before, or that spit flew from his mouth. He had also never gotten his teammates as riled up as Ilya could.

By the end of last season, Shane had completely stopped attempting to give speeches. There had been no point. Just the same refrain, over and over: “We’re winning this one.”

Almost always, he had fulfilled his promise. And it had never mattered, anyway.

Maybe, if he had been more like Ilya, it might have.

Ilya grabbed Shane’s wrist and flung their arms into the air. “*We’ve got fucking Hollander!*” he screamed, and the guys leapt up and collided with them.

And Shane was buried.

+++

“It was too much?”

Shane didn’t know how Ilya had gotten their cubbies side by side, if he had requested them or if it had actually been a coincidence. Regardless, they were close enough that Ilya could whisper without anyone overhearing in the general hubbub of the dressing room, still full of excited chatter and the loud sound of many men’s voices, overlapping.

Shane’s heart was still beating hard in his chest. He felt saturated with sweat, and the knowledge that it was not all his—that at the center of the jolting, jumping group hug, the arms of strangers had been pressed against his—made it even worse. He swallowed hard and shucked his drenched shirt, replacing it very quickly with a fresh tank top. “It was,” he allowed, “a lot.”

His throat clicked.

“Sorry,” Ilya murmured, and Shane breathed a little deeper, and felt his lungs give a relieved shudder.

“It’s okay.” He tugged off his leggings, replacing them just as efficiently with sweatpants, but not replacing his sweaty undershorts, though it made his skin crawl to put clean clothes on top of them.

Ilya's eyes tracked him, his head turned so his halo of curls would hide the direction he was looking from his teammates. He was half-naked and unselfconscious about it, but Shane felt shaky. He wanted to get out of the dressing room, and the arena, fast. "Not showering?" Ilya asked very, very quietly.

Shane just shook his head.

"I've got a meeting," he said, louder, but hopefully not demonstrably so. He saw some heads turn.

Ilya laughed, much better at affecting a casual air than Shane. "Let me guess—is it Rolex again?"

He had an unfair advantage. He already knew the answer, because Shane had already told him. "Yes."

Cliff walked up to them with a low whistle. He, too, was undressed, and Shane kept his eyes very obviously averted, as he had learned to do in the Centre Bell with the other Voyageurs. It just... made things easier for the other guys if Shane didn't look their way. "Fucking Rolex, man. How much money do you make?"

"Ey!" Ilya said. "So uncool. Don't you know, in America, we never speak of money?"

Some of the Europeans in the dressing room laughed. "He took Gregors' and Wimbledon's salaries—I'm pretty sure he's fine," Kane commented. Player salaries were largely public knowledge anyway, Shane knew. Transparency gave the unions and CBAs more power in negotiations with teams. Shane's sponsorship contracts were more private than that, but no one in the room (or anyone with access to the internet, if they were curious enough) had to doubt how much Shane was paid.

Thank god for salary retention, Shane supposed. He wasn't captain anymore, but by trading his contract, he was at least being paid the same to play for the Bears. He worried, or suspected, that this might not have been true if contracts in the NHL had worked differently.

He also knew that in their careers, he had made a lot more money than Ilya through sponsorships and modeling gigs. Ilya had more money than he could feasibly spend in his life, but before the leak, Shane had been one of the NHL's biggest superstars, with a squeaky clean record—nothing to object to. That he was handsome and could offer brands a modicum of part-Asian diversity had helped. Ilya had his own brand deals, some overlapping with Shane's—Gatorade, Under Armour, and CCM, among others—and some that specifically fit his own brand, including several Russian and Slavic companies, and an exclusive contract with an extremely expensive vodka brand, but Shane had a broader appeal. He had, for a while, been entirely uncontroversial. So he did have, as Ilya had once succinctly put it, "Rolex money."

He wondered what his next contract would look like. How much he would be offered. If his pay would be docked. If his sponsorships would sign him for less now that he wasn't nearly so uncontroversial.

Really. Shane would understand.

Ilya put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed tight enough to hurt. Shane clenched his muscles to stop an instinctive flinch. He blinked.

Ilya was looking at him hard. The grip on his shoulder tightened by another degree and Ilya shook him, lightly. “Hollander is good,” he said loudly, affably, a smile still curving his mouth. “He can buy us first round tonight, yes?”

“Fuck yeah! Hear that, boys? We’re going out later!” Cliff declared. “No arguments, no rain checks! I wanna see all of you, butts on barstools, no later than eight sharp, let’s go, let’s go!”

“My wife is eight months pregnant,” one of the goalies called out dryly, and Shane was almost startled when the room erupted with yet more cheering, whooping, and applause.

“Benji’s gonna be a dad!” someone yelled, jumping onto Benji Consmith and rubbing his knuckles aggressively through his shaggy hair.

“Okay, Benji gets a night off,” Cliff agreed amiably. “He’s giving us a new mascot, just in time for the season—but the rest of you fuckers, I want you out! We’re going to Fiorella’s, no excuses.” He turned and pointed a meaty finger at Shane. “You too, Hollander! We’re bringing you into the fold.”

Ilya’s hand slid from his shoulder to his back, just beneath the straps of his pads, and Shane finally realized that he was supposed to say something. “I’ll get the first round if Ilya gets the second,” he said, and almost bit his tongue off when he realized he had used his first name.

No one seemed to react, though, other than with what seemed like genuine happiness that Shane had agreed to their outing. Ilya’s fingers pressed into his muscles and Shane breathed. “Good,” Ilya said. “I have shit to do, but I will pick you up, Hollander, show you Fiorella’s—is a local bar, casual, chill, many, many sports fans and chicks who will give you a true Boston welcome to the city,” he teased.

“It’s historically our team’s local joint,” Cliff explained. He was shoving products into a shower caddy, completely nude. Shane glanced once at Ilya, met his eyes, and nodded. He sat down, feeling Ilya’s fingers slip away, and started taking off the rest of his gear. (In his head, he heard the phantom clatter of his helmet the night he had dropped it carelessly on the floor of the Centre Bell, the night he had told his team he was gay and had been met with icy hostility in return, and accurate but painful accusations that he, their captain, was a liar). “They have a private back room that they let us use most of the time. Very chill. Where are you staying?”

Shane glanced at Ilya. “A hotel, for now,” he said, and some of the guys nearby made sympathetic noises. “I’ve looked at a few places, but... haven’t settled on anything yet. This summer was...” He glanced around and settled on, “Crazy.”

“I can fucking imagine,” St. Simone said sympathetically, ducking his head to purposefully catch his eyes. He was handsome and big, like most of Boston’s players, and was the only

Black player on the Bears' roster the previous year. He smiled at Shane, then winked. *"I am just glad to finally have someone on the team who knows French."*

Shane managed to laugh. *"You'll have to accept my Québécois,"* he said, because St. Simone was from France, not Canada. *"But it'll do in a pinch."*

St. Simone laughed. *"I'll accept it!"*

"Fuck, so unfair," Ilya whined. "Perfect Hollander, speaks two languages and neither is Russian! Cannot believe that Saint Vicky gets a friend before I do." There was more laughter and jostling, and more of the guys moved into the showers. Shane, heart still beating fast, tried to keep his eyes trained low as he packed his bag. "Hollander, need a ride?" Ilya asked loudly. "Do you have a car in the city?"

Shane glanced at him. He knew a few of the guys were surprised by this offer, and he was aware of how intentional Ilya was being. They were teammates now. Even if they hadn't been... more than that, it was important that no one thought they were enemies. Especially no one on the Bears or in Boston, where Ilya was beloved, and Shane was an unknown variable, dropped into the mix and trying to stay afloat. "No, not yet," he said, shoving his Reeboks onto his feet. He had changed his socks, but he was acutely aware of the unpleasant feeling of tacky sweat on his skin. "That would be great, thanks. All my shit is still in Montreal and Ottawa. I need to get a move on, I guess."

Moving his stuff had simply fallen off of his list of priorities after Ilya had offered to let Shane stay at either of his two fully furnished homes in Boston. Shane's other contractual obligations had been more important to deal with than moving his furniture and clothing, or getting someone to drive his Jeep from Ottawa to Boston. His parents were going to make the road trip in a week, and Shane needed to find a day to fly up to Montreal and shutter his apartment for good.

Or maybe he would ask them to do it for him. Hell, he could just pay his real estate agent to deal with it all, and never think about it again. What was left in Montreal for him anyway?

He closed his eyes for a moment.

He was selling his apartments in Montreal. He didn't live there anymore, and neither did his parents. He was never going to play for the Voyageurs again. That part of his life was over. Completely.

Ilya kept touching him. This time it was another quick, friendly swipe of his fingers over the back of Shane's neck, a brush through his damp hair that turned Shane's head to follow the motion of his hand, then up his arm and to his face.

"Fuck, Hollander," Ilya drawled. "Let's go then. I don't have all day."

Shane stood and shouldered his bag. "Okay," he said. He glanced at Cliff and St. Simone and waved awkwardly. "Thanks, bye."

"See you tonight," Cliff called, and St. Simone echoed him in French.

Ilya and Shane walked out of the locker room into the comparative silence of the underground hallways, windowless. “Okay?” Ilya murmured.

“I’m kind of freaking out,” Shane admitted.

“I know.”

“Was it obvious?”

“Only to me,” Ilya shrugged. “I know you very well.” Their shoulders brushed. “Shane, is okay. You are very awkward, this has always been true. No one noticed.”

“Oh, good, that makes me feel better,” Shane grumbled, but they were alone, and his breath was slowing down. “Fuck. Okay. Okay. You think—you don’t think anyone suspected anything?”

“What, that we are gay secret lovers?” Ilya drawled, and Shane shushed him aggressively. “No. They get it—we’re teammates now, that matters more than whatever stupid rivalry the league wanted. Besides, they know how I act with people I fucking hate, and it is not how I treat you.”

Shane blinked. “Who do you hate?”

“Dallas Kent.”

Shane snorted. “Obviously.”

“Drapeau and Comeau.”

Shane looked away.

“Lemaire,” Ilya said darkly.

“Oh, yeah,” Shane murmured. “Didn’t you, like, knock his tooth out?”

“Teeth,” Ilya corrected with a proud grin. “He should not have talked so much shit if he wanted to keep them in his mouth. Had to make him shut up somehow.”

Ilya guided him confidently through the tunnels until they emerged into the private parking lot behind the arena. Shane had arrived in a chauffeured car that morning, but now he allowed Ilya to direct him to his car. As if Shane could have missed it. It was bright orange. “I guess I’ll need to get used to that mindset,” he said quietly, just the sounds of their feet on the asphalt. “Fighting, and everything. Now that I’m in Boston.”

“We will fight for you,” Ilya said confidently. “Your face is too pretty. You cannot risk it in a fight—is your number one asset, yes? For Rolex?”

“Shut up.”

“No, never. You don’t want me to.”

Ilya unlocked his car but leaned on the hood, arms crossed. Shane hesitated. “Um. I’m sweaty, and I stink. Should I... I have an extra towel I could-”

“Oh my god, who cares?” Ilya rolled his eyes so hard Shane worried he would give himself a headache. “Get my car disgusting if you want. I like the scent of your sweat.”

“Yuck.”

“Romantic, no?” Ilya grinned. Shane smiled back, and it felt tired, but it felt genuine.

“Come on. I’ve got to get you to fancy meeting, and I know you will find a way to blame me if you are late,” Ilya said, opening his door and sliding in. Shane did the same but hesitated, glancing over the fancy leather seats. Ilya held out his hand over the console, welcoming, and Shane interlaced their fingers and joined him.

Chapter End Notes

I want to get the beginning of this fic up quickly so there will also be a chapter tomorrow and I'm very excited for it!!

Thank you for reading, hope you enjoyed some actual hockey lol!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Domestic chapter alert! getting some stuff in place for the rest of the story, hope you enjoy!

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

Fiorella's, the Bears' team bar, was nestled in a squat brick building with wooden floors as dark (and almost as sticky) as tar, low lighting, and dozens of wall-mounted televisions, some of which were dramatically cracked as if they had been punched or attacked by flying beer cans. A large room behind the public seating area often catered as a private space for the Bears during the season. It was an old establishment, and Shane lingered on the outskirts of the party, studying photos of the team over the decades they had been coming here to celebrate victories or mourn losses. Signed portraits of legendary defensemen and a gallery of team group shots from every Cup-winning year adorned the walls. There were photos of players who had brought the Cup with them to this very bar on their days with it, posing with waitresses and the owners and drinking beer from the top. It was clearly beloved by the Bears, and treasured by the city.

It was part of their legacy.

So was Shane. At least, he intended to be.

Ilya appeared as Shane nursed the ginger ale that had been procured for him. Ginger ale was supposed to settle stomachs, but Shane's was churning. "Okay?" he asked, touching Shane's shoulder—brief and friendly. Because they were supposed to be friends now. Even though Ilya wouldn't stop touching him in a way that was maybe a little more than friendly. But Shane didn't have the heart to turn him away.

"Yeah," he said, knowing that he wasn't a good liar and was especially bad at lying to Ilya. But he didn't *want* to lie. He really wanted it to be true; he wanted to be okay. "Your team is nice," he said earnestly.

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "Is nice. We are actually friends, you know?"

Shane nodded. He had considered the Voyageurs, at least the ones he had played with for most of his career, to be his brothers. Maybe there was something to be said about family versus friendship, the people you were assigned by something as ineffable as chance and salary caps and draft lotteries, and the people you chose. Maybe the Bears had just gotten luckier.

Shane's brothers hadn't stood with him. But the Bears had chosen him, and they had brought him here, into their den.

His shoulders lifted a little. “I’m good,” he said, finding a real smile. He raised his can and shook it slightly. “It’s always awkward to be sober around drunk people, but I’m used to it.”

“You can get drunk if you want,” Ilya said, lifting his own glass of hard liquor. “No practice tomorrow.”

Shane nodded noncommittally. “I know.”

“Good,” Ilya said. “You want to make the rounds with me? I can introduce you more. We have known each other very long time, Hollander.”

It was weird to stand so far apart from Ilya, to not be touching him all the time. Shane was so used to living with him, even after only two months, that the reasonable foot of space between their bodies felt like an ocean.

Maybe Ilya read the emotion in his eyes. “We can go home, if you want.”

Shane sighed. “No. I’m... I want to try. I really want to try here. I want to....”

He didn’t want to be as disposable to the Bears as he had been to the Voyageurs. It was a harder proposition because they already had Rozanov on their team, so Shane was not as indispensable to their roster as he should have been in Montreal—but that just meant he would have to work harder.

The Voyageurs had been his brothers, but Shane had never been good at making friends. He was going to try, though.

“You can go hang out with your friends, catch up with them,” Shane said. “I’ll start introducing myself. Stop acting like a wallflower.”

Ilya tilted his head. A curl fell across his eyes. Shane almost reached out to brush it away. “Wall-flower? What is this?”

“Um. You know ivy, like plants that grow up walls? A wallflower is a person who hugs the walls at an event, like a party or something, because they are... shy. I guess. The person who isn’t dancing when everyone else is.” Shane knew he was blushing.

He knew it from the grin on Ilya’s face, slowly creeping wider and wider. “Wow,” he murmured. “Did not know there was such a perfect word to describe Shane Hollander.”

“Shut up.”

“No.” He leaned in, just a little further. “My pretty wallflower.”

“Shut up,” Shane repeated, feeling brave enough to reach out and push Ilya away. Even through his shirt, the warmth of Ilya’s body made Shane feel a little stronger. “I’m fine. You go catch up with your friends. I need to introduce myself, show them I can, you know, stand on my own two feet.”

“Yes, but only when leaning against the wall, propped up,” Ilya said. His smile faded slightly. “Tell me when you want to leave, okay? I will rescue you whenever.”

That should have been insulting, but instead, Shane felt better. “Okay.”

He did his best. He knew he wasn’t the most social of guys, and he knew he was fucking awkward. He couldn’t help it, and Shane didn’t know how he could improve. In the world of professional sports, there were plenty of intense, focused dudes, but it also fostered a culture of aggression and partying that Shane had never fit into. He didn’t know how to be casual. He would never know how to act as effortlessly as Ilya did.

But he could introduce himself. Luckily, the Bears were willing to help him along, most of them either naturally affable or just genuinely excited to introduce another major player in the NHL to their team.

Shane spent the better part of an hour bouncing between different cliques, meeting their girlfriends and wives and the friends who had tagged along, trying to memorize first names in addition to the player stats he already knew by heart. The goalies convinced him to do a shot of tequila with them, and Shane decided it would probably help him more than it would hurt his diet. He talked about transfers with a few of the older guys on the team, all of them carefully skipping around the reason Shane had been transferred and focusing on the mundane issues of moving countries and finding apartments quickly (and Shane hoped he was subtle when he mentioned that he was asking everyone on the team for recommendations for real estate agents and brokers, trying to cover his and Ilya's tracks). He shook hands and even handed out signatures to the rookies and young AHLers who were old enough to accompany them on the outing, and tried to make jokes about the drinking age in Canada. They looked at him with awe.

At least that hadn’t faded.

Shane’s social batteries were never very long-lived, and he knew he was getting close to the bottom as he escaped from another group and made his way back to the bartender who was servicing their exclusive room. Some of the other Bears seemed happy to drift in and out of the main front room of the establishment, but Shane was relieved to have a little privacy. The last thing he wanted to do was answer questions or face accusations from fans. He didn’t know how most of Boston’s sports fans were reacting to his presence on the team, and he wanted to live in ignorant bliss for at least a little longer.

Once the preseason games started, he would be able to show them what he was made of. Prove his worth, and all that.

“Ginger ale,” he asked.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder. Shane tensed. “What’s up, brother?” Cliff asked, slumping onto the empty stool next to him. “How’s it going? Saw you signing shit for the rooks. That was nice of you. I probably would have laughed in their faces.” To the bartender, sliding Shane his drink, he asked, “Can I get another beer? Whatever’s on tap.”

Shane laughed, hoping it sounded natural. “I like rookies when they aren’t too cocky,” he said. “It’s fun to see how... I don’t know, how optimistic they are.”

Cliff snorted. “Yeah, if you don’t like cocky rookies, I’m not surprised you and Roz hated each other. Glad to see you’re getting along now, though,” he said, eyebrows raised, clearly fishing for more information.

“We never hated each other.” Shane was happy to make that clear. “We were just... in a position where it was fun for fans to see us pitted against each other. The league took advantage of that. It was never personal, definitely not for me, and I don’t think for Rozanov either.”

“That sounds about right,” Cliff said easily. He turned on his stool so he was facing the room, elbows propped on the bar behind him. Shane was standing up, awkwardly straight, and had both hands on his drink. He sat down quickly, hoping he didn't look weird. “Rozy has too much respect for good hockey to have ever hated you.

“Oh,” Shane said. He nodded quickly. “That makes sense.”

Cliff smiled, big and broad, then glanced away. He scanned the room, then looked back at Shane. “Hey, listen, man, can I level with you for a sec?”

Shane’s eyes sought Ilya out. He was across the room, his back turned, a half-empty glass in one hand as he gesticulated broadly with the other, speaking loudly and excitedly with one of the rookies. “Yeah. Of course, yeah.” He took a sip of his ginger ale. “Shoot.”

“I have a niece,” Cliff said, leaning a bit closer. “She’s fifteen, right, and she’s a lesbian.” Shane blinked at him. Cliff laughed, thumping his hand on the table. “Tiniest little butch you’ve ever seen—her words, not mine, dude!” He laughed heartily, holding his hands up, palms out. “And she’s obsessed with hockey,” he continued when Shane said nothing. “Like, crazy obsessed. Super fucking good, too. She plays for her high school team, and she’s already on varsity, you know? Wants to be just like her uncle, in more ways than one, you know what I mean?” He guffawed, and Shane forced himself to smile and nod. “Anyway, most of her role models are in the Canadian Women’s Hockey League, and she really sees herself there a lot, which is great, I’m so happy she gets that, you know? Even if their league doesn’t get the coverage it should, or the salaries they deserve, you know?”

Shane nodded. The inequality of women’s sports leagues was not a new topic, but he never felt like he had anything meaningful to contribute to it. He had attended some of the CWHL games in Montreal when he was free, which wasn’t that often, and in his rare social media posts he occasionally advocated for game attendance and media coverage. It was a subject that always made him feel antsy and guilty, and he didn't know what to say.

“Yeah.” Cliff nodded, but his joviality faded very quickly. He balanced his elbows on the bar and leaned forward, his eye contact intense and unnerving. Cliff, Shane was very aware, was a massive guy, even for a hockey player. “Anyway, I just wanted to say. I felt like I *should* say. When everything went down with you, your whole thing, my niece was super, super upset about it. Like deeply affected. I think it scared her to see—well, something like that

happen, you know? And we all know the reception wasn't as good or fair as it should have been."

Cliff was being impossibly earnest, and Shane was fully aware that this intercession was well-intentioned, but he wished, fervently, that the ground could open beneath his feet and swallow him up. He wished he were in Montreal, staring out his windows at a skyline that was, if nothing else, familiar. He wished he were at the cottage, and he could stand at the edge of his dock and dive into cool water, letting his entire body become submerged. "Right. I get that. Must've been...." What the fuck was he supposed to say? "Must've been hard," he said, and hoped that he didn't sound bitter.

"It was," Cliff said. "Not more for her than you, obviously! Obviously, dude! But I just thought you should know that a lot of kids were looking up to you, and *man*, when you started to play like you did? After the leak?" Shane's throat was closing. "Oh my god, it meant so much to her. To see you be such a machine, such a fucking beast, even after that happened, to prove all those fuckers wrong, it just thrilled her. She was born and raised in Boston, dude, but I think she was rooting for Montreal in the conference finals—and bro! Scott Hunter? Oh my god, dude, she burst into tears."

"It was very brave," Shane said, "what Scott did."

Shane had never done anything brave. Everything had just happened to him.

"Yeah," Cliff said, and he nudged Shane's shoulder affectionately. "But she looked up to you first, you know? She's already bought one of your jerseys—for Boston, I mean. She wanted a Voyageurs one, honestly, but some loyalties can't be tested. I was gonna give you a little more time to settle in and everything, but she wants me to get you to sign it." He laughed, and Shane had a hard time controlling an instinctive flinch because, like everything else about him, Cliff's laugh was loud. "It'll probably be the first signature you sign on Bear merch, how about that? Jesus, man, it'd mean the world to her."

"Of course."

"And," he said, winking and speaking even louder, "you're officially her second favorite player. Used to be Rozanov, but he'll have to settle for third."

"Third?" Ilya appeared like he had been summoned, or maybe Cliff had seen him coming and Shane was just too spaced out to have noticed his approach. Ilya slung an arm over both of their shoulders, jostling them hard as he wedged his way between their bodies. "Third, he says! Never in my life have I been third, never, not once!"

"Accept it, dude," Cliff said, slinging a thick arm around Ilya's waist and squeezing him tight enough that Ilya let out a choked *oof*. "Hollander's on the team now, so you can't smoke the rest of us so easily anymore! Can't wait to see you two against each other in a scrimmage—it'll make the rest of us assholes feel less bad about losing all the time."

"Get better," Ilya growled, letting go of Shane to tussle with Cliff.

Shane pressed his lower back hard into the counter and finished his drink.

He closed his eyes. He took a deep breath.

You're okay, he reminded himself. You're okay. Everything is okay. You're safe, and you have Ilya. You are going to be okay.

His pulse slowed. He breathed out.

Cliff and Ilya were still wrestling, but it was evidently playful and shockingly careful, given their combined size and the bulging of their muscles. Ilya caught Shane's eye.

Shane smiled.

"Ey, ey!" St. Simone sauntered up to them, holding hands with a gorgeous woman with her hair in long braids and tattoos wrapped around her arms, disappearing up her sleeves. "No fighting! You will get us kicked out again! 'Ollander, back me up!"

Shane set his empty can down and helped St. Simone jokingly pull the two bigger men away from each other. The woman St. Simone was with held her hand out to Shane. "I'm Amanda."

"Shane Hollander."

She smiled. "I know."

"My fiancée!" St. Simone declared happily, waving the bartender down and ordering them all new drinks. "Perfect and wonderful and stunning, no?"

"Are you from Boston?" Shane asked.

"Yes," she answered, "which is why I am extremely pleased that you are no longer playing for Montreal. You were too good for those douchebags and we," she raised her glass, and shouted, "need to see some more fucking championship banners, don't we?"

The men and women in the semi-private room, all of them Bears or affiliated with the franchise in some way, turned to face her and cheered.

"Baby, I will get you a championship ring before I get you a wedding ring," St. Simone declared, dropping his arm around her waist and kissing her cheek. "That is a promise!"

Ilya dragged Cliff off his stool and shoved him toward St. Simone and Amanda. "Go fucking entertain the rookies!" he ordered, taking the voided seat. "If we are going to win more Cups, I need to talk to Hollander—alone, fuckfaces, get out of here, and no fucking listening in, this is private superstar conversation, understand?"

It was so bold, so blunt. Ilya could say exactly what he wanted, and no one ever suspected a thing. They laughed and shoved at him and grinned at Shane and they left, because their captain had told them to.

Shane envied that. He envied it more than he could have enunciated.

“You okay?” Ilya asked when they were alone again. As alone as they could be, secluded in a corner of the bar, eyes constantly drawn to them, but out of earshot.

Shane envied him. He wanted to be him, and he wanted to kiss him. Touch him, at least. He was suddenly, abruptly, completely sick of Fiorella’s. He wanted to go home, and he wanted Ilya to be there with him. “I’m okay,” he said. “Tired.”

Ilya hummed and nodded slowly. “Cliff told you about his niece, I guess?” Ilya asked. It sounded like he already knew the answer. Probably, he and Cliff had talked about it. Maybe after watching the All-Star game, when Ilya and Shane had started acting more like friends than enemies, Cliff had even asked for Ilya’s advice on broaching the subject.

“Yeah. You know about that?”

“Yes. Cliff is my best friend,” he said, trying on a goofy smile that disappeared a second later. “He was very worried about his niece. But she is fine and good now. I told him not to bring it up with you, but I knew he wouldn’t listen.” He glanced at Shane. “And... how is that?” he asked, words and cadence clunky. “For you? To hear that?”

“How does it feel?” Shane asked rhetorically. Ilya hummed. He rolled the question over in his head, but the simplest answer still felt the most accurate, even after taking a minute to really consider it. He stared at his hands, flexing his fingers. “I want to be a role model for kids who want to be good at *hockey*. That’s it. The rest, I’ve just always had to deal with. And this is just one more thing to deal with, you know? It’s not exactly new to me.”

“Oh,” Ilya said. “Okay.”

Shane sighed. “I know. It’s okay. We’re figuring it out, right?”

“Sort of,” Ilya said. The bar was dim. They were sitting side by side, thighs only a few inches apart beneath the overhang of the counter. He glanced at Shane and smiled, then reached across their seats and put his hand on Shane’s thigh. A shaky breath left his lips, and Shane set both his hands on top of Ilya’s, plucking lightly at his knuckles, feeling bold and brave and new in the shadows. “I have never been a role model for anyone. Especially not *children*.”

Shane laughed. He wanted to kiss Ilya’s cheek, at the highest point of its curve. Shane decided to save that instinct for later. “I know.”

“You love me anyway?” Ilya whispered.

“So much,” Shane agreed.

That was still the easiest part.

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The week off from training camp was nerve-wracking for Shane, but at least he had the excuse of getting settled in Boston to reject the various invitations from his new team members on outings or to their houses.

Getting used to Boston would take time. Shane knew that.

“I love Boston,” Ilya told him one morning in his house. “What are you thinking so far? Still nice, huh?” Ilya leaned over the counter, chowing down on an enormous amount of high-protein cereal, mixed with blueberries and sliced bananas, both the milk and box at his elbow so that he could periodically refill the mixing bowl he was eating out of. Shane was watching him in awe, sitting on one of their new cushioned barstools, dressed in Ilya’s oversized clothes and sipping on a gritty smoothie with much less enthusiasm.

It felt so much like that day almost exactly ten months ago, in this same house, when Ilya asked Shane to stay, and Shane said yes, and then ran. It was strange to remember that happened less than a year ago. Their lives had changed so much. So much had happened. Had it really been ten months? The All-Star game that changed their relationship forever, Ilya’s father’s death, and, of course, the leak and the trade? Ten months. That was how long it took to start a new life, Shane supposed. But in the face of their relationship (come December, they would have known each other for ten years), ten months seemed like a snapshot. A blink. A second.

In ten months, he had gone from breaking down in tears in the shower of a hotel room he shared with Hayden, so afraid of the feelings bursting in his chest and the deep-rooted belief that Ilya would never love him back, to living together: to sharing two homes—or three, including the cottage—with a man he loved, and wanted to be with, forever.

Maybe that was why ten months felt so short. Because Shane had already started planning for the rest of his life.

Ilya glanced up, using the side of his forearm to rub away a trickle of milk from the corner of his mouth, eyebrows raised, and Shane jolted as he remembered that he had been asked a question. Ilya smirked, but it wasn’t gloating, just soft and pleased.

“Oh, um, yeah, it’s nice,” Shane said. “What, uh, what do you love about it?”

Ilya hummed and bobbed his head as he chewed. “Sometimes I think it is like Russia in good ways, and very different in others,” he said. “I don’t know. It strikes a—a balance? It is sharp, and the people are rude and blunt, and the weather is fucking terrible. Like home, da? Nightlife is okay, is more bars than clubs, and many, many college students—they did not used to bother me so much, but now is annoying. Maybe it would get boring if we did not travel so much. But is a very gay city, have you noticed yet? Lots of pride flags. Feels nice to see that, in the open, like, all the time. And people laugh while they yell at each other on sidewalks. The people are so grumpy, and the sports fans are violent in a way that I want them to be, you know? I like all that.” He smiled again. “I like the bricks. I think the water is lovely. I love fall here—you will see, the trees?” He kissed the tips of his fingers and flicked them out, “Mwah! Beautiful.”

“Wow,” Shane murmured, knowing his smile was embarrassingly infatuated, but not caring just then. Ilya’s grin was just as goofy. “So you wouldn’t ever want to move? Is this, like, your place?”

Ilya shrugged. Shane watched the play of muscles beneath his skin, and Ilya's smirk returned, full force. "I would move," he said. "I am... I *like* this city, I have good friends here, I love my team, and the fans are fucking incredible. But that is how deep the roots go." He held up his hand in front of him, level to the top of his shoulder, fingers flat, palm down. "It's not shallow, but it's not deep. Not yet. I still feel more attachment to Moscow," he said, lowering his hand so it was level with his belly button. "Very deep roots. I grew up there, and so did my mother and my brother. All my memories of them are in Moscow. But the dirt there is... is not good dirt..."

"Barren," Shane murmured. "Nothing can grow there anymore. It doesn't... feed you."

Ilya nodded. "Da, yes, I think. But, of course, that is more complicated. Less good things. Fewer friends, honestly." He sighed and set his hand on the counter.

Shane reached across to take it. "I didn't have any friends in Ottawa, either," he admitted. There was no one he had kept in contact with from his childhood or high school. "Or that many in Montreal," he said after a moment.

"You had some *good* friends, though," Ilya said firmly. "Friends who supported you. That matters more, I think, than just the number." He squeezed Shane's fingers. "And you will make more friends here. I will help. I am very—more than you, I am charisma...?"

"Charismatic."

Ilya groaned, tugging on Shane's hand hard enough that he nearly knocked over his smoothie, and pulled him to his feet. "I fucking hate English and your stupid emphasis on stupid syllables! Why the fuck is it different?"

Shane laughed. "I don't fucking know," he said, and let Ilya drag him forward until both of their hips were pressed hard against the counter edge and they could kiss.

Shane thought about Ilya's metaphor of roots for the rest of the day. Montreal and Ottawa were the only places he had ever lived, and they were two hours apart. Now, he was in America, living farther away from his hometown than he had ever been. He had done a lot of traveling because of his career, but since the draft, he had never thought about living outside of Canada. When Boston won the lottery the year of their draft, Shane, who had believed he would be picked first, had considered what it would be like living outside of his country and six hours away from his parents. But it didn't matter in the end. Montreal was a better fit for him anyway, he thought, and he was glad to be in Canada. His mom could be overbearing, but Shane had never wanted to be far from them, especially not with the way his life had turned upside down when he was barely nineteen and suddenly rocketed into a life of fame and wealth.

And, as he had been told many, many times in his career, he was extremely Canadian.

People usually just meant he was polite. In Boston, he worried it would make him even more of an outlier.

Shane tried to imagine growing roots in a city like Boston, crowded and loud and as old as Montreal with just as rich a history. Shane had liked Montreal, and he had felt that he fit in with its urban Québécois culture, where hockey was the leading interest on almost everyone's minds, even if he had never cared for the nightclubs or the glamour. But had he ever grown roots there? He had loved his team. He had loved being a Voyageur and wearing blue and red, and he loved the Centre Bell; every day he had played in the arena, he had looked up at the banners he had helped raise to its ceilings. But he had never really known his neighbors. He'd never had a girlfriend or partner or even a regular hook-up in Montreal. There were restaurants he liked, and bars he tolerated more than others, and a regular running path for days when he didn't mind being interrupted by fans. Like Ilya, he had loved the sports culture of the city, how much the city loved hockey specifically, and how the fans loved him individually—but Shane loved that the most when he was on the ice, and had never grown used to the attention in his day-to-day life. Boston was different, he knew. Hockey was not as big in America, even in a city where sports fanaticism was supreme. What would it be like to live here long-term? How much of that would be impacted by his relationship with Ilya? How much of an identity could he carve out for himself here, in America?

Ilya had already moved countries for his career, but he had done so with intent. He had wanted to leave Russia, although the reasons he needed to escape were brutally unfair. Even when Shane had felt his worst after the draft, disappointing every sports pundit who predicted that he would go first, he had been relieved to stay in Canada.

Leaving had not been his decision. But Ilya was his choice.

“Okay?” Ilya asked, glancing at him when he had been quiet for a long time. He was rinsing their dishes. Shane was drying them off and putting them away, because he knew how Ilya's kitchen was organized now. Ilya had given him permission to move stuff around, and Shane was starting to think the offer was genuine.

Shane thought about roots. His roots, he knew, were in Ottawa. The cottage, the lake, the places he had played as a child before hockey intensified and took over his life with his exuberant permission. It was the city where his grandparents had taught him how to swim, and where they were buried. Shane would always have Ottawa.

Maybe he could have Boston, too.

He slipped his arms behind Ilya's neck. Ilya put his own hand, clammy and slightly damp, on Shane's cheek. “I'm okay,” he said. “I love you.”

“How much?” Ilya asked, hoisting Shane onto the counter with a laugh.

“Enough for,” Shane said, and his breath caught when Ilya's hot, wet mouth landed on his throat. “Enough for anything, I think.”

Shane thought about regrowth. And roots. Putting down roots.

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Yuna and David arrived at Shane's new apartment two days later, having driven Shane's Jeep all the way from Montreal to Boston, a small moving van following behind them at a delay. "Everything else is in storage," Yuna said before they had even completed their salutary hug, "and there is some stuff that we dropped off at our home that we are going to bring to the cottage for you. Summer clothes, a few pieces of art, that sort of thing."

"Okay," Shane said. "I trust your judgment, Mom. Come inside."

His dad whistled. "This place is nice," he said. "I think your stuff will look good here. Hopefully, you won't even have to hire another interior decorator."

"Ha ha," Shane said sardonically, but he lingered by the counters, unduly stressed as he watched his parents explore his new home. (He would probably hire an interior decorator anyway, even if he didn't end up needing any new furniture. He liked getting an expert's opinion on stuff like this. It comforted him to know that he had done things right.)

"It's very much your style, I think," Yuna said confidently. "I love the paint colors, and it's in such good condition. I doubt you'll have to redo any of it."

"And the view," David said. "Wow, kid."

"I'll keep a guest bedroom reserved for you," Shane said, his throat tight. "You know... whenever you want to come by, you're always welcome."

His parents, on opposite sides of the large main room, both turned to face him at the same time, identical looks of sorrow and sympathy written on their faces.

Shane looked at the floor.

Telling his parents about the trade had been one of the hardest parts of the process. He had never exaggerated or joked when he mentioned in interviews that Yuna Hollander was the world's biggest Voyageurs fan. Part of him had been worried that she would be disappointed that he no longer played for her team, or even frustrated with him for playing against their divisional rival. A bigger part of Shane had known that the real source of her disappointment would be with the Voyageurs team itself, that it would hurt her to know that they had gotten rid of Shane because he was gay.

Shane imagined that there were probably a lot of disappointed Montreal fans right now: some disappointed to lose his skill, but some disappointed by the reason they had so pointlessly traded him away. No one had a more personal stake in the matter than his mother, though. She loved him. She had loved the Voyageurs.

There were plenty of rumors these days about the Voyageurs, from their management and owners down to the players. No one who understood how to watch a game of hockey could have missed the tension between Shane and his teammates at the end of the season. No one who watched the news could have misunderstood the reason.

There was plenty of support for Shane online, and an enormous wave of backlash against Montreal, but none of it changed what had happened. Nothing could reverse it.

“Well,” his mother said, injecting her voice with a false brightness. “Well, this place seems really lovely. Three bedrooms, you said? Are you going to convert one into a gym, or a yoga studio, maybe?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said, glad that she had changed the conversation. “It might be nice, but I can do yoga anyway, and Ilya said that the building’s gym was pretty good. I haven’t checked it out yet.”

His parents exchanged a look. Shane winced.

“That’s right,” David said slowly. “You mentioned that you bought this place from Ilya, is that right?”

Shane nodded. “Yup.”

“And Ilya has his own house here, right?”

“Yup. Yeah, uh. You are actually invited for dinner there. Tonight. If you want.”

Another glance. “Of course, we’d love to,” Yuna said. “How far is it?”

“Maybe a thirty-minute drive when traffic is bad,” Shane said. “Not far. Secluded, for how close it is to the city. I’ve spent most of my time over there since coming to Boston. We’re planning to stay at the house most of the time, just use this apartment if we need a place to crash close to the arena, and as a cover for me—the house is bigger, there’s more space, more privacy, because, you know, it’s not an apartment. It’s very modern, it’s very him, you know? His style. It’s nice, you’ll like it.” He closed his mouth tightly.

Yuna and David were both staring at him.

“So,” Yuna said shortly. She glanced at David for a third time. “So. Does that mean you’re moving in together?”

Shane thought about denying it, then wondered why he would bother lying, now, after everything. He nodded nervously. “Yup. I mean, we’ll have two places, so technically the apartment is mine, and Ilya is obviously keeping his house, but....”

“You’re planning to spend most of your time together.”

“Yes.”

Yuna clicked her tongue and glanced away. “That’s fast.”

“No,” Shane laughed. There was an edge of something uncomfortably close to hysteria in his tone, and Yuna’s attention snapped back to his face. “No, it’s really not.”

“Oh, yes, right,” Yuna murmured.

Shane had told his parents everything, or almost everything, in the days after the leak when they and Ilya had both been at his apartment with Svetlana, who was in Russia for the rest of

the summer. Shane had not gotten to tell his parents that he was gay of his own volition, and his impassioned and careless reunion with Ilya when he flew back from his father's funeral to be with Shane meant there had not been a formal declaration of their relationship either. But he had tried to explain, in his own way, and leaving out many key details, how he and Ilya had found their way to each other, over and over, across cities and countries, through the years.

They had eaten dinner together a few times over the summer as well, when they had all been down by the lake. His parents seemed to like Ilya, Shane was pretty confident, and he knew Ilya found a peculiar joy in nestling himself in a domestic family arrangement. But so much had happened to Shane in such a short period of time that their relationship reveal had honestly felt... almost anticlimactic.

Actually, he preferred it that way. They were together. They loved each other. With his parents at least, it wasn't much more complicated than that.

"We'd love to see him," David said, and Yuna quickly agreed. "And see the new house, of course. It's a lot, Shane, we know that. But we still want to be part of your life, always."

"Always," Yuna echoed. "As long as you need us. You just call, and we'll be on a plane."

"Thanks," Shane murmured. "I love you guys."

"We love you too," David said, crossing the room to pull Shane into a brief, tight hug, then patting his shoulder. "Now come on. You can carry your own bags up. We're old, and you need the exercise."

Shane laughed in his face. "I do not."

"No fighting," Yuna said, already half out the front door. "Come on, Shane. A little extra weight lifting won't hurt you. We don't have all day, Shane!"

But they did. They had all day and the next.

Shane got a move on, anyway.

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Shane was thankful to return to training camp.

Moving was stressful. Brand deals were complicated. Negotiating his online presence (striking a balance between not being too visible for his own comfort but posting enough so it didn't look like he was hiding himself or running away) was borderline soul-crushing.

But hockey was hockey. Shane knew how to play hockey.

And Ilya's team was... nice.

Loud. Aggressive. Sometimes almost violently physical, even against their own teammates, both on and off the ice, because that was just the way Boston played—willing to test the refs,

willing to take penalties, willing to sport a few unnecessary bruises.

Ilya pulled extra ice packs out of his freezer and pressed them to Shane's ribs, held them in place while they kissed slowly, the dichotomy of warmth and cold making him shiver.

They yelled at each other, petty insults that dragged their scoring points and their mothers into shouting matches. They yelled at Shane, too. He couldn't say he liked it, but the insults were vague, generic—"my grandmother skates faster than you, Hollander," or "We got rid of Wimbledon for this guy?" and from St. Simone, "I can handle the Quebecois accent if I have to, but if you don't score a fucking goal in the next minute I'm going to break my stick over your head!" Said with affection, allegedly.

Shane heard the same insults and much worse hurled at Ilya, their beloved captain. But Ilya knew how to chirp back, and Shane really didn't.

Some of the comments were still thoughtlessly sexist. Some of it came close to raising Shane's hackles, his natural defensiveness, his instinct that everyone here hated him because he was gay. Even as the month progressed, Shane still felt like he was walking into the locker room every day with his shoulders hunched around his ears. He still never got fully undressed. He still kept his eyes trained dutifully inside his cubby. He still waited until everyone was done before showering, or made sure he was in first.

Everyone but Ilya, who didn't leave him alone. Not for a goddamn minute.

"Shut the fuck up, Vicky, you haven't scored single fucking goal all day—can you see that fucking net? Put a goddamn puck in it or I'll put my blade through your fucking eyes since you aren't using them, eh?"

He smacked Varkov over the back of his head and said, "I once saw Wimbleton tie his skates onto the wrong fucking feet. So fucking stupid he would have put them on backward if it was possible. We need a fucking playmaker, not a fucking nitwit."

And he shouted, from the other side of the rink, when he definitely should have been out of earshot, "I know your grandmother is fucking dead, Carmichael! You can come up with a better insult than that!"

As often as not, Ilya and Shane arrived at practice together. "You are the one always whining about emissions and ozone and gas, blah, blah, blah," he would whine in the morning, while they shared coffee (different mugs, because Ilya's was heaped with teaspoons of brown sugar that made it so sweet Shane wouldn't have been able to stomach it even if he wasn't on a diet) and their astronomically different breakfasts. "No one is watching, and if they are, who cares? We carpool. Is normal, Hollander. You are my friend now, okay? You trying to make me look like bad captain? Like I am not welcoming? I am very welcoming. I will show you welcoming."

As often as not, Shane caved.

They had spent a few nights apart, but not many. Once or twice, Shane had asked Ilya not to follow him back to his apartment. A few times, Shane had gotten the vibe that Ilya wanted

space and made himself scarce without needing to be prodded. But most nights, they slept in the same bed, either the familiar one at Ilya's house, now decorated with boring blue sheets that Shane swore were better for his skin complexion, or at Shane's apartment, in a redecorated room with large prints on the wall that displayed photographs of the cottage and the lake from a dozen different angles.

"Nice touch," Ilya had said the first time he saw them, tapping the glass over the photos.

"Thanks. They were my idea," Shane said proudly, walking up and wiping away the fingerprint smudge with the hem of his sleeve.

Ilya grinned at him, dopey and fond. "So you won't get homesick?" he asked, squeezing Shane's waist.

"Something like that."

He still felt homesick. But that felt stupid to admit less than a month into settling at his new city, so Shane kept it to himself.

Ilya followed him around at practice. Shane's position on the team was still undecided, and he vacillated between playing left-wing on Ilya's line and center on the second line, usually with Pummel as right and a rookie named Sidney Carter on his left. Gregors and Wimbledon, the guys who had been traded to Pittsburgh, had been playing left and center respectively, but the lines had been inconsistent on the Bears for several years. LeClaire said they were hoping for more stability this season, but the weeks went on, and he and the other coaching staff had not yet settled on a decision regarding Shane's final placement.

Ilya was an attentive, demanding captain. He was surprisingly eager with affection, physical and verbal, and Shane learned very quickly that he was frankly excellent at commanding his team. He didn't know if Rozanov was any good at communicating with refs, but amongst his team, Shane finally started to believe the league rumors that Ilya was not only beloved in Boston, but indispensable in his own dressing room.

In the dressing room, Ilya talked loudly and often, and he focused most of his attention on Shane. He dragged him into conversations unwillingly and pushed Shane out of his comfort zone. He would strip to his boxer-briefs and stand around for longer than necessary, as if making a point of how comfortable he was next to Shane, which, really, was so unnecessary and unsubtle that Shane didn't even know where to begin. The best he could do was ignore it completely.

Ilya also tried to follow him into the showers, which Shane put a stop to right away.

"You cannot shower alone for the rest of your career," Ilya argued after practice one day, when they were ensconced in the apartment.

"I won't," Shane snapped, although he wasn't actually sure why Ilya thought he couldn't. It seemed reasonable to him. "But I'm just—I'm just getting settled, okay? You don't have to worry about it. Clearly, nothing is wrong. And I don't *want* to shower with you in public, okay? That is not helpful. That is the opposite of helpful."

“Ah,” Ilya said, nodding seriously. “You will get hard again, and everyone will know you are truly a sex maniac.”

Shane tackled him to the floor. They wrestled. They had aggressive sex on the carpet in front of Shane’s new view of the Boston skyline, hands finding the bruises already littering their bodies and digging in where they could hide new marks over old ones.

Shane thought he would hate the extra attention of Ilya’s captaincy. He thought it would set his teeth on edge. He was surprised by how grateful he felt.

(When the story had first broken, when Ilya had first seen the video, he called Shane from 7:00 am Moscow time. The first question he had asked was if Shane was alone, and the second had been if he was safe. “*You are in safe place with safe people?*” Those were Ilya’s priorities, always. Shane’s safety. Shane knew that, but he had never had a better demonstration.)

It was pretty obvious that a wall had been built before Shane ever arrived at TD Garden. Ilya had told Shane once that he had threatened to beat the shit out of anyone who said anything about Shane’s outing, but Ilya claimed that the warning hadn’t been necessary. Once the trade was announced, Ilya had doubled down, ensuring Shane that the Bears were not nearly as toxic as their aggressive play implied, and from very early on, he had been a strict enforcer on what was acceptable locker room talk, and what wasn’t. Not everyone had agreed with him, however.

“Gregors was piece of shit,” he said bluntly. “Fucking dick about literally anything. Everything. And I fucking broke his nose when he tried to say some shit about you, and no one held me back when I also bruised his ribs. Did not even get sidelined for it. Managers know what’s up. That’s why they got rid of him.”

It sucked that in the NHL, getting traded to another team was the de facto punishment for bigotry instead of being expelled from the league, but Shane understood what Ilya meant. From the players to the management, the Bears had a strict code. There were lines they wouldn’t cross. If anyone had a problem with that, they knew enough to keep silent.

Shane had suspicions that a few of the guys on the team were less chill than Ilya or Cliff, or even St. Simone and Benji, the goalie who had recently had a very cute baby. Shane had been happy to look at the pictures the new father showed around when he returned to the locker room after his brief paternity leave, and he was surprised by how much they made him miss the Pikes. His godkids, technically.

Cliff was aggressively welcoming, and St. Simone and Benji and a few of the other players were nice and clearly happy to have him. Many of the rookies and AHLers, including Pummel and Sidney, were star-struck, wide-eyed, and flattering. Some of the older guys, however, tended to look the other way when Shane walked into the locker room.

But it never made its way onto the ice. That’s what mattered. That was what had gone so fucking wrong in Montreal.

The ice was clear. The ice could be reset, like new, after just a few turns of the Zamboni. The ice made sense. It was just physics. Skates cut across it, and pucks skidded down its surface.

Shane knew hockey, which was good, because the season was about to begin.

The morning of their first preseason game in September, Shane woke up in Ilya's arms. That had become routine, and it didn't surprise him anymore. He didn't have to look around or wonder where he was. He knew this bed, and this room. He was starting to know the city around it.

Ilya was already awake. "Sleepyhead," he accused, voice thick and throaty in a way that made Shane shiver.

"What time?" he grumbled, pressing his face to the space between Ilya's pectorals. He could feel his metal cross pressing against his forehead.

"Early," Ilya said. He dug his fingers a little harder against Shane's scalp, and Shane groaned at the sensation of the pleasant massage. "Very early. We have lots and lots of time...."

Shane forced one eye open and turned his head just enough from the warmth of Ilya's chest to peer up at him. "Is that smart?"

"What, fucking you?" Ilya asked, one eyebrow quirked. Then he broke into the widest smile Shane had ever seen on his face. "Smartest thing I ever did."

Shane adored him.

Chapter End Notes

(this is my favorite chapter whoops I have so much sincere affection for these fictional characters)

Two things to quickly address because I read all of your lovely comments:

- In terms of Ottawa and the Centaurs, just remember that canonically, Ilya was still playing for the Bears during the season this fic is set in so we haven't even diverged yet! I know how beloved the Centaurs are and I really thought a lot about how to handle that when I started writing this sequel, it will be addressed!
- It isn't next chapter (sorry) but yes I do promise that the Voyageurs games are coming up... and yes... we will all get what we want...

Thank you for reading, and thank you to MurmuredLullabye and everybody who has helped correct some of the hockey-related mistakes I've made! I super appreciate genuine feedback!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

(There's a brief sex scene in here. If you don't care/don't want to read, skip from "I've slept in your bed everyday this week." to around "He didn't tell Ilya to hurry up." It's at the end of the chapter, should be easy to skim through)

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

The first preseason game Shane ever played for the Boston Bears was a 3:00 pm home game against Detroit. Preseason games were always exhibition games: a win or loss would not matter for their chances at the playoffs.

It mattered to Shane, though.

There had been open practices and media appearances, but this would be Shane's first night playing in TD Garden in front of Boston's fans while they cheered for him instead of screaming obscenities. Or, Shane hoped they would cheer for him. A high-profile trade made team loyalties complicated, and everyone understood that. These people had spent years chanting for Hollander's downfall on the ice, and sometimes off it. Not all of them would be happy to see his face on their team's lineup, and some of them, he knew, would not be pleased that Boston had even offered him a place after last season.

He really tried to stay off the internet these days. Shane had never been very active on social media, but over the summer, he had decided to hand over all his socials to his management team and let someone else run them. He didn't want to see it. He couldn't.

He sat in his cubby, dressed, and breathed.

Ilya paced the open space like a cougar, face intense and twisted. Shane had never seen this side of him before, not even during All-Stars. He could tell that this mattered to Ilya, too.

"Okay," he said, "okay, fucking listen up!" Everyone was already listening, of course. Ilya's energy was magnetic, pulsing through the room with each heavy step he took back and forth, each roll of his massive shoulders, bulked up with pads and his home-black jersey. "It's a new year. It's a new team. Guess what? It's been three fucking years since we made it to the fucking finals." The Bears booed and clattered their sticks against the wooden bases of their cubbies, all of them sitting and watching as intently as Shane. Shane knocked his stick against the ground a second after them, trying to find the rhythm of the group while distracted by the focused look in Ilya's eyes. His voice was already hoarse. A sneer widened his mouth into a gash. "Are we going to let it turn into fucking four?" he asked slowly.

"Fuck no!" Cliff hollered, similar sentiments echoing across the room.

Ilya put a hand behind his ear, mouth pulled into an exaggerated mew. “What the fuck you say?”

“Fuck no!” they chanted in unison.

“Fucking no!” Ilya agreed, screaming the words. “Three is fucking enough, I say! We are starting this season tonight, in Boston, in our fucking arena! Can you hear them out there? Our fans? Can you hear them fucking screaming? They are not screaming for Detroit, I can fucking tell you that. They are screaming for *us*. Are we going to give them a reason to groan or boo instead?”

“*Fuck no!*”

“Fuck no! I want them to be louder! I want to make them louder! When they are fucking chanting my name, I want to have *earned* it! Is the first game of the season, you think we should start off with a fucking disappointment? Fuck no! I want every fucking fan to watch us tonight and know, to fucking know, that we are taking them to the fucking finals this year! That’s what I fucking want! I want them buying tickets tomorrow because they *know* is a sure thing! I want that! Can you give it to me?”

The Bears whooped and hollered. Shane tried, and felt a cheer catch in his throat.

“I fucking know you can!” Ilya roared. “I know who the fuck you are! I know what you can do! You know what you can do tonight? Is fucking wipe the floor with those fucking Detroiters! Get them the fuck out of my city—out of *our fucking city*! We are fucking winning this fucking game!”

They leapt to their feet. Shane followed, half a second out of synch.

There was an ‘A’ on Shane’s jersey now. The ‘C’ was still on Ilya’s, and he deserved it.

Ilya clapped the back of his helmet as they jostled their way out of the dressing room, a herd of enormous, muscular bodies, all of them spoiling for a fight and shot through with electric energy. First game of the season. Every step they took made the cheering louder. Shane felt Ilya’s thumb creep below the rim of his helmet and brush his hair, not yet sweaty. “Good fucking speech, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed. “They love you.”

Ilya blinked.

They entered the tunnel single file, and Ilya’s hand dropped away.

Shane took a quick breath as he stepped onto the white ice, a few men behind Benji, their goalie, and skated off as their entrance song played over the speakers.

He was playing center on the second line tonight, but he had a feeling that the position wouldn’t stick. LeClaire wanted him on the first line, playing left wing with Ilya, and Shane was starting to believe that was just a matter of time. But at least for tonight, for his first exhibition game in black and gold, he was center.

Center, second-line, A.

Warm-ups passed in a blur.

He watched Ilya line up for the first face-off. He won. No goals.

Shane closed his eyes, trying to focus himself. His line was up. LeClaire tapped his shoulder, and Shane vaulted the barrier gracefully, St. Simone and Aliue to his left and right. He passed Ilya. Ilya touched his shoulder.

Shane wished that he could hear the fans properly. He wished he had taken a moment during warm-ups to scan the crowd, looking for signs with his name on them (would they even be there?) to see if they were negative or positive. He couldn't look now.

The game was on.

"Hollander," sneered Detroit's second line center as he skated into position in the middle of the ice.

"Lemaire," Shane returned calmly.

Vincent Lemaire had never liked Shane or Ilya, though Shane tried not to take it personally. He understood. Vincent had been a rookie alongside them, and had been the third nominee for the Rookie of the Year trophy, but that had been petty consolation. He played a decent first season, but he played against Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, whom the league and the media had hand-picked as the next two NHL superstars before they even stepped on the ice. Shane and Ilya had legendary rookie seasons, with Shane winning the Rocket Richard Trophy and Rookie of the Year, and with Ilya as one of his closest contenders in goals scored. There had been fierce debates about who, between Ilya and Shane, would take the rookie trophy. Lemaire had barely been part of the conversation. He was traded from the team that drafted him after his bridge contract ended, and he had played for Detroit ever since.

Shane wouldn't have handled any of that well if their positions had been reversed, so he tried not to hold his grudge against Lemaire.

But that had been seven years ago. Shane hoped he would have gotten over it by now.

"Pussy," Lemaire said, spitting on the ice as soon as he and Shane bent over for their first face-off.

Shane said nothing in return, but from the edge of the circle, St. Simone overheard. "If I hit you hard enough, Lemaire, it might actually make your face less crooked," he spat back, tension flooding the center ice.

He scoffed. "No, I guess I am wrong," Lemaire murmured, too quietly to be heard by anyone else. "Pussy isn't quite right, huh, Hollander? Because you're too busy sucking Rozanov's cock now, aren't you?"

Shane's brain switched off a second before the puck dropped.

He won the face-off, but he did not remember it, and he would never remember the first goal he scored wearing the black and gold of the Boston Bears.

His awareness only returned when Ilya slapped the side of his helmet hard as Shane swung over the barrier onto the bench. Shane jolted, and glanced at him, locking eyes with Ilya. “Stay with it,” Ilya murmured quickly but intensely. “None of that.”

“What?” Shane asked, glancing around, disoriented and confused.

Ilya smacked his helmet again and said loudly, “Good fucking goal, I like to see it,” and then quietly, “Stop *leaving*. Okay? Stop it.”

“Oh,” Shane said. Belatedly, he sat down, grateful that Ilya had stood to greet him so he hadn’t been standing alone. “Okay. Sorry.”

“Later,” Ilya murmured.

Shane nodded, stomach upset, feeling rattled.

The shift changed, then changed again, and Ilya was hopping over the barrier with Cliff, giving Shane a backward glance. “Stay,” he mouthed, and Shane nodded.

“Fuck that guy,” St. Simone said darkly, shuffling up the bench next to Shane. “Just—fuck that guy. Don’t listen to him.” He switched to French. “*We have your back. You don’t need to worry about fuckheads like him.*”

Shane couldn’t find the words to respond, so he nodded.

A moment later, he blinked, and he was leaning down, elbows tucked, and Lemaire was mouthing something at him, but it was all a rush of wind.

Shane got the puck again.

Step, turn, push. He shot it across the ice to Aliue, who cradled it for all of three seconds before it was neatly scraped off his blade by one of the Detroiters, and then the rookie defenseman on their third line checked him cleanly, knocking the puck free until St. Simone picked it up.

Shane was in position to receive the next pass, but he never did.

The refs were already calling interference when Shane took his first breath. Lemaire was standing over him, sneering, and for a second, Shane wondered if he was going to spit on him.

He had hit Shane from behind—already an illegal move, even if he’d had the puck. But it was just a two-minute minor. Apparently, the satisfaction of seeing Shane’s feet knocked out from under him was enough to stomach the penalty.

Shane jumped up before anyone could think about getting medics onto the ice, turning swiftly to face Lemaire. He was uninjured, just tripped and a little winded, but play had

stopped, so he took a moment to sneer in Lemaire's face. "Careful," he whispered, a voice like Ilya's murmuring in his brain. "You might lose your sponsors over sloppy play like that. Oh, wait...."

Lemaire reared back to hit him as his teammates skated in, grabbing their captain and holding him back.

"Two minutes!" the ref repeated as Lemaire shook off the other Detroit players and turned, remorseless, to the penalty box.

"Piece of shit," St. Simone growled.

Shane thought about all the bruises he had incurred last season during the playoffs, when several of the defenseman lines had stopped even pretending to care about him. "I've taken worse," he said. "Come on. Power play."

+++

They won the game handily, but that was no surprise, and it didn't feel all that good.

It would have felt worse to lose, sure, but even before Shane had been traded, Boston was ranked far above Detroit the previous season. A victory was practically foretold.

That the score ended at 4-1 was a better consolation.

"Hey," Ilya said, pulling Shane aside as the guys flooded toward the locker room, hooting and chanting. "What the fuck was that?"

"What?" Shane asked. He turned his eyes to the floor.

Ilya grabbed his chin, forcing his face up, and Shane pulled away, frantic.

"Don't," he hissed.

Ilya's mouth twitched. He looked around. They were not alone, although their teammates were not paying attention to them. But there were assistants and equipment managers. And there were cameras. "Sorry."

"Just," Shane whispered harshly, "don't. You are getting way too fucking comfortable, Rozanov."

Ilya looked at him hard. "Where did you go?" he asked. "On the ice. Is like... you stopped... you just stopped."

"No, I didn't."

Ilya growled. "Not moving. But is like your eyes-" he waved a hand in front of his face "-stopped. Like a robot. Hockey-playing robot. Where did you go?"

Shane looked away. He bit his lip and looked back. "I don't know."

Ilya looked concerned. He looked *worried*. Shane hated that he had put that expression there, and he hated that he had done it so many times. “Shane-”

“Hey!” Cliff stuck his head out of the dressing room. Shane clenched his muscles to stop an instinctive jump. He and Ilya were standing a foot apart. It was fine. “Debrief over? Come on! We’ve got a win to celebrate, let’s go!”

Ilya grabbed his shoulder and squeezed. “Da,” he said. “Yes. Come on, Hollander.”

“I’m okay,” Shane whispered as Cliff ducked back inside the room, because the worry had not left Ilya’s eyes. “Just—stop fucking touching me, okay? They’re gonna know, Ilya.”

Ilya glanced at him, looking carefully, then nodded. “Don’t go anywhere,” he ordered. “Don’t go where I can’t follow.”

“I’ll try,” Shane promised.

+++

The remainder of their preseason games went much better. Despite being veterans, Shane and Ilya played in every match, Shane switching evenly between center on the second line and playing Ilya’s left wing. It was obvious that Shane was more practiced at center, but Boston had enough depth that he wasn’t necessary in the position. He was getting accustomed to playing left wing, however, and no one could deny the electricity of his and Ilya’s joint power on the ice.

There were six preseason games in total. They only played against three other franchises, two games each: on Tuesday, they played Toronto at home, then on Saturday they flew to Buffalo, then drove to Toronto and played them in their arena, and were back home the next Thursday to play Buffalo again. Shane’s summer had not been altogether relaxing, but the sudden return to whirlwind traveling back and forth across New England was a bit dizzying. There were new traditions he had to learn. Fan chants and customs he had only ever witnessed from an enemy’s perspective. He signed a jersey as number 24 for the Boston Bears and handed it to a little girl wearing a Voyageurs baseball cap with a wink. Some of it felt normal. Some of it felt extremely normal, actually. Some of it felt sad.

“Here we go, Bears! Here we go!” their stadium cheered when they defeated a team of green-eared rookies in their fifth game of the preseason.

Shane missed, acutely and keenly, the familiar rise and fall of Montreal’s *“Olé! Olé! Olé!”*

Their last game was Saturday, early October. They had played Buffalo twice and Toronto twice, and it was time to finish out the circuit: the final preseason game was against Detroit again. Obviously, they knew the schedule well in advance, but Shane was still dreading it.

He was dreading it until the moment he received a call from LeClaire the night before they were set to fly to Detroit. “Lemaire is injured,” his coach said succinctly, right off the bat. Shane slumped a little against the counter, glad it was a phone call instead of a video call. “He’s not playing. Price boarded him so hard in Buffalo he busted his collarbone.”

“Okay,” Shane said.

“Just a courtesy call.”

“Thank you.”

“Absolutely.” LeClaire paused. Shane didn’t know how to fill the silence, or if he was allowed to end a call with the head coach of the Bears. Theriault would never have accepted that kind of player initiative, would have ripped Shane a new one for being a superstar prima donna if he had ever attempted to bow out of a phone call before being given the word. But LeClaire wasn’t Theriault. “Listen-”

Shane startled slightly as Ilya wrapped an arm around his waist, burying his face in his neck so he could eavesdrop. Shane let him and leaned into the embrace instead of the counter.

“Listen.” LeClaire sighed. “I talked with St. Simone. We’re not going to stand around and let our players get slandered, got it, Hollander? We’re going to be pushing those refs for unsportsmanlike conduct penalties, and the league is on our side with that, okay? You and Hunter brought a lot of positive attention last season, and even the higher-ups know that now is not the time to fumble the bag.” He paused. “There was enough of that already, last season. But that was *last* season. You’ve got a lot of visibility on you, kid, but that also means a lot of protection. Call it out when you hear it. Your teammates will back you up. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach,” Shane said.

“Good. Get some sleep. Maybe send off some prayers that Lemaire will never walk straight again, I don’t know. See you in the morning, Shane.”

As soon as he hung up, Ilya murmured, “I told you it would be fine. When Price boarded him, I thought the barrier would shatter. He is starting the season with an injury, and it is not half as bad as he deserves.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, slumping into Ilya’s waiting arms. “I should have listened to you.”

“Yes. Am always right about these things. Am a genius.”

Shane snorted. “You’ve just boarded enough people to know when a hit will actually hurt.”

“Yes, that is what makes me a genius. Because I know how to board a motherfucker without injuring them.” He swayed slightly and kissed Shane’s neck again. “And so does Price.”

“What do you mean?”

“Price meant to hit Lemaire like that, I mean. No one fucking likes Lemaire. He pisses everybody off, and not in a charming, fan-favorite way like me. Lemaire thinks he should have been number one in draft, but instead he was number fourteen, and then for rookie award he was number three, but still a million places behind *us*. He will still be sore about it in ten years, when he is dinosaur dust, retired and forgotten, and we are on Stanley Cup number twelve.”

“If you're on twelve, I'll be on thirteen,” Shane corrected.

“You will have taken a season off by then to have my babies.”

Shane spluttered on a laugh. “Oh my god, Ilya, what the fuck?”

“Two of them, twins. One of them is maybe even a goalie.”

“Wow, disappointing.”

“No,” Ilya said easily. “Never. Could not be.”

Shane blinked, his eyes damp. He felt tired. He felt relieved, and he wished that he didn't have to feel relieved. Ilya's arms were warm, and Shane swayed in the backward embrace like they were dancing. “No,” he agreed, “never.”

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“Stay with me, okay?” Ilya asked beforehand, shoulder-to-shoulder in the dressing room. Shane glanced at him through his eyelashes. He was standing to Ilya's left, already mimicking the position they would take on the ice. “Don't go anywhere. I want to play hockey with *you*. Not with hockey-robot. With *you*.”

“I don't know,” Shane murmured, mostly teasing, swallowing his nerves. “Playing like a hockey-robot almost got me the Cup last year.”

Ilya made a short, sharp sound. He reached behind Shane and readjusted one of his straps. Shane felt a tiny molecule of tension leave his neck as Ilya made sure the buckles on the back of his shoulder pads were perfectly even. “I'd rather play hockey with you anyway,” Ilya repeated, just a whisper, closer to Shane's ear than he ever should have gotten in the locker room.

Shane swallowed. “Okay.”

They beat Detroit.

+++

That was preseason. They won four of the six matches, and they were just exhibition games, but it felt like a good start. They flew back to Boston immediately following their final afternoon game, and Cliff and St. Simone paced the center aisle in the last few minutes before their descent, assuring everyone's mandatory attendance at Cliff's home for a celebratory party.

Shane and Ilya were sitting next to each other. Shane on Ilya's left, against the window. No one said anything about their supposed rivalry or their alleged hatred of each other. No one even seemed to care. They acted like it was normal.

“You want to go home?” Ilya asked quietly, waving Cliff off with a non-answer that wouldn't have worked from anyone but the team captain. “We can go home, if you want.” The plane

cabin was loud, filled with boisterous, happy voices. Ilya was clearly feeling the infectious excitement of his team. Shane watched his fingers twitch against his thigh.

“Let’s go,” he said, because he knew if he went home, Ilya would follow him. “I need to... bond. Right?”

“If that is what you want,” Ilya said. “Could happen today. Could happen tomorrow.”

Shane wanted to take his hand. Ilya’s fingers twitched. He picked at a thread in his sweatpants. “I want,” he said.

“Okay,” Ilya said.

They didn’t touch.

+++

Cliff Marlow’s house was a grandiose McMansion in a neighborhood close to Ilya’s, just outside the official city limits. It was big and sprawling and more than a hundred years old. It wasn’t necessarily what Shane would have expected from the hulking defender. The interior was a mix of antique architecture and modern furniture that made Shane cringe, but it was nice enough.

And it was crowded. And loud.

Cliff had a sound system wired throughout the entire first floor and lights that pulsed in beat with the music. With a click of a button, he could turn his home into a nightclub, and Shane hadn’t realized that when he agreed to come over. But it was still too early to leave, especially given that Shane knew this was the team’s way of trying to really bring him into the fold, once and for all.

He had proven himself. He could do what he was brought to Boston to do. He was still Shane fucking Hollander.

The only remaining question was whether he could figure out how to get along with the team off the ice as well as on it. And that was a harder question, because Shane had never been sociable, or good at reading cues, or even particularly likable. He wasn’t aggressive, he wasn’t loud, and he wasn’t easy-going.

He wanted to leave, but leaving was the same as giving up, so he stayed.

Hugging the wall, a glass of ginger ale clutched close to his chest because he thought it would be more subtle than a can, probably didn’t really count as mingling or socializing, but it was something, wasn’t it? He was here. He was *trying*.

Ilya slumped next to him, hooking his elbow high on the mantle of the fireplace. He was wearing a muscle tank and the position exposed his armpit hair, and he grinned at Shane, slow and sly, and licked a drop of vodka from the side of his glass. “Hello, pretty wallflower.”

“Ilya,” Shane said warningly.

“What?” Ilya said. He swayed. Shane wondered if he was actually drunk or just playing it up in case anyone looked in their direction, but the team seemed pretty distracted. Cliff had a massive bar in his dining room, and he had set up a game of beer pong on the table. It was... strangely wholesome, in a way. The Bears had a lot in common with depictions he had seen of frat bros, despite being outrageously wealthy and semi-famous and definitely capable of something more classy than a game of beer pong. But then, Shane had never been to college, so what did he know?

“Why aren’t you playing?” Shane asked. St. Simone and his fiancée, Amanda, were lounging together on the couch across the living room from them, her legs in his lap and his hand on her thigh, but they were just talking. Benji Oregon, now officially a dad, was sitting in an armchair, smiling at his phone. Pummel was already passed out under the coffee table, but Shane was pretty sure it was from regular exhaustion and not alcohol—it always took rookies a while to become accustomed to the relentless schedule of the NHL. This was clearly the room for the boring people, and Ilya was the odd one out.

“Not my skill,” Ilya said, shrugging casually. “Hand-eye, whatever. No. And I won’t drink Marly’s shitty beer.”

“Okay,” Shane said. “I think some people are outside by the pool.”

Ilya smiled at him, rolling his neck lazily. Shane swallowed and took a fortifying sip of his ginger ale. “Trying to get rid of me already, wallflower?” he purred.

“No,” Shane said quickly. “No, of course not.”

Ilya hummed. “You do not look like you are having fun, even though you are star of the night.”

“I’m not the star-”

“Brightest, prettiest star,” Ilya cooed. “Just look at your eyes.” And he reached forward and tapped Shane’s cheek, making him blink in shock. “Freckles on your cheeks and stars in your eyes. Sozvezdiya.” Shane had been trying to learn Russian in the rare moments of downtime he had, but he certainly didn’t know that word. Ilya leaned in and murmured, “Constellations.”

“Oh,” Shane said. “Thank you.”

Ilya laughed. Shane wanted to lean into him. He wished they were home suddenly, fiercely, at Ilya’s house or the apartment or the cottage, it didn’t matter. He just wanted to be alone with him.

Ilya gave him a look. Shane wondered if he was thinking the same thing, and Shane didn’t move away when he swayed even closer. “I missed you,” Ilya said, not quite against Shane’s neck but a little too close for comfort.

“Missed me?” Shane looked around. He decided he could be bold, in dim lighting and with the music turned loud. “I’ve slept in your bed every day this week.”

“Yes, but you haven’t let me fuck you in *our* bed,” Ilya said. Shane's mouth dropped open slightly.

“I sucked you off two nights ago,” he murmured. He wasn’t drunk, but it almost felt like he was. “In *our* bed.”

“Yes, you did, was very wonderful, but not the same as fucking you, and was two nights ago. Maybe you can go a few days without getting off, but I am virile. Young. Fertile, you know?”

“Ilya,” Shane hissed.

Ilya darted in closer—too close, and Shane's lungs heaved and his heart raced, part terror, part disastrous desire. “I want to fuck you,” Ilya whispered, then pulled away. He raised his glass and took a long sip of his vodka. Some of it spilled over the plump roundness of his bottom lip and trailed down his chin, like water or sweat.

Shane wasn’t drunk, but he wanted to lick the alcohol off Ilya’s skin. “Here?” he asked, wondering what the answer would be.

Ilya smiled slowly. He set his glass down pointedly on the mantle. “Not here,” he said, Shane mostly reading the words off his lips, barely able to hear him. “But we should get started.”

Shane abruptly turned and stalked out of the living room. Ilya followed close at his heels, and Shane was delighted that he could lead him without saying a single word.

Ilya took control once they were in the relative privacy of the hallway. “Come on, come on,” he said, tugging Shane up the impressive front staircase. “I fucking need you, fuck, I am so hard.”

“Me too,” Shane admitted, dizzy with want and recklessness.

Ilya dragged him through the house, around an open second-floor balcony and into a hallway lined with tall, dark doors. He shoved one open knowingly, revealing a plain and undecorated guest bedroom, and slammed it loudly behind them, causing Shane to flinch. Then Ilya pinned him to the door, wrists above his head, and Shane relaxed.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” Ilya panted, their mouths pressed together even though they weren’t kissing. “Fuck, I am so fucked. Gets me so horny, seeing you on the ice, playing with you. I am going to be fucking bricked up the entire season, Hollander, and it’s your fault. They gonna call me a fucking pervert, think I get horny from skating, but it’s you, it’s you.”

“It’s always you,” Shane agreed, and stuck his tongue into Ilya’s mouth. Ilya let go of Shane’s wrists, but Shane kept them against the door of his own volition as Ilya dragged his hands down his chest and then down his stomach, pressing hard against recently exerted muscles, drawing an involuntary groan from Shane that he barely managed to stifle.

“They can’t hear you,” Ilya whispered against his jaw. “Be a little louder, Shane.”

“This is risky,” Shane said, like it didn’t make his breath stutter.

“Is not,” Ilya said. “Marly has one million rooms in this stupid house. No one will check this one.”

“They might notice we’re both gone.”

“And I will say you were having panic attack and I, very good captain, took you aside and calmed you down.”

“You will not say that-”

“Maybe I will,” Ilya said, stealing a kiss and the words off Shane’s lips. “Is not so different from truth. I am very, very good at calming you down, yes?” As if he needed to make his point any clearer, he rolled his hips against Shane’s half-hard erection. “And I cannot send you back out there looking like this. Would be irresponsible, Shane. Make me a bad captain. I am not a bad captain, am I?”

“No,” Shane gasped as Ilya’s hands wiggled down the front of his pants. His fingers gripped and spasmed on his shoulders. “No, you’re fucking wonderful—you’re a wonderful captain.”

“As good as you?” Ilya asked slowly, giving Shane’s cock one long, purposeful stroke, grip almost tight enough to waver over the line between pleasure and pain.

Shane gasped and threw his head back. Ilya caught him before his skull could connect with the wall. “No,” he gasped. “You’re so much better. You’re amazing. You’re—you’re so fucking good at it. Your team loves you, Ilya. You make them—believe in themselves.”

It was maybe some of the weirdest dirty talk they had ever exchanged, but Shane didn’t miss the way Ilya’s eyes lit up, or the way his fingers tightened in Shane’s hair, or the twitch of his cock, pressed against the crease of Shane’s thigh. “Tell me,” he growled.

“You’re so good to me, Captain,” Shane said.

Ilya dropped to his knees.

This time, Shane let his head knock into the hard wooden door, and he relished the sting.

He came alarmingly quickly in Ilya’s skilled mouth (skilled not only at the technical aspects of a blowjob, but at playing Shane’s body specifically, like an instrument he had been practicing for years). Ilya moved down, working him through the aftershocks by lapping aggressively at Shane’s thighs, smearing thick saliva into the space between his legs. Then Ilya didn’t give him a moment more to recover before he was kissing Shane again, pushing his sticky tongue into Shane’s mouth and making him taste his own semen. Which, really, was at least slightly better than vodka.

“Turn around,” Ilya ordered, caught between his captain voice and the voice he always used when he got bossy in the bedroom—a delicious, hazy middle ground that made Shane want to pant and beg and cry, just a little. He turned without questioning.

Ilya yanked his sweatpants and boxers down to Shane's knees, tangling him in place, and pushed his chest hard against the door as he pulled his own erection out. Shane didn't care what he did with it, as long as he never let go. "Going to fuck you," Ilya said. "Going to fuck your thighs right here, hoping someone has their ear pressed to the other side of the door. You should scream for me, Hollander. Scream *my* name. I want everyone to know who is doing this to you."

He pushed his cock between Shane's thighs. Shane clenched his muscles, making the space as tight as was comfortable as Ilya pushed through his own leftover spit.

"Say my name," he ordered, thrusting Shane against the door.

"Ilya."

"Again."

"Ilya. Captain."

"Fuck. Again."

Shane imagined what it would have felt like if Ilya had just shoved inside him, straight into his core, no prep, no lube other than spit.

It would have hurt. He would have liked it, anyway.

"Ilya, Ilya, Ilya, Ilya, Ilya-"

Ilya came soon after that. Shane was too fucked out to make fun of him. He caught most of his spend in his cupped hands, and the rest trickled down Shane's thighs, making him shiver. Some landed on the door.

Ilya pressed a wet, full-mouthed kiss to Shane's ear, making him shudder. "Lick it up."

He obeyed.

They were lucky the guest bedroom had an en suite.

Ilya kissed his inner thighs as he wiped his come off of Shane's skin with toilet paper. Shane watched him sedately, still leaning against the door. On the other side, one floor below, all the members of his new team were gathered, probably wondering where they were.

He didn't tell Ilya to hurry up.

"Wow," he whispered. "I'm glad we won."

Ilya grinned up at him, kneeling between his feet. "Of course you still care about that."

Shane huffed. "Of course I do! What, you don't?"

“Not as much as you.” Ilya kissed his recently cleaned thigh. “No, I am very happy, and very proud of your excellent goals, and very, very happy that Montreal will already be learning what fucking idiots they were.”

Shane didn’t want to think about their upcoming games against Montreal. He laced his fingers through Ilya’s curls and gently pulled him up. “We have to go.”

“Yes.” Ilya kissed him. “They will be wondering where their stars are. Cannot abandon them for too long or they will start knocking into walls, too confused without us to tell them where to go.”

“You’re so mean.”

“Not to you.”

“Sometimes.”

Ilya grinned, leaning hard against him. “Only sometimes.”

Ilya left the room first, checking they were alone, and then Shane followed. They walked down the stairs together, even though it made Shane’s heart thump. Despite his nerves, it was difficult not to take Ilya’s hand.

“There they are!” Cliff shouted when they walked together into the living room. He raised his glass. “Rozy, I was trying to figure out who the fuck you’d taken off with.” He walked up to them, looping his arm over Ilya’s shoulder and gesturing, wobbly from liquor, at Shane. “This fucking guy—he’s a real womanizer! All the fucking rumors are true, buddy.”

“Yeah?” Shane asked weakly, trying hard not to meet Ilya’s amused eyes.

Shane was not a good liar. He had successfully kept his sexuality a secret for years because it was simply so unheard of in their profession that no one had ever expected it—and especially not from a player of Shane’s caliber, no matter how unfair that was.

Ilya shoved Cliff off him playfully. “Who the fuck would I be fucking here?” he asked broadly. Shane worried he was going to wink at him. “This is team gathering, I don’t see any fucking groupies! What, am I fucking off with Benji’s cousin? Aliue’s sister-in-law?”

“Hey!” Aliue and Benji both objected, groans ringing out through the room that made Shane wonder if the accusations were not too far left of the truth.

“No.” Ilya grabbed Shane by the forearm. “We were talking puck. You could not know how fucking happy I am to have someone who can keep up now. Makes things exciting.”

“Talking puck,” Cliff scoffed. “Okay, whatever, man. Shane, you sure I can’t get you a drink?”

“I’m sure,” Shane said.

The beer pong tournament was winding down. Aliue had dominated, inspiring jokes about how he should have gone into the NBA. Shane watched the final few rounds lingering at the edge of the room but making easy small talk with his teammates, feeling a level of physical satisfaction that made it slightly easier to relax in mixed company.

And Ilya never strayed to far from him. About fifteen minutes passed before Ilya touched the back of Shane's neck, a quick, intimate glide of his fingertips. Shane glanced at him. He had been doing that a lot lately. He didn't want to admit how good it felt.

Ilya slammed the rest of his drink back and set it down hard on a coaster. "I'm fucking out," he announced, and many of the guys booed him, but he waved them off broadly. "Hollander is designated driver for me. Sweet guy, no?"

"You're driving all the way out to Rozy's glass box?" Cliff asked, whistling, one eyebrow raised. "Nice guy."

"I am special," Ilya grinned.

"No, you're not," Shane said. "Does anyone else need a ride?"

Thankfully, no one did. There were more hugs as they left, more congratulations and well-wishes for the season, and then they spilled out onto the wide suburban street crowded with the team's expensive, gaudy vehicles. "His neighbors must hate him," Shane murmured as they walked to his car.

Ilya scoffed. "This is fucking Boston. They *love* him. They love all of us." He knocked their shoulders together. "Soon, they love you most of all. You will bring them a Cup. So fucking soon."

"We will," Shane murmured, glancing at him. It was dark out, but the street was well-lit, and a few of the houses still had their lights on. He wanted to take Ilya's hand so badly, but, like Ilya had said, they were in Boston. In a city full of people who might recognize them. Or maybe not. "I want to go home."

Ilya looked at him, eyes and face suddenly somber. "Canada?" he asked after a moment.

Shane blinked. That hadn't even occurred to him. "No," he said, bluntly honest, and Ilya smiled.

Shane took a breath. He took a risk.

He grabbed Ilya's hand and held it, alone on the street for the less than twelve steps that remained to his car. But he did it.

Ilya's smile was brighter than the sun.

Regular season starts next chapter! Thanks for reading!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

(goals accredited to a Macklin Celebrini... i am ruining my feed for this fan fic god damn it)

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

Shane had a routine in Montreal. It was strict. He rarely deviated from it. Any unexpected changes had always thrown him off his game, always made him feel unsettled and off-balance, like he needed to close his eyes in an already dark room and breathe for a moment. He had game day routines, and off-day routines, and bye-week routines, and away-game routines. In the past, he had special routines for when they played against Boston, and when they played in Boston, and when he saw Ilya and when he didn't.

Some things were constant. Some things changed. Shane had always considered himself adaptable.

He stared at his socked feet over the side of the bed, toes buried in the carpet.

Ilya sat up and kissed his bare shoulder. "Game day," he whispered, excitement permeating his voice.

First of the season.

Shane didn't have a routine yet.

And he was playing left wing.

"You are brilliant," Ilya murmured, kissing his neck. "You will stun them all, you know? You leave them in the dust. Shane fucking Hollander."

Shane raised his hand, elbow twisting awkwardly so he could cradle Ilya's jaw. "Ilya Rozanov," he whispered, and craned his neck to kiss him.

Then he winced and pulled away. "Morning breath, yuck."

"Damn," Ilya said dryly. "I thought I finally got you."

"Never."

They brushed their teeth side by side in the bathroom and got dressed in separate rooms. They would drive to practice separately, then go to Shane's apartment together. Lunch, a nap, maybe something else. Shane wasn't sure yet.

Ilya took him by the wrist. “Shane Hollander,” he said, like it was a reminder.

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“Rozanov and Hollander on the first line,” a newscaster said over the radio, awe distinct their tone, like those two names together were something to worship. “I’ll tell you, I cannot believe it.”

“Boston is already looking strong for the Cup this year, and we know that’s what they’re hoping for.”

“Break it down for me: what were the Voyageurs thinking, making this trade to their biggest divisional rival? I mean, really!”

“Word on the street, Voyageurs management believed that Hollander and Rozanov’s infamous rivalry would get in the way of their on-ice collaboration.”

“And? Is there any validity in that?”

“Based on what we’ve heard and seen in practices and during the preseason exhibition games, absolutely not. Hollander and Rozanov seem friendly off the ice, and I’d go so far as to say they’re soulmates in skates.”

Shane's hands flexed on the steering wheel. He was glad Ilya was driving his own car and hoped he was listening to his usual hype music instead of the pre-game radio show. Shane usually drove in silence. It would probably be better for his mental state to turn off the radio now. He left it on.

“So what happened? What changed between these formal rivals?”

“Part of Hollander’s statement about the trade addressed that very question, and Rozanov has echoed the same sentiment in interviews since; according to these hockey superstars, the alleged rivalry was always a spin created by the league to drum up some interest in new talents.”

“So it was never real? Or is that just the team PR line?”

“Oh, they’ve certainly played hard against each other over the years! You’ve got the trade of titles between Russia and Canada in the WJC from their early days and their starts as number one and number two in the draft—then the famous first face-off in their rookie year—these boys have certainly always taken each other seriously as competitors, but according to them, that animosity never made it off the ice!”

“And we believe that story?”

“Based on how they’ve been playing, I think we have to!”

“What about Hollander’s relationship with the rest of the Bears? I can remember a few hard hits he’s taken from Cliff Marlow over the years, and they went face-to-face in the division finals for the cup in Twenty-Fourteen. Does that leave any lingering animosity?”

“It’s what every traded player has to go through, but Hollander has certainly been playing well with his new teammates. Of course, everyone with an eye on the league this past year is waiting for the inevitable first game between the Voyageurs and their former captain-”

Shane smacked the radio off. He gripped the steering wheel.

Practice first. Then lunch. Then a nap. A fortifying snack (enough calories to count as a second lunch, really), then back to the arena. Opening ceremonies.

They were playing Washington. Not Montreal. Not yet.

They were going to win.

He relaxed his grip.

+++

Morning skate, practice drills, left wing. An unmatched energy in the locker room, spilling from every cubby and every player. They were looking at Shane especially, and he knew it, knew the pressure on him. He could play through pressure, but he was acutely aware that it was coming from every corner today.

Practice ended. They had planned to leave separately and meet up at the apartment, but when Shane headed for his car, Ilya grabbed his arm. “With me,” he said, and Shane was too stressed out to protest when that was all he really wanted. Screw his routine. He wanted to be with Ilya.

They got in the car together, Ilya behind the wheel, and drove.

“You are nervous,” Ilya murmured.

“Yeah,” Shane said, because there was no point in denying it.

“Why?” Ilya asked. “You are Shane Hollander. Should not be nervous.”

He sighed. “Being Shane Hollander wasn’t enough last year.”

“It was, though. It was more than enough. The Voyageurs were playing like garbage even before-”

“Hey-”

“And you, *you*, got your team to the finals. Third year in a row. We are about to make it four. And this time, it will not be only you on the ice. This time, you will not have to watch your own back. This time, you will have me on the ice with you. No more—fucking what was it—no more fucking pinball, okay? You have this. We have this. You’re good.”

“I know,” he said quietly. He took Ilya’s hand, settling them on the gearshift. “I know, okay? I know I have you. I know I have this team. I know we’re fantastic. I’m still nervous.”

Ilya glanced at him, but this time did not try to correct him. Shane was grateful. "Okay. What can I do, then? Anything?"

"You do a lot," Shane admitted. He wondered, briefly, how visible they were through the windshield, then leaned over and put his cheek on Ilya's shoulder, not caring that he had to contort himself awkwardly over the console. "You do enough."

"Oh," Ilya said, throaty. "Good."

"Very good," Shane murmured. "It's okay. I'm always nervous. Sometimes... that's just the way I am."

Ilya took a moment to respond. "I know that, I think. I mean, I understand feeling like that."

Shane looked up. It was an awkward angle, and most of Ilya's face was hidden behind the broad stretch of his jaw, covered in the five o'clock shadow he hadn't shaved off that morning. "You do?"

"Not with nerves," Ilya said. He tapped his fingers beneath Shane's. "But... feeling... bad. Feeling bad, for no reason sometimes, I think. I get that."

"Oh." Shane looked ahead. He nodded. "Yeah."

"You make me feel better," Ilya insisted. He paused. "Mostly."

Shane swallowed. "Good," he murmured. "I'm glad. You always make me feel better. I promise that's true. Just... not always one hundred percent better, if that makes sense?"

"Da," Ilya murmured, a low note to his cadence that made Shane think he really meant it. "Da, konechno."

"Konechno," Shane repeated quietly.

"It means-

"Of course," Shane finished for him. He kissed his shoulder. "I know. I'm learning."

Ilya nodded quickly. "We are always learning together. Kind of exciting, no?"

"What, are you gonna learn French?"

"Fuck no," Ilya snorted. "But... I am glad. That we both feel better, when we are together. Feels good, being with you, always."

"It doesn't have to be perfect to be good," Shane said.

"Yes. Exactly that."

"Thank you," Shane whispered, "for being with me when things get bad."

Ilya nodded. His fingers tapped. "Most important place to be."

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The afternoon passed in a blur. It felt nice, like always, to nap beside Ilya. They both slept in their boxers and woke up blisteringly hot, giggling at the sweat between their bodies, sticky, requiring them to take their second shower of the day. “I love how frizzy your curls get,” Shane confessed through the steam.

“Your cheeks,” Ilya returned, “they are so pink.”

They ate enough food to get them through the game, Ilya partaking in Shane’s carefully crafted diet for once as he shoveled down brown rice, chicken, and vegetables. “Maybe not so terrible on game days,” Ilya acquiesced. “Not like it tastes worse than protein powder scrambled eggs or whatever the fuck Cliff eats.”

Shane’s nose wrinkled. “Ew,” he said, although he had heard much, much worse recipes from guys in the league before.

Ilya grinned, scrunching up his expression. “Check Marly’s fridge next time we visit—buckets and buckets of cottage cheese,” he said, and mimed throwing up, making Shane laugh.

They drove back together like it was normal. There were cameras in the parking lot, and fans lined up outside the gates. They got out of the car like it was normal. “I’m your Captain,” Ilya said proudly. “Maybe I tell the press that you get lost in scary big-time Boston without me.”

“Montreal has three times the population of Boston! It’s way bigger!” Shane said, just to keep the conversation going as they shouldered their bags and walked past cameras and phones and shouting Bostonians without acknowledging them.

“Boston is scarier,” Ilya said simply.

“You two sure got friendly fast,” Cliff said, tone joking, when their banter had continued all the way into the locker room and halfway into pads.

Shane froze. Ilya did not.

“It’s so lonely at the top,” he cooed, and the other Bears near them all laughed or shoved him good-naturedly. “We are from same draft year, you know? We’ve known each other long time. Cannot all be fighting and chirping.”

“Longer than anyone else in the league, actually,” Shane managed, hoping it sounded casual. “We met when we were both sixteen, I mean... that’s a long time to know someone.”

“I’m his oldest friend,” Ilya said loudly. “Sad for him, though, because he is not mine.” He tapped his chest. “Room in my heart for many, though, we all know this.”

Shane scowled but had to actively fight off a smile.

“Right,” Cliff drawled. “Right.”

Then it was game time. Shane zoned out through Ilya's speech, just as aggressive and charismatic as the others he had heard from the captain. He thought about the arena of fans waiting for them, even more than the preseason games. His parents weren't there, but they would be watching. Rose would be watching. Svetlana, Ilya's actual oldest friend, was in the stands, in reserved seating with Sergi Vetrov. Who else was out there? Who was rooting for him? Who was hoping to see Shane Hollander catch a blade through his throat before the first game was done?

Ilya's speech concluded with a cheer. Cliff pulled Shane to his feet and slapped his shoulder hard, startling Shane back into the moment. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ilya watching, but Cliff didn't notice his concern. "Hey, man," he said fiercely, jostling him. "You've fucking got this. It's been a fucking delight to play with you—you're a fucking monster, bro, we know you're gonna bring it."

St. Simone grabbed his other shoulder. "First game as a proper Bear," he said, overtly pleased. "I don't even want to wish you good luck!"

More hands. More faces. More smiles and grins, nervous and eager, some young and some veteran.

Shane wondered if there were some players here who didn't really want Shane Hollander in Boston. But he *knew*, for sure, that there wasn't a player in the league who didn't think he was good.

One of the best.

They took to the ice.

"Here we go, Bears! Here we go!"

It wasn't the same as an "*Olé!*" the Montreal cheer that had roused Shane to action for years, but it was something. It was still important. It was still meant for him.

He heard the chant begin to shift as they skated circles through the beginning warm-ups, slapping a plethora of pucks toward their open goal.

"Holl-an-der! Holl-an-der! Holl-an-der!"

He glanced up. The sea of black and gold was unfamiliar, and yet, hadn't he been playing in this arena for about as long as he had played in Montreal? The individual faces were always lost to distance and mass. Even if the people were different, the crowd was still the same.

And that chant was familiar.

Ilya skated alongside him. He raised his hands into the air, and the cheering grew deafening. It was almost a competition, Shane heard, like a representation of their entire careers in sound: "*Holl-an-der! Holl-an-der!*" on the high notes but voices in the mix screaming, "*Roz-a-nov! Roz-a-nov!*" never quite drowning out the syllables of his own name. Maybe it wasn't a competition, actually. Maybe it was more like a choir.

“Come on,” Ilya said, hands still in the air as they turned circles in sync, each step and push perfectly aligned. “Give them what they fucking want!”

Shane raised his hands.

The cheers rose to the roof, and Shane felt like he rose with them.

The game began.

Shane remembered the extended period of dissociative episodes he had experienced at the end of last season. Almost every game, he had stepped onto the ice amid a hostile team, facing players from around the continent that all had opinions about him and his life and his privacy, and his brain had shut up. He had felt disconnected from his body, barely aware of bruises, and of hunger, and of aches, emotional and physical. He played very well through this period, but there was not a single point in his entire career—his entire life—when he had enjoyed hockey less.

He stood to Ilya’s left, knees bent low, watching. It was unusual, unexpected, maybe a little melancholy to watch the face-off from an outsider’s perspective. It wasn’t his to win anymore.

But Ilya could do it for him.

He won, got the puck, and they were off.

It was the first regular game of the season, and the change of energy was palpable in the air. But despite the excitement and the press of the event, it would not be their best game of the season, not even close. They hadn’t hit their groove, were not inextricably attuned to every twitch and quirk of the other skaters on their team. They also had not had enough time to analyze the other team, to see how Washington was playing that year, and adjust themselves accordingly. No one really expected opening games to be anything special.

But, god. Playing with Ilya?

The first Bears goal of the season happened ten minutes into the first period.

Ilya skated slowly down the center, puck carefully knocked between the sides of his stick, then lifted and swung forward, momentum carrying him toward the net in time with his swing. The goalie dropped flat on the ice, and the defensemen lunged to block it.

But when Ilya swung his stick, he had knocked the puck back, not forward. Straight to Shane, open and unguarded on the ice. Ilya had not even had to look over his shoulder to know where Shane was, and Shane had not needed to see his eyes to know the play Ilya was making—the fake out, pretending to knock the puck forward to get the goalie on the ice while he kicked it back to Shane, and Shane, with the precision that had beat five separate records in All-Star accuracy competitions, knocked the puck straight over the goalie’s shoulder.

The first goal. And it was Shane’s.

The second point was scored in the second period. Ilya lost the face-off, but St. Simone bullied the puck away from an opposing rookie and shot it toward Shane, who carried it down the ice.

He spun, turning his back on the aggressive player skating up to him and keeping the puck out of his reach for long enough for Shane to locate Ilya across the ice, driving toward the net, and triangulate where he would be in the next second. He finished the spin, facing forward again, keeping the opposing player away, and shoveled the puck quickly, briskly, across the ice to Ilya, who knocked it into the net without hesitation off the deflection.

Ilya's first point. Shane's first assist.

Third period.

Straight down the center of the rink, blades flashing, Shane reached out as the goalie hunkered down over the crease.

His backhand lifted the puck clean off the ice, wobbling through the air as the goalie swiped for it—and missed.

Putting pucks in nets. It was what he did best.

“Holy fuck,” Cliff said as Ilya and Shane collapsed, panting, on the bench at the end of the second period. “I mean—*holy fuck.*”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed. “Is better than sex. Way better.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Shane said.

“For you? After that? I will do *anything*, Hollander.”

He almost froze. *Too much. Way too much.*

But the team laughed, slapping Rozanov's back and grabbing Shane by his elbows and shoulders. “I know that's right!” Aliue cheered, knocking the toes of his boots against the barrier and whooping, mimicked by the fans leaning over the bench behind them.

Washington did not score. 3-0.

In some ways, smiling at Ilya, feeling disturbingly close to tears as they piled onto the ice and fans roared and stamped their feet, it felt like a hat trick. Better than a hat trick, maybe.

“Holl-an-der! Roz-a-nov! Holl-an-der! Roz-a-nov!”

God, it sounded so good.

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(And when they skated off the ice, like he had done every game since he had joined Boston, Shane folded his fingers to his palms and murmured, “Love you,” to Ilya Rozanov, in front of

their team and an arena and a dozen cameras.

And Ilya said it back.)

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“Question for Rozanov. What has it been like captaining Shane Hollander, who led the Montreal Voyageurs to three consecutive finals and two Stanley Cups? How has it affected your dynamic? Do you feel any additional pressure while captaining a captain?”

Shane adjusted his tie.

“Shane is very good captain,” Ilya said into the microphone. He tapped his shoe against Shane’s, but it wasn’t as comforting as the gesture usually was. “But we have very different styles.” He smiled, leaving the details unsaid, and still got a few chuckles from the assembled press corps. “We make good captain team—I am better at speeches, but the rookies are not so terrified of him. It works for us, and no, I don’t feel extra pressure. We are good at taking each other’s advice.”

“Shane, anything to add?”

“Nope, I think that covers it.”

It had been so long since he had to sit here, under these lights, in a suit, and sweat through these questions. Usually, Shane was pretty good at blanking out and doing these appearances by rote, media-trained and camera-ready answers sprouting from his mouth without much thought, but he was out of practice.

The Voyageurs hadn’t let him do any press appearances after the leak.

The press was aware of this. “Shane, this is your first press conference since joining with the Boston Bears. How has your transition to a new team, a new city, and a new country been going?”

“It’s been great.” At least he wouldn’t have to repeat the same answers in French when he was done. “The Bears are an awesome team, and I’m extremely excited to still be part of an Original Six franchise. Rozanov and I had wonderful chemistry during last year’s All-Star game, so it was exciting to transform that into something permanent.” His throat clicked. He hoped it wasn’t audible. “I’m still getting used to Boston, but the fans are incredible.”

“This is also your first press conference since the now-infamous private conversation between you and Rose Landry was leaked last season. Anything you would like to address?”

He wanted to say *No fucking comment* so bad it was on the tip of his tongue, but that wouldn’t be helpful. Ilya pressed the full length of his foot to Shane’s firmly beneath the table. “I’ve already confirmed this,” Shane said, reciting from a pre-written script he had memorized so thoroughly it was practically ingrained on the backs of his eyelids, “but I am gay. Obviously, it was not my choice to share that with the world in the way that it happened, but there is no taking it back. And I wouldn’t want to,” he lied. “I’m happy to live my truth,”

he lied. “I think hockey fans, and all sports fans, are aware of the way our profession doesn't always represent everyone—especially hockey, sometimes. It's important that we take steps forward, not backward.”

Bland. Generic. His team had been right to call him a liar.

“Do you think the Voyageurs' decision to trade you last season after your legendary playoff run was a step backward for the NHL?”

At least that was easy. “No comment. Next question.”

“Are you aware that your former team also won their first game of the season tonight, under the guidance of their new captain, Joshua Abbot?”

“I am now,” Shane said dryly.

“Interesting questions only, please,” Ilya said.

“Shane, in the video with Rose Landry, you mentioned having previous partners. Are you currently in a-”

“No personal questions,” one of the Bears' PR managers, a young woman named Willow, said loudly.

“Shane, how do you think being outed has affected your dynamic with the Bears? Do you think you've had a different experience than Scott Hunter has had with the Admirals?”

He knew this was coming. They all knew this was coming. It was like standing in front of a firing squad, prepared to try to catch a bullet between your teeth. “I can't speak for Scott Hunter's experience,” he said shortly. “The Bears are wonderful players and good people. I've felt very welcomed.”

“Shane, some Boston fans online have vocally questioned the decision for your trade. What do you have to say to fans who believe that bringing you on might be a detriment to team optics-”

“Okay, fucking enough,” Ilya said, slapping his hand on the table. “Shut the fuck up. We talk hockey now, okay? Sticks and pucks, yes, you are familiar? It was a fucking shutout, he scored twice, you don't want to talk about that?”

“Actually, we're done here,” Willow announced, pushing their microphones to the table and gesturing for them both to stand. “Thank you, everyone, goodnight.”

“Ilya,” Shane said. He couldn't look at him as they strode away quickly from the snapping cameras and the voracious, scribbling reporters. “Fuck you.”

“Fuck me?” Ilya snapped. Willow, a hand on each of their shoulders, pushed them through the hallway. “Fuck *me*? Fuck them! You should have said it. Should have fucking shut them the fuck down. Why answer any of their stupid fucking questions?”

“Ilya,” Shane said through gritted teeth, but couldn’t manage anything else.

“Enough,” Willow said shortly. “You’re done here. Go home. Go celebrate. Don’t look at your socials, and don’t post anything. We’ll be in touch.”

Ilya turned on her. “And why didn’t you say anything? You gonna let them walk over him all season-”

“Ilya!” Shane grabbed his arm and shoved him into the wall. “Fuck off! Leave her alone! I don’t—you don’t—just fuck you.”

“Hey.” As if they needed more spectators, St. Simone and Cliff had emerged from the locker room, both in suits for their own press appearances. St. Simone held his hands up, but his eyes lingered on Shane’s face, expression sympathetic. They had probably been watching the broadcast. “Maybe we should sit down and take a breather-”

“I’m going home,” Shane snapped. He bit back the instinctive, “Don’t follow me,” that he almost aimed at Ilya. He took a breath. “Thank you,” he said to Willow, and then shouldered past Ilya when he tried to grab him. “Good fucking game, guys.”

+++

Since moving in, Shane had spent some time in his new apartment without Ilya.

But not much.

He stripped out of his suit the second he got back, so angry and upset he nearly tore the seams on his trousers when he kicked them off. He showered roughly, scrubbing his fingers through his hair and trying not to think about anything.

Of all the times he could have dissociated, why couldn’t he just… blink out now? Go to sleep? Deal with all this in the morning?

He needed to eat something, but the thought of food turned his stomach. He stood, dressed in socks, sweatpants, and an oversized sweater in his kitchen, staring out of the distant window over Boston.

What do you have to say to fans who believe that bringing you on might be a detriment to the team?

What did he have to say? He was sorry. That was all. He was just fucking sorry.

The knock at the door didn’t surprise him. He was surprised Ilya hadn’t just used his key, because of course he still had his own.

Shane thought about letting him stand out there, ignoring him, seeing how long it would take Ilya to give up and leave, or just barge in without waiting for Shane.

But anger was still simmering in his gut, like gasoline floating on the surface of water, waiting for a spark to catch fire.

“What?” he snapped, throwing open the door.

Ilya shoved his way inside. “What do you mean, ‘what?’” he asked, tense. “You think we are going to end it like that, huh? You storming off? No. We are going to fucking talk, because guess what, Hollander, we are fucking adults. We can talk.”

“We can talk,” Shane agreed, slamming the door shut and throwing the lock and then the deadbolt for good measure. “But you never listen to me, anyway.”

He turned around. Ilya, standing in the middle of the room, had the audacity to look surprised. “What? What you mean, I don’t listen? I listen.”

“No, Ilya, you don’t.” Shane turned away and stomped into the kitchen, feeling like a petulant child. He opened the fridge, staring at the mostly empty shelves, then slammed it shut. “Fuck.”

“What don’t I listen to?” Ilya demanded.

“To me,” Shane snapped. “You don’t listen to me, not about this. You have some idea in your head about how I feel, or should feel about—about being out, but you don’t listen to me when I try to tell you how I actually feel.”

“That is not true!” Ilya said. “I know how you feel! I was there! I know how terrible this is for you. How can you say I don’t?”

“You were there, but it didn’t happen to you, Ilya, none of this happened to you. It happened to *me*. I’m the one who has to deal with it.”

“Then let me help you,” Ilya said, like it was obvious.

Shane scoffed. He put his elbows on the counter and dropped his head into his hands, running his fingers through his hair. “You can’t help me. Not with this.”

Ilya sounded offended. “Why the fuck not?”

Shane slammed his hands down and looked up with a snarl. “Because, Ilya, because I’m fucking gay! Because that video leaked, and I didn’t get a say, and now everyone knows, and you don’t understand how much that sucks for me!”

“It sucked for you on Montreal because Montreal were morons,” he snapped. “It doesn’t have to suck here, though, okay? This is different here! The team is different!”

“It’s not different for me.”

He growled, frustrated. “We don’t care,” Ilya said, firm and loud. “None of them cares. They do not care who the fuck you fuck. They just fucking don’t. I know you can’t just take my word for it, I know you must see for yourself, but Shane, the team doesn’t care. Not like Montreal. No one cares that you are gay. They only care that you are good at hockey, and you are one of the fucking best. Okay? Are you getting that?”

Shane took a steadying breath. “The thing I think you’re missing, Ilya, is how fucking embarrassed I am. I don’t think you get that.”

Ilya did look surprised at the declaration, and then quickly infuriated. “Why the fuck? Why be embarrassed? So you are gay, why must that be embarrassing-”

Shane flinched. “No, because that’s not what I’m fucking talking about!” he shouted. Ilya’s mouth snapped shut. Shane worried about the neighbors, and then decided he didn’t give a fuck. “I’m not talking about being gay, or people knowing that I’m gay, Ilya! I’m talking about the fucking video! That—that conversation was probably the most intimate, vulnerable conversation I will *ever* have with *anyone*, and *everyone* has seen it. Richard fucking Cromwell has seen it. My parents have seen it. All our teammates—our coaches—you have seen it. Seen me fucking crying in a restaurant as my movie star ex-girlfriend coaxed me into admitting I like dick. That was—it was *personal*. It was mine. Those words were mine, and someone fucking stole them, and now they belong to everyone. I’m fucking embarrassed, Ilya. I’m humiliated. I can’t think about it without wanting to throw myself out a window-”

“Hey,” Ilya snapped, and Shane winced.

“Sorry.”

“No, fuck, no.” Ilya ran his hands hard through his curls, messing them up. “No, sorry. I’m fucking sorry, okay? I shouldn’t—you can keep going. I was listening. I promise, I was fucking listening.”

“Were you?”

“This time I was,” he said. “I promise, I was.”

Shane closed his eyes. “Okay.”

“Hey. Hey.” Hands, clean but calloused from years of unending labor, cupped his chin. “Hey.”

“Ilya,” Shane said, teary-eyed, grasping his wrists. He took a deep breath. “You can’t keep touching me like you have been,” he said, as if he wasn’t holding Ilya’s hands to his face, keeping them there.

“Because you don’t want me to?” Ilya asked. “Or because you are worried about me?”

Shane sighed. “Of course... of *course* I want you to touch me. I always want your hands on me, Ilya. But-”

“Then I am allowed to touch you,” Ilya said stubbornly. “When you are sad, I am allowed to touch your face and hold you. Unless *you* tell me not to. You are the only one allowed to say not to. But they,” he nodded toward the front door, as if gesturing to the world, “they don’t get a fucking say if I touch you. If I want to hold you, I will hold you. I don’t care what they think. Shane.” He ran a thumb over his cheek. Shane blinked, and a tear spilled over and fell, running down until it collided with the side of Ilya’s thumb and tumbled down his wrist. “I

know you care. I know it's different for you. But it is not the same for me," he murmured. "I won't touch you because it makes you nervous, but it doesn't make me nervous, okay? I don't fucking care what they think."

Shane sniffled. "I'm sorry, but I do."

"I know," Ilya whispered. "You are allowed to care. But they don't know, Shane. They don't know about this, about us. It's okay. I can hold you here. They don't know."

"I can't—" Something dark and hurting yawned in his stomach. "I can't go through it again. It can't happen to me again—getting outed, or another leak. It can't happen again, Ilya, oh my god, I can't do it again."

He made gentle shushing sounds—not to tell Shane to be quiet, but to soothe. "It won't, Shane, it won't."

"And it can't happen to *you*," he said fiercely, grip tightening, pressing Ilya's palms harder against his face. "I can't watch that happen to you."

"Listen," Ilya said, "your turn to listen now. It could not happen to me, Shane, because I. Do. Not. Care. They can know about me. I do not care. What happened to you would never happen to me."

Shane shook his head, unable to believe that. "You don't get it. And you don't mean that. You think it was bad when it was just me? If they knew about us, if we got outed like that together, on the same team, and with Russia—"

"Then I marry you and get Canadian citizenship," he said quickly. "Or your parents adopt me—I know they would, they fucking love me now."

The laugh was forced from Shane's lungs unwillingly, but it tumbled out and still felt good, nevertheless. "That's not how it works."

"Oh, no, really?" Ilya asked dramatically. "Wow, no way. You know, I have never thought to look up how I could get citizenship, literally never occurred to me in my whole life to Google that."

"Shut up."

"Come here," Ilya said, and dragged Shane into a hug, arms wrapped around his shoulders, hands firm on the back of his head. Shane clutched him desperately. "I don't want you doing this alone," Ilya murmured, holding Shane tight against himself. They were both so strong; when they held on, when their fingers gripped skin, they could bruise each other so easily. "I don't ever want anyone to think you are alone. They should know, they should fucking know that you have me. You always have me. Every moment."

"I know," Shane said urgently. "I know that. That's what matters most."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Shane was torn between being grateful that, in their embrace, Ilya could not see his face, and annoyed that he couldn't see Ilya's.

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispered. “It just—I don’t think it can happen now. I know it’s your choice....”

“Not now.” Ilya’s fingers were in his hair. He scratched once, twice, and Shane melted, all the remaining tension pouring from his body. “Not now. We don’t need to figure it out now.” He kissed his temple, then nuzzled back in. “I think it was Step Six anyway, you know.”

“What?” Shane murmured.

“Step Six of my master plan, remember? What, you weren’t listening? Figures. I should have expected. Who’s not listening now?”

“Shut up.”

“See! You admit it! You don’t want me to speak, you are silencing me, Hollander!”

Shane laughed hard and wet into the crook of Ilya’s neck, halfway to a sob.

“Shush,” Ilya said, rocking him. “Step Six: tell the world. That was the plan. But first we have to win Stanley Cup, Step Four, and then our contracts are up, and we decide where we want to be, maybe back in Canada. Step Five. Step Six: tell the world.”

“You remember all those steps?” Shane murmured. “Really? By number?”

“Of course, I do,” Ilya murmured. “All I ever think about.”

Shane sniffled. He held him. “Stanley Cup first?” he murmured. “Okay. Okay. And then... and then we figure it out from there.” He tried to be brave. “I think I can do that.”

“Cocky,” Ilya said.

“You like it.”

“I love it,” Ilya said. “Yes. We figure it out from there.”

They didn’t let go of each other for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one's sad, but I promise it's worth it because Montreal?? next chapterrrrr! It'll be up quickly because I meant to upload this one yesterday but then I actually threw my back out??? i am not old enough for this but i was laid out flat for like three hours (the ao3 writers curse has actually been coming for my neck recently)

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Finally it's fucking here some good fucking food the chapter everyone has been waiting for! Hope you like ;)

Pretty much all my inspiration for the game came from a Nick Suzuki highlight reel, which is ironic, because irl he's the actual captain of Montreal lmao

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

“Like this?” Shane asked, shifting nervously.

Cliff nudged his elbow closer to his body. St. Simone pushed his shoulder down. Shane was surprised by how little their casual touches bothered him. “From the core,” Cliff said. “Stop leaning forward. And you’ll have to practice this on skates, too, because it totally changes your momentum.”

“Absolument,” St. Simone. “You’ll knock your feet out from under yourself if you are not careful—extrêmement embarrassant!”

Shane hadn’t considered that possibility. He tightened his core muscles, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet.

“What is this?”

Shane glanced up without lowering his hands. Ilya had entered the gym without any of them noticing and was standing to the side, his equipment bag at his feet, head cocked as he studied the trio.

“Cap!” Cliff said happily. “We’re teaching Hollzy how to throw a punch!”

“I know how to throw a punch. I’ve been playing hockey since I was a toddler,” Shane grumbled, but when St. Simone gestured for him to resume his stance, he did as told. They had some good advice, and he wasn’t planning on ignoring it.

“Voyageurs next week,” St. Simone said, bracing the punching bag for Shane. “Must be ready for it.”

Shane hit the bag, feeling the satisfying build and release of pressure in his ribs. He hit twice more, quick successive jabs. St. Simone rocked back on his feet.

Cliff whistled. “That’s more like it, Hollzy! You’re a fucking Bear now, I think the fans would literally excommunicate you if you snagged another Lady Byng. We all gotta make

sacrifices for the game—you're gonna have to get used to chilling in the sin bin.”

Shane had no intention of being taken off the ice for penalties. But it felt good to hit the punching bag.

“No, no,” Ilya said quickly, stepping forward and grabbing Shane’s forearm, trying to pull him away from the bag. “No, I have promised you! We will fight for you, Hollander.”

Shane frowned and shook him off. “I don’t need anyone to fight my battles for me.”

St. Simone snorted. “You sure proved that, buddy,” he said. “I am pretty sure I saw Jedson cry real tears when you scored that overtime goal in Chicago.”

“Oh, well.” Shane flushed. “That’s just hockey, I mean.”

Cliff and St. Simone laughed. Ilya kept frowning.

It was mid-November, and they were five weeks and twenty games into the regular season. They had played through Canadian Thanksgiving, which happened every year and always made Shane feel a little bitter, and there wouldn’t be a break longer than a few days until February. By now, they were settled into the fierce rhythm of the season, eating as much as they could, exercising carefully but consistently off the ice, and playing games every few days and winning most of them.

Twenty games, and they had won fifteen of them, with a six-game streak in the middle of it. It felt pretty fucking good.

Their first game against Montreal was approaching, though. Maybe Shane should feel lucky that he had gotten a full month to settle into his team without having to face the Voyageurs, especially in the preseason games. He had established himself as a Bear, as a scorer, as a left wing who could actually keep up with Ilya Rozanov. He would not be facing his former teammates while unsure of where he stood in the rankings or what commentators were saying about him.

Shane had not lost the vindictive edge that had carried him through the playoffs last year. He was still playing well. Better than well, even. The Bears and the Voyageurs had extremely different styles and strategies, and they typically looked for different traits in their early draft picks, which meant that Shane’s skills were more unique on the Boston team than they had been in Montreal. It highlighted his talents—his accuracy, his footwork, his ability to predict what plays would unfold ahead of time—while the aggressive defense of the Bears let him move unencumbered on the ice. They always had his back.

It was satisfying.

“But I need to be the one in penalty box because I cannot control myself,” Ilya whined. “You will corrupt him! Give the other team a two-man advantage!”

“You two can sit together,” St. Simone said, chuckling. “I think that is what you secretly want, Rozanov, is one-on-one time with your very best friend.”

Shane hit the bag hard. His wrist landed awkwardly. “Ow!”

“See!” Ilya said. He moved as if he were going to grab Shane’s forearm and then held back at the last moment and gestured angrily. “Look what you have done!”

“Nothing, no, it’s fine,” Shane said quickly. “Just a twinge.” He rotated his wrist as he took a step back. “Yeah, it’s fine,” he repeated. To be sure, he flapped his wrist loosely through the air and grinned at his teammates. “See!”

“You are stupid, Hollander,” Ilya said, cross.

Cliff clapped his shoulder, snickering. “Glad you’re okay, boss.”

St. Simone rolled his eyes. “I suppose that is enough for today, then. Maybe you are right, Roz. At least for next week, we can be the ones throwing punches on the ice, oui?”

“We, yes,” Ilya said. Shane didn’t know if he was joking or not. He and St. Simone exchanged delighted smiles. “We deal with those fuckers. I want Montreal in the ground. I’ll send them over the fucking barriers, flip them up into the crowd, you know?”

“Seems personal, Roz,” Cliff said, nudging Shane.

“Is personal! Such stupidity cannot go unpunished!”

“Thanks,” Shane said dryly. “Listen, just—go easy on Hayden at least, okay?”

Ilya gave him a look of utter betrayal, and Shane immediately laughed. “Easy on *Pike*? The fuck, Hollander? Who do you think I am?”

“He’s a good guy!” Shane objected, still chuckling.

“Bah.” Ilya waved him off. “He already has horde of little children, he has spread his seed-”

“Ew, Ilya, ew-”

“It does not matter if he dies, his genetics live on! What else is the point of having so many little gremlins?”

“Those kids are my godchildren,” Shane said. “And I would rather not have to adopt them if you murder their dad.”

“Godchildren, wow,” Cliff said, eyes widening. “I don’t think I knew that.”

“Oh, yeah.” Shane glanced at his hands, at his wrist, still lightly smarting. “Hayden and I are close.”

St. Simone looped an arm over his shoulders. “Will be nice to see your friend then, yes?” he asked, forcing his joviality on Shane. “And nice to put your team in the dirt.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, trying to slide subtly away from St. Simone’s grasp. “We’ve got it in the bag.”

Cliff put a heavy hand on St. Simone’s chest and knocked him back, away from Shane. “Come on, enough coaching, we should probably actually work out now. Hollander, watch that wrist! We’re not losing you before Montreal, got it?”

Cliff and St. Simone wandered off toward the treadmills. Shane sat down, unwrapping the bandages he had put on before they started boxing. Ilya lingered at his side, standing over him. “I will not murder Pike,” he said. “No promises for Boiziau. He has no little children who will guilt me with their big eyes.”

Shane snorted. “I’ll take what I can get. Thanks.”

“You are ready?” Ilya asked. Shane saw his fingers twitch and wondered if Ilya was resisting the urge to touch him again. Ilya had been trying to obey Shane’s desires on that front. He was an impulsive guy, so he wasn’t always successful, but he was trying. Shane appreciated it. He knew it wasn’t what Ilya wanted.

He thought about Ilya’s question. Montreal had been playing fine so far. It was still early in the season, but they were equal on wins and losses—not playing nearly as well as the Bears, but it hadn’t been a disastrous start for them. Still, Shane felt confident. “More than ready.” He smiled, a little grimly. “We’re winning this one.”

+++

“I think we can all tell—this one’s personal tonight.”

“Always interesting to see how it plays out after a big trade like this. We have former Montreal Captain Shane Hollander, now in a new position and with a new letter on his black and gold jersey—that’s right, the newly minted left wing Alternate Captain for the Boston Bears takes on his former home team! The Bears are leading the league this season in goals, following closely behind Colorado and San Francisco in points.”

“And with Montreal trailing behind in Divisional rankings already, I think we’re going to see some tension on the ice.”

“That’s right, new Montreal Captain, Joshua Abbot, formerly playing for Pittsburgh, has definitely been looking for an opportunity to prove himself on his new team. And I don’t think there’s going to be a better opportunity than this.”

“This isn’t just the regular Bears-versus-Voyageurs rivalry, as we all know. Cards on the table, folks: I think Shane Hollander’s got something to prove, too.”

“Let’s see if he can swing it.”

“Listen the fuck up. Are you fucking listening? Okay, then listen a little fucking harder because I am not going to fucking repeat myself.” Ilya locked eyes with Shane. Shane, bizarrely, unexpectedly, found himself smiling. Ilya didn’t return his grin but there was a light

in his eye, manic and intense, and delighted. “We aren’t just going to win this one,” Ilya said, voice rising in the silent locker room, the roar of fans entering the stadium like the ocean crashing far away. “We are going to murder Montreal. You understand? I’m talking blood on the fucking ice. I’m talking teeth. I’m talking leave it all the fuck out there because this one *fucking matters!* How many games have we won this season? How many goals? I don’t fucking care. That doesn’t fucking matter tonight. Everyone is watching tonight. Why are they watching? It doesn’t fucking matter. I don’t fucking care. But everyone, *everyone*, is watching. This one fucking matters. We could win the fucking playoffs, and people will still be fucking talking about it if we lose to Montreal tonight. So are we going to fucking lose?”

“No, Captain!” Shane shouted, familiar now with the ebbs and flows of the Bears’ pregame speeches, his freshly-taped stick clattering against the cubbies along with everyone else.

“No, we fucking aren’t!” Ilya screamed, and that was their cue to launch to their feet and swarm the center of the room. Shane joined in, but he stayed on the outskirts, feeling the mania surging through his teammates without getting swept up in it.

Ilya was red in the face, already hot. Shane could barely tear his eyes off him, even knowing that the Voyageurs were in the building, and they were merely minutes away from facing them.

Ilya pushed through the huddle to Shane. He raised an eyebrow and Shane nodded his head, just slightly, and Ilya leaned in and knocked their helmets together, his hand on the back of Shane’s to control the force of the bump.

“You are all in,” Ilya murmured, looking at him closely, visors scratching against each other as they leaned closer. He pulled back. Shane missed him already. “You are all fucking in tonight, Hollander. On that ice, tonight, it is your victory, da? You take in every fucking moment, okay?”

Shane’s mouth was dry. It was absurd to look at Ilya, fully geared up, acting as his captain, and feel such a stunning wave of love. It was glorious. He nodded. “Okay.”

Ilya grinned and knocked their helmets together again.

They tromped through the tunnel and skated out to enormous fanfare. The Bears usually had pretty good attendance at their home games, but tonight, the stands were packed. Bears versus Voyageurs was always fun to watch (didn’t Shane and Ilya know it best? The people loved a good rivalry), but all season, the biggest story in the NHL had been Shane’s transfer. People wanted to see how it would play out.

Ilya was right. If they lost this game, people would still be talking about it during the playoffs.

So they couldn’t lose.

Shane saw Hayden’s jersey first, then Boiziau, and then Miitka, the most recognizable in his goalie pads. Their away uniforms were mostly white, less of the iconic red and blue that Shane had worn for so many years, but still so familiar to him.

He caught Hayden's eye. They would get drinks after this. They had planned it weeks ago. They hadn't talked much over the summer, not since one heavy, emotional phone call after his trade had been announced, but Shane didn't want to lose his best friend, even though they couldn't live out of each other's pockets anymore. They would get drinks after the game, and their relationship wasn't ruined. But Shane didn't know how it would be on the ice. Everything might change, and Shane couldn't predict it. His situation with Hayden was completely dissimilar to the complicated emotions that had followed Ilya and Shane every time they had competed over the years—by most metrics, his and Hayden's friendship was much easier. The NHL traded players all the time, and they often remained friends with their former teammates. It was normal.

Shane hoped they could be normal, too.

As if to disprove his worries. Hayden waved his glove and gave Shane a little salute.

Shane felt something ease in his chest. He returned the gesture with a genuine smile and focused on warmups. He didn't phase out, not even under the raucous pressure of the fans or with the awareness of his former team's gaze on the back of his neck.

The game began.

Shane breathed.

Right away, he knew it would be an intense game. Physical, and hard. In a way, he craved it.

Ilya won the first face-off, but they didn't score. Abbot, the new Montreal captain and center, won the second and did not score either. St. Simone had the first shot on goal a few minutes into the first period, but Drapeau caught the puck and play stopped, then resumed. The shifts changed again, then again.

Shane sat on the bench. He closed his eyes and felt the chill of the arena, the sweat on his brow, the press of St. Simone's shoulder pads against his own, and the comfortable tightness of his skates, perfectly laced. He tapped his stick on the rubber mat. He let the sound of the crowd wash over him, not picking out individual words, voices, or chants. Just noise. The smell of ice. The smell of plastic, and fresh tape. The smell of sweat.

"You're up," LeClaire said.

He hopped the barrier.

Ilya won the face-off.

Shane felt the play settle over him like warm water in a shower. His shoulders rose and fell, and his heartbeat was steady as he turned on a dime, blasting past Montreal's defenses as both teams rocketed toward the Voyageurs' goal.

"Rozanov is keeping it on the outside, Hollander gets in position and Roz plays it across the rink—there's St. Simone in the crease, screening the goalie, giving them some coverage. Hollander bats it back to Roz and Roz is behind the goal line—"

Ilya rounded the goal and shot the puck to Shane, who caught it.

Shane had the puck. He turned, gliding toward the goal. His hand twitched and Drapeau dropped, pads and shoulders hunched to create a wall in front of the net. Shane caught the puck off the tiny push he had given it and pulled it back toward himself, readjusting as he dashed in, shoving straight past Boiziau's attempt to knock him off balance. He swerved tightly around Drapeau's reaching stick and pushed the puck over the goal line, just behind his skates.

Drapeau's stick lashed out, catching Shane hard against his shin guard. Shane dropped to one knee, but his momentum still carried him forward in a glide.

"Hollander scores! First goal of the game!"

First goal. Shane was already looking up, looking out into the stands, and he saw the moment when every fan in the arena launched to their feet, fists raised in synch as they cheered. For him.

He spun back up onto his feet. He raised his stick and they cheered louder.

The Bears surrounded him, Ilya at the front, but Shane kept his eyes on the fans through the celebration.

Montreal was playing angry. Shane could tell. He could read it on his former teammates, the brothers who had shunned him. The way they kicked their blades against the ice and the strangling grips they kept on their sticks. Montreal was angry, Drapeau was practically steaming in the crease, and they probably wanted to win this game just as badly as Shane did.

But the Bears were used to playing angry. For that matter, after the previous season, so was Shane. They all knew how to channel anger, how to use anger, how to stand in a stadium full of furious fans trying to boo them out of the arena and smile and wave and blow kisses.

The Voyageurs were not accustomed to the same treatment.

And, Shane knew, they were not yet accustomed to playing without *him*.

The shifts changed, and changed again. They were back on the ice.

Ilya won the face-off, and they were gone.

Shane knew he was playing with a smile on his face. He could hear Varkov and Carmichael whooping behind them as they raced back and forth across the ice, trying to follow every play, trying to keep in control of the puck as it whizzed across the ice. They were pushed back into the defending zone, and Varkov got the puck and took it behind their goal line before shooting it across the ice to Shane, straight past Hayden's extended stick.

Shane didn't need to look. He knew exactly where Ilya was.

"It's this one-two with Hollander and Rozanov, we've been seeing it all season, they get in control of the puck and come down the ice together and you never know which one is going to

take the shot—but tonight it's Rozanov! With the Bears' second goal of the night! He fires it in so strong, it's really an integral part of so many of Rozanov's plays. You can tell how fast he can whip the puck into the air when he moves like that. It'd be hard for any goaltender to block that kind of shot, and Drapeau just wasn't quick enough."

"Holy shit," Shane gasped, colliding with Ilya. "Holy shit!"

The first period ended. Shane and Ilya skated a lap on their way back to the bench. Shane found Svetlana's face in the crowd. He waved, a broad grin splitting his face.

"Come on!" Ilya roared as they hit the barriers and stepped over to the rest of their team. "It is not fucking over yet!"

LeClaire was shouting and clapping, and Shane did his best to nod and listen along, but for the entire commercial break, all he could think about was how desperately he wanted to get back on the ice.

He, St. Simone, and Ilya leapt over together and took their positions. Abbot, blonde, blue-eyed, numb-looking, won the first face-off of the second period and raced straight down the ice toward Benji, Ilya hot on his heels, with St. Simone and Shane just ahead of him. Cliff checked Abbot hard, and the puck went flying, first into the cradle of a Voyageur's stick, who preemptively made a shot on goal only for Benji to easily bat it away. Cliff got control of the puck and Shane, on the left side of the ice, caught his eye and turned hard, preparing to race in the opposite direction. Ilya, in the center, turned, looking over his shoulder. St. Simone, playing right, was already facing the other way.

Cliff shot the puck to Shane, and all three of them took off at the same time.

They dashed across the blue line, skating at a dead sprint, Shane just slightly ahead to carry the puck safely across, but Ilya and St. Simone caught up with him a second later.

Wide open ice. Shane to the left, Ilya in the center, St. Simone on the right, all of them keeping pace with each other.

In blue and red and white, Comeau turned hard to follow them, skating right for Shane, and Shane shot the puck straight to the cradle of Ilya's waiting stick. Boiziau advanced on him. Ilya turned his stick, making like he was going to pass the puck back to Shane, and Shane hunched to receive it as he dodged past Comeau.

Ilya used the back of his blade to send the puck to St. Simone, who shot it into the net.

"That was blink and miss it! Two passes in under a second, wow, that was some beautiful teamwork right there. Looks like Drapeau didn't see that last pass in between all the Voyageurs gunning for Hollander and Rozanov. St. Simone gets it in the net!"

Shane collided with St. Simone and Ilya in the center, beating each other's shoulders with their gloves before they turned and headed for the bench.

"Had to get in on the action, you know?" St. Simone said, grinning widely.

“Had to?” Shane gasped. “That was fucking incredible, man! Calisse, c'était incroyable! Très bien, très bien!”

St. Simone's smile crept even wider. “Merci, ‘Ollander,” he said, knocking their helmets together.

Over his shoulder, Shane caught Hayden's eye. He lingered near the center of the ice, despondently skating away from his teammates after the loss. Shane caught his eye.

Shane waved again. Hayden waved back.

They reset. Back on the bench, Shane panted hard, eyes fixed on the puck as Aliue's line took center ice.

“Aliue's being patient, and he's being smart; he knows he's got the time. Lateral moves, lateral moves, and—yes, right there! He out-skated the line, had the open space, got it right over Drapeau's leg, and Drapeau is not gonna be happy about that. That's four-nothing for the Bears, and you know they are flying high as we approach the end of the second period.”

From the bench, Shane launched up with the rest of his team, cheering and banging on the barrier as Aliue, sheepish but pleased, skated back, the rest of his line and the defensemen knocking on his helmet and shoulders.

“Let's fucking go!” Shane cheered, feeling the roar of the stadium and his team—*his team*—echoing the sentiment back, proud and unashamed, letting the celebration drag on.

“Had to do it,” Aliue said, leaping the barrier and touching Shane's shoulders briefly. “Can't keep letting you old-timers get all the glory!”

“Keep playing like that, and no one's gonna remember me,” Shane promised, thrilled and elated.

Aliue flushed, pleased.

“Hollander, you're up!” LeClaire announced. He skated out, playing the last minutes of the second period before intermission was called.

“Fuck,” Ilya drawled as they skated back to the bench. “You think they are crying yet? I think I see a few tears.”

Shane glanced at the opposing team's bench. For a second, he had an intense feeling of déjà vu, the same kind that had struck him during preseason training, every time he glanced down and noticed his jersey, his shorts, or his socks; those were *his* colors over there. He recognized those faces. They were more familiar to him than the Bears'. None of the Voyageurs were looking back at him, but Shane could recognize each and every one of those guys by the slope of their shoulders, the way their hair stuck out the back of their helmets, or the distinctive ways they taped their sticks.

He knew them. They had known him, partially, but when they had learned the fullness of him, they had turned their backs.

Ilya grabbed his jersey and hauled Shane onward.

He closed his eyes hard and opened them, giving himself a moment to readjust and settle. “No tears,” Shane reported after a beat. “I think it’s just sweat.” He smiled at Ilya. “I bet we can make them sweat a little more, though.”

Their next shift, Comeau spat on the ice as Shane brushed past him, and the second Comeau had the puck, Ilya slammed him so hard into the boards that his helmet came loose, spinning far across the ice as Comeau’s face split into a rageful sneer.

“Boston penalty: number Eighty-One, two minutes for boarding!” A cheer went up from the crowd. “Montreal has a two-minute power play.” A boo resounded.

“Sorry about it,” Ilya said, wiping his brow as he skated to the penalty box. He lifted his hands into the air, encouraging the screaming that rose for him and immediately playing for the cameras as he stepped into the sin bin.

LeClaire scoffed and slapped his clipboard against Shane’s back. “Hollander, take the face-off.”

He felt a dim thrill at the words.

Abbot was stone-faced, impassive. Shane had only ever met him on the ice, but he remembered the times they had played when Shane was a Voyageur and Abbot was in Pittsburgh. He had a brick wall for a face and he never showed any emotion. He did not seem to be playing with the same fervor as the rest of Shane’s teammates, but he also did not seem put out that they were losing so terribly.

Abbot clearly knew how to take advantage of the power play. He got the puck and dashed for the open left side of the ice, quick footwork evading both Carmichael and Varkov. He was fast, and he was strong, and he made it to their goal before Shane or St. Simone could catch up.

He shot the puck hard across the ice, and it bounced impotently off Benji’s pads as he dropped down, flattening his legs, but Abbot had not stopped and he picked it up off the rebound and threw the puck into the air, aiming over Benji’s shoulder.

Benji lurched out of the butterfly split and caught the puck with his glove mid-air, swiping it out of play.

The Bears piled onto him uproariously, cheering and screaming for their goaltender.

“It’s a fucking shutout, baby!” Varkov cheered.

“Not yet,” Shane cautioned, but Carmichael spoke over him. Yelled, really:

“It fucking better be!”

Ilya left the penalty box just before they cleared the ice for the third period, watching commercials on the Jumbotron, interspersed with replays from the game and fancams. Shane

gazed absently at the flickering lights far above, panting as his racing heart slowed. He saw his own face projected, and he grinned, wide and happy. When he waved, the fans cheered. The camera cut to a different feed, showing two women in the nosebleeds covered in rainbow face paint. They immediately jumped up and turned around, showing off matching Hollander jerseys.

In black and gold.

“Your colors,” Ilya whispered. “Looks good.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, heart swelling as the cameras cut across the arena, showing off dozens of fans sporting fresh jerseys with his name and his number. “Yeah, it fucking does.”

Third period. They jumped the barrier to line up, refreshed.

This game was never going into overtime, but Shane wasn’t done yet.

“One more,” he told Ilya. “I’m getting one more.”

Ilya smiled. “Just one?”

“Well,” Shane said, laughing, skating out of the face-off circle, “we’ve still got the rest of the season.”

They were up against Montreal’s first line, and play was wild and sharp and fierce. Montreal was getting desperate. Boston was getting greedy. Shane was not immune.

The seconds on the clock ticked down, down, down.

Shane felt sweat trickle between his shoulder blades.

Hayden got a hold of the puck and made a dash for the opposite goal.

Then Hayden and Shane were chasing each other, neck and neck, down the entire length of the ice, and it was almost familiar, except Hayden had control of the puck and Shane was trying to get it away from him, and that had never happened before.

“We’re seeing a lot of open ice here, they’ll skate it out at center, down the wing—Hollander knocks the puck away from Pike as they cross the blue-line—Rozanov in control, back the other way, jetting up the ice—he drops it back, St. Simone shoots—Drapeau blocks—but it’s not good enough! Hollander gets it on the rebound! Shane Hollander bats it in at the last second! That’s five-nothing Boston!”

They piled onto Shane, arms and hands touching and grabbing and pushing him, all in celebration, but Shane wobbled under the sudden onslaught for a moment.

Then Ilya was there, shoving the guys back and gesturing, shouting something incomprehensible to Shane’s ringing ears, but the other guys seemed to understand. They backed off, letting Shane go, but surrounded him in a circle, then began skating an

abbreviated lap around him, clapping their sticks rhythmically on the ice until the fans joined in, a great, stomping cheer, and Shane, at the center, laughed.

It was showboating, and rude, and unsportsmanlike.

They did it anyway.

They won the game.

+++

Shane skated up to Hayden as soon as the huddle broke. Hayden was still on the ice. Shane looked around for JJ but couldn't see him—maybe he had already gone back to the guest dressing room.

He swallowed. "Hey, Hayd," he said, half-raising the arm not holding his stick.

Hayden crossed the distance between them and hugged him around the shoulders, knocking their helmets together in that oh-so-familiar gesture of camaraderie, and Shane laughed, knowing that cameras were probably swirling around their heads at that very moment but not caring.

He and Hayden pulled back after a brief embrace. Hayden had a nasty bruise on one cheek that Shane knew he'd received in New York earlier that week, and his eyes were a little red.

"Still on for drinks?" Shane asked. They had decided weeks ago they were going to meet up, but Shane knew intimately well how sometimes after a game, especially after a loss, emotions could run high. He hoped his nerves didn't show on his face, aware of all the cameras catching this awaited moment between Shane and his former alternate captain.

Hayden smiled, tired, but real. "Yeah," he agreed, sounding hoarse. "I'll bring Jackie."

Shane blinked, immediately looking into the stands. He could see phones pointed at them, but he tried to look past them for a recognizable face. "She's here?"

"She, and the kids, too," Hayden said. "Brought the whole family down, including Jackie's mom, just so we would have the extra hands. There, see?" He pointed.

Shane spun and saw the kids, Arthur and Amber on Jackie and their grandmother's shoulders, and Jade and Ruby on their seats, jumping up and down and screaming hysterically. He waved and they shrieked.

Shane turned back to Hayden, grinning widely, and saw the heartbreaking smile on his oldest friend's face. "Buddy, we have *missed you*."

Shane choked back tears. "I missed you, too."

+++

The team was gathering at Fiorella's to celebrate their triumphant win, but none of them questioned or objected when Shane bowed out. Ilya had given him a careful, prodding look and nodded when Shane had smiled in return.

Shane brought them to a bar Cliff had recommended, small and family-owned and not a sports bar, where they were less likely to be recognized, and he sat down in a booth in the back with Jackie and Hayden. Jackie's mom had travelled with them and was watching the kids for the night. Shane had given a quick, almost too-emotional greeting in the arena to the exhausted children, luxuriating in Ruby and Jade's squeezing hugs and almost crying when he realized that Arthur and Amber had not forgotten him in his long absence, before the three adults absconded.

"So," Shane said slowly as soon as the waiter dropped off their drinks. He stopped there, unable to think of a way to start the conversation, and for some reason, the pause made them all burst into giggles. Relief, maybe.

He remembered being twenty, sitting in the corners of bars just like this one with Jackie and Hayden, not yet married or parents, but all three of them hiding out from the more raucous members of the team. That felt like so long ago, but it had only been a few years. Their lives ran on different schedules than other people's, though. Their careers on the ice would only last twenty years, if they were lucky. That made the time they had together all the more precious.

They laughed, caught up, and eased into a familiar repertoire. Jackie and Hayden didn't make fun of Shane's ginger ale. Long before Ilya, they had always kept their house stocked, just for him.

"How's Montreal?" Shane asked after a while. He ran his nail over the slightly raised texture of the can's logo.

Hayden and Jackie shared a look.

"It's been weird," Hayden said, mouth pursed unhappily. "Yeah, it's been really weird. I mean, it just sucks, you know? It sucks to be on that team, knowing everything that went down. It sucks working for the entire franchise, actually," Hayden said, jabbing unhappily at a plate of appetizers. "Nothing to do about it, though. It just sucks. And I think it's going to continue to suck for a while."

Shane wanted to glance around, to double-check that there were no phones out and recording them, but he saw Jackie's eyes making the rounds, sharp and careful, and he saw the way she squeezed Hayden's forearm when his voice started to rise. Shane let her handle it.

"How's Boston?" she asked Shane, redirecting the conversation away from her melancholy husband.

Shane blinked. "It's... good. It's... it's kind of been great, actually. Surprisingly. The team is amazing, and the coaching staff is—they're wonderful." He didn't want to brag or rub it in Hayden's face, but he was genuinely amazed by how different LeClaire and his team were from Theriault's. Shane, as Captain, had always felt like most of the team responsibilities off

the ice fell solely on his shoulders, making sure everyone got along and behaved and didn't let interpersonal issues get in the way of their game. Ilya was a fantastic captain (a better captain than Shane, he could admit), but those responsibilities were not planted solely on his shoulders.

Shane hadn't realized quite how much pressure Theriault had placed on him. He didn't know how to explain it to Hayden, either.

Jackie seemed to notice his hesitation. "And how's Ilya?" she asked very softly. "It must be nice now that you are living in the same city. I can't imagine how hard it was before when you were both always traveling."

Shane saw a flicker of annoyance cross Hayden's face, but instead of inspiring dread, it just amused him. And that felt nice to realize that it didn't scare him so much anymore. "He's good," Shane said. "He's... I guess I never thought about what his life in Boston was like, you know? Maybe that makes me a bad partner. But I can tell that he loves this city, and it loves him back. And the team worships him, actually, they're like a bunch of puppies—well, actually, the rookies are like kittens, but the rest are puppies."

"Bear cubs," Jackie suggested, and Shane smiled.

"How long are you in town?" he asked after another hour had passed easily, exchanging information about their cities and their families and catching up. It felt normal. Like Shane was just any regular guy in the league who had been traded unexpectedly, but hadn't lost touch with his friends.

"Flight's not until late afternoon, which is nice," Jackie said. "My mom wants to visit some of the museums, but I'm not sure it's a good idea to try to drag all the kids along for that. The plane rides are bad enough, but they were just so excited to see you, Shane, even though we told them it would just be for a little while."

Something occurred to Shane. It cut through the loneliness he had begun to feel in Boston, disconnected from his friends and his parents, and it made him lean forward, urged him on, when in the past he would have hesitated. "Can the kids keep a secret?" Shane asked quickly. "Not Arthur or Amber, obviously, but the twins? Do you think they could keep something to themselves?"

Hayden pursed his mouth. "If I bribe them appropriately... with enough chocolate..." He and Jackie exchanged a look. She gave a little nod. Hayden turned back to Shane. "Yes."

"Come over for breakfast tomorrow, then," Shane said, not letting himself second-guess the offer. "Bring the kids, obviously. We'll do a whole thing."

"Come over to your apartment?" Hayden asked, smile growing. "Shane, buddy, of course, we'd love to—"

"No. Not to my apartment. Ilya's house. I, uh, live there. Some of the time. Most of the time, actually. You know. We're living together. I moved in over the summer."

“What?” Hayden demanded, then quickly backtracked. “Not that—not that I have a problem with that, dude, of course not! Um, but that’s pretty quick, isn’t it? Fast? It’s already complicated that you’re on the same team, should you really... I don’t know.”

“You guys had twins before your second anniversary,” Shane said dryly. “I don’t think we’re moving too fast.”

Jackie covered her mouth with her hand, but her smile was visible in her eyes.

“You always have to bring that up,” Hayden grumbled. He bit his lip. He nodded. “Okay. Okay, yeah.”

“I think it’s a great idea!” Jackie said eagerly. “Of course the girls would love to see you more—they miss their Uncle Shane so bad, you don’t even want to know, they’ve been a nightmare with the babysitters lately, it’s legit terrible.”

Hayden sighed. “Yeah, can’t really overstate that, unfortunately.” He spun his beer bottle on the table. “Um, would—Rozanov is gonna be fine with it, right? If it’s his house?”

“Ilya will love it,” Shane said, then shrugged. “Well, not *you*, necessarily, sorry, Hayd—but he loves kids. He’s great with them. Frankly, I think he loves WAGs, too, just in general. And, like I said, it’s kind of my house too, so he doesn’t really get a say. We have a decent yard that’s super private for the girls to run around, and we can pull out the grill and everything. Maybe we’ll invite Ilya’s friend, Svetlana, do you remember her? She was there that night—well, you remember her. It’ll be great. Ilya will love it.”

Shane didn’t say that he knew Ilya would love it because it would make Shane happy. He didn’t need to add that Ilya always wanted to do things that made Shane smile, or that Ilya knew Shane was still adjusting to living in a new city, far away from the life he was familiar with. Ilya didn’t like Hayden, and he thought making fun of Hayden was awfully entertaining, but he wanted Shane to have people in his corner. He wanted that more than anything.

And the next day, Ilya glared bloody murder at the grill while Hayden laughed at him and Jackie gently tried to correct his technique, and Svetlana sunbathed in the center of the yard in a tank top and shorts even though it was November in New England, and Shane let himself get bowled over by toddlers while holding Arthur on his shoulders, the little boy’s grip in his hair tight enough to pull out strands, and Shane knew he had made the right choice.

It was wonderful. A feeling bloomed and unfurled in his chest at the same time, something old returning to him and something new being born. The sensation of finding equilibrium after being off balance for so long.

Putting down roots.

Yeah, I love this chapter too. I hope you enjoyed! (Also, just casually reminding everyone that the Bears and the Voyageurs would play each other 3-4 times in a regular season... so we're far from done here)

There will not be an update tomorrow! Sorry in advance! Thank you for reading!!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Just want to let everyone know this story is about at the halfway point, it'll be 11 or 12 chapters (I think...) but i don't want to add the chapter count until i know for sure. Thanks for reading!

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

“Oh my god! You’re Shane Hollander!”

Shane liked the way people with thick Boston accents pronounced his last name. It made him think of stadium chants and a thousand voices slurring vowels and consonants into a wave of noise. He looked up with a smile, dropping a package of dried seaweed into his basket. “Yup. Hi.”

The man standing across from him was probably close to Shane in age and height, but he gazed up at him like he was a giant. “Could I get a picture?”

Shane smiled. “Sure.”

Shane had learned that he didn’t get recognized as much in Boston as he had in Montreal. Because he was one of only two gay NHL stars, and because Shane had been linked to Rose Landry, and, of course, because of the scandal, Shane was more famous and more recognizable than almost anyone else in the sport, other than Scott Hunter after his Stanley Cup kiss. That level of notoriety, even after years playing at the top of the league, was difficult to manage on the best of days. It could be very annoying.

But, Shane was starting to realize, things were calming down.

It had been almost a full year since the video leaked. It had been more than six months since Shane’s abrupt trade from the Voyageurs had been met with massive fanfare and media coverage. Six months was a long time in celebrity culture. Fans moved on. Reporters lunged after hotter stories. New dramas unfolded, and they appealed to much wider audiences than people who cared about the NHL or strangers’ sexualities.

In the press conferences and media scrums Shane had to participate in, he would probably never be free from questions about the leak, the video, or his sexuality, but the general public didn’t pay any attention to NHL interviews. And in Boston, where hockey wasn’t the most popular sport, and Shane was not their most beloved player, sometimes he could feel... almost normal.

He could go grocery shopping for himself, for instance. Unlike in Montreal, usually only a few people would stop him for a picture or to say something about what had happened—

almost always to offer an awkward word of support. If he put on a baseball cap and sunglasses, even though Ilya snickered at him, few people would do more than double-take, shake their heads, and move on.

It was like being invisible in the best way. Or, at least, the closest to it that he would ever get.

So when Shane had run out of a few essentials in his apartment after spending a few unbroken weeks at the house, he had decided to run down to a local grocery store and pharmacy instead of ordering what he needed online. This was the first time he had been recognized, and he was happy enough to take the picture.

The young man's phone played the tinny sound of a camera shutter as they posed for the selfie. Shane smiled, knowing he was a little stiff, and also aware that was normal for all his pictures with fans, before and after the leak.

"Thanks, bro!" the guy said happily, stepping away. "Dude, I was so fucking excited when you got traded. We're taking home the Cup this year, bro!"

"We're certainly trying," Shane agreed, smiling. He offered the man a handshake, eagerly accepted, and then went about his day. He picked up cheddar popcorn to keep in his cabinets for the next time Ilya spent the night and a bag of spinach for himself.

As a child, dreaming of the big leagues, Shane had never imagined a future where he had to be having a good day to even consider picking up a few groceries for himself, but it was worth it.

He was working very hard to make it worth it.

He left the cool interior of the grocery store and stepped outside. It was a bright day but frigid despite the sun and the clear ground. Boston's weather didn't scare him after a lifetime in Canada. Actually, it felt familiar.

And Ilya was right. Watching the leaves change color was beautiful.

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Between games, their victories crowding out their losses, Shane finally had a chance to see Boston. To see it up close, not just as a skyline, or hidden behind privacy hedges, or in glimpses between the doors of the skating rink and whatever car they were driving that day.

The Bears took it upon themselves to bring Shane to all the touristy spots in the city. Their social media team ate it up. Even Willow, who had never once been pleased with Shane and Ilya's performances in their, admittedly, terrible press scrums, nodded to him once and said, "Good job. Boston loves to hate that touristy shit. Keep it up."

St. Simone and Cliff dragged him to Faneuil Hall. "I'm not breaking my diet," he said stubbornly, but he was smiling.

St. Simone kept shoving little paper cups into his hands. "Samples!" he said, and Shane was aware of the phones trained on the three recognizable Bears players in the crowded

marketplace. “Samples do not count for calories, ‘Ollander, everyone knows this!”

“That is not true!” Shane laughed, but he caved. Just a little. Only because they had a two-day break before the next game.

Cliff and St. Simone cheered.

He attended a hockey game at Boston College with Pummel and the other rookies, who knew several of the Division I players on the team, and cheered with them and waved affably every time the cameras continuously zoomed in on them. It was nice to watch a hockey match that had nothing to do with him, with players he didn’t personally know or compete against. When they invited him into the locker room after the game, he accepted. It was conceited, but as he got older, Shane had really started to appreciate the awed look in the eyes of younger players when they gazed at him.

He visited the Paul Revere House and a few museums with Amanda, who was studying for a PhD in American history. Shane knew absolutely nothing about history or art, but it was nice to learn about his new city’s past from someone who clearly loved it as much as she did.

Once his baby was a few months old, Benji and his wife invited the team over for a large barbecue in their backyard. Shane still felt a little overwhelmed by the number of bodies and the roughhousing, but Benji’s wife handed him their baby with a smile. Shane grinned down at the little girl, happy to hold her for most of the afternoon (and to use her as a very effective shield against the boisterous Bears). Benji’s wife took a photo of him holding the baby, her hand wrapped around his finger. She posted it on Instagram, and Hayden and Jackie both reposted it with pictures of Shane with their children.

“You look too good with babies,” Ilya growled later. “You will give me ideas.”

“You already have plenty of ideas on your own,” Shane laughed.

“So don’t give me more, Hollander.”

One day after practice, Cliff practically knocked the door to the locker room off its hinges when he burst in, weighed down by six enormous bags and followed closely by the PR team, their phones already out and recording. “Hollander’s never tried a cannoli from Bova’s!” Cliff crowed, which meant nothing to Shane but got an enormous reaction from the rest of the team, who immediately lunged for the bags and started pulling out pastries.

“I don’t eat cannolis,” Shane said, not looking at the cameras. “God, Cliff, what did my diet ever do to you?”

“It’s tradition,” Cliff said. “Rozy, tell him! He’s got to!”

“It is tradition,” Ilya said, shrugging casually. He accepted the box passed to him over the heads of the players and opened the lid to show the powdered sugar-covered monstrosity inside. “But you are Shane Hollander, and you do what you want,” he finished, winking as he swiped up a bit of the cream and stuck it in his mouth.

(Shane ate the cannoli. It was so delicious he almost cried.)

He found a rhythm for keeping in touch with Hayden and his family through video calls and late night bedtime stories read over Skype. He slowly retook control of his social media presence, posting pictures with the Bears of celebrations and victories, interacting occasionally with Boiziau and Miitka and, to his surprise, a few other Voyageurs team members who had reached out to him in recent months, apologizing for their reactions or their silence.

It stunned him. But Shane accepted the apologies, despite Ilya's ice-cold fury.

Shane wanted to move on. He wanted to be okay.

And, in trying to do just that, autumn passed.

His life had changed, and it had settled.

+++

"What are you doing for Christmas, Hollzy?" Cliff asked, drumming his hands on the armrest beside him. Cliff always looked crammed into plane seats, even on a private jet.

"Going home to Ottawa," Shane said. "Just visiting my parents. It'll be low-key."

"Nice, nice," Cliff said. "They're not flying down? What, we haven't convinced you that Boston is the best city in the world yet?"

Shane laughed. "No, not quite." He shrugged. "I miss home. I need to visit. Might drive to Montreal and spend Boxing Day at the Pikes' house, though."

Cliff's smile softened. He was a massive guy, but Shane now understood why he and Ilya were friends. They were both raucous and rude and vulgar, and they were both absolute teddy bears on the inside. "Nice, man. Well, you know, next year if you stay in town for the holidays, you have an open invitation to my place! Everyone in my family is from Boston, and the Marlow clan is fucking massive, but we've always got a few extra seats at the table. Rozy usually comes over, but he's on vacation with his friend or something. Svetlana, have you met her?"

Shane murmured his response, feeling warm as he thought about the next year. He glanced across the plane. Ilya was asleep, stretched across three seats, drooling on his arm.

Svetlana was going to Russia for the holidays with her parents.

Ilya was coming to Ottawa. With Shane.

"Hey," he said. "Thanks, Cliff. Thank you. That means a lot."

Cliff reached out, then paused. Instead of clasping Shane's shoulder, he waved a little, then turned the awkward gesture into a salute. "No problem, brother." Cliff glanced over his shoulder, then back at Shane. "Really," he repeated, "it's not a problem at all, dude."

+++

Shane did not have a large extended family, so Christmas was usually just him, Yuna, David, and whoever Yuna had invited. This year, it was just them and Ilya.

It was almost caustically normal, how domestic they had become. David kept Ilya's favorite brand of vodka stocked, and he and Yuna cooked two different kinds of lasagna: one that abided by Shane's diet, with chickpea noodles and a tofu-based cheese substitute, and one with extra beef. Ilya ate four portions of the latter.

"I'm still beating you in scoring race," Ilya said, mouth stuffed.

"Chew your food, you fucking asshole."

David laughed at them.

"You have been playing incredibly well," Yuna said, jumping on the topic of hockey with her usual quickness. "Shane, I have to say, I was pretty apprehensive about LeClaire moving you to play left wing, but you've done quite admirably."

"Thanks, Mom," Shane said dryly. His lasagna, if he was being honest, was not very good.

"But you need to work on that backhand." She sniffed. "Honestly, and I hate to say it, Shane, but the Brooklyn Scouts' goalie should really be ashamed of himself for that last one you got past him."

"Jesus, Mom, thanks."

"She is right," Ilya cooed, leaning in and kissing Shane's cheek. Shane pressed against him, knowing how much that kind of easy affection meant to Ilya. Ilya put a hand on Shane's thigh under the table, and Shane wiped a smear of tomato sauce off his chin. David passed Ilya the Parmesan. Ilya topped up Yuna's wineglass.

"I am right, thank you, Ilya," Yuna said, nodding imperiously. "It's good advice, Shane. You should take it. For how many switch-ups the Bears have had this year, the team is doing amazingly well, of course, but that doesn't guarantee anything."

"I'm pretty sure we're about guaranteed a spot in the finals," Shane said dryly, even though saying so would have been blasphemy in the locker room (LeClaire would have smacked his head with his tablet if he heard Shane). But it was true. They were currently the highest-ranked team in the Eastern Conference. The very thought gave him a thrill. He and Ilya, at the top, for once side by side. Sharing first place.

They smiled at each other.

Yuna hummed, far less impressed. "It's been a great year for the Western Conference, though."

Shane groaned. "Mom."

“What?” she objected. “I’m just saying. There is some exceptional hockey being played in the Pacific and Central divisions—some of the Central teams are playing better than they have in years, honestly. And the Mudslides have beaten you twice. You shouldn’t rest on your laurels yet.”

“Yuna,” David said.

Ilya laughed.

“Mom,” Shane repeated. “We don’t need to talk about hockey all night.”

She looked baffled by the suggestion. “What else would we talk about? What else do you two even do when you aren’t playing hockey?”

Ilya laughed again. Shane elbowed him.

David sighed. Yuna blanched, then quickly raised her hands. “No, I don’t need to know-”

“Oh my god!” Shane shouted over Ilya’s giggling. “We—oh my god! No! We, like, work out! We watch movies and shit! We, I don’t know, we cook dinner! Normal couple shit, oh my god, Mom!”

“Normal couple shit,” Ilya snorted.

“Normal couple activities,” he defended, but Ilya just kept snickering. “I hate you.”

“You love me,” he sing-songed, pursing his lips aggressively even though there was somehow more tomato sauce on his chin already. “Gimme kiss.”

Shane put his hand on Ilya’s face and shoved him away. Ilya licked his palm. Shane made a sound of abject disgust and stood up from the table, heading for the kitchen sink with his hand held in front of his body as if it were contaminated.

David was laughing too by that point, but Yuna had crossed her arms and didn’t look nearly as impressed as Ilya did with himself. “You will both be thirty in just a few years, you know.”

“We are athletes,” Ilya drawled, as Shane aggressively soaped up between each of his fingers. “We never really grew up, you know?”

Yuna nodded and took a long sip of her wine. Ilya helpfully filled it back up. She cracked a smile. “I’m starting to see that.”

+++

“I like how it is with your parents,” Ilya said much, much later that night, when their *normal couple activities* had come to a close.

Shane murmured something illegible, nose pressed into Ilya’s belly button. He blinked and steadied himself. “It was nice,” he agreed truthfully. “Until you started licking me at the dinner table.”

“Not like you don’t have my spit all over you all the time,” Ilya pointed out.

“That’s different. And I can always shower after.”

“Not always. You’re lucky I didn’t bite you,” Ilya said, fingers finding Shane’s cheek and pinching his skin gently. “You are so cute and bitable.”

Shane shook him off, shuffling a little so that he could prop his chin on Ilya’s hipbone instead of his stomach. “I am not.”

“You are,” Ilya said firmly. “Is okay though. I won’t bite you in front of your parents.”

“You won’t bite me at all, asshole-”

“But!” Ilya cut him off loudly. “I was saying! I liked that.”

Shane paused. He nodded, wobbling his head rather than actually raising it. “Yeah,” he agreed, moving his hands from their limp position on the bed to cup Ilya’s hips, sliding beneath him to feel the warm flesh of his ass. They were in the cottage. Shane always closed up the outbuildings during the season, but the main house was available year-round, and he’d had a cleaning crew come through in preparation for the holidays. He couldn’t imagine a place he wanted to spend his break at more. “It was nice. Really nice. I’m so glad you were there. I usually hate Christmas.”

Ilya gave him an incredulous look. “You hate *Christmas*? Sorry, does holiday have a different name in Canada, what are you talking about?”

Shane poked him. “Be nice. You didn’t even celebrate before you moved here.”

“No, but you did,” Ilya said. “I have not met an American—or a Canadian, whatever, whatever, it’s the same thing and you know it-”

“It is *not* the same, you asshole!”

“-who claims to hate fucking Christmas! What are you, what is green man who steals Christmas? Or skeleton who also steals Christmas?”

“The Grinch,” Shane sighed, “and Jack Skellington. But Jack Skellington loved Christmas. I think that’s why he stole it.” He frowned, trying to remember the plot of a movie he hadn’t seen since he was a kid.

Ilya tapped him on the forehead, drawing his attention back up. “Why do you hate Christmas?” he asked, as much a reminder as it was a question.

“I don’t hate it,” Shane allowed. “It’s just—I don’t know, it’s a lot of *stuff*. I like getting together with my parents and sharing a meal, but the presents are always so awkward, you know? I don’t know what to get anyone. And if I need something, I get it for myself when I need it. I don’t want to wait until December.”

Ilya was grinning at him, sly and delighted. “Fussy,” he murmured. “You didn’t like your presents, malysh? Or was it the terrible hummus pasta noodles that made you grumpy?”

Shane huffed. “That’s not what I meant. I just get... overwhelmed.” Between the lights and the wrapping paper and the food and the mess, it was all just a lot.

“I know,” Ilya murmured. “Is okay.” Shane listened to his breath, the strange interior rumble of his stomach. “I like Christmas with your parents.”

Shane tilted his head enough to smile at him. “I’m so glad,” he whispered. “That makes me so fucking happy, Ilya. I just want you to be happy. Honestly, that’s the only gift I need.”

Ilya smiled back, warm and fragile. “I like that they know,” he murmured, pulling at Shane’s shoulders until he shuffled up the bed, his ear now pressed over Ilya’s heart. “Your parents. I like that when we are all together, I am your boyfriend, and you are my lover-”

“Gross.”

“-and we can kiss and canoodle on couch-”

“Canoodle? Where are you even learning-”

“And is okay.” He shrugged. “Is normal. *We* can be normal about it, and no one cares. Your parents are just happy that you are happy, and I am happy that you are happy, even if you are Ebenezer Scrooge and hate Christmas. Your parents know who *I* am, too, and that is nice. Is nice that someone in the whole fucking world knows who I am. Same way with Jackie and the Pikes,” he said, grinning. “We can do normal family things and normal couple things. I can hold your hand. Kiss your cheek. Give you a romantic present.” His fingers glanced across the back of Shane’s neck, the same gesture he had made so many times during practices, subtle, but personal. “I can touch you however I want.”

Shane swallowed. “Not *however*...”

“I like being open,” Ilya said, and Shane knew how seriously he meant it. “It gives me a picture of the future. How one day, I will get to hold your hand and kiss you wherever I want, and everyone will know the truth. I know,” he cupped Shane’s face, pulling him up the last stretch of the bed until he was hovering over Ilya, their bodies aligned, ankles tangled together, “that the future is not right now. And I know maybe you feel a little differently about that than I do. But I am still looking forward to it.”

Shane did feel different from Ilya. The idea of sharing any part of their relationship was not necessarily appealing to him. What they had was private. It was so deeply personal that sometimes he felt like Ilya’s fingers were buried in his chest, squeezing rhythmically around his heart to keep it beating. It didn’t feel like that should belong to anyone else.

He kissed Ilya anyway. “I don’t hate Christmas,” he said. “I don’t hate anything when it means spending time with you. You’re right. It’s not forever, it’s... it’s just not right now. But I’ll be here, with you, whatever happens. I think we got that part right the first time around.”

Ilya pulled the blankets up over their heads, and the winter air around them grew warm.

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Christmas break was short in the NHL, rarely more than a few days off. By the following Wednesday, the 27th, they were back on the road, first to Buffalo, then to Calgary, where they trounced the Coals in the biggest shutout of their season, six-nothing, then to a disappointing loss in Edmonton. They stayed with Shane's parents for two nights before continuing their Canadian string of away games to Vancouver and then onto Seattle before finally, finally, returning to Boston.

"I'm quitting," Ilya said when they eventually made it through the front door of their home, stumbling over luggage and bleary-eyed from travel, exhausted and frustrated by a delayed flight that had extended their trip by one unnecessary day. They kicked off their shoes, Shane bending down to situate them on the shelf while Ilya flung himself against the wall of the foyer dramatically. "I will be lovely house husband. No one will ever see me again. I will order groceries and make you terrible smoothies and wash the dishes."

"No, you wouldn't," Shane grumbled, standing. "You would leave them in the sink for long enough that the mold would grow arms and legs and ask for a bottle."

"Oh, how cute, you are thinking of babies already."

Shane laughed, startled, but shoved his shoulder. "Ew, Ilya, ew."

"Is better, though," Ilya said, pushing past Shane's playful shoving to wrap his arms around his waist and nuzzle into his neck.

"What's better? Mold-babies in the sink? I'd have to disagree."

"No, no." Ilya pressed his nose to the corner of Shane's jaw. The angles of their faces seemed to line up perfectly, like puzzle pieces fitting together. "Traveling. Away games. Better when I have you all the time."

"Ilya," Shane murmured.

This season, Shane had requested private hotel rooms on the road. His seniority and visibility granted him the concession. He probably could have requested that stipulation years ago in Montreal, but he had always liked rooming with Hayden—Hayden was a familiar face in every city, and they got along so well, and he never made fun of or cared about Shane's stringent neatness and his lengthy bedtime routine.

But now, with the Bears, it made sense to room alone. He wondered if management would have suggested it even if he hadn't asked.

Ilya had requested the same thing. The benefit was that whenever they wanted, they could sneak into each other's hotel rooms, and no one would even notice that they were missing.

Almost every night, even on the road, they slept wrapped in each other's arms.

It was risky. It was wild. Strangely, it reminded Shane of their earliest hook-ups, although they had never actually stopped hooking up in hotel rooms, and they were much happier and easier with each other now.

But it still scared him.

Ilya wasn't scared.

Shane could tell in the way he touched him, no matter who was around, how he barely held himself back. Ilya lived fully as often as possible, on every day he wasn't weighed down by dark thoughts and sickly ruminations. When Ilya was in a good mood (and Shane hoped that he was usually in a good mood these days), he made it everyone's problem, literally. He was loud. He acted as a caricature of himself that was aggressive and fun and flirtatious, and Shane knew it was a role that he got joy out of playing. And Shane knew Ilya still wished he could show more of his authentic self. The version of him Shane got to see over Christmas dinner, and when Ilya put his shoes on the shelf and reorganized his spice cabinet after seeing how Shane kept his, and when Ilya asked Shane to drive them home because he was tired, even though he complained the whole way back about how slow he was.

Shane loved all of it. He loved the act and the actor and the person behind the mask.

Shane just fucking wished he wasn't terrified of it, as well.

"Come to bed," Shane said. "Let's go to bed."

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Ilya's phone buzzed on the nightstand, next to a bottle of lube. The bottle rattled and the drawer hummed.

"Ignore it," Ilya murmured. He had slipped down the bed as they slept and was curled in fetal position against Shane, his face pressed to the underside of Shane's pecs. The bed was probably close to one hundred degrees, even though they had kicked all the blankets off the bed long before they fell asleep. Shane didn't mind, though. He was used to waking up sweaty and hot with Ilya. Warm. It felt good on sore muscles, and he slept like a log in Ilya's bed, with his favorite brand of sheets beneath them.

Ilya's phone buzzed again. Shane hummed. "Is that the security alert?"

"Sounds the same as the rest," Ilya moaned. "I don't know."

"It doesn't sound the same," Shane said patiently. He blinked. There were no clocks at all in the house, so he groped across his nightstand and found his own phone. "Shit, it's almost eleven."

"Hmm, kept you up late, didn't I?"

Shane didn't really want to leave the bed.

Ilya's phone buzzed again and then began ringing. Shane levered himself onto his elbows with a groan. Ilya grumbled and held on like a barnacle, keeping his hips pinned to the bed. "Cliff's calling you," Shane yawned, collapsing down.

"Fuck Cliff," Ilya murmured.

"He's your best friend."

"No, Svetlana is my best friend. Cliff is a hunk of muscle with a brain—or maybe not, I don't know. Too many concussions to tell."

"You're so mean," Shane said. The phone fell silent. The doorbell rang.

They both sat up.

They looked at Ilya's phone, three security alerts showing movement in his driveway, on the front walk, and then at the front door.

Ilya snatched it from the nightstand, turning his naked back to Shane and sitting at the edge of the bed. "Fuck," he said, pulling up the camera feed. He looked over his shoulder, wide-eyed, at Shane. "Marly and Saint Vicky."

Shane opened his mouth. Ilya's phone rang again, and Ilya answered before Shane could say anything. "Why the fuck are you at my door at asscrack of dawn?" Ilya growled, standing. Shane stayed on the bed as he dashed into the bathroom, hearing the sink turn on. Ilya's voice carried, though he was out of sight. "No, after the week we have had, eleven is still asscrack. We just fucking got back, what do you want? I just woke up, am not thinking straight yet, spell it out. I—yes. Yes, I will fucking come down, Jesus, Vicky, shut up. Yes, I will come down, give me a fucking minute."

Shane heard him hang up. He heard him brushing his teeth and splashing water across his face and chest. Ilya appeared, fully naked, in the doorway. "Is nothing serious, just wanting to hang out. I will send them home," he said. He stood there for a moment, then darted in and picked up a pair of sweatpants off the nightstand. He realized they were Shane's, set them down, and fished his discarded pair from under the bench at the foot of the bed. "They know I do not like surprises, I do not know why they would do this."

"Because they miss you."

Ilya looked up. "What?"

Shane shrugged. "They miss you. You don't go out with them as often as you used to, I bet. Or invite them over. With me here, I mean. They miss hanging out with you. I would, too."

Ilya stared at him. He put a hand on the bedspread next to Shane's foot. Shane tilted his ankle and touched his wrist with his toes. "I see them all the time."

"But less than before," Shane stressed. He stood up and started getting dressed. (Despite Ilya's initial protestations that Shane would have to keep his clothes in the guest bedroom, he

had two drawers of underwear and soft pajamas in Ilya's room). "They miss you. I get it. You should hang out with them."

"What?" Ilya asked, eyes intense. "And tell them, what? You slept over? We have sleepovers after a week of traveling together?"

"No," Shane said, sliding a shirt over his head. "I'll stay up here. You stay downstairs. They don't have to know I'm here."

"What?" Ilya asked sharply. "The fuck? Why would I—I would not do that to you—"

"I'm suggesting it," Shane said lightly, reaching out to take Ilya's hand. "You should hang out with your friends. I'll stay up here. It's okay." He squeezed his fingers. "But you shouldn't keep them waiting."

Ilya's eyes were wide but his forehead was creased. "No," he said shortly.

"Do you want to hang out with them?"

Ilya hesitated.

Shane lifted his hand and kissed his knuckles. "Go let them in," he said. "I'll be lazy. I'll stay in bed. If I need anything, I'll text you."

"You are not a prisoner in our house," Ilya said sharply.

"No," Shane said, "which is why I'm choosing to stay."

"You want to stay here?" Ilya asked, leaning in.

"I want you to hang out with your friends," Shane said, "if that's something you want. Ilya, I'm okay. I was going to read all morning anyway, so I'll still just do that. If it bothers you, we don't have to, but... I don't mind."

Ilya looked at him for a long time—probably way too long, given that his friends were waiting on his doorstep.

Then he nodded decisively. "Give me minute," he said brusquely, standing and snagging a sweatshirt off the table. He darted through the door.

Shane felt a nervous breath whoosh out of his chest and he sat down, slumping back against the headboard with a sigh.

From the first floor, Ilya's speaker system turned on, playing something casual and lo-fi. Shane heard Ilya shout something, probably at the door, and a flurry of knocks, bangs, and muted shouting from outside. Shane imagined that was Cliff and St. Simone banging on the door, and he smiled tremulously at the mental image it conjured.

He didn't hear the door open, though. He frowned.

Half a minute later, loud footsteps sounded on the staircase (Ilya always took them two at a time), and the door flew open. Ilya jogged inside, dumping a water bottle, a ginger ale, two bags of Shane's pre-packaged seaweed, and a sealed bottle of protein smoothie on the bed, along with a book Shane must have left in the living room. "Music on and is staying on," Ilya said, rounding the bed and leaning down, getting in Shane's face with startling quickness as he blinked back mutely. "Listen to me. This is important," Ilya said, hands firmly grasping either side of Shane's face, forcing eye contact. "You are listening, yes? This is important."

"Yes," he said, numb and surprised.

"Good. Listen: this is not about secrecy. This is about privacy, which you deserve, and which you get to have and to choose, as much as you want it. This is for your privacy, but not secrecy. You are not my secret. Okay? You are not a secret."

Shane had already been tearing up. "Okay," he whispered.

"Okay?" Ilya asked again, intensely. "I send them away if you want."

"No, I don't want that." Shane touched the inside of his wrist. "Okay. I understand." Ilya's grip relaxed just enough for Shane to lean forward and kiss him. "I love you," he said.

"You're not my secret, either. I'm just—I'm not ready."

"I know, and that is okay," Ilya said, kissing his nose. "We're figuring it out, and we have the time to do that."

"I know," Shane said. "I really know. Go, be with your friends. Have fun. I'm alright. I am," he said earnestly, nodding, secretly loving the way it felt to move his head while Ilya held it, as if he didn't even have to rely on his own neck muscles when Ilya was present. "Thank you for the snacks."

"Okay," Ilya said. He kissed his cheek. "Okay. Text me if anything changes. Anything. Is fine. I kick them out on their asses, ten seconds flat, even Marly, I can take him."

"Go," Shane insisted, and kissed Ilya one last time before he darted out of the room. The door clicked shut. Shane let out a quiet sigh of relief before he crawled down the bed and pulled the dark sheets over his head, taking a minute to settle his breathing.

He heard Cliff's loud voice carrying up the stairs and St. Simone's occasional exuberant whoops. He heard the television turn on and thought he heard the recognizable opening music of an EA title.

He pulled the blankets back and picked up the water bottle, taking a long pull. He set it down and picked up his glasses and the book he had been reading last night.

He settled in, quiet as a mouse.

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Shane was asleep when Ilya crawled back into bed. The hands sliding up his shirt woke him up, but Shane didn't startle or jerk. He relaxed into Ilya's hold and nuzzled up when Ilya laid

his head on top of Shane's, cheek to cheek.

"Hmm," Shane yawned. "Have fun?"

"Sort of," Ilya said after a moment. Shane started to pull away but Ilya held him tighter. "No," he murmured. "Stay. Stay right here. I want you in my arms."

"Okay," Shane whispered. "What happened?"

Ilya shrugged. "Nothing. Was normal. We ate food, played games. Saint Vicky asked me why I have not been going out so much, seeing women all the time, and I don't even know what I said. Something about Cup-eyes, I think. And still, Marly called me a womanizer, *again*." His hand slid higher up Shane's stomach, cupping his chest. "And I did not correct him."

Shane stared out the window of their bedroom. There were a lot of trees in Ilya's neighborhood, and the houses weren't pressed up against each other, but he could see the corner of another, much older home, and a window. It didn't bother him. Ilya had let him install the automatic blinds, but most days, they left them up. "You could have corrected him," he murmured, "if you wanted. If it was important to you."

Ilya huffed. "Okay."

"No, I mean it," Shane said, squirming until Ilya let him turn over and they could face each other. He put one hand on Ilya's chest, over his mother's cross, and the other on his face. He wasn't surprised to find that Ilya's eyes were wet. "Hey, hey," he breathed, stroking his cheek. "Ilya..."

"Is lonely," Ilya said, voice croaking, "sometimes. I know is stupid because I have so many people here, and because Svetlana knows and your parents and friends, but—I feel so stupid for feeling lonely."

"You're not stupid," Shane murmured, heart breaking. "You've never been stupid."

"How could I feel lonely when I have you?" Ilya said, pulling their hips together but not sexually. Rather, Shane imagined that it was because he couldn't pull their faces any closer while still being able to look at each other, but he wanted to be wrapped up in Shane. "I should be least lonely person in the world."

"I don't think that's how it works," Shane said, sliding his hand into Ilya's hair. "Ilya, I... I want you to know... you *have* to know that you—you can do whatever you want." His heart was beating quickly. "It's your life. Cliff is your friend, and you know St. Simone better than me—"

"They are your friends, too," Ilya said quickly. "I know they are. Vicky asked if we should invite you over, to join us, and I had to make up some excuse. They wanted you here, and it felt so fucking dumb to say no even though you *are* here, you are right upstairs—"

"I'm sorry," Shane whispered. "I'm sorry, I wasn't ready today. I'm sorry I made you do that. That was—stupid. I'm sorry."

“God,” Ilya muttered, and apparently couldn’t resist the urge anymore because he wrangled Shane in and Shane went willingly, tucking Ilya’s head beneath his chin. “We are both idiots, then, okay? And it’s obvious, so we don’t need to say it anymore.”

“No,” Shane laughed quietly, “no we don’t. And you’re not stupid.”

“Neither are you.”

“I know,” Shane said, smiling, stroking through Ilya’s curls and playing with his pendant. “Highest IQ in the league or something like that, right?”

“Yes.” Ilya kissed his chest.

Shane took a deep breath. “I don’t ever want to think that you are unhappy or... constricting yourself for me, okay? It’s your life, and I’m a part of it, obviously, but it’s *yours*. My shit has nothing to do with your shit.” Shane wished he had better words. He wished he had studied English literature, and that he read more books, and honestly he wished that he were a better fucking queer ally and could know exactly what to say to Ilya to make everything better. That was all he wanted.

But Ilya pressed close to him and Shane hoped he hadn’t done too bad a job. “I think,” Ilya said slowly, lips brushing the sparse hair on Shane’s chest, “I am learning that I don’t want to be in the closet for forever, you know? I like being outside of it.”

“Okay,” Shane murmured. He thought about the night he had seen those fucking Twitter notifications, the night he saw the video, recording him in his most private moment, leaked to the world. How *his* world had crumbled and stopped existing for two hours until Ilya called him.

He never wanted that to happen to Ilya. How long could they keep doing this, just hoping that no one would ever find out?

Everything in life was a risk.

Ilya was more than worth it.

“Okay. We’ll figure something out.”

“Not today,” Ilya murmured. “Not tonight. But we have time off, coming up, yes? Bye week next month, for All-Stars? Maybe we talk then. Talk more.”

“We should talk all the time,” Shane said. “I think I’d explode if I didn’t get to talk to you everyday.”

“That would be very sad for me,” Ilya said. “But I think I feel the same way. Maybe we both explode at the same time and then neither of us ever has to feel sad, okay?”

Shane tightened his grip. He didn’t like the curl of dread those glib words set in his stomach, but he could admit, there were worse outcomes. “Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

(very long end note for anyone interested, maybe mild tlg spoilers):

I feel like this is what I've really been building to this whole fic, and one of the most interesting parts of tlg to me. The fact that Shane is mostly content having a very private relationship, but Ilya doesn't want that, and how that dynamic changes over the years. (I think this is the reason ppl sometimes misread shane in tlg: he and Ilya entered their relationship under a mutual understanding that they would stay closeted, and Ilya's desires have shifted, which is valid, but he doesn't communicate that—Shane is equally valid for continuing to operate within the actual defined parameters of what they have agreed to).

It's complicated and sad but fair on both sides, and I wanted to explore what that would look like in this universe, where Shane has more trauma about being outed. And Ilya feels a strange type of guilty jealousy as the person who wants to be out more, while knowing how much it has hurt Shane. Shane is scared of more attention but would never want to force Ilya to stay in the closet; Ilya is desperate to be honest and open with his team but doesn't want to do anything that would hurt Shane. It's tough! They're trying their best! They still love each other more than anything (and maybe that makes it harder)!

Let me know your thoughts if you have opinions, I'd love to hear!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Longest chapter yet, this one's huge! Spoilery content warning in end notes (nothing major but check if you need to)!

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

“Montreal,” Ilya drawled, landing hard on each syllable and drawing them out with his accent.

Shane gave him an unimpressed glance. “Montréal,” he agreed, pronouncing it with the French diction that dropped the ‘t’ from the center of the word: “*Moh-rey-ahl*.”

Ilya leered.

Shane rolled his eyes.

“Feel good to be back, Hollzy?” Cliff asked, sitting at their table. There was at least twice as much food piled on his plate as Shane’s, and Shane’s serving portion would have made a normal person gawk. He knew from their many shared team meals that Cliff would put it all away and burn off the calories and more in that night’s game.

Like before all Montreal games nowadays, the Bears were buzzing with energy.

Shane knew it was partially because of him. And while that did warm his stomach and chest—the aggressive protectiveness the Bears extended on his behalf, and the genuine righteous fury they had for the way the Voyageurs had discarded him—it also felt like a lot of pressure.

So far in the season, they had played Montreal twice at home games and beaten them both times, soundly. They were ranked well above them in points, and Boston was at the top of the Atlantic Division and looking to stay there.

But tonight they were playing on Montreal’s home ice, in an arena that had two Stanley Cup banners in the rafters that Shane had put there. It was different.

He shrugged as if it wasn’t. “Just another game,” he said. “Excited to see Hayden and the kids tomorrow. And my parents made the drive, so that’s nice.” His parents attended most of the games Shane played in Quebec and Ontario, especially his mother, who worked for Shane and didn’t have to take time off when she wanted to travel to Toronto. They had both come to Boston to watch the Bears’ home games on two separate occasions, and Shane had been so happy to see them in the crowd that he had not begrudged their refusal to wear his Bears jersey. Honestly, some days wearing it still felt like a betrayal to him, too.

But he didn't feel like that most of the time. Shane knew what real betrayal looked like, and it wasn't sitting around in a cafeteria with St. Simone, Cliff, Ilya, and half of the team as they shoveled truly nauseating amounts of food into their mouths.

Montreal had been his home once, and he had left it, but that wasn't betrayal.

It wasn't a betrayal to make a home somewhere else, either.

Beneath the table, Ilya pressed his foot against Shane's.

Shane pressed back harder.

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The Centre Bell was heartbreakingly familiar. Or maybe the heartbreak came from the things that weren't familiar about it: the guest locker room, the wrong bench.

Shane was finally used to wearing gold and black after years in red and blue. The colors never surprised him anymore.

When they skated onto the ice, of course, his eyes went straight to the rafters, to his banners. How long had he dreamt of one day retiring his jersey here, alongside them? Shane didn't want to say that he had given the best years of his career to them—he certainly hoped that wasn't true—but he had given them his youth. It had meant very little to the managers and owners, and maybe less to his teammates. It was exactly what Shane had always feared, and yet, in the end, he hadn't expected it.

He looked away from the 2015 and 2016 Stanley Cup banners. He would earn more. They would hang in Boston, or maybe in a different city. Maybe that would be his legacy: moving between states and provinces, cities and countries, dotting the continent with banners everywhere he went. Hopefully with Ilya in tow.

That wouldn't be such a terrible fate.

Shane looked out at the crowd. If he could have seen their faces, maybe he would have recognized some of the attendees. Season regulars or local celebrity VIPs, children he had handed signed pucks and sticks to in the past.

They would recognize him, that was for sure.

"Hollzy," Cliff said, skating up and stopping near him. "Check it out." He pointed.

Shane followed the gesture. It took him a moment to make out where Cliff was pointing, and then he saw it. He usually tried not to read fan-made signs because they were often either embarrassing or just bizarre, but Cliff had pointed this one out on purpose. When the fans holding the sign saw that he was looking in their direction, they started jumping. Shane thought he could pick out their screams from across the stadium.

The poster board depicted a large 24, half colored-in with red and blue, and half in black and gold, cut diagonally through the numbers. Beneath it, in legible block letters: *We Miss You*,

Cap!

St. Simone skated up. “Another,” he said, nudging Shane slightly with his stick.

Shane followed his gesture to three fans in the middle of the rows, each holding a one-word sign that together spelled out: *Come Home Hollander!*

“Wow,” Shane said.

“Montreal knows they fucked up,” Cliff said easily. “The fans are smarter than the GMs, I guess. Come on—we should still stick it to them, just in case there was any confusion.”

“You don’t have to tell ‘Ollander that,” St. Simone scoffed. “He wants it more than the rest of us combined.”

Shane couldn’t deny it.

They guided him back to the rest of the Bears as they began stretching, but Shane’s eyes kept drifting to the stands. There were virtually no Bears jerseys in the Centre Bell, but that was understandable. But there were more signs. Just a few, and scattered between seats. The majority weren’t for him, because most people were loyal to their teams more than to individual players. Some were against him (there was an inverse *Go Home Hollander!* sign, hastily scrawled, and a *HOLLZY=TRAITOR* sign that didn’t even make sense), but he could see his name in the crowd, and the good outweighed the bad.

They didn’t hate him. Not all of them.

“Feeling good?” Ilya asked.

“Feeling fucking fantastic,” Shane told him honestly. “Let’s win this one, okay?”

Right away, it was quick and vicious. Abbot scored the first goal of the game, which made Shane’s jaw clench. He was glad he hadn’t been on the ice when it happened, and he was even happier when, three minutes later, he scored the Bears’ first goal of the night off an assist from St. Simone.

They were off.

The next goal also went to Shane. Shane carried the puck across the blue line, evading Hayden’s attempt to swipe it away from him, then skated back and shot it to St. Simone, still in the neutral zone. In a quick, zig-zagging blur, St. Simone crossed back over the blue line again and dodged several of the defending Montreal players until Shane and Ilya were in place for the play. St. Simone passed to Ilya, behind the red line, and Ilya whipped it out to Shane, at the edge of the crease, who skirted past Drapeau’s extended legs and planted the puck in the net.

“Nice,” Ilya said. “Very nice.”

“Thanks for the assist, Captain,” Shane said, panting.

In comparison, the second period seemed to crawl. No goals were scored, and the waves of the crowd ebbed and flowed as they chanted for their team to catch up. Ilya was put in the penalty box after Comeau spat more of his usual vitriol at Shane during a face-off, and Ilya immediately slammed him into the boards. At least Comeau joined him, the refs having overheard his certainly unsportsmanlike comments. They played shorthanded for five minutes, both teams down one man, and Shane could feel the unsettled energy building on both benches, each team longing for some action.

Despite the penalties and the crackle of tension waiting to break, the scoreboard remained unchanged.

Montreal was playing better than they had in either of the two matches they had played in TD Garden. It was mid-season, typically when a lot of teams were at their best—they had hit their stride but were not yet completely exhausted or missing any key players to injury reserve. The Voyageurs were lingering in the bottom-middle of the divisional rankings, although doing slightly better in the Conference; Shane could not confidently claim that they were out of the running for the playoffs entirely. If they continued to improve, they might be able to secure a wildcard slot. It was unlikely, but possible.

Shane didn't think it would happen, though.

And even if they did, and if the seeding brought them face-to-face in the playoffs, he knew the Bears would beat them. Hell, maybe they would even manage it in four games.

They pulled him for an interview during the break between the second and third periods, which he had expected and prepared for. The questions were predictable and he had pre-scripted answers to all of them:

“How does it feel to be back in the Centre Bell?”

“Many of the first NHL matches I watched as a child were in this arena. I will always have a lot of love and nostalgia for it.”

“What is the experience of playing against the team you were formerly captain of?”

“This is our third game against Montreal. Obviously, there's a lot of history between these players and me, but especially by this point in the season, it feels like any other game.”

“You and Hayden Pike have always been close, and you're the godfather of his children, is that correct? What is it like to leave behind a friendship like that?”

“I have always had friendships with men on other teams in the league. I've always respected other guys, on and off the ice. Playing hard against someone is another form of respect. There could never be any ill will between me and Hayden. We haven't left anything behind.”

St. Simone grinned at him when he stalked back into the locker room, snatching something to eat off the table and accepting a water bottle from one of the trainers. “They are obsessed with you, ‘Ollander,” he teased, going through a mid-game stretching routine. “I thought they were bad with Rozanov, but it is twice as worse with you!”

“It’s because we’re in Montreal,” Shane said sourly, speeding through his routine.

“It is not,” St. Simone laughed.

“They know he will not cuss them out on camera,” Cliff chortled. “Fewer fines.”

“Worse headlines, though,” Ilya quipped. “‘Assistant Captain Hollander gives media-perfect answer that is extremely tactful and extremely boring’—boo, who wants to read that?”

Shane just rolled his eyes.

They stepped back onto the ice for the third and final period. The score held steady at 2-1 in their favor for five minutes until Shane’s shift came up again. A rookie jumped the walls to exchange with him, and Shane suddenly saw Pummel open on the other side of the ice, the puck in his possession, two Voyageurs gunning for him from either side, and no one to pass to.

Shane launched himself over the boards and toward the middle of the ice. They locked eyes, and Pummel shot him the puck. Shane, completely alone as no one had expected his sudden emergence from the bench, caught it without breaking pace, sprinting down the center ice, just four or five hard strides as he juggled the puck and jammed it through Drapeau’s five-hole when he dropped wide to try to stop the shot.

3-1. Shane’s hands raised.

Most of the Montreal fans booed viciously. It was impossible to make out individual words, but he knew they were unhappy to watch their former player score a hat trick on home ice against them.

But some of the people in the crowd were *his* fans. A *Hollander4Ever* sign waved violently from the nosebleeds, proving his point. And many of the people in the crowd cared less about teams than about watching some good fucking hockey.

Shane could certainly deliver. He could always give them that.

His team skated up to him eagerly, but aside from a few shoulder taps and helmet knocks, they didn’t touch him. Shane wondered if Ilya had told them specifically to stop dogpiling on him or if they had figured out his aversion on their own. He didn’t really care. He was grateful, and happy, and exhilarated.

Ilya joined him on the ice. “Hat trick,” he purred.

“Good, wasn’t it?” Shane asked, smug and pleased. “You feel like joining me tonight?”

Ilya gave him a slow, steady smile. “Oh, yes.”

The game resumed, more vicious than ever.

Shane got control of the puck a few minutes later and he raced down the outside of the rink. Shane scanned, looking for a pass. Ilya was at the center, Abbot behind him, looking at

Shane.

Then Comeau appeared at his side. Shane saw his snarl before he noticed his speed, his weight, how close he was to crashing into Shane.

He did not have enough time to brace before the collision occurred.

Comeau drove him hard into the boards. Shane felt Comeau's elbow dig into his ribs as he slammed him with so much force that he threw Shane off his skates, up, so that his hip connected hard with the edge of the barrier. Worse than that, though—far worse—was the instinctive way Shane's arm rose, preparing to brace himself or cover his head, and the way his elbow planted onto the barrier glass and stuck, pushing in the opposite, in the *wrong* direction. Momentum carried him forward with his elbow jammed, immovable.

Shane hit the ice on his back before the pain registered. Comeau almost tripped over his ankles as Shane went out under him, and inertia kept Shane gliding down the ice into his legs. Comeau unbalanced above him, a snarl on his face but something satisfied in his eyes. Comeau's stick came down on Shane's stomach, and Shane did not know if it was a genuine attempt to regain his footing or if the additional *thwack* of the stick into his abdomen was just one last hit.

"Fag," Comeau spat, answering that question as he steadied himself and turned away.

Shane didn't quite hear the noise he made as he flipped himself onto his front, cradling his injured arm against his stomach, chin pressed against the ice in a sudden, sharp burst of cold. It was less than a shout and more than a whimper. He swallowed it back and almost choked.

His teeth rattled. His arm buzzed. His stick had clattered out of his hands, spinning off across the ice, and he threw off the glove on his good hand as his fingers, shaking, tried to push himself up.

He could only see the ice. But from the corner of his eye, he saw a blur of white and black and gold.

One-handed, he got to his knees, then to his feet, his head rocking back from the pain. He tore the other glove off and threw it to the ice, flexing his fingers furiously to try to push out the terrible, buzzing numbness from his fingertips, and started to skate shakily for the bench—he needed to get off the ice so they could replace him.

He didn't reach it.

Shane jerked back when his direct path was suddenly obstructed as Cliff slammed a Montreal defenseman into the walls. Their gloves were dropped, but their helmets were still on, grappling ferociously as they wrestled and shouted obscenities into each other's faces.

Shane took an unsteady step back, meaning to skate around the fight, and finally noticed the brawl in the center of the ice. St. Simone and Abbot were trading punches, both of them massive and steady on their skates as they managed to duck most of the precise, devastatingly quick blows, while Varkov screamed at Koch, a ref lodged between them as they continued

trying to grab each other's jerseys. Benji, out of the crease and standing to the side, was arguing furiously with another referee, who was holding him back from joining in.

Shane turned around, feeling dizzy with pain and more than a little disoriented. His eyes sought out the one person he was always looking for, and always knew where to find.

Ilya had Comeau on his knees. Their helmets were long gone, and so were their gloves, crumpled on the ice like discarded gauntlets. Cameras swirled around their heads like hawks, projecting and immortalizing the vicious, dead-eyed snarl on Ilya's mouth as he laid into Comeau over and over again, one hand fisted in the front of his jersey, keeping him from falling to the ice. The white front of Ilya's jersey was speckled with a fine sheen of blood when Comeau coughed. Comeau's face was almost unrecognizable behind the waterfall of blood pouring from his broken nose, his mouth hanging open, his lips cut in multiple places from the impact of knuckles driving them into his crooked teeth. Ilya reared back, his bloody fist raised in the air, presented for the entire arena to see, and then he was tackled by a fleet of referees.

Comeau fell flat on his face, spitting blood onto the ice.

Shane took a shaky step forward.

A hand on his shoulder stopped him. He spun to face Hayden.

"Come on, bud," he said, grabbing Shane's jersey and towing Shane toward the bench. "Get off the ice, come on, don't make the medics run out here into this mess. Your teammates have it handled." Hayden's fingers curled in his jersey—the away-game one was more white than black—and pulled Shane, unresisting and gliding listlessly on his skates, toward the bench, threading the various clumps of players and refs whose fights were mostly subsiding. Shane hunched slightly, still protecting his limp arm, and let himself be dragged. Hands from the rest of his teammates (at least they hadn't cleared the bench to join the brawl) reached for him, opening the gate to let him in, but Shane paused.

He knocked his helmet against Hayden's. "Thanks, man," he said.

"Course."

In all, less than sixty seconds had passed.

Shane ducked past his teammates and coaches and disappeared into the tunnel.

The medics were on him immediately, feeling his shoulder and trying to maneuver around his equipment while he winced and sighed.

"Yup, you're going to the hospital, Hollander. Come on, let's get you up."

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"Dislocated shoulder and a broken collarbone. You're lucky. A hit like that could have fractured the socket, and then you would have really been in trouble."

“Yeah, I feel lucky,” Shane grumbled, not feeling very gracious. He was reclining in a wide hospital bed, and he was on some serious pain meds that had him feeling like he was floating on a cloud of teased cotton balls. But he was still annoyed that he hadn’t finished the game.

“Shane,” Yuna said disapprovingly. “Thank you, Doctor. He appreciates it, really. He’s just worried about his team.”

Shane frowned. “But we won?” he asked, just to make sure.

Yuna smiled at him and patted his ankle. Shane shifted. He wished they had let him take a shower. “Yes, sweetie, you won.”

Ilya had been ejected from the game after what he had done to Comeau’s face. In the ensuing power play, Montreal had scored a single goal, bringing the score to 3-2, but cementing the victory for the Boston Bears.

Shane rocked his head on the pillow. “Good. Where’s Ilya?”

His parents exchanged a glance.

The doctor answered. “It’s after visiting hours. Your parents are allowed to sit with you, of course, but I’m afraid that’s the only concession we can make. Your teammates can visit you in the morning.”

“Their flight isn’t until the evening,” Yuna said.

“Good, good.” Shane nodded. His head felt loose, like there were more ligaments in his neck than usual. “Okay, but what about Ilya?”

His mom bit her lip. Shane thought she was trying to fight back a smile. “He’ll visit with the rest of the team, okay, Shane?”

“Hmm,” Shane grumbled. He kicked his feet against the bed slightly. He worried that his feet would plunge through the mattress, but it was sturdier than he expected. “Does he know where I am?”

“Yes.”

“Does he know I’m alright?”

“Yes.”

“Can I call him?”

Yuna glanced at the doctor so Shane rolled his head up to look as well. The doctor shrugged. “We’re not seeing any signs of a concussion or head trauma. He’s just loopy from the meds. He’s cleared to use a phone, but you might want to monitor his activities.”

Shane made an offended noise. “I do not need to be *monitored*-”

“Thank you, Doctor,” his mom said loudly, speaking over him. Shane grumbled some more. “I think that’s all the questions we have.”

“Wonderful. We’ll keep monitoring him, but he should be released before tomorrow evening. You might even be able to fly back with your team.” The doctor gave him a kind smile. “I’m sorry that your return to Montreal took such a turn for the worse, Mr. Hollander, but we’re glad to have you back either way.”

“Thanks.” He looked at his mom. “Can I call Ilya now?”

The doctor laughed and left. Yuna muttered, “You should be very grateful for patient confidentiality,” as she fished Shane’s phone out of his bag and handed it to him.

It was more difficult than usual to maneuver his phone while one-handed, but he wasn’t going to ask his mom to hold it for him while he spoke to Ilya. He knew Ilya would be worried. He managed to pull up the contact and debated whether he should video call him or not, then shrugged.

Ilya answered almost immediately. “You are good? You are safe? You did not hit your head, I rewatched the tape.”

“Nope,” Shane said, smiling goofily and popping the ‘p.’ “Just the shoulder. Collarbone. Whatever. I’m out for a month.” He pouted.

Ilya ducked slightly beneath the camera, exposing the curly top of his head, and Shane saw a nondescript hotel room behind him. “Good, good.”

Shane was offended. “Hey! I thought you liked playing with me now!”

Ilya looked back up, incredulous, then laughed. “You idiot,” he said fondly. “What do they have you on? Are you alone?”

“No,” Shane said, drawing out the vowel. “My parents are here. And I don’t know. Something... loopy, I guess?”

“You guess,” Ilya said, still smiling. “Can I speak with your mom?”

Shane frowned harder. “You don’t want to speak with me?” he demanded.

Ilya laughed again. Shane watched the rolling of his shoulders through a tight t-shirt and saw the way the muscles relaxed. “After,” he promised. “Please let me speak with Yuna.”

Still offended, but always willing to capitulate to Ilya’s requests, Shane passed his phone to Yuna, who immediately turned the camera off and started talking very quickly. Shane didn’t bother trying to follow along.

David sat in a chair by the head of his bed. He looked tired. Shane glanced at the window and noted that it was quite dark. The game had started at 7:00, and Shane had probably left the arena around 9:00. After all the X-rays and the brain scans, Shane figured it was around midnight.

He glared at his dad and went to point an accusatory finger at him, but he tried to use his bad arm and winced. "It's past your bedtime," he told his dad. "You'll be cranky tomorrow."

David smiled and touched his cheek. "I won't," he promised. "I have too much to be grateful for."

"Here, sweetie," Yuna said, handing Shane the phone.

"Hello?" Shane asked the receiver.

He recognized Ilya's huff of laughter. He thought he would probably recognize any noise Ilya made, no matter the distance or the context. "Hello."

"Hello," Shane repeated in his best Russian accent, which made both of his parents grin.

Ilya laughed again. "Okay, but what if I do a Shane Hollander impression, huh? You don't think that's so funny."

"Can't do a Shane impression," Shane hummed, closing his eyes. "I'm too boring. I barely sound Canadian."

"Oh, he thinks he barely sounds Canadian, really? Mr. *P-ah-sta*? Mr. *Too-er*? Mr. Soory About Thoot?"

Shane giggled. "Okay, okay." He yawned.

"It's late," Ilya said quietly. "You should sleep. I will be there in the morning, da? Or by afternoon at least." He sounded chagrined. "I might be held up with the team. I'm sorry about that."

"No, no, I get it," Shane said, speaking through another yawn. "You're the captain. You're a great captain, by the way. Way better than I was."

"Not true—"

"Yup," Shane said, eyes closed, phone almost sliding out of his hand as his grip loosened. "You're so good at it. I wish I was that good at it. But also, I like that you're my captain. You... are good at captaining."

"Shane," Ilya said softly, "I love you. I am glad your head is okay. I will see you tomorrow. Sleep."

"Love you," Shane murmured. Someone was holding the phone for him now. "Ya tebya... ya tebya..."

"Lyublyu."

"I know. I was getting there."

"Okay."

“Okay.”

Between one moment and the next, he fell asleep, and Shane dreamed that he and Ilya were skating down Mass Ave, weaving between cars and smiling at each other in the flashes between street lamps.

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The next morning, as soon as visiting hours began, Hayden was the first person through Shane’s door.

“Hey, man.”

Shane, now on a significantly lower dosage of painkillers and feeling better for it, even though his shoulder hurt like hell, smiled at him warmly. “Hey.”

A nurse had been standing by Shane’s bed, discussing PT options with him, but she smiled gently. “I’ll give you two a minute,” she murmured, stepping away. “Mr. Pike.”

He smiled tightly. “Hi.” He nodded after her as she left. But when the door closed, Hayden suddenly staggered as though all the tension in his body had abruptly disappeared.

Shane jolted and winced hard when he pulled against the sling, and Hayden wobbled and hurried toward the bed, practically falling into Yuna’s evacuated chair. “No, dude, no, don’t move,” he said, hands fluttering over Shane’s legs. “Be chill, dude.”

Shane stared at him. “Be chill?”

“What?” Hayden asked.

Shane laughed at him. Hayden laughed too.

Then, Shane watched his expression crumple. “Sorry, sorry-”

“Hayds,” he said helplessly, trying to reach out as Hayden shielded his teary eyes with his forearm.

“No, don’t move,” Hayden said quickly, voice wobbling. “It’s okay, I’m okay. God, you shouldn’t be fucking comforting me. God, I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” Shane asked, desperate and unsettled. His head still felt a little light with the drugs, and he worried it was making him slower to react than he should have been, but Hayden was crying. Shane had probably seen Hayden cry four times in their friendship—no, five. He could list them all: the day he proposed to Jackie, the day he married her, and at the births of each of his children. “Buddy,” he murmured, wishing Hayden had sat on the other side of the bed so he could touch him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Hayden said quickly, still trying to wipe his eyes as if he wasn’t actively crying. “I’m just—I’m just—I’m so sorry you got hurt.”

“It’s not your fault,” Shane said gently. He wished his mom were there. He had sent his parents back to their hotel when he woke up, knowing they needed showers and some sleep in a real bed, but he thought Yuna would have known what to do. She would have been more comforting than him, at least. “Hayden. I’m okay. You know that. What’s really wrong?”

Hayden put his hands in his lap. He flexed his fingers and stared at them for a long time. Shane let him have the silence to gather himself, never looking away from his best friend’s face.

“I’m having a hard time,” Hayden choked out eventually. “With the Voyageurs. It’s been hard. I mean... Abbot is fine, actually. He’s weird. But he’s the most stoic dude I’ve ever met, but he doesn’t give a shit about policing locker room talk, so it’s been all over the place. I think the rookies are skeeved out by the toxicity of it, and I’m trying to be there for them, but Comeau and Drapeau are just so *loud*. JJ and Miitie are still chill, but it’s like—it’s like no one wants to be there anymore. God.” He put a hand over his face. “It sucks knowing that you’re on the most famously homophobic team in the NHL. The team that literally discarded two Stanley Cups because a player was gay. It sucks, and I don’t want my kids to think—I just don’t want that to be true.”

“Hayd,” Shane said softly. A part of him felt an immediate wash of guilt, but he set it aside. He knew that emotional response wasn’t helpful or useful—none of this was Shane’s fault, and he could not help Hayden by feeling responsible for causing his misery. But Shane couldn’t think of anything that would be helpful in the face of his best friend’s anguish.

“Sorry, man.” Hayden was wiping away tears. “Sorry, it’s just—it’s been tough. And I miss you, and Jackie misses you, and, you know, *mostly* we just miss our go-to babysitter-”

“Hey!”

“And I don’t really know how I can solve any of my problems without completely uprooting my family or leaving them for half of the year,” Hayden said in a rush. “I just don’t know. I don’t know yet.”

Shane sighed. “Jackie would follow you anywhere,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, but how the hell could I ask her to do that?”

“You don’t ask her,” Shane said. “You just tell her the truth.”

Hayden laughed wetly. “It’s nice that you think I’m capable of hiding anything from my wife. Dude, she knows what kind of porn I watch. She knows everything.”

“Then I bet she’s been trying to convince you not to re-sign with Montreal when your contract is up,” Shane said simply. “Jackie wants you to be happy. That’s all she wants. Hayden, look, I get it, changing teams is hard, and it sucks sometimes, but sometimes-” he shrugged, helpless, and didn’t even notice the twinge in his shoulder. “Sometimes it’s worth it. Sometimes you *have* to.”

Hayden glanced up, smiling shakily with red eyes. “It was worth it? For you?”

Shane hesitated. “Honestly... I would do anything to take back the leak. But... at the same time, playing with Ilya—playing with all the Bears, honestly—it’s the most fun I’ve had in years. They push me, on the ice and off it. They make me a better player. They care about me. I think they want me to be happy.”

“Wow,” Hayden murmured. “Good. That’s fucking good, bro, I’m so happy for you.”

“I think a lot of teams have that,” Shane said quietly. “I don’t think the Voyageurs ever did. There is something... rotten, I guess, at the core. Maybe it was mostly Theriault’s fault, or maybe it goes all the way up to the owners. It was already bad before I left, and I just hadn’t realized it yet. Hayden.” He opened and closed his good hand on the bedsheets. “Your contract is ending. You shouldn’t stay somewhere that makes you miserable.”

“I know,” Hayden murmured. “I know that. It’s still hard to accept, I guess.”

“I get that,” Shane said. The weight of his words settled between them, but he saw Hayden’s shoulder slump slightly as though divested of a burden. Shane smiled. “Well,” he said, injecting levity into his voice, “if Boston makes an offer, you should really consider it. The cannolis are to die for.”

“If Boston is the only city to make an offer, I’m throwing myself in the St. Lawrence,” Hayden shot back.

“Not the Charles River?”

“Not a fucking chance.”

“Hey,” Shane said quickly. “I’ll be out of here later today, but I won’t fly back until Tuesday. Maybe when I’m released-”

“Oh, please,” Hayden said desperately, falling onto the bed. “I wasn’t kidding about the babysitter thing.”

“I’m not offering to be a babysitter! I just want to see my godkids!”

“That too,” Hayden said, grinning, and Shane let himself hope that, once again, things would turn out all right.

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Hayden left with promises to pick Shane up when he was released, and to bring Jackie and the kids along. Shane was left alone for only a few minutes, his eyes closed, properly exhausted from a night of being unconscious on pain meds instead of getting proper sleep, when he heard the door click open. He blinked and fought back a groan, looking up, expecting to see his mom or LeClaire or even Ilya, although he had apologized over text that he wouldn’t be able to make it to the hospital ahead of the team’s visit that afternoon, but it wasn’t any of them.

It was Rose.

Shane smiled slowly. “Oh. Hi.”

“Hi,” she said softly, sinking into the chair. She took his hand and squeezed it. Her hands were soft and manicured, delicately cared for. Shane knew her skin routine was even longer than his own, which was no shoddy feat. But his hands were hardened and calloused and scared despite that. She held them gently anyway. “I was going to surprise you after the game—I went incognito. You would have been very proud of how stealthy I was.”

“Oh, so you weren’t wearing my jersey this time?” he asked.

Her eyes lit up as she nodded. “No, I totally was! A Montreal one, but still.” His smile wavered. “I do have your Bears jersey, of course,” she added quietly, “but again, I was trying to blend in. Easy to do if you’re wearing a blue and red jersey in the Bell Centre.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. How were you going to surprise me?”

“I messaged one of your team’s social media people,” she said proudly. “I was going to get an escort into the dressing room. You know, really show you off, impress your new teammates.” She plucked at his fingers. “How... how are your new teammates?”

He slumped into his pillow, his smile wide and real. “They’re wonderful,” Shane said, and saw tears appear in her eyes even as her smile grew. “Rose. It has been really, really wonderful. I, uh.” He shifted. “There’s something I never told you that maybe I should have.”

“Shane, obviously, you don’t have to tell me anything-”

“Of course,” he said quickly, “but I want to.” The leak had not been good press for Rose, either. Sure, anyone with a brain could tell that she was well-intentioned in the clip, but she was still involved in the incredibly high-profile outing of someone who was ostracized because of it. Some of the blowback had made its way to her, even though Shane had been very vocal and clear from the start that he didn’t hold anything against her. She was still a movie star and obviously still working (if it had impacted her professional career, she had kept it from Shane), but he knew that a lot of people had unfairly put the blame in her corner.

And he knew that Rose blamed herself.

He squeezed her hand. “Remember when I told you that I had been with guys before?” he murmured.

She nodded.

“It was really... really mostly one guy, in particular,” Shane said. “And he lives in Boston, as it happens.”

Her exclamation, “What?” came out breathy and soft with wonder as he eyes widened.

Shane laughed. “Yeah. Um. We’re together now. We weren’t, when we were dating, me and him, I mean, obviously. I wouldn’t have done that. But we figured things out after you helped me figure myself out. And the trade was just a fucking lucky coincidence, but the best coincidence in the world.”

“Oh my god, Shane.”

“We live together,” he said, voice growing tight with tears. “I love him so much. Thank you.”

“Oh,” she croaked. Tears rolled down her face and she raised a hand, stroking his cheek. “Don’t thank me. Don’t ever thank me.” She leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together. “But I’m so happy. I’m so happy for you. For you *both*.”

Shane smiled blissfully. “I’m happy, too.”

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The team visited him last.

“Rose Landry was in the waiting room,” Pummel said dreamily. He looked shell-shocked. He held his hand out to Shane. “She signed my palm.”

“Congratulations,” Shane said dryly.

“It’s fucking unfair,” Carmichael whined, jostling Varkov for space to lean on the windowsill. “You’re gay, and you still bagged Rose Landry? Come on, dude, what the hell?”

“I did not *bag*-”

“Leave him alone,” St. Simone interrupted, rolling his eyes. “He is literally in a hospital bed. Let his ex-girlfriend give him a little comfort.”

Shane groaned. He wished both his hands were free so he could cover his face. “We do not need to talk about Rose anymore, okay?”

“Ooh,” Aliue cooed. “They’re still on a first-name basis! Maybe there’s hope for you yet, Hollander!”

“I’m gay,” Shane said dryly.

(It occurred to him later that it was the first time he had ever said those words to the Bears. None of them reacted as if it was anything important, and Shane himself didn’t even realize it at the moment.)

“Gay *and* got Rose Landry,” Carmichael repeated. “Fuck.”

“We need to find you a girl, mon ami,” St. Simone said to him.

“You need to find a Rose Landry who's willing to date me!”

“That will definitely take longer.”

Ilya plonked himself down in the only armchair in the room. “Even Montreal hospitals suck,” he announced. “We need to get you transferred out of here.”

There was nothing wrong with the hospital. Shane rolled his eyes. “I’m not getting transferred anywhere, it’s just a broken collarbone.” He frowned. “I’ll be out for the next month, so I’m going to miss All-Stars, which sucks. Hopefully, I’ll be back by the end of the break.”

“Not bad timing, really,” Cliff said, knocking his knuckles against the base of the bed. “I mean, I’m sure your All-Stars team is going to miss you, but it saves you from a lot of bench time during the season.”

“Yeah,” Shane sighed. “There is that. What happened to Comeau?”

The guys immediately started laughing. Ilya closed his eyes, soaking up the sound reverently, like a god receiving worship. “He’s probably also here somewhere,” St. Simone said dryly, watching Ilya. “Concussion. Broken nose. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s missing a few teeth.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Roz broke his jaw,” Cliff huffed.

“How’s your hand?” Shane asked.

Ilya gave him a look of mock offense. “Hollander! You think I do not know how to punch without breaking my hand?” He showed off his fist, wiggling his fingers. The joints were clearly swollen, and it was badly bruised, and through the purple riot of color, Shane thought he saw a cut and wondered if it had come from the edge of Comeau’s teeth. “All good.”

“It’s definitely not all good,” Cliff scoffed. He looked back at Shane. “Word’s in. It was a game misconduct, so he’s suspended for the next game.”

“Gives me time to recover,” Ilya gloated, still wiggling his fingers.

“Fuck,” Shane said. “You’re down both of us?”

“Hey! We survived long before you showed up,” Varkov, who had played for the Bears for almost thirteen seasons, objected.

“Sure, but played well?” Ilya quipped. “No, not really.”

“Did the medics look at your hand at least?” Shane asked before a real argument could break out. “They actually cleared you? It isn’t just your own opinion that you’re fine?”

“X-rays and everything, Hollander,” Ilya drawled, but he still looked pleased with himself. “Worth it. Comeau is a piece of shit, and worse, he is terrible player.”

A nurse walked in after knocking briefly and immediately boggled at the amount of 6-foot athletes spilling across the room. Then she frowned and put her hands on her hips. “I’m sorry, but you cannot all be in here.” She seemed to eye their broad shoulders and thick necks. “It’s a fire hazard,” she said dryly.

Many of the guys laughed and a few apologized. Ilya raised his hands in deference but made no move to leave his chair.

“Hollzy, are you flying back with us?” Pummel asked as most of the team gathered their coats and whatever possessions they had flung across the room.

“No,” Shane said. “No point. I’m visiting the Pikes tonight, then I’ll probably go to my parents’ house or my cottage in Ontario for a few days before heading back.”

“Damn,” Aliue whistled. “Well, get better soon!”

“Real soon,” Varkov interjected, walking past the nurse, whose arms were folded. “We need you on the ice, brother!”

They filed out until only Cliff, St. Simone, and Ilya remained, by default and without any conversation, as Shane’s closest friends on the team.

Cliff gave the nurse his most charming grin. “Are we good?” he asked.

She huffed and didn’t answer as she walked over to Shane, running him through a few brief movements of his shoulder to make sure nothing had worsened overnight and asking him how his new medications felt. He answered honestly that his arm definitely hurt more (which made Ilya scowl), but that he preferred not being on the heavier dose, and she left with a nod.

“No roughhousing,” she said, pointing at Cliff.

“No, ma’am!” he agreed with his usual boisterous laugh.

The door shut.

“Capitaine,” St. Simone said almost immediately. (Shane looked up reflexively, so used to hearing the same French address from Boiziau, then looked away quickly. JJ had texted him the night before, checking up after the game, but he had not responded when Shane had mentioned when visiting hours were.) “It is past lunchtime, and I am starving! Since you are out of commission from the game, I think, maybe it is your turn to scrounge up something for us to eat!”

“Yeah,” Cliff said quickly. “I saw a row of vending machines in the lobby. Maybe they’ve got some Canadian specialties, you know?”

Ilya slowly raised an eyebrow. “You want me to get you Canadian snacks?”

“Hell yeah, I do.”

Ilya hummed but shook his head. “Hollander would never eat something out of a vending machine. It is not in his nature.”

“But you guys can eat,” Shane said quickly, knowing Cliff and St. Simone still had a game to play the next day and not wanting to guilt them. “I don’t mind, really.”

Cliff slapped a hand on his blanket near his knee. “You heard the man, Cap!” he said. “Get to it!”

Ilya gave them a look. He glanced at Shane. “Anything you will actually eat?”

Shane smiled and shook his head. “My parents are picking me up lunch from a local restaurant I like,” he promised. He paused. “Actually....”

“Yes?” Ilya asked eagerly, always excited when Shane expressed any interest in breaking his diet.

Fuck it, Shane thought. He was officially on injury reserve. “If they *have* them, I wouldn't say no to the Lay's Ketchup chips—but only the ketchup.”

“Ugh,” Cliff made a noise of disgust, his face scrunching up.

Ilya leapt out of his chair, pointing a finger at Cliff. “Shut the fuck up. You,” he said, redirecting his attention to Shane, “I will find you these, I swear it.”

“No, Ilya,” Shane laughed, “it doesn't—I don't *need* them-”

Ilya was already through the door, waving an uncaring hand over his shoulder. It closed behind him with a soft snick.

“So,” Cliff said immediately.

Shane was trying to readjust his sling so that it didn't pull on his neck as much. “Yeah?” he asked absently.

St. Simone coughed.

“So,” Cliff repeated. “You... and Rozy.”

Shane looked up.

Cliff immediately put his hands in the air. “Hey, man, listen, listen—you totally don't have to say anything if you don't want to, but, you know, me and Saint Vicky, we've just been noticing some things, and we wanted to reach out and be like, you know, we're here for you! For whatever you need, really!”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“We are friends now, aren't we, ‘Ollander?” St. Simone asked. He looked uncomfortable, but he met Shane's eyes with a half-smile, half-grimace. “So, all we are saying is anything you need, we can help you with. If there is anything, that is.”

“Because you don't have to tell us if you don't want to,” Cliff said quickly, nudging St. Simone with his elbow, “but, you know, if anything is making you uncomfortable-”

“Or just, eh, not respecting your, em, boundaries-”

“Because we know you're not so down with the whole touchy-feely locker room stuff, and we've been telling the guys to lay off, you know, especially off the ice-”

“But if someone, if anyone, was perhaps not being very good-”

“Not even just about that!” Cliff said loudly, glancing at the door. “But, you know, about anything.”

“Anything?” Shane asked hesitantly.

“*Some* of the guys,” he emphasized, “might have a weird sense of humor about stuff. About, you know, your stuff. Which we don’t! But some of the guys might be making jokes, and maybe not mean anything *bad*-”

“Just insensitive,” St. Simone said firmly, pronouncing it like a French word.

“Yeah, we thought, you know, *you should know*, if anyone’s making jokes that you don’t appreciate, and you don’t feel like you can speak up about it alone, we would totally have your back, brother,” he said, clasping Shane’s ankle over the blanket. He then immediately raised his hands. “Sorry! Whoops, sorry—we’re working on it, I promise.”

Shane wondered if his mouth was hanging open. He couldn’t quite tell.

“And,” St. Simone said slowly, picking his words carefully, “this too... it would apply if someone maybe had, em, like, a higher position than you? An imbalance?”

Shane blinked.

Cliff sighed and dropped his hands. “We’re talking about Ilya,” he said bluntly, abruptly. “I know he’s the captain and he’s been in Boston for a lot longer than you, but seriously, if he’s making you uncomfortable, let us know and we can, you know, talk to him. If you want that.”

Shane wondered what universe he was in. He wondered if the nurse had somehow quadrupled his dosage. He glanced at his heart monitor and was surprised to find it steady.

“Okay,” he said slowly, trying to reboot his brain to functioning order. “Wait. So... you think Ilya is... making me... uncomfortable?”

“I mean, not exactly,” Cliff said quickly. “We just, you know, we’ve sort of caught a vibe. He, uh, touches you a lot, and Roz is just like that with some people, but we know you aren’t like that, and so we just wanted to put it out there, like—*if* it ever made you uncomfortable, and you wanted someone to talk to Roz about it for you, or just back you up, then we could do that.”

“Or if there is anything,” St. Simone added seriously, nodding quickly. “Anything at all. It is, you know, it is complicated, I think? You are in a new city where you don’t have family, and I understand how that is lonely sometimes. And Rozy is your captain, so....”

Shane blinked. He licked his lips. He blinked again. “What does him being captain have to do with anything?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Cliff said. “I mean, maybe nothing. Is it nothing?” He gave Shane a hard look, his impressive eyebrows furrowed. “Vicky just meant that Rozanov is obviously—he

has seniority on the team and with the GMs and LeClaire, and obviously we love him, but that wouldn't ever affect whether we would, like... help you. With anything. If you needed it. Which maybe you don't! I don't fucking know!"

This speech seemed to have exhausted Marly, who was not often a man of many words.

Shane's head was spinning a little but not from the medication. "I'm sorry, are you asking if Rozanov—if Ilya is... taking advantage of me?"

"Not in a bad way!" St. Simone said quickly. "Not ever on purpose! But you are, I think, in a much... eh, what is fucking English word? *Précaire*—precarious position, yes! And so it is important that you know," he gestured between himself and Cliff, "that you have friends. If you need us."

"Ilya's your captain," Cliff said. "He's lived here a lot longer than you, and he knows a lot more people in the city." He shifted in his chair, expression shifting to an apologetic grimace. "And you're, like... *out*, and with the way it happened—which was so fucked up, dude, I'm sure I've said it before, but yeah—it just seems like... man, I don't know!"

He shook his head hard, eyebrows lowering. He glowered at the window for a long moment before he turned back toward Shane, leaning forward. "I know you were down, but did you see Roz's face when he was laying into Comeau?" Cliff slowly shook his head, as if in disbelief. "I've seen Rozy in plenty of fights, but that was *different*, man. It was different in an intense way. So, I guess, all that to say—you don't have to tell us anything, but if that *intensity* ever made you uncomfortable... I don't know." He sighed. He admitted, "Maybe we're a little concerned. It seems like it happened pretty quickly, is all."

"Quickly," Shane echoed dully. "*Quickly*."

"You've only been in Boston for six months," Cliff said, obviously trying to gentle his tone and expression, which made him look slightly constipated. "And because of your history, and because you bought his old apartment, it seems like maybe he was the first person you really knew in Boston. Honestly, dude, we just want to clear the air and make sure that you know we've got your back, whatever is going on. That's it, really. And if we're way off base, then tell us. We'll shut the fuck up. But we don't want to ice you out or ignore you because you're gay or some stupid shit like that." He closed his hand into a fist and rested it against his heart. "We're here for you," he said earnestly.

Ilya chose that auspicious moment to kick the door open, his arms full of Coffee Crisps, Canadian Smarties, Caramilks, Cheezies, and, of course, Ketchup Lay's.

Shane burst into laughter. Ilya dropped half the candy bars on the floor in surprise, which made Shane laugh even harder, even though it made his chest hurt and sent sharp pangs through his allegedly medicated shoulder.

"What did you do to him?" Ilya demanded furiously as he slammed the door shut, hastily abandoning the rest of the snacks on the foot of Shane's bed as he rounded the side and tried to hold him down by his good shoulder.

“They think,” Shane gasped between breathless bouts of laughter, “they think that all your *very obvious flirting and extremely touchy nonsense* are making me uncomfortable in the locker room! And, and that we’re moving *too quickly* because you’re my captain!”

“What?” Ilya demanded, rearing back. “Huh?”

“Hey, man,” Cliff said gruffly, offended. “We’re just trying to help!”

“We were not making fun of you, Rozy,” St. Simone said, also sounding a little put out. Shane couldn’t stop snickering and hadn’t quite caught his breath yet. “Or speculating about anything, either! We just wanted ‘Ollander to know he could speak with us about anything!”

“Anything,” Ilya repeated. He turned his incredulous look back to Shane and repeated, “What the fuck?”

“I told you,” Shane said through a cheesy grin. “You are so obvious.”

Cliff and St. Simone were looking between the two of them like they were trying to track a puck between the blades of six sprinting players.

“I am not obvious,” Ilya objected.

“So obvious,” Shane said. “I think Cliff thinks you’re in love with me,” he said. “He thinks it’s unrequited.” He pouted.

Ilya blinked. “What is ‘unrequited’?”

“Unreturned. You like me, but I don’t like you back.”

“Dude,” Cliff said, shaking his head in exasperation, “you are absolutely shattering the bro-code right now.”

“I’m on drugs,” Shane defended himself.

“Unrequited?” Ilya squawked, finally processing. “Unrequited, Ilya Rozanov? Who doesn’t love me?”

Cliff and St. Simone both raised their eyebrows and glanced at Shane in unison.

Shane’s face hurt from how hard he was smiling.

He held his good hand in the air, flexing his fingers. Ilya took it instinctively, without even thinking.

Shane cocked his head, smile shrinking just slightly as humor turned to fondness. He thought of that morning he had spent hiding out in their bedroom while Ilya stewed in the living room, not able to enjoy time with some of his closest friends because he was so burdened by the weight of the secret he was (poorly) keeping. He thought of the morning with Hayden, Jackie, Svetlana, and the kids, all of them enjoying a day together with no obstacles in their

way. He thought about Ilya at dinner with his parents, and his confession, *"I am learning that I don't want to be in the closet for forever. I like being outside of it."*

He tilted his face up toward Ilya, like a flower finding its way to sunlight.

Ilya looked at him closely, tilting his own head slightly, silently asking, *Are you sure? Are you really sure?*

Shane nodded.

Ilya kissed him.

(They had always been better at showing their love with actions rather than with words.)

"Shit, well," Cliff said loudly a few long moments later. "Not unrequited then." He coughed, clearly signaling that they should break it up.

"Apparently, they do not know the meaning of the word," St. Simone sighed.

"And," Shane said when Ilya pulled back, speaking for them because Ilya was just staring down at him with a star-struck look on his face, "not too fast. We've been together for," he squeezed Ilya's hand, "a while. Since before the move to Boston."

St. Simone's eyes widened. "What, really? During the rivalry?"

"Yes."

"How long is 'a while'?" Cliff asked suspiciously.

Ilya raised his free hand and brushed Shane's hair back. "Long time," he said unhelpfully.

"How long is a long time?" St. Simone asked.

"It depends," Shane hedged.

"Depends on what?"

"How you classify a relationship."

"How do *you* classify a relationship?" St. Simone asked.

"None of your business," Ilya snapped without looking away from Shane.

Shane put them out of their misery. "It's been a long time, but we've only been serious since right before the leak happened," he said. "About a year. Last year's All-Star game, really."

"Yes," Ilya agreed quietly. "Almost a year."

"Wow," Cliff said. "That's fucking rough timing."

"Best timing in the world, actually," Shane said softly. "He was with me through it all."

“Aw,” St. Simone cooed.

“Uh, and before that, it wasn’t like, exclusive, right?” Cliff asked, glancing sidelong at Ilya.
“He wasn’t cheating on you?”

“No,” Shane said. “It took us a while to figure things out. You can imagine why.”

“Okay,” St. Simone repeated, “but seriously then—how long?”

“Keep guessing. You will get there eventually,” Ilya said dryly, and he kissed Shane again.

Chapter End Notes

CW: the f-slur is used once (fuck Montreal) and on-ice injuries result in broken bones and descriptions of blood.

AHHH it's been awesome seeing all the comments like "I know that the other guys have clocked them." You were right, of course! Ilya got clocked hard (not that he ever tried that hard.) I know I said this fic would not be based on tlg, but that last scene is basically an inversion of the scene where JJ is like "It's okay that you have an unrequited crush on Rozanov, I'll help you get over it" lmao.

I even have injury reference now, lol, i have literally seen multiple tiktok edits of Will Smith getting injured by the Bruins (Edit: actually, it was the Penguins, forgive me, they have exactly the same team colors lmao) and Celebrini coming in swinging so this is very loosely inspired by that. Shane's final goal in the game is also straight up ripped off from Sidney Crosby (I finally gave him a Sidney Crosby goal!) Thanks for reading!

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Alternate Chapter Title: Shane Has Four or Five Emotionally Fulfilling Conversations and Finally Accepts that Everything is Going to be Alright

(don't worry too much about any medical inaccuracies because i sure didn't)

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

“That’s stupid,” Shane said loudly, glaring at the television. “I can’t fucking believe he just did that.”

“Boo,” Svetlana agreed. “Some of these pricks, they don’t take the competitions seriously. Do they not care that so many of their fans look forward to this all year? It is a terrible attitude.”

“Exactly,” Shane said. “Also, like, isn’t it embarrassing for them to play so sloppily? They’re literally there to be All-Stars; they should want to prove themselves.”

“Instead, they fuck around like children at a carnival!” Svetlana agreed, nodding fervently. “You would do much better if you could play. You and Ilya always knew how to give the fans what they wanted: play hard, show off, make it *feel* like you are watching superstars.”

“Maybe the actual tournament will be better,” Shane said glumly.

He wished he was at All-Stars. Just a month ago, he had been stressed over the idea that he might not even make it to the games: each team in the league only received one guaranteed spot on the roster, and in Boston, Shane knew that would always mean Ilya. He was their captain, and he had played for the Bears for his entire career. Shane’s only chance of getting into the game had been through fan voting, and he had not known how that would go.

But he had made it in. Shane Hollander was either still good enough to play for All-Stars, or at least he was popular enough. Notorious, even. Whatever the cause, the ballots were counted, and he should have been joining his boyfriend in Florida. He had even thought about planning something romantic to mark the (more or less) one-year anniversary of their relationship, as undefined as it still was at the time. To Shane, though, Florida would always feel like a beginning. One of many.

He had stressed about not getting in, and then felt relief to know that people still cared enough to vote for him, and both emotions were for nothing, because fucking Comeau broke his collarbone. So Shane was sitting on the couch in Svetlana’s beautiful, Spartan apartment, eating popcorn without butter or salt, and feeling sorry for himself.

“Kto vash lyubimyy igrok?” Svetlana asked abruptly. Shane took a moment to struggle through the translation before he understood the general idea: *Who is your favorite player?*

Svetlana had agreed to practice with him, but Shane was still embarrassed by how shoddy his Russian was. “*My favorite player is... me?*”

“Ya sam,” she corrected without commenting on his butchered accent. ““Myself.””

“Ya sam,” Shane said, nodding. “*And my twice favorite-*”

“Nyet—*'my second favorite...'*”

“*My second favorite player is,*” he smiled, “Hayden Pike.”

She laughed. “You have terrible taste.”

“Nyet. I do not.”

She hummed. “The children are cute,” she said, then wrinkled her nose. “As long as they are five feet away from me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The commercial break ended. Shane was rifling through his popcorn bowl, trying to decide if he had any interest in finishing it, when Svetlana sat upright. “Oh, look!” she cooed. “How sweet! Did you know they would do this?”

Shane glanced up. During the break from the skills competition, someone decided to throw together a highlight reel of himself. Shane immediately felt his face turn red. “No, of course not!” he sputtered. “I would have told them not to!”

The announcer was talking about Shane’s injury, which had abruptly dropped him from the All-Star game after he had been the number one pick in the fan ballots. On screen, they played the clip of him hoisting the Stanley Cup (the first time) and then another of his first hat trick, then a clip from a game in 2015 where he had scored five goals.

Svetlana was cackling. “God, this is much better!” she announced. “Finally, some good hockey! These presenters know what the people want.”

“Shut up,” Shane grumbled. He could already imagine the ribbing he was going to get from his teammates when he went over to Cliff’s to watch the actual All-Star tournament with the team tomorrow.

A clip of him at his first All-Star game played in full while the narrator talked about current record holders and the day Ilya had beaten Scott Hunter in the shot-accuracy competition, and then Shane summarily shaved a second off his record.

The footage changed.

Shane recognized the game. It was from last season's playoffs, the third game of the conference semifinals: one of the last games he would ever play with the Voyageurs instead of against them. Shane had played well, despite getting boarded early in the first period when his defensemen had left him wide open on the ice. Shane watched the footage of the game silently, quick cuts between the three goals he had scored and the assist he had given Hayden.

He barely recognized himself. He had watched tape of his own games dozens or hundreds of times over his career, studying himself to map out all the ways he could still improve, could still be better. But he avoided these games.

There wasn't anything to learn from them. Shane did not want to play as he had been playing for those last few months with the Voyageurs. It was too sharp, too mechanical. His team had not helped him, but Shane had hogged the puck with single-minded determination, leaving himself open to countless attacks. He had won face-offs at the cost of more effective plays, and it hadn't mattered in the end, because his accuracy had been so sharp, despite being hollow. Uninspiring.

Each clip cut before showing how his teammates had barely celebrated his goals, but Shane remembered that too, even though most of the games were distant, foggy blurs in his memory. He had not really been present for them, and he had not played like himself. He had played like—well, plenty of people had told him how he played:

Machine. Robot. Monster. Beast.

His eyes, always dark, went flat. Metaphorically, it was almost as if they stopped reflecting the light. He won face-offs without twitching, got the puck, skated like he had never been sore or bruised or tired, and scored. He did it over and over. There was no joy in his face. All the celebrations with his team were half-hearted at best, and nonexistent at other times; some games, it was just Hayden and Boiziau skating up, clapping him on the shoulder while the rest of the Voyageurs turned tail and headed to the bench or back to center ice.

Either way, Shane hardly reacted. He wondered if it was obvious to other people—Shane knew that commentators and fans alike had noticed how differently he played, how mechanically perfect but uninspired and flat, not like his usual style at all. But did they notice how deep his unsmiling expression went? He hadn't been on social media at all those days. Were people tweeting about how he looked soulless?

Dead inside?

"Ilya does it too, sometimes."

Shane glanced at her. She was still eating her popcorn, one kernel at a time, as the skills competition finally resumed. "Does what?"

She wasn't smiling anymore. "The fade-out. Disassociation, I think, is the word in English."

Shane bit his tongue. "Dissociation," he said slowly.

“Yes.” She gestured casually at the screen. “He gets the same expression on his face as you have on yours. A sort of... out-of-body experience, I think, as he once described it.”

“On the ice?” Shane asked, wondering how he had ever missed this. “During hockey?”

“No.” She finally looked at him, gaze solemn. “Never during hockey. Hockey is always his escape. He never needs to escape from it.” She tilted her head. “But in Russia, usually. With his father, and his brother, sometimes.”

“Oh.”

“He probably has never done it around you,” she said softly, but Shane wondered if that was true. “I saw it in you last season, and I recognized what was happening because I knew it from Ilyusha. Too much pressure, too much negative—you check out.”

Shane hesitated a moment, then nodded. There was no point in denying it, not when the evidence had just been broadcast on the screen in front of them, and when Svetlana clearly knew what she was talking about. Shane had always known that he was prone to those bouts of dissociation on the ice when under extreme stress, but it had never happened with such an alarming frequency before last season.

It hadn’t happened to him since the start of the current season. Ilya had noticed it during the preseason games, though. He had told Shane he didn’t want to play with a robot. He had kept him present on the ice until Shane finally remembered how to occupy his own body. His own mind.

“He-” Shane cleared his throat. “It happens to him, too?” He tried to think. He remembered times when Ilya had gone quiet. Unfocused. But it had never been for long, and he had always snapped back to himself quickly whenever Shane focused his attention on him.

But maybe Shane should have understood the flatness in his eyes. He should have recognized it, like looking in a mirror.

His shoulder hurt, but he knew it was just a phantom pain.

Svetlana shrugged. “It is not your fault. But it is something you can understand. So, maybe, that means you can help him, alright?”

Slowly, Shane nodded. “I’m gonna try,” he said, making eye contact with her so she knew how serious he was. “I promise. I’m going to try.”

She smiled. “Good. Ilya deserves someone who will.” She took his hand. “So do you.”

On the television, Ilya won the fastest skater competition. They both cheered even though, of course, he could not hear them.

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“So, how is it on injury reserve, Mr. Hollander? Are you sitting pretty? Feeling very pampered?”

Shane rolled his eyes, struggling to fold laundry one-handed. He was in the middle of the chore when Ilya called early the morning of the tournament. “Who, exactly, is supposed to be pampering me? Svetlana?”

He and Ilya both snorted at the idea. “Yuna has not disobeyed your wishes, then? Come down to coddle you in my terrible absence?”

“No, I managed to hold her off,” Shane said, not admitting how hard that had been. During Ilya’s brief suspension, they had impulsively traveled to the cottage after staying the night with the Pikes, to the delight of his godchildren. It had been a wonderful way to spend a few days, wrapped around Ilya as he weathered the worst of the medications and swelling. His parents had supplied all their food and had been delightfully overbearing, but when it was time for them to return to Boston, Shane had been firm. He could handle a few days alone. “God, I can’t believe I finally have some time off, and I’m going to be injured for all of it.”

“Time off is an illusion,” Ilya said confidently. Shane smiled. He tried to picture where Ilya was and imagined him slumped over a hotel bed (he pictured the same exact bedroom where Shane had finally admitted to Ilya that he was gay, and where Ilya finally opened up about his family, despite the improbability of that being true). Ilya would be sitting up against the headboard, an arm thrown over his eyes, focused entirely on the phone held in his hand. “Is the season, Hollander. There is no such thing as real time off.”

“And here I thought I was working a nine-to-five.”

“More proof that you are stupid as well as boring.”

“Hey! That’s no way to talk to your boyfriend,” Shane objected, but even he could hear the giddiness in his voice when he said the word.

“Well, boyfriend,” Ilya teased, “since I must now prove that I am not uncaring partner—how is your shoulder? Feeling better?”

“Much better,” Shane said. “The trainers say I’m still on their proposed timeline, so I won’t be missing more than one or two games when we get back.” He huffed. “Which is a relief, because I’m still pissed about missing the All-Star games *and* the Olympics.”

“You would not have been at the Olympics anyway,” Ilya said factually, and Shane huffed again. The NHL commission had decided, to the outrage of many players and fans alike, that they would not allow players in the league to join their national teams in PyeongChang. They had even scheduled the All-Star game and the league’s bye week earlier in the year so that players would be unable to attend the Olympics without missing team games.

Shane was not the only one who was pissed. He had desperately wanted to win a gold medal for Canada, and he said as much to Ilya, ranting over the phone. “I still can’t believe that I let Scott Hunter beat me, you know? It’s literally been a dream of mine since I was a kid, and I thought I’d get at least two or three more chances. I don’t want to wait another four years, and even that’s still only if the league or the IOC or whatever changes their minds.”

“Even if they change their minds for next time,” Ilya said, “I don’t think I will ever play for Russia again, you know?”

“Oh,” Shane said. He had been clumsily trying to fold a shirt by holding it to his chest with his chin, but he dropped it. It fluttered to the ground. “Ilya, I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I understand. I have been thinking about it a long time. I don’t even know that I would *want* to play for Russia. My father, he was always talking about Russian prizes and American prizes, but he never cared about *my* prizes. I was always failing Russia, but Russia was never winning for me. Why would I want to give Russia medals? I don’t.” Shane listened to his breath and each minute rise and fall of his voice. “I don’t think I do. I feel like, yes, there are places there and people and family who I do not want to leave, but I am so tired of thinking about Russia. I only hear bad news now. I don’t want to go back, or I don’t think I do, but it is hard to tell.”

“Maybe we could plan a trip or something,” Shane suggested. “Maybe just a short one, this summer? You could show me around. All your favorite places. Maybe... it would help. Give you some... I don’t know, closure?” Except Shane couldn’t go to Russia, he remembered, staring at the crumpled shirt on the ground. He would need to rewash it. How many countries were unsafe for him to travel to now?

“I don’t know,” Ilya repeated, weary, and Shane couldn’t tell if the same thought had occurred to him. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“We have time to decide.”

“Yes, we do.” Ilya sighed. “I will think about it. Thank you for saying so.”

“Of course, Ilya.”

“Is just-” He cut himself off. Shane could imagine him shaking his head in annoyance and wished again that he was learning Russian just a little faster, but even after a weekend practicing regularly with Svetlana, he knew he would not be able to hold a conversation this emotionally intense. “Is just—I wish that there were only good things, or only bad things, and that it was easy. If Moscow only belonged to my father, good, it could burn to the ground and I would not blink, not anymore. But Moscow belongs also to a brother I loved once, you know? To my niece and her mother. It belonged to *my* mother. It belonged to *me*, so why can’t I have it? Why don’t I get that?”

“I don’t know, Ilya. I don’t think we’ll ever know.”

Shane closed his eyes. He listened to the silence over the line and heard the slight intake of breath before Ilya started speaking again. “My mother was a figure skater,” he said very quietly. “She was very good, but she never went professional. She had babies very young, you know? And my father would not have let her continue after. But she was so beautiful, so powerful when she was skating. I have so many memories of her sad, but on the ice, you could not tell. My earliest memories of her, we are both on the ice.” A quick breath, the prelude to tears. “She’s holding my hand.”

“She must have known,” Shane said quietly, “how great you were going to be. I bet it was obvious, even then.”

Ilya sniffled. “Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t know. There aren’t many videos of her skating, none good quality. I wish there were.”

Shane thought about hiring someone to dig through archives looking for footage of Irina Rozanova on the ice, but he knew that Ilya must have already done that. There just wasn’t anything to find, probably, not from a non-professional woman skater in the Soviet Union in the eighties. Just a void, a blank space on the narrative of history that could not be colored in. “But you remember her?” Shane asked. “You remember her skating?”

“Yes.”

“That’s what matters the most. I didn’t know her, but I think she would have wanted that more.”

“She was so beautiful,” Ilya said again, his voice breaking.

(Shane hated Comeau then. He hadn’t hated him before. For all his fury and resentment and bitterness, he had not actually felt hatred toward anyone from the Voyageurs’ entire franchise until that moment, when Ilya started to cry in Florida, and Shane was stuck in Boston with a broken collarbone.)

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Shane had never been to Cliff’s house without Ilya. It felt a little surreal.

Shane had never really hung out with any of the Bears without Ilya, actually. Maybe, in a way, he had always felt like he was tagging on, a toddler holding onto his father’s coattails, too nervous to speak to strangers unless prodded.

Cliff had told the group chat that he left the front door unlocked (something Shane was appalled by), and Shane had to stand on the porch, clutching a bottle of wine for support as he worked up his nerve, before he walked in without knocking or ringing the doorbell.

He glanced at the front staircase. He blushed.

“Hello?” he called. He was terribly late, because Ilya had informed him over text that it would have been insane to show up precisely on time. Shane could hear noise and voices from deeper in the house.

“Hollzy!” The rookies spilled out from the dining room, looking hyped up and happy, visibly re-energized from their weeks off. “Hollzy’s here!” they hooted.

A chorus of cheers echoed from the kitchen, and everything abruptly felt familiar again. They would eat lunch, watch whatever ESPN was broadcasting, and wait for the All-Stars tournament to begin so they could chirp their captain from half a continent away. This was just a team hangout, a bonding experience for the Bears, the staff, and their families. It wasn’t any different from a hangout at Hayden’s house.

Shane leveled a glare at the rook. “You’re nineteen,” he said blandly, nodding to the beer in his hand.

“And you’re Canadian!” Sidney chirped. “It’s legal in your country, isn’t it? Let me live, Grandpa!”

Shane couldn’t help his smile. He rolled his eyes and the rookies cheered and raced out of the room, probably to avoid further nagging.

Shane wandered through the familiar hallways of Cliff’s house. The back of the house contained the main living area, a huge converted kitchen and entertainment room that stretched across half the first floor. It was crowded with people, some lounging on the sofas watching a college football game, others lingering by the stove as Cliff continuously dolled out heaping plates of eggs and bacon.

“Pulled pork on the grill!” Cliff told Shane as he wandered in. “It’ll be another hour, but then it’s fucking sandwiches all day, baby! In time for the tourney, too.”

“Hi, Shane!” Amanda said happily. She had probably had a few drinks already if Shane had to guess, and she was draped over St. Simone’s broad shoulders, about to slip off her stool. She waved at him. “I missed you!”

“Hands off my girl, ‘Ollander,” St. Simone said with a wink.

Shane rolled his eyes. The guys laughed.

(This is normal, Shane reminded himself. His shoulders relaxed another fraction.)

“Saw your highlight reel yesterday, Shane!” Benji called. “Sheesh! I almost fucking forgot about that breakaway in the second game against Toronto—that was fucking wicked, bro. Are you bringing that energy to our playoff run this year?”

“No jinxes!” called Pummel, who was certainly the most superstitious player on the team.

Most of the other players just laughed at him.

“Maybe,” Shane said, setting the bottle of wine sheepishly on the counter. “I mean, I won’t be playing center, so... probably not exactly the same. But I haven’t gotten slower or anything.”

They laughed as if he had told a joke, and Shane shrugged, happy to play along.

“Sit, sit,” St. Simone said. He swung Amanda off her stool and planted her in his lap. She rolled her eyes and stood up between his legs, leaning back against his chest. “Ah, well, had to try,” St. Simone said happily. He kicked out the stool. “Sit!”

Shane sat.

St. Simone leaned in. “How is Rozy doing?” he asked. “Feeling good after his wins? Best skater, right?”

“Rozanov always feels good after winning anything,” Shane said, then, feeling more confident, “and he knows he’s lucky that I’m not there this year.”

“Ooh!” St. Simone crowed. “I know that is right!”

“I’m telling Rozy you said that,” Cliff said immediately. “Eggs? Omelette? There’s beer and seltzer in the fridge, and the WAGs have a few bottles of wine floating around.”

“Not just the WAGs,” Aliue said, shaking an alarmingly full glass of rosé at Shane. “This is all I drink during the season.”

“We know,” several of the Bears deadpanned in unison.

(Shane’s shoulders relaxed the rest of the way.)

Shane drifted around, making conversation. He watched a few minutes of the game with Varkov and Carmichael, but he actually couldn’t stand football (all the starting and stopping drove him crazy). He cooed over pictures of Benji Jr. and offered to send his wife Jackie’s contact info if she needed any advice. He graciously accepted some joking complaints about the loss the team had suffered when Shane had been injured and Ilya was suspended. He smiled, he laughed, he cracked a seltzer and he missed Ilya, but he felt normal. Comfortable.

After a while, though, Shane, feeling a little claustrophobic despite the friendly, affectionate gathering, meandered outside under the guise of checking out the food Cliff had set up to slow-cook on the grill. A few of the team’s children were playing in the yard under the observation of some scattered groups of parents. Shane felt awkward standing around in his sling. He wished Ilya were there.

“Hollander! How are you?”

He turned, an automatic smile affixing to his face as LeClaire approached. “Good, good. Disappointed to be missing out on All-Stars, of course.”

“Yeah, I bet. It’s always a wonder to watch you in the tournaments. I’m sure you’re not the only person disappointed tonight,” LeClaire said happily. (Another difference between the Bears and the Voyageurs that had startled Shane in the beginning: Theriault was tolerated and accepted as an efficient coach, but he wasn’t very well-liked. He certainly wouldn’t have been invited to any team events outside of the arena, not even casual ones during the day. Even if he had been, Shane doubted he would have accepted. If there weren’t cameras rolling and hockey wasn’t the only subject of conversation, Theriault made himself scarce.)

“Yeah, my parents, for one. They both always enjoy watching. My mom is always saying she wishes they played standard games, though.”

LeClaire laughed. “You know, I’ve met your mother, and I believe that.” He took a sip of a nonalcoholic beer and nodded at Shane’s sling. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Good. Still on track. Hoping to get cleared for exercise soon.”

“How’s your season been?” he asked, then held up a hand to forestall Shane’s answer. “Not points, not games, not statistics. A lot has changed for you, and I haven’t checked up in a minute. How are you?”

Shane paused. “I’m... good.”

LeClaire gestured for him to continue.

“I...” Shane glanced around, but they were in an isolated corner of the patio and most of the guys were inside. “Honestly? There were... reasons I was happy about coming to Boston, and... by the end of last season I definitely needed to get out of Montreal.” LeClaire nodded sympathetically, mouth tight, but didn’t interrupt. “But I didn’t think the team would be a good fit. I didn’t think the city would be a good fit.” Shane hoped he didn’t sound like a high schooler as he admitted, “I definitely didn’t think I would fit in with the guys.”

“And do you? Off the ice, do you have a good dynamic? I know you’re pretty close with Rozanov, is that right? And Marly and Saint Vick?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. He smiled. “Yeah. And, honestly, all the guys. It’s been-” He shook his head, glancing out across Cliff’s backyard, and wished that he was doing a better job at articulating himself. “You know, I just never really thought this would go so well.”

“I could tell you were worried during preseason,” LeClaire said, nodding slowly. “And growing pains are normal, I think. Normal, but temporary. You’re happy in Boston?”

Images of new barstools at the counter and two toothbrushes in two homes flickered through Shane’s memory. The view from Ilya’s bedroom window and the Boston skyline from the living room of the apartment. “I’m very happy.”

“Good, good.” LeClaire smiled. “You meet anyone special yet?”

Shane hesitated.

“You don’t have to answer, of course,” LeClaire said calmly, “but if you want to talk, you can. I attended most of these guys’ weddings, you know. It’s not a bridge too far to talk about our personal lives.”

“Oh, well, I’m definitely not there yet,” Shane spluttered, but unbidden, he pictured Ilya in a tux, his curls casually styled, smiling at Shane with his hands in his front pockets on the lawn of the cottage.

He was definitely blushing. LeClaire laughed. “Maybe not yet,” he said, “but I recognize that look, Shane.” He winked. “I’ve been married for thirty years. If you ever need advice, you know where my office is. And if you ever feel like sharing anything about him with the public, we’ll have your back. Give the media team a heads up, and they’ll help with whatever you need—drafting captions, arranging photoshoots, whatever. They’re there to help.”

Shane wondered if LeClaire would say that if he knew that Shane was thinking about marrying a fellow member of his team.

Then, carefully, Shane pushed the thought away. Yes, he thought. LeClaire probably would say the same thing if he knew Shane was in love with Ilya.

He extended his hand, a complicated feeling in his chest that felt good despite its unfamiliarity. "Thank you, Coach. Thank you."

LeClaire took his hand and gave it a firm shake. "I'm glad we got you, Shane," he said. "You know, back in the day, your draft? The owners pushed hard for Rozanov. And he was a great pick for the Bears, absolutely no doubt, but I was the loudest voice in the room saying, 'Don't write Hollander off. That kid's got more tenacity in him than anyone is giving him credit for.' Ah, well. Glad to see we ended up with the best of both worlds, huh?" He winked. "Rozanov and Hollander on the first line. What a time to be alive!"

Shane could only agree.

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Shane opened the front door when Ilya was halfway down the path. Ilya burst into a smile and dropped his bag, and Shane ran to meet him.

Strong arms went around his waist, and his hands, freed from his sling for the moment, cradled Ilya's head. "We have got to stop meeting like this," Shane said, smiling against Ilya's mouth.

They kept their faces pressed together, barely even kissing, just noses poking into cheeks and lips moving against each other as they spoke. "Ah, no, I don't think so. This is the best welcome home I could imagine."

"It's not better than the one you gave me," Shane said, dropping his arms lower until they were both holding each other as if they were slow dancing. "Sorry, Mr. Rozanov, but I don't have a key to give you."

"Oh, Mr. Hollander, you have not bought me a fancy car to celebrate my incredible performance in All-Star game?"

"I'd buy you a Jeep," Shane said, biting his lip. "Something practical. Good in the snow, and on these fucking Boston potholes. Maybe a hatchback."

Ilya made a noise of unexaggerated disgust. "I won. I think I deserve more."

Shane hummed, pretending to think it over. "No," he finally said. "You did better last year."

"Last year," Ilya said, tightening his grip and tensing his arm muscles so that Shane felt the squeeze from his ribs to the small of his back, "I was playing with you. Is unfair advantage. Now I am so used to having a psychic left wing, difficult to play without. They are all so fucking slow."

"I thought I was slow."

"They are slower."

“I missed you,” Shane said. It was mid-afternoon and it was cold, but Ilya was warm. “God, I missed you.”

“Show me how much, okay?” Ilya said, then quickly picked Shane up, one arm propped beneath his ass.

“Ilya!” Shane squealed, too loud for being outside, but he couldn’t make himself care. “Ilya, your bags!”

“Fuck the bags,” Ilya said, “I want to fuck you.”

He got as far as the entryway and then wobbled horrendously when he tried to slip his sneakers off. “Oh my god, put me down before you crack my skull open,” Shane ordered, straining against him.

“Mr. Hollander, I would never!” Ilya objected, but he let Shane hop down. “Is because of your stupid shoe rule. I would have made it otherwise.”

“Stupid?” Shane asked, taking a step back so that Ilya would get the full picture when he raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms.

“Not stupid,” Ilya quickly corrected. “Completely logical. Makes perfect sense. I was just in an airport, people behave fucking terribly in airports. Cannot be getting their awful germs all over my lovely hu-” He cut off, something surprised in his expression, then shook his head. “Sorry, into my lovely home.”

“What?” Shane asked, confused.

“Was nothing,” Ilya said, gesturing with spread fingers at his head. “Russian. Interference.”

“Big word,” Shane said, taking a slow step back.

Ilya matched him. “Well, I am big guy, so it suits me.”

“*Big guy*, oh my god, you’re so stupid-”

Ilya lunged.

Shane dodged and ran into the house, laughter following him.

“Mr. Hollander!” Ilya yelled, chasing him around the counter. “I still think you owe me a reward!”

“I don’t owe you anything!” Shane shouted. Ducking and weaving until they were on either side of the island, Ilya in front of the fridge and the stove, Shane held on to the backs of the stools as if he could use them for cover. “If you want something, Mr. Rozanov,” he purred, craning his neck slightly, “you’ll have to come and get it.”

Ilya planted both hands on the counter and leapt straight over it, feet landing hard on the floor next to Shane, who was so shocked that he didn’t dodge when Ilya grabbed him around the

waist and growled in his ear, “Maybe make it harder next time.”

“Okay,” Shane agreed numbly.

Ilya laughed and swept him into his arms again, this time in a bridal carry. “How is arm, collarbone?” he asked as he plonked his way into the living room. “Why are you not wearing sling?”

“I don’t have to wear it all day anymore,” Shane said. “I got more X-rays this morning. The bone is mended, so I just can’t do any strenuous lifting for another week or two, until the team medics clear me.”

Ilya hummed. He dropped Shane unceremoniously onto his enormous sectional, careful of his arm and torso, and crawled over him, pinning him into the cushions with over two hundred pounds of pure muscle. “Maybe I can do strenuous stuff for you, hum?” he asked.

Shane nodded. “Yes, please.”

“Such a good boy.”

Shane gasped.

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“I’ve been thinking,” Shane said later, both of them cuddled close on the couch, a documentary about a mountain climber playing on the massive television.

“Uh oh,” Ilya muttered.

“Shut up,” Shane said. “I was talking to my mom-”

Ilya snorted. “Uh oh.”

“*Shut up*. Listen, okay? Just listen.”

Ilya put his hand on his face and brushed Shane’s lip with his thumb. “I am always listening, I thought I told you this.”

Shane immediately felt flustered even though they had just gotten off (twice), but he tried to push past the feeling. “Okay. Okay, so, basically—I was talking to my mom about, like, charity initiatives in the NHL and the work Scott Hunter has been doing and, you know, what you and I talked about too, I guess. And I was thinking maybe it’s a good time in my career to start something like that.”

“A charity?” Ilya asked, blinking.

“Yeah. Like a hockey camp or something, something we could run over the summer in Ottawa.”

Ilya tilted his head. “We?”

“Oh.” Shane smiled, chagrined. “Yeah, sorry, I sort of skipped over that part. I think we should do it together.”

“Together?” Ilya repeated. “In Ottawa?”

“Yeah. It’ll give you a reason to be in Ottawa during the summer, if anyone is wondering, and then we can, you know... we can still be together and not worry so much about getting spotted or people asking questions. And I think it would be a good thing. I think we could do a lot of good.”

“And this is charity camp, like for kids who cannot afford?”

“Um, I mean, maybe, if that’s what you’re into? We could definitely do that, we all know there’s such a high cost to get started in the sport. But... I was thinking more like, we run the camps and then give the money away? Maybe to mental health organizations?” He found Ilya’s other hand and rubbed his fingers between his knuckles. “Suicide prevention initiatives. That kind of thing.”

“Oh,” Ilya said.

Shane took a deep breath. “Because, you know, I think—I think that’s something both of us could really be passionate about,” he confessed, looking at Ilya through his eyelashes.

“We’ve... been through a lot. We’re still going through a lot. I think... anxiety and depression... dissociation,” he glanced away and then back at Ilya, who was watching him closely. “That’s stuff we both understand.”

“Yes,” Ilya said. He stroked his thumb over Shane’s cheek again. “And my mother, too.”

“And your mom,” Shane agreed quietly. “We could do it for her. I was even thinking we could name it after her. Maybe—maybe find some figure skaters to teach one of the camps?”

“We could do it for her,” Ilya repeated. “We could do it for ourselves.”

“Yeah,” Shane breathed. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Ilya kissed him. Shane melted beneath him. “I love you,” Ilya croaked, voice thick.

“Oh, baby, come here,” Shane said, touching Ilya’s face so he could feel his tears.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Ilya said. “I want to do it. Yes. I have no notes.”

“Okay, okay, great! Well, I’ll tell my mom, and she can start getting the paperwork-”

Ilya buried his face in the crook of Shane’s neck and snickered.

Shane smacked his shoulder. “What? I’m sorry, did *you* want to be the person who figures out how to register a charitable organization in Ontario? No, I didn’t think so. Leave it in the capable hands of Yuna Hollander.”

“Smartest thing to do,” Ilya agreed, still laughing.

Shane held him close, wishing he could burrow closer. He was glad, at least, that they hadn't put their shirts back on.

"Okay," Ilya said a minute later. He kissed Shane's neck. "Okay. I also have something to say, though, so now you will listen." He pulled back, flopping onto the sofa cushion next to Shane so they were sitting side by side instead of lying on top of each other.

"Okay," Shane agreed, feeling a stab of apprehension.

But Ilya smiled, nervous, but genuine. "I have to have a hard conversation with you. Hard conversation, but good, I think."

Shane shuffled so that he was upright and pressed against Ilya. He raised his leg and draped it over Ilya's thighs and found his hands, pulling them into his lap. "Okay."

"I was speaking with Svetlana and she agrees, so... for me, it's time." He nodded, as if he was shoring himself up or realizing just how firm in his convictions he really was. "I want to come out to the team. I want to come out as *me*. I'm not ready for public just yet, and obviously would not be safe, but for the team... yeah. And I know we talked about Stanley Cup, but I want to do it before then, especially since Marly and Saint Vicky know and they cannot be trusted to keep my secret." He sighed. "And because I want to. Those guys are my friends, some are like family. I respect them and I want to be honest with them. That's what I want. I don't want to pretend to be *only* a womanizer—I am also maneater, yes?"

"Yes," Shane said quietly. "You definitely are."

Ilya nodded, squeezing his hands. "So. That's what I want. It's probably what I'm going to do. But we need to, uh, have conversation about the rest. And if you think it's terrible idea... okay. If you think it is dangerous, then we talk through other options. But it's what I want, and you need to know that."

Shane closed his eyes. He was not going to freak out. He took several deep breaths and then he let go of Ilya's left hand so he could cup the back of his neck. He pulled him in until their foreheads touched, and they nuzzled just a little closer, so the tips of their noses brushed. "I'm so proud of you," he said quietly. "I'm so happy for you. I love you. I'm... I'm so happy that you feel safe, and comfortable, and—and that you have friends and teammates that you can feel safe around. Ilya, that makes me so happy, and I'm so proud of how brave you are. You're wonderful."

"You're sweet," Ilya said, voice tight, no longer as perfectly calm and level as he had been affecting. He mimicked Shane's posture, large hand cupping the base of his skull, thumb rubbing over the first vertebrae. "Those are very nice words, Shane. Now tell me how you feel."

"I feel proud, and happy," Shane repeated firmly. "That's true."

"And?"

"Scared," he admitted. "For you. For me."

“I’m scared, too. I want to do it anyway.”

He kissed him. “Okay. I want to talk to our lawyers and agents—everyone really—first before we bring it to management. No laughing, but that definitely includes my mom. We need to have everything in order to make sure that we’re *safe*.”

Ilya had no objections to that. “Yes.”

“And then once all of that is done, yes, of course. You get to tell people, tell whoever you want, whenever you’re ready.” He took a deep breath. “In your own time.”

“Thank you.”

“No. Don’t. Don’t thank me. God, Ilya, I love you.”

“So much. And I feel very, very good about this,” Ilya said. “It makes me feel good to do this. I want to do that.” He paused. Shane could see him rolling words over in his head, and also saw the moment he steeled himself. “And that makes me so sad,” he said, “because you didn’t get to have this moment with anyone. You should have had the chance to wait until you felt good, too. You deserved that, and you never got it.”

Shane bit his lip. He closed his eyes and thought about what Ilya was trying to say, then smiled slightly.

“You know, that isn’t actually completely true,” he said. Ilya tilted his head. “I had it with you,” Shane said, smiling a little. “I mean... yeah. I had it with you. You’re literally the only person I ever *told* that I was gay, you know? Rose figured it out and everyone else, well. But I chose to tell you that I am gay. I had that moment, Ilya, and I got to have it with the most important person in the world.”

“Fuck,” Ilya said. Then he winced. “I’m sorry I laughed when you said it.”

Shane chuckled. “It’s okay. I get it,” he said. “It still meant a lot to me.”

“But you are still okay with this? With me moving forward? Telling team and coaches, my friends in Boston?” Ilya asked seriously. “It will—they will have questions. About us. People will assume things, and we could deny, but...”

Shane took another moment to breathe deeply. “I can’t go through another leak,” Shane admitted. “I just can’t. And unless we wanted to lock ourselves up twenty-four-seven and never speak again in public... it would always be a risk, you know? Cliff and Victor figured it out, more or less. Other people on the team might have too, or they might soon. And that’s okay, that’s whatever, but if a fan or a reporter or someone got hold of something incriminating—I just can’t do that again. So... it has to be my choice. We have to choose it.”

Ilya kissed him. “Team first,” he said. “We can talk about more. After Stanley Cup.”

“What happens if we don’t win?” Shane teased. “Are you gonna wait another year, just to get your Scott Hunter moment?”

“Who is that?” Ilya asked, face blanking, and Shane laughed. “No, I guess it rings a bell—oh, is he that really, really old commentator on ESPN, the one who always wears the terrible brown suits and is colorblind?”

“You asshole.”

“Your asshole.” Another kiss. “Does not matter. We win. Easy. Simple.”

“Easy and simple,” Shane said, shaking his head slowly, secretly delighted by Ilya’s audacity. “Winning the Stanley Cup is easy and simple.”

“No,” Ilya corrected. “You misunderstand. Easy. Simple. Because I have already won.”

Chapter End Notes

more ao3 writers curse, bc the power on my entire block went out yesterday ____.
(picture me writing fanfiction by candlelight)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Pride Night designs were inspired by some of the Canucks and San Jose Shark's jerseys over the years

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

Shane sprinted toward the goal line, outpacing most of the players on the ice and whizzing past the San Jose defenseman trying to trip him. It was probably just a desperate instinct that made the player throw out his stick in front of Shane's skates, and Shane could have skated through and taken the power play from the inevitable tripping penalty, but his eyes were locked on the goal. He hopped the player's stick neatly and swerved.

San Jose's goalie raised his right leg just two inches off the ice as he pushed laterally, trying to keep up with Shane's angle of approach.

That was all the opening Shane needed. He shot low, and the puck whipped into the net in the millisecond before the goaltender slammed his pads back down.

TD Garden erupted. It was a wall of noise so strong it almost felt like a physical sensation. The stadium was packed and had been all season as the Bears raced through the rankings and ever onward.

It was March. Only one month left until the playoffs began.

Shane had healed well and quickly from his injury, a perk of his extremely stringent exercise routine, his diet, and his regular yoga practices. Ilya could make fun of him, but Shane tended to bounce back from injuries.

Tonight was the proof.

He had just scored a hat trick, which felt appropriate given that it was Pride Night, and the arena was decorated with rainbow and trans flags and enormous LED signs by the front gates proudly declaring BEARS CELEBRATE PRIDE.

In past years, whenever he had played during Pride Nights, he had always felt embarrassed and, he could admit, a little ashamed. He had kept a strict policy in his locker room, but not strict enough to make himself obvious. Some guys had no problem announcing their objections to the optional jerseys or the special tape, even though they had never been required to wear them. Most of them had refused, some without comment, but others very vocally. Shane had always just squared his shoulders, put on the jersey, subjected himself to the supremely inferior tape that *always* frayed, and skated out, hoping that someone,

somewhere, would appreciate the gesture enough to make up for the terrible squirming in his stomach that came from a deep-rooted fear of being perceived.

This year was different.

The Bears were unanimously wearing the specially designed Pride-themed jerseys. If anyone might have objected to them, then the majority had outweighed them: in most of the locker rooms in the NHL, a few or even half of the players might choose to wear the optional jerseys, but the rest would opt out without looking like outliers. This year, by the time that the entire first and second line of forwards and defenseman, Benji and the reserve goalie, and their two rookies had vocally declared that they would be wearing the jerseys for the game, anyone who might have objected was in the minority. No one fought about it. Shane was beginning to wonder if he was imagining the mild disdain he had believed he was seeing in some of the guys he was less friendly with. Maybe he would never know for sure, but they were wearing the jerseys either way. That was more than enough for him.

The redesigned jerseys were simple, though more overt than some in the league. Instead of the roaring bear's head that decorated the crest of their usual uniforms, this one showed a bear standing upright on its rear legs, holding a hockey stick that was wrapped in Pride tape on the handle and the blade. Rainbow and Trans Pride patches on the shoulders added color to the black and gold scheme of their home uniforms.

It felt good to wear. It felt indescribable to wear it alongside his teammates.

Shane had happily abandoned the terrible tape, however. He no longer needed to prove anything to anyone.

Ilya had used it, though. His stick was a riot of bright colors, and during warmups, he kept waving it above his head like a helicopter.

(They'd had a long conversation, just the two of them, about Ilya leaning into the Pride theming. It wasn't necessarily safe for him to do so, Shane thought, because Russia's laws specifically prohibited the promotion of LGBT identities, which was quite literally what a rainbow jersey and stick tape did. For Shane, that and similar laws were the only defensible reason for the league's refusal to make participation in Pride nights mandatory: as awful as it was, not all players could safely show their support. But Ilya had said firmly, over and over, that he didn't care. He had used the tape before, and he would do it again. Shane couldn't have dissuaded him, and he had stopped himself from trying to. Shane feared that Ilya was getting a little reckless. But it was Ilya's life, and not Shane's right to police him. Still, it *was* his job to worry about him, and so he did, but he tried to keep it to himself. He did a poor job, but at least Ilya knew the attempt had been made.)

After the team celebration of his goal, Shane skated down the ice. He waved to Ilya, sitting happily in the penalty box with a stupid grin on his very pretty face. Shane had scored while they were on the penalty kill, and he was fairly pleased with himself.

The rainbow light show flashing across the arena, reflecting off the ice, was a little distracting, but it didn't feel terrible. Shane faced the audience, trying to find the faces of

couples and ecstatic children to wave at, watching them scream, cheer, and laugh as he did so.

There was a point to this, he knew, no matter how awkward or embarrassing. This was the point.

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They went to Fiorella's afterward, most of the Bears now wearing newer (less fragrant) Pride-themed merch, and the bartender asked for a picture of them all together. Ilya smacked a theatrical kiss against Shane's cheek when the camera went off.

If anyone noticed, they didn't comment, and two weeks later, the printed photo was hanging on the wall of the bar among decades of photos of white men who never could have admitted it even if they were gay. Photos of Cups and playoffs and celebrations and tributes. And, now, Shane and his team, celebrating Pride.

(He thought about banners hanging in the rafters of the Centre Bell. It was easier to push the memory away than it had once been. He could just... let it go.)

Legacy, Shane thought. This was what it meant to be part of a legacy.

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"Did you like?" Ilya asked that night in bed, cuddled together and freshly showered. Ilya was a little drunk and Shane, of course, was sober. Frankly, he was still astounded that anyone in the league drank alcohol so close to the playoffs. They were cuddled together, warm and smelling of their usual shower products. "Or was it too much?"

Shane answered honestly. "It was too much." He added, "It was wonderful."

"I thought it was wonderful too," Ilya said, squirming a little with happiness.

Shane set his fingers on top of a bruise high on Ilya's abdomen, just beneath his pecs. It wasn't a unique blemish on his body, but Shane thought he had received this one tonight. The San Jose left winger had checked Ilya—not hard or illegally, but Shane had been watching, and he had seen the top of the stick jab Ilya near that spot.

Shane circled the mark, the little bruise. They were willing to put their bodies through so much for this career. Shane was infinitely meticulous about his diet, and Ilya also had to be careful about what he ate and when and how much, and they were both extremely accustomed to forcing themselves to eat another portion even when they were the furthest thing from hungry. They had both played through minor (and moderate) injuries. They had both broken bones. They both knew that one day, one bit of bad luck could end their careers or even their lives, or change them irrevocably. Every player in the league believed that potential sacrifice was worth it, for one reason or another—money, adrenaline, fame, or pure adoration of the sport.

When they were sixty, Shane imagined he and Ilya would be wobbling about with bad knees and fake hips, and he still smiled.

When they were sixty...

“What?” Ilya asked, seeing his smile.

“I love you,” Shane said. “I’m thinking about growing old with you.”

It wasn’t too much to admit, not anymore. “Yes,” Ilya murmured. “I think of this a lot, too.”

He started to lean up to kiss Shane. “Do you think I should call Scott Hunter?” Shane asked.

Ilya paused. “What?”

Shane shrugged. “I was thinking about him tonight, with all the advocacy he’s been doing for Pride nights.”

“You are thinking about Scott Hunter in our bed?”

“Yes, Ilya,” Shane said.

“That is cheating.”

“It is not, Ilya.”

“It is borderline cheating! And with my worst enemy!”

“It’s not anywhere close to cheating, and Scott is not your worst enemy.”

Ilya grumbled. Shane kissed his jaw.

“I haven’t spoken to him since last year,” Shane said. “He reached out over Instagram, asking if I would ever want to do work on his charity initiatives. I told him not at the moment, but then I never got back to him. Do you think I should?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” Ilya said. “You do enough.”

“Do I?” Shane asked, biting his lips. “Ilya, I’ve barely done anything. I’ve barely said anything.”

“You are yourself,” Ilya said. “You are brave. You are open even though you don’t want to be. Did you not see crying children in the stands who are so, so happy because now they have gay Boston player they can look at and think, ‘See? I can do anything. I can do *anything*.’ I saw them. I sort of am one of those kids, you know.”

Shane blinked quickly, wishing his eyes weren’t damp, but couldn’t drop the point. “But that’s not work,” he argued. “It’s not the same as actual advocacy.”

“It’s not the same,” Ilya agreed, “and if you want to do more, do more. But I think it is enough.” He shrugged. “Maybe don’t go to Scott Hunter, though. We could make it part of

our foundation, if you want?”

“No,” Shane said quietly. “I think our foundation should focus just on mental health and suicide prevention—I mean, we should definitely find charities who advocate for gay—sorry, er, queer people, I guess? You know, since they’re... we’re at risk for that kind of thing. But I—well, honestly, I don’t want to tie every aspect of my life to my gayness. Queerness. Whatever. Do you think that’s okay?” he asked earnestly.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I do.”

Shane shuffled on the bed. Ilya moved with him. “Would it be crazy if I said that... I think I need to meet more gay people? Ones I’m not sleeping with, I mean? I was talking to the fans after the game and hearing all their stories, I just sort of realized, like, I don’t really know anybody but you.”

Ilya gave him a long look. “No? No one?”

“Well, back in the day, my buddy Joe—he competed in the Sochi Olympics as a figure skater—he was gay, *is* gay, but I knew him in high school, you know? I never told him I was gay, and we haven’t kept in touch since the Olympics. Actually,” Shane thought about it. He peered through the blurry memories of his outing and the million messages he had received that night, the flood of comments and concerns and slurs and opinion pieces, and messages from old friends. “Right after the video. He messaged me. Honestly, I didn’t even remember that until right now. I never went through all my DMs from that night—I saw the notification, but I never responded.”

“You should respond,” Ilya said, sliding his hand up Shane’s thigh. “Even if it is later. Maybe he also feels alone.”

“And maybe I should also reach out to Scott Hunter?”

Ilya sighed like he was being tortured. “Fine,” he finally acquiesced. “If you have to.”

Shane glanced at him. “Okay, this is embarrassing, and you’re not allowed to laugh at me,” he said seriously, “but I think we should watch some movies, you know? Gay movies, I mean. And maybe read some books.”

Ilya was laughing anyway, but Shane didn’t really care. “Oh, you need to study how to be gay now?” he teased. “I think you are pretty good at it.”

“Shut up,” Shane said, but he grabbed Ilya’s wrist and pulled his hand higher. “You know what I mean. I feel like... I’m so laser-focused on hockey, like, eighty percent of the time. Ninety. And maybe there are... other things I should be paying attention to.”

Ilya hummed. “I have seen the *Brokeback Mountain*,” he said. “They fuck in a tent with no lube and then they ride horses.”

Shane reared back. “What? How?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya shrugged.

“Oh. Should we skip it? Is it bad?”

“No, is very good,” Ilya said. “You will like. Will cry a lot and I get to comfort you. Yes, we should definitely watch.”

Shane was baffled. “Why would I want to watch something that makes me cry?”

Ilya gave him a very deadpan look. “Okay, never mind, *you* should not watch any gay movies in that case.”

“What? Why? Ilya, why not? I’m gay!”

“Oh my god,” Ilya groaned, throwing an arm over his face. “Never mind.”

“No, Ilya, what do you mean? Ilya?”

“Go to sleep, Shane.”

“Ilya, seriously, I don’t-”

“I’ll explain in the morning, malysh.”

+++

After San Jose, they traveled to Washington for a game and stayed two nights. With the end of the season approaching, every game had a desperate edge. They had pulled ahead enough in the Eastern Conference that there was very little chance that they could slip out of playoff contention, but, as LeClaire constantly reminded them, now was not the moment to relax. If they kept their first-place ranking, they would be seeded in the first round against the eighth-best team in the Conference, the second wildcard team; any advantage they could get in the first round of the playoffs was one they should seize with both hands.

The Bears won the game, but Washington was having a good season. It looked like they would either get the number three spot in the Metropolitan Division or one of the wildcard slots. If they did make it in, then the Bears could conceivably be facing them off in the Conference Finals in a few months, but that seemed unlikely.

The Admirals were the only team in the Conference giving the Bears a run for their money. They had already played against each other four times, with two wins each. The Admirals were trailing behind the Bears in points, but not by much. That did not guarantee how the playoffs would unfold, but Shane had a suspicion they would both make it to the Conference Finals, especially if one of them ended up facing the second wildcard slot team. Shane believed that once again, it would be him and Scott on the ice.

Svetlana and his mom agreed with him, so he was pretty confident.

Playoffs were approaching, but they still had time to relax between games.

After their win, LeClaire booked out an entire restaurant for the team and the travel staff, and they converged on it, one giant herd of muscle-bound, bruised idiots. Shane snagged a private

table in the corner of the room where they sat with Cliff and St. Simone. Ilya ordered two steaks, and Shane ordered a salmon filet on brown rice, holding back a sigh.

He was going to take a break from his diet at some point, but he couldn't quit during the season, no matter how much the team made fun of him.

"You are going to get mercury poisoning, dude," Cliff said.

"I'm very careful about that. And actually, salmon has some of the lowest levels of-"

"What is mercury?" Ilya asked, glaring at Shane's dinner like it had personally offended him. Shane wrapped an arm around his plate preemptively, worried that Ilya might knock it off the table.

Cliff snorted. "Never mind," he said. "Hey, I bet you guys don't get to do this often!"

"Do what?" Shane asked, still eyeing Ilya in case he made a move.

"You know, get dinner together," Cliff said. "It's kind of like a date, except me and Saint Vicky are watching you."

"Voyeurisme," St. Simone commented, nodding sedately.

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya smiled at him. "No," he agreed. "We don't really do this often. Usually, we order in or cook for ourselves."

"Is not bad," Ilya said. He turned his smile toward his friends. Shane melted a little at how happy he looked to share this with them. "I like spending time alone, and Shane is so neurotic-"

"Hey!"

"There are few places we could go where he would be happy. Still," he tilted his head, "yes, is nice."

"Well, then, we should do it more!" St. Simone said. "You two, me, Amanda, and Cliff. That's not suspicious at all!"

"It's not about being unsuspicious," Shane started.

"It's about Russia," Ilya said. "I cannot be fully out while I still have Russian passport. Not when only a work visa lets me stay in America."

"Oh." Their faces softened with a familiar look of commiserating guilt as they were suddenly reminded of how high the stakes really were for them.

Shane looked at Ilya. Sometimes, he had so many regrets about all the wasted years between them, held together by infrequent texts and brief hookups. And then he remembered that it hadn't entirely been their fault.

Even now, it was dangerous for them to be together.

“Thanks for the offer, though,” Shane said, putting a hand on Ilya’s knee and knocking their shoes together. “We’ll probably take you up on it sometime.”

“Good,” St. Simone said. “Amanda loves you, Hollzy. She says you are the only Bear with an attention span longer than a goldfish’s!”

Shane laughed. They ate their dinner. He kept his hand on Ilya’s leg under the tablecloth.

Afterwards, they returned to their hotel, and it was Shane’s turn to sneak into Ilya’s room.

“Entire night ahead of us,” Ilya said as he let Shane in, waggling his eyebrows. “What should we do to pass the time, Hollander?”

(They watched *Brokeback Mountain*. They both cried, and Ilya was no comfort at all.)

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After Washington, they had back-to-back away games against New Jersey and Montreal. Comeau was back on the ice (Ilya had not broken his jaw, but he had knocked a few teeth loose). LeClaire gave them a long speech before the game about holding their heads high and not instigating fights. “If Montreal starts some shit, sure, give them what-for,” he said. “We’re a team. We stick up for each other, and our players. But keep in mind that playoffs start next month. If you get injured tonight, you won’t be happy with yourselves. I’d rather see all of you leave the ice intact than see Montreal limping off.” He smirked. “Only literally, of course. Metaphorically? Make those fuckers crawl.”

Ilya gave Shane a vicious smile. “*Teeth*,” he mouthed.

They skated out to a booing, jeering crowd. This time, Shane didn’t see any signs with his name on them, but a lukewarm reception this late in the season made sense. They wanted to see their team make it to the playoffs, and the Bears were one of their biggest roadblocks.

It was strange, Shane thought. He had dedicated so many years to the sole pursuit of bringing Montreal to the playoffs, giving the fans what they wanted. He had felt that responsibility acutely.

And now he lived somewhere else, with different people, and despite everything, he was happy.

Happier.

Ilya leered at him as they stretched on the ice, and Shane laughed. *Yeah*, he decided, mentally correcting himself. *Happy*.

The game began.

Abbot had hit his stride with the team, and Shane was at least a little glad to see that Hayden and JJ were both playing well. Miitka, as goaltender, was having possibly the best season of

his career, and if they made it to the playoffs, he would be the one to credit.

With each game, the Voyageurs had become slightly harder to defeat. This was definitely their closest game of the season, but Boston still kept a consistent one-point lead after the first period. Miitka was doing well, but their offense was slowly overwhelming him, creating too many opportunities for shots for him to block them all. It didn't surprise Shane, not really. Comeau was the Voyageurs' first-line defenseman, and he had always been too aggressive, too focused on opposing players rather than on the actual puck.

Still, the game was close. By the start of the third period, Abbot and Koch had each scored once, Ilya had scored twice, and Aliue had scored once, bringing the score to 3-2 in their favor. If Montreal could get one more goal without letting them score, they would go into overtime: even if they lost in overtime, they would still gain one team point for finishing regulation time tied, which would help their standing in the race for the playoffs. Shane knew they wanted it.

He wanted to keep them from it.

He hopped the barrier, knocking his shoulder against Ilya's and trading a nod with St. Simone. They took center ice.

Despite or because of Ilya and LeClaire's attitudes, they made it to the final five minutes of the game before any violence erupted.

Shane knew because he glanced at the clock as they lined up for a face-off in the Voyageur's end-zone, to the left of their goal.

He felt the familiar exhaustion of a long and slow game roll over his shoulders, but stayed focused. Ilya was in the center of the circle, St. Simone and Shane on the edge, in position with the Voyageurs' left and right wingers.

The puck dropped. Ilya's stick clashed hard with his opponent's, and they pushed toward each other fiercely before the puck shot out, uncontrolled, to the left.

Shane caught it, already turning his back on the other left winger. Cliff and Hammersmith were wide open near the blue line, all the Voyageur defensemen guarding their goal.

Shane shot the puck to Cliff and dodged to the side immediately, trying to screen the left winger while St. Simone and Ilya lined themselves up for a pass.

But Cliff saw an opportunity and took it. He skated to the center of the rink, hugging the blue line, and whipped the puck down the ice. The Voyageurs reacted like he was making a pass, guarding St. Simone and Ilya, and the puck flew into the net.

Shane whooped. It was a sound he was more used to hearing from Ilya's mouth. Another goal for Boston, and another assist for Shane. A two-point lead this late in the game was good insurance that they wouldn't go into overtime. Montreal would not get any points for the match.

Shane grinned, about to skate in and celebrate Cliff's victory with him, when he saw a flurry of movement in his periphery. He spun just in time to see Comeau rushing toward him, a snarl on his face. Shane braced.

Comeau collided with him and grabbed the front of his jersey. His grip through the gloves was weak. Shane shoved him off immediately.

Their gloves hit the ice at the same time. Montreal management could pretend that they were above Boston's dirty play all they wanted and spin the narrative of the upstanding, clean Voyageurs versus the underhanded, vicious Bears, but Shane knew the truth:

Hockey fans loved to watch a fight.

Comeau wasn't as patient as Shane. He threw the first punch. Shane learned something new about himself in that moment: when he was playing hockey, truly in the zone, sometimes it was like he could see where the puck would be in the next few moments, whether that was behind the stick of an opposing player after a convincing fake-out or halfway across the ice, needing to be intercepted before it reached an open defenseman.

The same was true in a fight. He knew well before Comeau lashed out where he was aiming and how to duck away.

Shane tightened his core, tucked his elbows, and didn't lean forward when he decked Comeau across the jaw for all he was worth.

Comeau had not squared his stance; Shane had hit too quickly, and he hit again, and again. Comeau's feet went out from under him, and he hit the ice after three punches, not even landing a glancing blow in return.

"I know, I know," Shane said, shaking out his hands as the refs skated up immediately. "He did start it, though."

St. Simone was laughing uproariously, louder than the crowd's half-hearted boos. "That's two!" he crowed, risking an unsportsmanlike penalty to gloat over Comeau as he stumbled upright. "Two in a row, Comeau! How does it feel, huh? Does it pay to be an asshole?"

Shane rolled his eyes as the ref called, "Both guys, five minutes each, for fighting! Montreal penalty: number Forty-One, two minutes for instigating, ten-minute game misconduct for instigating in the last five."

JJ Boiziau was leaning on his stick near the penalty box, his chin propped on the end. He watched Comeau stumble toward the Voyageur's tunnel, ejected for the game misconduct, as Theriault, steam practically pouring from his ears, sent another player to the penalty box to serve Comeau's time. "Capitaine," JJ drawled as Shane skated toward him, then paused. Then he smiled, just a little. "Slip of the tongue, eh? But where did you learn to punch like that?"

Shane smiled back, oddly relieved. He hadn't heard much from JJ all year, and he suspected that JJ took the on-ice losses a lot harder than Hayden. He turned past him, skating backward

to the box. “What can I say?” he called. “Guess I really am a Bear now.”

JJ laughed like Shane hadn’t just decked his own teammate. “No more Lady Byng for you!”

“Nope,” Shane agreed.

The door shut. It wasn’t Shane’s first time in the penalty box, though usually, he was assigned penalties for mistakes and not malicious misconduct. His second year, he had gone an entire season without taking any penalties, but that was partially because he had not made first-line yet and partially because the Voyageurs had not made it to the playoffs. Shane doubted it would ever happen again, especially while he played for the Bears.

Both teams finished the game shorthanded. When Abbot was on the ice, he was as primed and stoic as ever, but the rest of the Voyageurs had visibly run out of steam. Shane scowled, wishing the rookies at least would make the most of their time on ice, but it didn’t matter in the end.

They had won all four matches against the Voyageurs that season, all within regulation time. The Voyageurs needed every team point they could get if they wanted to snag the wildcard spot, but tonight, they got nothing. The Bears were ranked first in the Division and Conference, second overall in the league. The Voyageurs were about to lose their chance at the playoffs to Detroit. Ilya was tied for first in the league for goals with the captain of the Colorado Mudslides, and Shane had a strong lead in the race for most points with his assists and goals combined. Abbot was a good player, but he wasn’t outstanding.

Shane and Ilya were.

Shane tapped his stick on the rubber mat idly as he watched the listless last thirty seconds of the match until, finally, the buzzer went off.

Shane grinned as he stepped out of the penalty box, skating laps around his celebrating team as he waved to the audience and the scattered cheering fans throughout.

They were going to the playoffs. He knew it now with a confidence that felt like prescience. In the first round, they would beat the wildcard team with the worst record.

It would not be the Voyageurs.

He watched them slink off the ice, only JJ and Hayden looking back to offer commiserating waves. Their season was almost over.

The most important part of Shane’s was about to begin.

A victory against the Voyageurs didn’t feel good because Shane, at his heart, wasn’t vindictive. He was just competitive. He just loved *hockey*. He didn’t want to play against assholes because that meant acknowledging that notoriously bad people were still allowed to play in the league, were still celebrated, even. He didn’t need to prove himself against the Voyageurs because he already had.

“Fuck those fuckers!” Ilya screamed succinctly, grabbing Shane from behind and briefly lifting him off his skates with the force of his embrace. “You are so fucking sexy, knocking that piece of shit to the ice,” he growled into Shane’s ear, dropping him back down.

Shane preened. “It was pretty badass, wasn’t it?”

(Okay. Maybe Shane was a little vindictive. He wasn’t nearly as bad as Ilya, though, and that had to count for something.)

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Their final game of the regular season was against the Tampa Bay Thunderstorms in mid-April. They had almost completed a very impressive season and were top three in the division, securing a guaranteed spot in the playoffs, but most of their success had been attributed to their goalie, who was probably the best in the league and the current favorite to win that year’s Vezina. But a week ago, their goalie had torn his MCL, requiring surgery and devastating their playoff chances.

Shane believed they would have destroyed them, regardless.

There was always a strange humor in games like these, Shane had found over the years. By the final game, both of them were guaranteed a spot in the playoffs based on their divisional ranking. There was also an incentive not to play too hard and risk injury or exhaustion so close to the Stanley Cup. But they also knew that in a few weeks, they might be facing each other on the ice once more, when the stakes would be astronomically higher.

Because it was a home game, the Bears had one last additional impetus to put on a good show for the fans who had turned up for their season finale.

Which they did. It felt nice to have done it for the fans.

Shane also had selfish reasons to be glad they had won.

In the locker room, after the game and press and an abbreviated celebration that had left everything covered in champagne, mandating an extended shower break while the staff ripped through the clean-up process, Ilya found Shane’s eyes between the moving masses of bodies, everyone determined to get out of the arena and properly celebrate their (official) advancement to the playoffs. Ilya cocked his head. Shane nodded.

Ilya smiled.

“Okay, listen up, people!” Ilya shouted. “My house, tomorrow, eleven AM sharp! This is mandatory team event, okay? I don’t care about your babysitters or dogwalkers—be there or you will play five minutes a game for all of playoffs!”

“Sounds relaxing,” Benji quipped.

“There will be food,” Ilya said. “Do not bring your children. That is all!”

“Whoo!” Cliff said, clapping obnoxiously. “Let’s go, great speech, Cap!”

“We are going to the Finals!” St. Simone added. “Do not bring your children!”

The locker room cleared, most of the guys heading out to clubs, to their beds, or to their partners. Shane got a few additional congratulations on a particularly clever goal he had scored in the second period and wondered if, after tomorrow, anything would change. He and Ilya lingered, discussing plays and outcomes and statistics as Captain and Assistant Captain, until they were the last ones left. Shane glanced at his watch. LeClaire was expecting them in five minutes.

They stepped into the hallway outside the locker room together but did not turn in the same direction the rest of their team had, toward the parking lot. They hovered by the door until they were alone, caught in the moment when the team had departed and before the equipment managers would sweep through.

Shane looked up at Ilya. “Ready?” he asked.

“I am ready,” Ilya said so easily, and Shane melted at the irresistible smile pulling on his mouth and the glimmer in his eyes. Ilya looked so, so happy. “Are you? Last chance to back out, Hollander.”

“I’m not backing out,” Shane said firmly. “We’re doing this together.”

“Okay,” Ilya murmured. He took Shane’s hand.

Shane interlaced their fingers.

They walked to LeClaire’s office together.

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“You are like housewife.”

“That,” Shane said, pointing a finger and glowering, “is sexist, Ilya.”

Ilya laughed. “What if I meant it as compliment?”

“Still sexist,” Shane grumbled.

“Is it?” Ilya asked. “House husband, then? House spouse?”

Shane spluttered, blushing. “I don’t know where you come up with these things.”

“Svetlana and I watch terrible daytime television when we are burnt out on hockey.”

Shane frowned at him. “You get tired of hockey?”

Ilya laughed. “Oh, Shane Hollander, never change.”

“I wasn’t going to,” Shane said, offended.

“I know.” Ilya stood and wrapped his arms around Shane’s waist, pulling him away from where he had been wiping the sink clean of water droplets. Ilya kissed his cheek, then his neck. “I’m so happy you will never change. Most boring person on the planet. All mine.”

Shane had ordered catering. Neat lines of warming trays were set across Ilya’s massive counter space. He had lined up glasses, plates, and utensils so no one would have to dig through the cabinets, and moved all the sodas and seltzers to the front and center of the fridge. He left a few extra rolls of toilet paper in the first-floor bathroom, and double and triple checked that between the stools, the dining table, and the sofa, there was enough seating (as long as the rookies sat on the floor), and brushed off the outdoor dining table and sofa, just in case.

Everything was neat and orderly, just waiting to be besieged by twenty enormous professional athletes who were going to show up any minute now.

Ilya kissed his cheek again. “Is going to be okay,” he said. “You know, I talk to all the guys after your trade. Made sure to get one-on-ones with everyone before preseason, and I think LeClaire did the same. I am not saying all of them are perfect, or all of them will love the idea of two gay guys on the same team, but I know these guys. I know them, Shane. They are decent. They will be decent about this, too.”

Shane sighed. He nodded, putting all his faith in Ilya’s judgment, and was surprised by how easy it felt. “Okay,” he said.

Pummel and Sidney arrived first and together. “Shoes off!” Ilya ordered, although it wasn’t the first time the team had gathered there that year, and they already knew the drill. “Don’t get your gross rookie dirt all over my house.”

“Hollzy!” Pummel said happily, ignoring his captain as he beelined for the buffet. “You’re here early! I guess we should have expected that.”

“Punctuality is important,” Sidney quipped, barely an inch behind Pummel in the line as they opened every container, finding pulled chicken and pork, chopped steak, stir-fried vegetables, and rice. “Oh, fuck yes, Mexican. Dude, I don’t understand where it all goes, I had a massive breakfast but I feel like I could eat a cow.”

“Go ahead,” Shane said, gesturing, then wondered if that seemed too presumptive, given that this was supposedly Ilya’s kitchen. Well, if they were confused now, it wouldn’t be for long.

Cliff and St. Simone arrived soon after with a lot of the guys. St. Simone pulled Ilya into the living room for a minute. Cliff wandered up to Shane as the kitchen filled with the sounds of athletes jostling each other. “Ready, dude?” he asked quietly. “Big fucking step.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, “but it’s time.” He put his hand on Cliff’s shoulder. “Thanks for being my friend, by the way. It’s meant a lot to me.”

Cliff smiled, broad and giddy. “Dude, of fucking course.”

Soon enough, everyone had arrived (not exactly at 11:00 am sharp, as Ilya had mandated, but for the Bears, it was still an impressive attempt).

Instead of spreading out, they crammed in around the dining table, shoveling down food, cracking sodas and jokes, and jabbing each other with their elbows with the frenetic energy of a top-ranking team about to start playoffs. The outside seating was carried inside and armchairs were dragged in from the living room. When all the stools were taken, Alieu hopped up to sit on the counter. Everyone had found a spot (and no one was sitting on the floor).

Shane ate his own food somewhat meditatively, keeping his distance from Ilya so that he could have a moment to himself.

Usually, in Montreal, team meetings like this had stressed him out. So much jostling, so many bodies in proximity, open-mouthed chewing, and overlapping conversations. Shane still sat at the counter, far out of the press of bodies at the table, but he wondered when it had all become less overwhelming. It would never be his favorite type of gathering, but at some point, since moving to Boston, Shane had found his footing, and it was stable.

No one touched him. No one shouted in his ears or called him out for being boring or mocked his food relentlessly.

Because this wasn't Montreal. This was Boston. And his life here was so much better.

He looked up and found Ilya already staring at the side of his face. Most of the team was well into their meals, and the buffet trays were almost empty. He smiled.

Ilya smiled back. He stood up abruptly and clapped his hands together.

"Okay!" Shane, watching from his perch at the end of the counters, thought Ilya looked so natural standing at the head of the table. Ilya was a good captain because he was loud and charismatic, but extremely perceptive. He could read his teammates in a way Shane had never been able to, and it was a skill he envied but knew he would never be able to learn. Ilya commanded attention so easily: he was massive, and he was stunningly beautiful, and even though Shane knew he could be insecure about his accent and how others perceived it, he never lowered his volume. Not for anyone. "Okay, special announcement ahead of playoffs. This is long time coming, but when we win Stanley Cup this year," he paused for a round of cheers, "I want it to be done with all cards on the table. I'm your captain, and I am proud to be your captain, so I want you to know this." He glanced at Shane, then at Cliff and St. Simone. Vicky nodded vigorously. Cliff flashed him a thumbs-up. Shane felt like he could tear up at any moment, but he made sure to give Ilya a tremulously hopeful smile. Ilya took a deep breath. "I am bisexual. I like men and women. I have reputation as a playboy, and this has always been true, but it is more to the story than that. If you did not know, it is not so safe for Russians, especially celebrity-public-figure Russians to be gay and out, so really, this is very, extremely important secret. But." He shrugged. "You are my team. You are my family. I wanted you to know. It was important that I tell you."

"Whoa," Pummel breathed.

Almost half of the team turned to look at Shane. He fought off the awkward urge to wave.

“Why you looking at Shane?” Ilya asked, offended. “He has been out for a year! I have been out for five seconds! Look at me!”

“Well, did you,” Aliue said, looking between the two of them, “did you... know? About each other?”

“Yes, there is big group chat of queer NHL guys,” Ilya said, then smirked. “And it is more than you think.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “I did know,” he said shortly. He glanced at Ilya and decided to stand up as well. “And just to be clear, yes, Ilya and I are—well, we’re in a relationship. We’ve been together since before I was traded, actually.” The ripple of shock that went around the table was expected and silent. Shane paused. No one said anything. “If you have any concerns, yes, LeClaire knows, and he has informed the relevant people in the franchise with our permission.”

“LeClaire did not have a problem with it,” Ilya said. “Do any of you?”

“*Before* the trade?” Pummel asked, mouth open.

“Oh, thank god!” Benji said loudly. “Does this mean we can finally acknowledge the time they snuck out to fuck at Cliff’s house?”

Everyone turned to look at him. He was at the opposite end of the table from Ilya, so it really was quite a dramatic shift.

“What?” Benji said. “Sorry, was I not supposed to notice? I mean, Saint Vicky was busy making cow eyes at Amanda, but I was there, too, guys! Your faces were like,” he held a hand against his nose, “this close, and Rozy was growling in your ear and Shane was blushing and then you both stalked out like someone was chasing you!”

“Oh my god,” Shane said, burying his face in his hands.

“And Ilya has barely been out clubbing all year and he hasn’t left with a single girl,” Benji continued mercilessly. “And Shane never has, and I get it, but those Bears bunnies were throwing themselves at Roz last month, and he didn’t even notice.”

“You can stop now,” Shane suggested gently.

“And the cannolis! The fucking cannolis!”

“What about the cannolis?” Shane asked, aghast.

Benji did not explain, which was probably a good thing. “And the shoe bench! Shane moved to Boston and *the next day* Ilya Rozanov put a fucking shoe bench next to his door! After *selling his goddamn apartment to his archrival*? Who also, coincidentally, made everyone take their shoes off when he hosted the potluck? Yeah, okay. And, *and*, at my barbecue, Ilya

brought a whole case of ginger ale. Hollander drank one fucking can and I had to figure out what to do with the rest—”

“You could always drink it,” Ilya grumbled. Shane’s shoulders slumped, gazing at him. He hadn’t known Ilya had brought the ginger ale. Ilya caught his eye and winked.

“And that!” Benji declared, gesturing between them. “The heart eyes! The yearning! It’s been unbearable.” He looked around the room for support, but everyone was staring at him now, dumbfounded. “What, really?” he demanded. “None of you noticed?”

“You fucked in my house?” Cliff asked, tone caught between outrage and admiration. “Dude, seriously?”

“We did *not*—” Shane started at the same time Ilya said, “Was only once.”

Benji laughed. “I guess I’m the only person on this team with eyes.” He grinned. “That’s why I’m the goalie. None of you would be able to see a puck coming from the fucking blue line.”

“Not true!” Cliff objected. “I figured it out! Well, sort of.”

“You did not,” Ilya drawled. “You were so far off mark it was like when you take a shot at the goal.”

Cliff pointed a finger at him. “Uncalled for.”

“I also figured it out,” St. Simone said.

“No, you did not, dude!” Cliff said. “I had to fucking tell you, you fucking dumbass.”

“Wait, how many people knew?” Aliue asked, as if he was offended to be out of the loop.

“Marly and Saint Vick have known since Shane’s injury,” Ilya said, “no one else was *told*, although apparently Benji is more clever than the rest of the team combined.”

“Wicked smart,” Cliff said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“Way more important question,” Hammersmith said, at risk of getting a crick in his neck from how quickly he was looking between them. “Before the trade, you said—how long has this been going on exactly?” He looked at Shane. “Did Montreal know? Is that why they were such pricks?”

“Montreal has no idea about Ilya,” Shane said firmly. “Well, except Hayden. But no one else. And it *has* to stay that way. Seriously. We would understand if you told your wives and serious partners, but this is actually dangerous for us, and for your captain, especially. We don’t want league-wide rumors to spread, okay?”

A general round of agreement went up from the players, but Hammersmith persisted. “But how long? Were you like, throwing games for each other?”

“Fuck no!” Shane snapped. “I would *never*!”

“You think I have to throw a game to beat this punk?” Ilya snorted. “No. Of course not.” He picked at his ear. “Was like foreplay, you know?”

Objections rang up, Shane’s loudest of all of them, but Varkov’s voice cut through the nonsense. “Oh my god,” he said, standing up, his chair screeching. He leveled a truly incredulous look at Ilya. “The *fucking Montreal girl* was *Shane Hollander*?”

Shane blinked, confused, but more of the longstanding Bears players rose to their feet as the volume grew in fervency. “No way!” Cliff objected loudly. “That shit started in, like, their rookie season!”

“Who’s the Montreal girl?” Shane asked over their heads, trying to find Ilya’s eyes.

Ilya shrugged and grinned.

“What about Rose Landry?” Pummel asked, looking devastated.

“During the rivalry?” Sidney asked, gawping.

“Foreplay,” Ilya repeated.

“Shut the fuck up,” Shane said. Over the increasingly jumbled questions, he shouted, “Okay, alright, listen up! Look, we’re not going to disclose the details of our relationship. Suffice it to say, there have been a lot of ups and downs and a lot of conflicts and problems that were completely out of our hands. But we wanted to be honest with you, because we both care about this team so much, and we wanted to win this fucking championship without any secrets.” He looked over all of them, Ilya at the back of the crowd, grinning proudly at him. “Okay?”

Murmurs of agreement and serious nods followed. Some of the players still looked surprised and even apprehensive, but Shane did not see the same sort of looks he had received in the Montreal locker room when the leak first came out. No one fell fully silent. No one refused to meet his eyes. No one was glaring, or muttering, or deciding out of the blue that he was bad at hockey now just because he was gay.

His shoulders relaxed. He saw Ilya’s smile widen.

“So, it’s serious, then?” Carmichael asked. “Between you two? Like, this is for real?”

Ilya shrugged, big and dramatic. “He is my wallflower.”

Shane slapped his hands on the countertop as laughter rolled across the team, shouting over them, “Oh my god, Ilya, you cannot be this embarrassing this early on!”

Ilya boggled at him theatrically. “Oh, I cannot? Fucking watch me.”

Varkov turned to face Benji. “You’re right,” he said decisively. “We were fucking blind.”

“You’d have to be,” Benji agreed, “to miss that.”

And Shane smiled and couldn't hold back his laughter.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I am so fucking excited for the next chapter -- playoffs!!! I'm so excited to share it! Thank you for reading!

[Cut for time when they're in DC:

"You know those pictures, with the leaning tower thing?" Ilya said. "They pretend they are holding it up?"

Shane glanced at Ilya, already dubious. "Yeah?"

Ilya pointed at the Washington Memorial. "I've seen ones where people put their legs in the air, pretend like that is their dick."

"Ilya."

"I know, I know, is bad idea." He winked. "Would make it look small."]

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Playoffs are complicated (said as a nonsports person writing an in-depth, yearlong fic covering a full season of hockey who doesn't want to pay for ESPN). For anyone who doesn't know and wants to understand before reading the basic explanation is here, I recommend reading this, it's short: <https://www.nhl.com/info/standings-info/playoff-format>

Only other things not explicitly stated but might be useful to know: home ice advantage means 4 of 3 games are played on that team's home ice (games 1, 2, 5, and 7), and the Stanley Cup finals are between the winner of the Eastern and Western Conference finals (i got this wrong in "something you can fix"): the best team from the west plays the best team from the east

So: we're covering a lot of games in this chapter and it is looong. Get a snack and hydrate (I promise its worth it)!

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

Shane blinked sweat out of his eyes. He breathed.

Ice, plastic, sweat. Perspiration on his upper lip and a chill in the air. The roaring chant of an exhilarated crowd and the grind of skates, a matching pair, stopping on a dime next to Shane.

“Still with me?” Ilya asked lightly.

Shane huffed through a grin. “Never left.”

In some fit of universal irony, they were starting the season where they had begun seven months ago.

Boston vs. Detroit. Game five, home ice.

They were about to win the first round of the bracket.

“Ilya,” Shane said.

He cocked his head and raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

Shane grinned. “Ilya,” he said, with emphasis.

Ilya grinned. “Shane,” he echoed.

The unspoken words passed between them.

“Fuck Lemaire,” Shane said, straightening up. “Let’s go make him cry.”

“I hope his parents are watching,” Ilya agreed.

They had already won three of the requisite four games needed to progress to the Conference Semifinals, and they were ahead in the third period. Detroit had only won game three off an overtime shot by one of their rookies, who had looked just as shocked as everyone else when his puck slid beneath Benji’s pads. The first game had been a slaughter, but a rivalry had been brewing all season between the Bears and them. Fights always dropped dramatically during the playoffs, when power plays were such a risk, and Shane could tell that Ilya was trying hard to direct his hatred of Lemaire into decimating them on the ice.

So far, he was succeeding. He succeeded again that night, halfway through the third period, when he scored the final goal of the game.

It had been a slow-paced period, everyone worn out and seeing the writing on the wall from the Bears’ lead in game wins and their two-point advantage, and Ilya made it all the way behind the redline with no one on his tail.

Ilya swooped around the back of the goal, facing out and scanning the ice. The Detroiters converged on Shane and St. Simone, trying to block the expected pass as the goalie pressed his full body against the goalpost, blocking the entire right half of the net.

Without turning his head, Ilya casually scooped the puck up on the tip of his stick and tossed it into the net across the goalie’s body, over his left shoulder before he could bat Ilya’s stick away.

“We should have done it in four games,” Ilya said carelessly in an interview after the game, “but we wanted to hear our fans cheering when we won the round in Boston.”

“What an asshole,” Yuna said, watching the live broadcast with Shane from one of the media rooms. But she was smiling, and there was something vindictively fond in her tone.

“I know,” Shane said.

“He really is your polar opposite, Shane.”

He shuffled, then put a hand on his mom’s shoulder. “We balance each other out,” he said. “I think I give him space to drop his public persona, and he gives me space to be a little... meaner, honestly.”

Yuna nodded slowly. She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “As your mother, I probably shouldn’t admit this,” she said, “but I think you needed that. I’m so proud of you. Both of you.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Shane said. “Honestly, I’m pretty proud of us, too.”

“Lemaire did not score, did you notice?” Ilya said when the interviewer asked about the obvious antagonism between the two captains. “He did not score in preseason games either. Perfect beginning and ending to the season.”

Shane and Yuna both laughed. “He really is an asshole,” Shane admitted.

If Ilya couldn’t have a fake rivalry with Shane anymore, apparently, he was going to make a few real ones.

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They played the Tampa Bay Thunderstorms in the second round of the bracket, which was more arduous given that they had to fly to and from Boston and Florida three times over the course of eleven days. The Thunderstorms were certainly better than Detroit, and they won consecutive games on their home ice, tying with Boston’s wins during games one and two. Back in their arena, the Bears snagged their third win in game five to uproarious applause from the stadium and superstitious whispers about a home-ice curse to rival Scott Hunter’s infamous run in 2014. Game six, however, brought them back to Tampa Bay, to the arena where Shane and Ilya had first shared the ice together, played for the same team *together*, where Ilya had kissed Shane’s helmet, and where they had felt the first shock of clarity at how good it felt to be allies instead of opponents. To Shane’s surprise, Ilya’s statement that Florida was full of Bostonians had been true. When they won the second round together as teammates once again, there were black-and-gold-clad fans in the audience cheering them on, and Shane remembered that fateful All-Star game right before his life, and his relationship with Ilya, had changed forever.

Shane grinned and waved to the stands, surprised but pleased. It was rare to play for an audience that had split loyalties; most of the time, the arenas they played in were dominated by local fans. It felt good to win this game away from home turf and still see their colors waving in the stands.

And that night, in the club Shane was dragged to for the celebration, Ilya caught Shane’s eye under the strobing lights. He smiled.

They met in the middle of the dance floor, not quite touching, but no longer on opposite sides of the room. No longer alone, staring, or lost.

They left together, to catcalls and jeering from their teammates, but without pretense: no more sneaking surreptitiously into hotel rooms or separate rides back to the hotel. St. Simone cheered Shane with a shot and a wink, Carmichael had the audacity to tuck a condom into Ilya’s shirt pocket, and Benji shouted after their retreating backs, “Make sure you take Shane’s room! He’s on a different floor from me!”

“Fuck,” Shane said meaningfully as they slumped into the back seat of a chauffeured car.

“Thrilling, isn’t it?” Ilya drawled, but he was drumming his hands happily on his own thigh, and his grin spread from ear to ear. He leaned in and whispered, “Being free. Being open. Isn’t it a thrill?”

Shane swallowed. “Yes.”

In bed, tired, exhausted, bruised, sore, exalted, “Can we have sex now?” Ilya asked. “No playoff sex is stupid rule and you know it. We have break now, a full week until next game.”

Shane thought about it. Any other year, it would have been easy to say no. In previous years, his playoff rules had been much, much easier to follow because he hadn’t been sharing a bed with Ilya Rozanov yet.

And, well, they did have a week. “Fine,” he said, and squealed in laughter when Ilya pounced on him.

“If we lose,” he slurred into Ilya’s neck an hour later, “I’m blaming you forever.”

It was Ilya’s turn to laugh.

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A week later, the Bears returned to TD Garden for the first game of the Conference Finals.

They were up against the New York Admirals.

Everybody had been waiting for this match up with bated breath. In the four games they had played against each other in the regular season, they were two-for-two. The Bears placed ahead of them in the Conference rankings by six points, which was a good lead, but all four games they had played during the season had been close.

The Admirals were the defending Cup champions, and they had beaten Shane the previous year when he and Scott Hunter had come face-to-face on the ice. Nevertheless, this time, Shane intended to beat them. All seven games were already sold out, but Shane hoped the round wouldn’t drag on for that long.

In the week off between rounds, he had been carefully following the Western Conference’s progress. The Colorado Mudslides were close to the Bears in points but had come shockingly close to losing to the Wild Card team in the first round, dragging it out to seven games. They had performed much better in the second round and Shane still believed they would advance to the Stanley Cup Finals. If they lost in the third round, however, the Bears would face San Jose in the Finals instead, and Shane was confident that they could beat them. The Mudslides were a better team than San Jose, but the pressure of the playoffs might get to them again.

“Stop talking about the Western Conference,” Ilya ordered him in the locker room as they strapped in for the first game against the Admirals. “You are making the rookies nervous.”

“I am not!” Shane said immediately, looking to the rookies for support. Except, yeah, they did look a little nervous. “Oh, well, sorry. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Very comforting, Captain,” Ilya drawled. “Turn around.”

Shane obeyed without question. Ilya’s fingers slid beneath the straps of his shoulder pads, adjusting them perfectly so that they sat evenly, firm and just the right pressure (enough for

Shane to feel, to ground and situate him, without digging in). “Thanks,” Shane said, hoping he wasn’t bright red.

Cliff cooed, making obnoxious kissy noises at them. Shane blushed and ducked his head.

“Shut up,” Ilya said. He picked up his stick and thwacked it against Cliff’s shin guards lightly. “You are just jealous, Mr. Single Man.”

“Low blow, dude,” Cliff said.

Shane turned back to his cubby while they bickered.

It surprised him how easily normalcy had resumed after revealing their relationship to the team (minus Benji, who had apparently known about it since the first game of the season). Maybe Ilya had the right idea, coming out before the playoffs, although Shane had initially stressed about messing up team dynamics so close to the finish line.

“What would be messed up?” Ilya had demanded. “They will be fine.”

And he was right. Everything was fine. In the locker room and at closed skates, they were chirped and teased with good-natured humor, and it never went further than that. Maybe a few extra curious glances. Nothing strange. Nothing unsurvivable.

But he had already made it through the impossible, so maybe anything was survivable, now.

Shane held his helmet between his hands.

“Want me to buckle it for you, too?” Ilya murmured teasingly.

Shane grinned. “Thanks, but I think I’m good.”

+++

The first game of the Conference Finals went to the Admirals.

“Next one,” Ilya snarled in the locker room. “Next one is ours. We beat them during the regular season, and we will beat them again.”

Playoffs were unimaginably exhausting. They had one day off before the next game, which felt like nothing at all.

“Eat,” Ilya said, putting a bowl of ground beef and rice on the table in front of Shane in the apartment because they hadn’t felt like driving out to the house after the disappointing game.

“Yuck,” Shane said shortly.

“Sorry, did you want to cook five-course meal? No? Fucking eat it.”

He ate. There was no skipping meals these days.

Ilya ran his hands up Shane's sides that night in bed. They were both only wearing sleep shorts, and the dry skin of his palms made a hushed, raspy sound against Shane's skin. As always, his fingers found bruises and sore points, skimming over them lightly. "You look good," Ilya said thoughtfully.

"We are absolutely not having sex-"

"I mean healthy," Ilya interrupted. He kissed the skin above his belly button. Shane's abs showed more now than they had at the beginning of the season, when he was still bulked up from the summer months off, but he had retained some body fat even into the playoffs. They were too well hydrated to ever get the rock-hard abs that gym bros and body-builders sported, but what they had was functional muscle, hard-won, and steady. "Last year, you did not look so good by now."

Shane trailed his hand down, finding Ilya's chin. "Last year I didn't have you," he said, and Ilya, no matter what he later claimed, absolutely blushed. "You take such good care of me."

"Fuck, Hollander, you tease. I thought you said no sex?" Ilya asked, rocking his hips against the mattress provocatively, but Shane knew it was in jest. They were both exhausted.

"Come up," Shane said, and Ilya obeyed.

"When we have day with Stanley Cup," Ilya said seriously, "I wanna do something so fucking nasty with it. Okay?"

Shane wrinkled his nose. "Absolutely not. People eat out of that thing, Ilya. Benji's gonna put his baby in it."

Ilya sighed. "You are so nice," Ilya whined, like it was a complaint. "Who cares? They will never know."

"It's literally gonna be the first joke the entire team makes when we get on that plane," Shane said through a yawn. "And if we actually did something, you know I wouldn't be able to lie about it."

"No," Ilya agreed, "you are terrible liar." He bent down and took Shane's nipple into his mouth. Shane hummed and let him suck for a few seconds before pushing him off. "What?" Ilya complained. "You worried about marks? You let all these asshole Admirals mark you up with pretty little bruises, but I don't get to contribute? They all know we are fucking, who cares?"

"I care," Shane said, smiling at his whiny brat of a boyfriend. "No sex."

"No sex," Ilya sighed, collapsing on top of him. He snuffled a little, digging his nose into Shane's hair, and took a deep breath. "I love your shampoo."

"Thanks, it's seaweed and-"

"I know what it is," Ilya said, taking another breath. "Stanley Cup," he said dreamily. "God, it's so fucking close."

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, closing his eyes and imagining it. “Fuck, Ilya. We’re about to do it.”

“Step Four,” Ilya said. “I promised, didn’t I?”

+++

Game two, they had something to prove, but despite that, the game started slowly.

By the end of the first period, no one had scored. By the end of the second, each team only had a point apiece. Things got interesting early on in the third, when Sidney, one of their rookies, slid a surprising slapshot behind Eric Bennet, but the tension really started to amp up when the Admirals regained their lost ground only two minutes later.

Regulation time ended in a tie, so they went into overtime. In the playoffs, that meant they would play regular periods, twenty minutes each, until someone on either side scored: sudden death. But it would last for as long as it took. In 2008, the series-winning goal for the Stanley Cup had taken seventy additional minutes to get to, longer than an entire regulation game.

“This is going to be brutal,” Cliff said grimly, tucked into his cubby. “Seven days in hell.”

Shane did not share the same dire outlook. “We just have to outlast,” he said firmly, speaking loud enough that everyone in the dressing room could hear. “We have more stamina than they do; we’ve won more games in overtime this season than the Admirals have. Actually, the Bears have won a greater percentage of overtime games than the Admirals for the past six seasons. The odds are in our favor as long as we don’t give up. Ilya is one of the greatest overtime scorers in NHL history: we’ve fucking got this. If it takes five minutes, it takes five minutes. If it takes ten, we give it our all for ten. If it takes thirty, then fuck it, we play thirty more, and we don’t give an inch. We keep going, we keep our defense strong, we keep looking for opportunities—and eventually, it’s our goal.”

“What he said,” Ilya said loudly. And then, not quietly at all, “I like it when you go captain mode.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Shane said, but at least he got the guys laughing instead of dreary-faced and despondent.

They skated back out, rejuvenated.

Twenty minutes passed with no points and few shots on goal, both teams playing it close to the chest, too concerned about defense to take risks. LeClaire was managing the delicate balance of not completely wiping out the reserves of any single line while trying to keep his strongest players on the ice. Fans started reluctantly trickling out of the arena when another intermission was called almost four hours after the game began.

But Shane entered the locker room confidently. “Hunter’s done,” he said without a doubt or a pause. “He’s completely wiped. He’s slow, and he’s sloppy, and he’s losing the *will*. That’s what will get him. Vaughn isn’t doing much better, and I’d say Wagner is doing worse. Honestly, their third and fourth lines are holding up much better, but that’s what you get when

you cluster the rookies and the veterans on opposing lines. The first line is wiped; that's where we'll get them."

Shane was right. He knew he was right. He and Ilya were still younger than all three of the guys on the Admiral's first line, and age wasn't everything, but it sure counted for something when games dragged on for this long.

Shane saved his energy, bided his time. Ten minutes into the period, they took the ice after a pause in play, and he nodded to Ilya, who grinned back and swooped into the face-off circle, cracking a big, theatrical yawn. "Okay, Grandpa," he said to Hunter, whose jaw was clenched. "Let's wrap this thing up, yes? You need to get home before your knees give out, I think."

"Rozanov," he gritted out, "I'm tired of your-"

"Oh, I know you're tired," Ilya cut him off. Shane fought down a smile, leaning in next to Wagner.

"Rozanov-"

The puck dropped.

Ilya got it to Shane, who took off like a bullet.

St. Simone bounced between the blue lines while Ilya and Shane raced laps back and forth across the width of the rink, speeding like they were in an All-Stars skills competition, passing in between the feet of the other players in a blur as they managed to keep control of the puck between them, like they were waiting for an opening. On a lucky shot, one of the Admirals' defensemen got his stick in front of Shane and knocked the puck away, only to be scooped up by Hunter. Shane hid a smile and chased after him, arms moving, coming up on his side, pushing Hunter faster and faster until he could hear his panting breaths.

Shane put on a burst of speed before they made it to the goal and danced in front of Scott, stepping in time to a silent rhythm in his head as he stole the puck from his blade and darted back, turning to avoid a collision by a hair's breadth. Ilya had pulled a similar trick with Vaughn on the other side of the ice, and they each turned and sprinted back, leaving the two Admirals captains behind in a spray of ice.

With only three Admirals anywhere near their defense zone, and St. Simone maneuvering near the blue line until he was wide open for a pass, it was almost easy to land the final shot of the game.

"I told you!" Shane shouted as their teammates flooded the ice to celebrate the ensuing victory. "I fucking told you!"

"You did," Ilya agreed, a grin splitting his face. "You did, you fucking did, you fucking genius." He grabbed Shane by the helmet and planted a kiss on the top of it, like he had done at their first All-Star game.

“I told you,” Shane repeated, panting for breath.

Ilya winked. “Stamina is king,” he said, leaning in. “You taught me that, too.”

“Gross!” Cliff yelled, colliding with both of them and pulling them into a hug.

+++

They drove to New York. How many times had Shane played at Madison Square Garden? The stats existed somewhere in his head, but there were too many to count. New York really did hate Ilya, as he had learned that season, but otherwise, it was a fun city to play in. There were so many people from all over the country in New York that any team could get a decent showing in the stands. Shane was feeling excited to play in the famous arena once more, because MSG had an energy like almost nowhere else.

But they lost the third game to the Admirals.

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“Scott Hunter wants me to come meet his boyfriend at a gay bar,” Shane told Ilya, frowning at his phone as if he was confused how he had gotten himself into this scenario. “I think I’m going to go.”

“Why?” Ilya asked, drawing the word out with disdain.

“Because we’re the only two publicly out players in the NHL, and we’re currently facing off in the Conference Finals for the second year in a row, and we don’t want there to be any bad blood between us or for the media to be able to spin some story about how there is tension between us. I mean, there were enough stories after he won MVP last year. It’s like they can’t resist; now that I’m not in a rivalry with you, they’re trying to throw me against Hunter.”

“And me against Comeau,” Ilya agreed, “and Lemaire. Although, to be fair, I fucking hate both of them. Also, I hate Scott Hunter.”

“You do not hate Scott Hunter. You respect him and appreciate him, and you think he is brave.”

“He stole your moment, your spotlight.”

“He took a lot of attention off me and made sure I wasn’t alone when it really felt like I was,” Shane corrected, although he harbored his own bitter feelings about how Scott’s coming-out had differed from his own. But that didn’t matter, and it wasn’t either of their faults. Tonight would hopefully help prove that to everyone eager to drive wedges into the infinitesimally small community of openly queer professional athletes.

Ilya didn’t object to Shane’s statement. He was quiet for a moment and then he asked, “Can I come?”

Shane sat down on the bed. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Ilya said nothing.

Shane found his hand between the sheets and squeezed it. “We’ll be in public in a queer space surrounded by openly gay people,” he said softly. “If you wanted to come, I think—well, I guess we could invite Cliff and Victor, since they did offer to help with stuff like this. But....”

“You are trying to talk to Hunter,” Ilya said, infusing the name with more contempt than usual. “You do not need a whole audience.”

“Ilya.” Shane remembered words that had once been spoken to him, and he paraphrased: “This isn’t about secrecy. Honestly, it’s not even about privacy anymore. It’s about safety now.” Ilya’s mouth twisted and his eyes flicked away. Shane doubled down. “For as long as you could theoretically get deported at the whim of the NHL, you need to be safe. I think we’ve pushed that as far as we can.”

Ilya’s eyebrows twitched. “You are still mad about Pride Night jerseys?”

“Oh, Ilya,” Shane sighed, “I was never mad. I was *never* mad. I’m just worried. You know that.”

“I know,” he agreed sullenly.

“It’s not fair,” Shane allowed, “and we *will* figure something out. But tonight... I’m sorry.”

Ilya sighed. He took their hands and pressed them against his cheek, nuzzling his nose to Shane’s knuckles. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I cannot act like this is your fault. I understand, and you are right as always, perfect Hollander.” He kissed his knuckles. “Okay. Will you do me a favor?”

“Sure,” Shane said, agreeing quicker than he should have.

Ilya grinned. “Make sure to tell Hunter you are a taken man,” he said, yanking Shane’s hand so that he fell onto the bed next to him.

“Ilya! Scott Hunter does not care! He has a boyfriend!”

“Make sure whole bar knows,” Ilya insisted, kissing across his fingers. “Shane Hollander, very, very taken. So taken. Completely taken.” He leered. “*Taken*, too, do you get it?”

“Shut up,” Shane said with a laugh, stealing his hand back and straightening. “I have to go. I love you, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya said, remaining on the bed. “It won’t always be like this, just so you know.”

“I know,” Shane agreed quietly.

“It will be different soon,” Ilya said, and Shane hoped he was right.

+++

“Hey, Rook.”

“Really, really not a rook anymore,” Shane said, accepting an extremely awkward hug from Scott Hunter. It ended mercifully quickly.

Scott patted his back, almost in apology. “I miss the days when you were still calling me ‘Mr. Hunter,’” he teased.

“Go easy on me,” Shane said. “I was pretty nervous that night.”

“That’s why I didn’t mock you at the time,” Scott said, gesturing him into a booth with another man around Shane’s age. “Still drinking ginger ale?”

“Yep,” Shane said, sitting down on the empty side of the booth. “You must be Kip. I’m Shane—Shane Hollander.” Obviously, he knew that. Shane tried not to visibly wince from embarrassment as he held out his hand.

“Yes, it’s so nice to meet you,” Kip said quickly. “My dad is a huge fan!”

“Wow, really?” Shane laughed, glancing at Hunter.

“Yeah, don’t tell anyone, but he was always a Brooklyn Scouts fan, so this,” Kip gestured between himself and Scott, “was surprising in more ways than one.”

Shane laughed a little too hard. “I, uh, know the feeling.”

“Oh!” Kip said. “Are you in a relationship, then?” He quickly held up his hands. “Obviously, you don’t have to say, and we would never say anything—you know what, forget I even asked-”

“Uh. No, it’s fine.” Shane glanced at Scott. He wasn’t sure what he had expected from Scott Hunter’s boyfriend. He wasn’t sure if he was surprised or not. He *was* pretty sure most people in the world would be surprised to learn that he was dating Ilya Rozanov, but Scott was potentially one of the few exceptions.

In the years before he came out, Shane had spent a lot of time thinking about their out-of-character fight. They had never really talked it out, not even after they had both apologized over Instagram DMs and later reconnected after they were both out. Well, after Shane *was* outed and Scott came out.

Shane shifted. Thinking of Ilya, alone in the hotel, he admitted, “I am seeing someone.”

“That’s great!” Kip said immediately. “Wow! Awesome! We’re so happy for you.” He nudged Scott with his elbow.

“Yeah,” Scott said belatedly. “Awesome.”

Shane paused. He gnawed on his lip. He bit the bullet and asked, “Uh, did you know? When we had our fight, what you said—I always sort of wondered....”

“Know what?” Kip asked.

Scott winced. “I didn’t know at the time,” he said, squeezing Kip’s shoulder. Shane ached at the easy way Scott’s arm was draped over him. “But... I guessed, after... you know, after the leak. It made a lot more sense why you dropped gloves over that comment, looking back.”

“Oh,” Shane said, more embarrassed now than ever.

So, Scott Hunter knew. He knew about Ilya. But at the time, it had just been a regular chirp, and Shane had exploded.

“What?” Kip asked again.

Hunter raised an eyebrow at Shane.

“The... person I’m with,” Shane said. He looked around. The bar was dead. So much for good publicity, but it suited his current needs. “He’s in the NHL. Scott knows who it is.”

“Oh,” Kip said. “Oh, wow. That’s... complicated.”

“I brought him up in that fight we got into, around when we started dating,” Scott explained to Kip, who nodded in recognition. “I didn’t know, but I touched a nerve.”

“I should probably apologize for hitting you,” Shane said. He smirked. “And calling you forty-five.”

“Okay, Rook,” Scott drawled. He held his hand out over the table, a do-over for their awkward introduction. “Peace?”

“Peace,” Shane agreed, shaking his hand.

Getting drinks with Scott and Kip was odd. Interacting with a couple whose history entwined with and paralleled his own was strange. It almost hurt Shane to see how easy they were with each other. Shane relaxed as the night went on, almost able to forget that he and Scott were in a competition that could define their careers, but he felt a familiar bitterness come over him regardless. Shane had attended Scott’s fundraisers and knew how much hockey meant to Scott, and how little he had outside the sport, and risking it all for Kip had been incredibly brave.

But Scott was allowed to risk it all.

No one stole that choice from him.

No laws or passports meant that it would be an immediate risk to his legal safety.

Scott and his partner were both white and both American, and they had never lived in different cities, much less different countries. Scott’s coming out had been so brave, so visibly heroic, so appealing to a mass audience who wanted a meet-cute between two masculine but equally attractive men that the response had been overwhelmingly positive.

Shane had cried on camera as a girl cajoled him into admitting that he was gay.

It was so unfair. So brutally unfair. It also wasn't Scott's fault. Scott was a good guy, and his bravery had taken some of the pressure off Shane—he had not been the *only* one, or even the most recent one. A kiss after winning the Stanley Cup was an enormous story, just much less scandalous.

(Scott had also won MVP last year, even though Shane had garnered more points in the season than him.)

Shane sipped his ginger ale. He allowed himself to sit with his emotions, his resentments, without drowning in them.

“You two are cute,” he said, honestly, an hour later.

“You should try it, if you ever get the chance,” Scott said, pressing the issue gently. “Being out of the closet with the person you love—god, Shane.” He shook his head, smiling down at Kip, who grinned at him like he had hung the stars. “It’s a whole ‘nother world. It’s everything.”

Shane made sure to internalize that feeling, too—hope. The rest of it, he let go.

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“Good?” Ilya asked blearily when Shane crawled into his hotel bed that night, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s waist from behind.

“Good,” Shane told him.

“Good.” Ilya yawned. “Don’t become friends with Scott Hunter, though,” he said sleepily. “Fuck that guy. He’s a million years old.”

Shane pressed a smile against the back of his neck and fell asleep like that.

+++

The Bears won the fourth game in another two grueling overtime periods, evening out their scores to two wins each.

Ilya threw down his helmet in the locker room before game five. “Okay, fucking listen up! I’m fucking sick of overtime. You are sick of overtime. The fans are honestly probably sick of overtime. We’re not doing that shit again. We are winning in sixty minutes, okay? Fucking thank you.” The Bears seemed to take this to heart because they won their second game in a row in regulation time, pulling ahead for the first time in the Conference Finals.

“That’s three games,” Shane said after, too nervous to sleep even though Ilya had come to bed early with him for once. It was summer, and the sun had just set. “One more and-”

“Stanley Cup,” Ilya enunciated, landing hard on the ‘c’ and the ‘p.’ “We win a Stanley Cup together.”

“Just one more,” Shane hoped, “and we get to try.”

Game Six was neck and neck, and Shane was dreading another long overtime standoff until the third period, when Carter Vaughn and Scott both scored within a few minutes of each other, while the Bears were unable to find a way through the other team's robust defense.

Shane winced as the buzzer sounded, stomach pitted with disappointment. If they had won, even if they had just scored two more goals and risked another overtime, then it would be over and they would be on to the next round.

Instead, there was another game.

Vaughn skated past him with a grin and a salute. “See you soon, Hollzy! Looking for a repeat of Sochi, huh?”

“In your dreams,” Shane said, but it was halfhearted at best.

Game seven seemed to come in a blink.

It was their first time making it that far in the series and the energy was different. Which made sense because truly, tonight, it was all or nothing. There would be no more chances to tie things up. Only one of them would move forward.

“I know you can do it,” Ilya said in the locker room, speaking to the team minutes before the first puck drop, quiet and intense. “I know it. I know it. I know how much you want it. I want it to. We all fucking want it. Guess what? So do they,” he said, pointing toward the hallway. “And they *think* they can get it. Do you understand? I *know* we can do it, but they think so, too. They are walking onto the ice with the same attitude, and you know? They want it too. So you have to want it *more*. You have to go out there believing you will get it *more*. There can be no doubt. You decide right here, right now, that you want it—that you will get this fucking win—that you *deserve* this fucking chance at the Finals. Right here, right now. Make that fucking decision, know that it is true, or get the fuck out of my dressing room. Okay? I said, *okay?*”

“*Yes, Captain!*”

“Okay. Good. We all fucking got it?”

“*Yes, Captain!*”

“You fucking want it?!”

“*Yes, Captain!*”

“*Fuck yes!*”

“You want it more than these fuckass New Yorkers?”

“*Yes, Captain!*”

“You think our fans want it more?”

“Yes, Captain!”

“Are you going to give it to them?” He was screaming now, and they were screaming back, even Shane, caught in the surge and the swell, cheeks red:

“Yes, Captain!”

“Then let’s go fucking get it!” Ilya roared.

They swarmed out of the locker room. In a way, playing against New York in the playoffs was fun; their cities were so close together that plenty of fans made the trip, and the stadium was a wash of colors.

Shane scored early, but so did Hunter, and Vaughn got one past Benji just before the first period ended.

“This is where we turn it around,” Shane said in the locker room after flatly denying an interview request, something he had hardly ever done. “Same rules apply as overtime. It’s the same game. We are faster, we are smarter, we have more stamina than these guys. Push that advantage *now*. Don’t let them get past us. Even if we don’t score again until third period, we *will* beat them then. They came into this game more exhausted than we did. That makes this our game to lose, and I’m not doing that. Are you?”

He was surprised by the quick, instinctive call of, *“Yes, Captain!”* that rewarded him.

“Really, just so sexy,” Ilya muttered.

“Shut up.”

The second period started on a high note.

Shane watched from the bench, eagle-eyed, as Pummel’s line swarmed the center ice, beautiful concentric rings of young, quick skaters. Shane had never lost the joy of watching other people play hockey, nor had he lost the ability to see the aesthetically beautiful aspects of it, even through his technical knowledge.

It all came down to the skaters. Very few hockey players were as technically skilled at skating as professional figure skaters, but that didn’t stop them from gliding. So much movement and momentum from such comparatively little effort: one hard push of their skates and they could fly.

Pummel was flying. He was exceptionally talented for such a young player and probably suffered from being on a team with the Bears’ all-star roster. On another team, he would have already had more time on the ice and likely more goals, even in his first year in the NHL. But he knew how to make the time he had count.

He was beautiful to watch, and he was strong.

“That’s the next generation, right there,” Shane said to Ilya.

“Can’t deny it,” Ilya agreed.

Pummel’s first goal in a playoff game tied them up at 2-2. The refs didn’t kick up a fuss when the team poured off the bench to celebrate with him at LeClaire’s signal, blushing and spluttering but so visibly pleased, but quickly ushered them off so play could resume.

“Can’t let the fucking rookie beat me,” Ilya said firmly.

“He kind of already did.”

“Oh, is that a challenge, Hollander?”

“No, it wasn’t-”

“Accepted,” Ilya said firmly.

He scored off an interception forty seconds later, finally pulling the Bears ahead, and grinned smugly at Wagner when he roared in irritation. “Told you,” he said smugly to Shane.

Shane rolled his eyes. “I was *not*-”

There was an intense face-off in the second period that almost stalled out when no one could get the puck out of the circle and into play.

They were clumped together in the left end zone face-off circle near the Admirals’ goal, fighting for the puck, and Hunter and Vaughn were sweating. All six forwards were close together, barely moving, desperately trying to track the puck between skates and sticks.

Ilya knocked it through Vaughn’s legs. Shane swooped behind him and escaped the cluster with the puck, knocking it straight toward Bennet, who skidded to the edge of the crease and dropped to try to stop it. The puck scraped beneath his leg, not blocked but slowed enough that it didn’t cross the goal line, but Ilya was already there, behind Bennet, stick extended to knock it the final inch before Bennet could drop on top of it.

They were two points ahead.

Things picked up again in the third period after a slow start, where the Admirals pushed uselessly against the Bears’ wall of defense. Cliff knocked it to St. Simone, in the neutral zone, and all the players turned and raced to the other side of the rink. The puck suddenly started flying around the boards, hurling between spread out players. One moment, Ilya was behind the Admirals’ goal line, whipping the puck to St. Simone, who carried it to the other corner of the rink before he got pinned against the boards. He managed to send the puck to Shane by knocking it back between his own legs, who caught it against his freshly re-taped stick. He looked up.

Ilya was right where Shane needed him to be. Center ice, alone.

The puck went from Shane, to Ilya, to the net.

Shane crossed the ice in a second, throwing his arms around Ilya. “Oh my god,” he said. “Oh my god! Hat trick! Fucking hat trick! In the *playoffs*!”

Ilya grinned hard, squeezing Shane tightly as the rest of their team swooped in, colliding with their captain. “You just need to punch Hunter, then it will be Gordie Howe hat trick for you.”

The score was 5-2. They were ahead by three.

“Fuck,” Shane said shakily, feeling his fingers trembling inside his gloves as they skated back to the bench. “Fuck, Ilya, oh my *god*.”

They were going to win.

Such thoughts were sacrilegious amongst hockey players, but damn it. There were ten minutes left on the clock, and they were going to win.

Ilya and Shane jumped the barrier in unison. Behind the minimal protection of the wall, Ilya shook off one of his gloves and Shane did the same. In the space between their bodies, shielded by LeClaire and the assistant coaches, Ilya found Shane’s hand and pressed hard on his knuckles, almost a massage. “Calm heads,” he said quietly. “Calm minds. Is okay. We fucking got this.”

“Holy shit,” Shane breathed, closing his eyes. His heart was galloping, but he listened to Ilya’s quiet murmurs, cutting through the roar of the stadium, and felt the press of his fingers. “Holy shit, Ilya. Hat trick.”

“Yeah,” Ilya agreed, smiling, and Shane smiled back, the tidal wave of overwhelming sensation receding until it was just Ilya, just Ilya’s voice and his hands. “You want another? Still ten minutes left. You’ve scored more in less time.”

Shane laughed. “I wouldn’t want to make Hunter feel too bad.”

“Eh, I don’t mind this,” Ilya said, something flinty and sharp coming into his eyes. “I think I got one more.”

“Four-goal game?” Shane asked, raising his eyebrows. “You really are cocky.”

“Not cocky,” Ilya said. “Just that good.”

He scored again three minutes later.

Then Shane scored in the last two minutes.

This time, Ilya collided with him. “Is almost unfair!” he crowed, probably loud enough for the cameras to pick up. “The rest of the world has to compete with us! With you and me, same city, same team, *same fucking line*! What the fuck are they supposed to do?”

They won, 7-2.

“Fucking hell of a way to finish it off,” Cliff said with his dazzling veneered smile.

“Yeah,” Shane said. He imagined this was what being high felt like.

They were going to compete for the Stanley Cup.

“Nice shooting,” Scott said, giving Shane a tired, disappointed grin when he passed their bench during their exhilarating victory laps.

Shane stopped. “Thanks.”

“Guess I really can’t keep calling you ‘Rook’ anymore, huh?”

“I think it’s been inaccurate for a while,” Shane said, smiling. “But... thank you. For everything.”

“Shane,” Scott said, “you’ve got nothing to thank me for. You did it all yourself. Well fucking done.”

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They had one week off. Just one.

(This time, Shane held firm on the no-sex rule.

“What? But we won! Come on, I want to fuck you-”

“It took seven games and two overtime periods. Absolutely not.”

“Had nothing to do with anything. Stupid fucking sport, all of you are crazy!”

“Oh, I’m crazy? Good thing you don’t have to fuck crazy, then. Who would want to fuck someone crazy?”

“Shane. Shane, please, please! Just the tip!”

“Just the—ew! Yuck! You are disgusting! And I hate your beard!”

“This is terrible thing to say! It is playoff beard! Ancient tradition!”

“Who’s crazy now?”

“Definitely still you.”)

They kept themselves entertained.

They flew between Boston and Colorado every few days, long, relentless flights that made Shane hate the very concept of home-ice advantage.

But a calm certainty settled over Shane, a focused attention that was not the same as the prolonged dissociative episodes he had experienced the previous year, but was not entirely different. He wanted to win. He felt a *need* to win, a need that might cripple him one day. He still, even after all this time, felt the urge to prove himself. He had done it in the last playoffs,

even though he hadn't won; no one had questioned how vital he had been to the Voyageurs by the end, which meant that when he was traded, they had looked like fucking idiots, and he had looked wronged.

Last year, that was all Shane needed. He didn't need to win the Cup.

Shane didn't want to look like a victim anymore, though. He was ready to be seen as a victor again.

The Bears took games one and two and were flying high until the Mudslides came back and got three and four. Bears took five.

Tonight was game six, and the guest locker room of Denver's Pepsi Center was almost silent.

If they lost tonight, it wouldn't be the end. They would take it to game seven, and that single game would determine the winner.

But if they won tonight, they won it all.

Ilya gathered them all together, fully dressed and sitting in their cubbies. "What can I say?" he said, spreading his arms. "What would you say?" he asked, pointing at Shane.

"Let's win this one," Shane said automatically.

Ilya nodded. "Good start, that. You?" he asked St. Simone, the other alternate captain. "What do you say?"

"Ollander summed it up pretty well," St. Simone quipped.

"Boring," Ilya said. "Okay, well, here is what I have to say. Last time I won a Cup, last time this team won a Cup, it was Game Six. Like tonight. Same score, three-two in games. And I like the sound of three-two, did you know? You know why I like it? Four-nothing is boring. So is five-one. Too obvious, so easy—I am Russian, I like to work for my rewards. But if the final score of the series is four-three, well, yes, that is a winner—but it looks a little too even for me. People could say, 'well, if it was one more game, maybe they would have tied.'" He shook his head slowly. "Nuh-uh. I don't want those numbers to be too close. Four-two, for me. Looks like a fucking winner. Looks like someone who had to *fight* for it, but got it in the end. So I want to win. I want to win tonight. Last time we were about to win a Cup, I said I wanted to hear our fans. Okay, well, this time, I want to hear our fans from across the fucking country, got it? I want all of fucking Boston on their feet, I want to hear them screaming from the middle of this fucking desert! I want to hear the roar and the stomp! I want you to bring me there, fucking understand? I know you can fucking do it, so do it! Bring me the fuck there! You can give them something to fucking scream about, so *fucking do it!*"

"You're a really great captain," Shane said, almost shyly, when the screaming had finally calmed down and they were about to walk through the tunnel, potentially to glory.

Ilya knocked their helmets together. "I like impressing you," he admitted quietly. "Gives me good motivation. Good speech, right? And even better because English is not my native

language.”

“You’re so fucking impressive,” Shane said. In clumsy Russian that he had practiced over and over with Svetlana, he said, “*I can’t wait to watch you win.*”

Ilya’s eyes turned molten.

“Fuck, Hollander speaks Russian?” Aliue muttered.

“They really have been together forever, I guess,” Pummel responded in a whisper.

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His parents were in the stands, and they were wearing black and gold. They were wearing his name, and his number, in black and gold.

Shane saw them on the massive screens above as the cameramen in the crowd masterfully cut between the families cheering for both sides and felt tears welling in his eyes as Ilya came to stand next to him.

Then the camera cut again, and Hayden, Jackie, the kids, and Svetlana were waving and blowing kisses. Svetlana was, of course, dressed head-to-toe in black and gold with a Rozanov jersey, and Hayden and Jackie were wearing street clothes, but it didn’t matter. Shane was embarrassed when a camera operator had the bright idea to split-screen with his face and caught the moment when his jaw dropped in shock.

“He told me they weren’t coming!” he shouted, outraged and delighted and heartened to his core. “That fucking asshole!” But it was belied by the way he was beaming and waving.

“Yes, I’ve been telling you, he is obviously terrible friend,” Ilya drawled. Then he nudged Shane and they grinned at each other, still projected for the stadium to see. “Well, Hollander? I ask you again, are you going to disappoint them?”

“Not a chance in hell,” Shane said, and he took off for the barriers with the sound of Ilya’s laughter following after him.

+++

At the end of the second period, they were behind by one. The Mudslides had a stronger start, but the Bears had stamina on their side. Ilya scored twice in the second period, and Pummel landed a slapshot, putting them at 3-4 going into the last period.

But the Bears were known for late-game goals and turning games around in the third period. Tonight, they just had to prove it.

The shifts changed and Ilya, Shane, and St. Simone retook the ice without pause or breath. Ilya got control of the puck within ten seconds.

Shane turned and skated in hard, getting to the edge of the crease while Ilya and St. Simone lingered near the blue line with Cliff and Hammersmith, passing the puck while avoiding

checks and looking for openings as Shane kept the Mudslides' goalie screened, moving in pace with each shift of his body even though his back was to him, and completely ignoring the defenseman trying to bully him away. Shane hunched low, awaiting the moment when one of the guys would see an opening to send the puck his way and then, hopefully, into the net.

St. Simone shot the puck to Ilya when the Mudslides' center and right forwards both lunged for him at the same time.

Across the rink, Shane met Ilya's eyes and read the change of plans in half a second.

Shane dodged hard out of the crease right as Ilya shot, distracting the goalie but also getting his own body out of the way as the puck sailed through the space he had been blocking a millisecond before.

They were tied, and Ilya had scored his second playoff hat trick of the season.

Their celebrations were blissfully, neurotically wordless. Most players tried a lot harder not to incur penalties in the playoffs, but Shane could have sworn that the Mudslides' goalie nearly gave in to the urge to break his stick out of frustration.

Five minutes on the clock. That wasn't a long time in a game. If neither team scored, they would go into overtime, which could potentially run for hours during the playoffs. Again, that would not be the worst fate, because as the Bears had proved in the Conference Finals, they tended to do well in long periods of overtime, but even just the idea made Shane twitch.

Sudden death to win the Cup felt cheap to him, as absurd as that was. He wanted to play a regulation game. He thought about Ilya's speech: if Ilya was more interested in counting how many games it took them to get to four, then Shane was more interested in watching the clock run down to zero.

He got his chance.

They were all in the Bears' defense zone, almost half the players stuck in a cluster behind the goal line, when the Mudslides' right forward managed to get the puck out to his captain, standing unguarded in one of the defense face-off circles. He quickly shot the puck toward the net, but Benji was quicker and the puck bounced hard off his pads, ricocheting quickly down center ice.

The Mudslides' captain was the closest, and he turned on his heel, chasing after it.

But Shane was faster.

The breakaway happened in seconds. Shane sprinted, feet pounding almost like he was running on solid ground, each push carrying him another five meters, then ten, then twenty, until he cleared the blueline with the puck against his stick, the Mudslides captain at his back and a defenseman careening in from the side, the goalie standing on the edge of the crease, getting closer, ready to drop.

But he was alone.

Alone on the ice.

Or that was how it felt for one perfect, silent moment.

Shane took the shot.

Some things came down to a moment. An opportunity, seen, seized, and grasped. The dominoes tipped one way when they could have just as easily fallen flat, done nothing.

The goal light lit up.

Shane dropped to his hands and knees, stick abandoned.

Game Six.

Step Four.

One year in Boston.

The Stanley. Fucking. Cup.

Ilya grabbed his shoulder and hauled him to his skates, throwing his arms around his shoulders, gloved fingers scrambling for purchase on the back of his jersey.

Shane squeezed back for a fierce moment then shoved his shoulders, getting enough distance between them to look around wildly. "How long," he gasped, searching for the scoreboard. "How long is--"

"Eighty seconds," Ilya said, grabbing him and shaking as their teammates surrounded him in a furious, aggressive victory. "Eighty *fucking* seconds left. Think they will do it, Hollander?"

"No, I fucking don't!" Shane yelled, and the team erupted.

Eighty seconds.

And the Mudslides were going to fight for them.

"Play it out," LeClaire ordered as they swung past the bench, brow furrowed in concentration. Ilya took a hit of smelling salts from Varkov. Shane politely turned down the offer. "They're gonna send out their goalie, but for fuck's sake, *do not let them score.*"

As if he had to specify that.

Ilya straightened with a gasp and they swung back to center ice for what would likely be the final face-off of the 2017-2018 NHL Season. The face-off that could decide the Stanley Cup winner.

Shane tried to remind himself that tonight was not all or nothing. If they lost, it would just mean another game, one that they would play in their own arena, to their own fans.

But fuck it, he wanted to win *this* one.

Ilya won the face-off, but they were playing against six skaters instead of five, as the Mudslides had predictably pulled their goalie from the net to get an extra attacker, desperate for a goal in the last minute of the game to push them into overtime, and therefore willing to risk the Bears getting a two-point lead. With an extra body to block players and intercept passes, the Mudslides quickly regained control.

With forty seconds left, they raced toward the Bears' goal. St. Simone checked a player before he could make a shot on goal, and Shane stole the puck from between their feet, racing back up the ice, making it almost across the blue line before he got slammed. He managed to stay on his feet but lost the puck and turned around at a delay, adrenaline fueling him more than smelling salts ever could have.

The puck was held by the Mudslides' captain, and he raced side by side with Ilya down the center ice, outpacing him with the speed that the Mudslides were known for. They were barely over the blue line when he made his desperate last stand, raring back and trying to send the puck toward the net.

Ilya lunged flat onto his stomach, stick held out far in front of him across the ice. The tip glanced off the side of the puck. He knocked the shot wide before Benji even had to drop, and the puck flew harmlessly into open ice and bounced off the boards.

Fifteen seconds left.

Then twelve. The Mudslides' captain reached the puck first.

Eight. Shane, rounding the goal from the left side of the ice, stole it back from him.

Six seconds. Shane shot it to Ilya.

Five. Ilya took off.

Two. The left winger dove in, blocking Ilya's path, and Ilya dodged hard to the side.

One. Ilya didn't make it in time to get a final shot on the Mudslides' empty goal.

But it didn't matter.

5-4. The Bears had won the Stanley Cup.

For once, Shane was happy to be at the center of the enormous piling hug around Benji in their crease. His ears were ringing too much to even register the screams of his teammates or the roar of the crowd. Ilya's arms were too tight around him to feel anything else.

They moved in circles, pushing in and out, the ice flooded with every member of their team as their song blasted over the speakers and streamers rained down on the ice, littered with discarded gloves and sticks. Pummel was crying. Benji was jumping up and down despite his heavy pads, pointing to someone in the crowd. He heard St. Simone screaming in French, *"I'm giving you a fucking ring, baby! I'm giving you a fucking ring!"*

They pulled away, overwhelmed, and then Shane had Ilya, just Ilya, almost alone for how much his vision had tunneled.

“We did it,” Shane whispered, craving nothing more than to cradle his fingers around the back of Ilya’s neck and kiss him on the ice. But he knew, in the long run, that wasn’t what he wanted. He didn’t want drama and presentation—Ilya didn’t even really want that, and he certainly didn’t want to copy Scott Hunter, even though it would be much more dramatic for two hockey players to kiss each other. They didn’t crave media attention, and they both valued their privacy. What they wanted was to live honestly, to live openly, to live authentically. To not have to lie, or fear the consequences. With that in mind, Shane resisted the urge to kiss his boyfriend but wrapped his arms around his shoulders instead and pulled him into a tight, fierce embrace. Authentically. “Remind me, what was Step Four of your plan again?”

Ilya laughed, loud and bright, squeezing Shane around the chest as their teammates flooded in, hands beating on Ilya’s back and shoulders and knuckles wrapping briefly on Shane’s helmet as around them the Bears seized each other and shook their wild elation and fervent, personal celebrations. “Step Four?” Ilya said. He pulled away, grasping Shane by the shoulders, and shook him hard enough to rock him on his skates. “Step Four: win the fucking Stanley Cup!”

He threw his head back and howled, more like a wolf than a bear.

Seized by inspiration, Shane cupped his hands around his mouth and made the high, fluttering call of a loon. It was almost certainly lost to the roar of the arena, but Ilya heard it and he turned to Shane with a smile so wide it must have hurt his face. And that was all that mattered.

They brought the Cup onto the ice, and their families walked out too. Yuna and David both hugged Ilya like it was normal, or like they couldn’t resist. And who the fuck cared what anyone had to say about it?

Shane couldn’t tear his eyes away as Ilya lifted the Cup.

He wanted to kiss him.

One day. One day. Maybe it wouldn’t be until they were retired, and it definitely couldn’t happen until Ilya had citizenship or guaranteed protections from a country that wasn’t Russia, but *one day*.

Shane would kiss him on the ice in front of the world and not think twice about it.

The weight of the Stanley Cup was familiar to Shane now. This was the third time he had hoisted it above his head in the greatest victory their world recognized.

He lifted it. He kissed it.

With Ilya beside him, it felt lighter than ever.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've ever felt prouder of any single idea I've ever had than making Shane do the loon call on the ice after winning the Stanley Cup with Ilya. Spread the gospel, amen!

The sheer amount of notes I had to take for this chapter. I had fucking charts. Brackets, even! I've watched enough hockey that some of it has all blended together, but still plenty of credits:

- Ilya on his stomach knocking the puck away is from the very end of the 2013 Stanley Cup between the Blackhawks and the Bruins
- Ilya's over the shoulder goal is not that unique but I used a Trevor Zegres video as reference (comments have reliably informed me it is in fact called "the michigan" if you want to look it up more easily, thank you comments!)
- the majority of general inspiration came from watching a Dallas Stars/Jason Robertson highlight reel for the 2022-23 season

I have to say -- this was some of the most fun I have ever had *writing*. I enjoy action scenes, but I never had any idea how much I would love writing sports sequences like this, but I actually exhilarated myself multiple times this chapter. I sincerely hope it was half as fun to read as it was to write, and just thank you for giving me a reason to write this!!!

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Not the final chapter! I lied! You're welcome!

Chapter Notes

I know some people were disappointed that they didn't get to kiss on the ice, but that's just not where their relationship was yet, and they don't need the world to know to be happy together! thank you all for still being nice and respectful in the comments, I know it was bittersweet, but like Shane said, they will get their moment one day! Thanks for reading, enjoy some more bittersweetness (also! note! this is not the last chapter lol)

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

They woke up together. They woke up hot. Their room was bathed in sunlight, falling in broad, bright, slanting lines across the dark blue bedsheets and their naked skin, touching at every conceivable point from their ankles to their temples.

It was so bright, reflecting from the off-white walls, that Shane had to squint a little to make out Ilya's face, slightly puffy from sleep and heavy-lidded, already smiling down at him.

"Where are your glasses?" he murmured, reaching out and cupping Shane's cheek.

Even though he had just opened them, Shane let his eyelids flutter shut. Ilya's hands were so big. It felt like he could cup the world in his palms. Or maybe it just felt that way to Shane.

"You know I don't wear them while I sleep," he grumbled half-heartedly.

Ilya hummed. "Is a shame," he murmured. "Fuck, Hollander."

"Fuck," Shane agreed, letting his neck go limp. Ilya cradled his head back down to his chest, hand sliding around the back of his skull to run through his hair and play with the curls on his nape. "Ilya..."

"We did it," Ilya whispered. "We fucking did it."

Shane smiled against the cushion of muscle beneath his cheek. His ear was pressed against his pec and he could hear the languid, steady thump of Ilya's heart. These days, he thought he could hear it wherever he went. "We did it."

"I am never leaving this bed."

“Okay,” Shane said, yawning. “Sounds good to me.”

“No,” Ilya whined. “You must be responsible one who says we have a plane to catch and must eat breakfast and get dressed and yadda yadda yadda. It cannot be left up to me. We will miss flight and starve.”

“I don’t know,” Shane mumbled. “I think I’m okay staying right here. We’ll hire a butler. They can bring us all our food in bed until we rot through the mattress. Although,” he mused, “it’s a pretty nice mattress. I think it’ll take a while.”

Ilya’s fingers kept playing with his hair but he took a moment to respond. “We don’t have to go,” he said, “if you don’t want to. Optional attendance.”

Shane sighed through his nose. He debated opening his eyes and finding Ilya’s, but decided he was too comfortable to bother. “We should go,” he said. “I should go. Rolex gave me another watch, you know? When else am I going to have a chance to wear it?”

Ilya huffed. “Okay, it’s official, I will agree to let Yuna be my manager too,” he said. “I want Rolex diamonds to match you.”

Shane smiled. He pursed his lips so he could kiss Ilya’s chest. “I’ll buy you a Rolex if you want one,” he promised. “You pick the model. Send it to me, I’ll buy it for you. Birthday present. Did you know we’re filthy rich on top of everything else?”

“Oh, I know it,” Ilya said. “What did I do to deserve all of this?”

Shane finally turned his head so he could meet Ilya’s eyes. His answer was simple. “You knocked.”

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The NHL awards were once again held in Las Vegas, but they had flown back to Boston for the Cup Parade first, which had been somehow even more insane than the parades Shane had attended as a Voyageur; Boston fans were passionate, and most of them had not gotten to expunge their energy watching the game in person, so they flooded the streets in a shower of confetti. It immediately reminded Shane of Ilya’s final speech before Game Six, and he wholeheartedly believed that he would have been able to hear the noise of this crowd from Denver.

Shane watched from the trolley carting them through what felt like mile-long stretches of fans, waving to all of them and feeling overwhelmed, as Ilya hoisted his second Conn Smyth trophy, awarded alongside the Cup, above his head and screamed like a maniac, absolutely matching the energy of the gathered throngs and delighting the denizens of his adopted city.

Cliff was almost as loud as the crowd on his own. He leaned over the railings of the open-roofed vehicle to high-five the slowly passing crowd. Shane was worried someone was going to pull him out before he remembered that Cliff was a wall of muscle. He kept himself inside the cart but watched fondly as Cliff blew kisses to a shrieking little girl balanced on her mom’s shoulders, her face painted to look like a cartoon bear’s.

“God, it feels good,” Cliff said to Shane, pulling back.

“Yup,” Shane said, because it really was that simple.

“And you’ve gotten *three* in four fucking years, you fucking maniac,” Cliff exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief. “What are the stats on that, Hollzy?”

Shane tried to calculate the statistics, accounting for the additions of new teams throughout the 70s and the 90s, but the numbers ran out of his head. They had turned the corner and were driving past an open park full of people. A large cohort of fans had converged on the spot with their own speaker system set up, playing something loud and upbeat with a female vocalist, and Shane could see a cleared space for dancers and performers in their midst. The section was a riot of color and glittery outfits, more like an impromptu dance party than a parade. As the buses turned the corner, the crowd’s attention turned to face them. There was a sudden hustle of movement, and Shane heard screams of his own name rise above the rest of the noise. Quickly, two huge guys wearing too much leather for June hoisted and unfurled an enormous banner that read *THIS IS OUR BOSTON PRIDE*.

Shane smiled. He held his hand up and waved. “Love you all!” he shouted, and the entire section lit up with excitement. “Happy Pride! Thank you!”

Ilya was holding onto the railing and jumping up and down hard enough to rock the bus. His head turned to face Shane with a manic grin across his face, so wide his teeth didn’t touch.

“I love you, too!” Cliff hollered, and the crowd grew even more ecstatic. “I fucking love gay people! Woohoo!”

In answer to Cliff’s earlier question, Shane said, “It’s pretty fucking good.”

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The flight to Las Vegas was what Shane and Ilya were complaining about as they dragged themselves out of their sun-drenched bed less than two weeks after winning the Cup. Already, the bruises left behind by the playoffs were fading. Some of their aches and pains would linger a little longer, but Shane traced a faint yellow bruise on Ilya's stomach as they faced each other in the bathroom, brushing their teeth. He couldn’t wait until they were completely gone.

A fresh canvas.

“We should make an additional donation to some environmental nonprofits this year,” Shane said after spitting out his toothpaste. “All this flying is not good.”

“It is way too late to worry about that,” Ilya said, and Shane sighed.

“I’m sick of flying.”

“Just because of the emissions?” Ilya teased.

“That too.”

There was a stubborn smear of glitter on the base of Ilya's deltoid, just above the hollow curve of his armpit. Shane worried at the spot with his fingers, wondering which party it had come from. They had celebrated that first night in Denver, then celebrated again on the plane back, drinking champagne forty thousand feet in the air, then had their first true enormous party in a nightclub that management had rented out for them for a night once they were back in Boston. There had been confetti cannons and dancers with body paint involved—someone had joked about calling in a gigolo for Shane. Ilya had asked Shane to explain what the word meant and then glared, wrapping a possessive arm around his waist as he declared, "I am enough gigolo for ten men."

The glitter was probably from that. Or the parade. Even though they had showered (thoroughly) after both events.

Ilya pulled his hand away, studying the glitter that had transferred to the tips of Shane's fingers. "Pretty," he said, kissing them. His lips sparkled when he smiled. "Should I wear it to the awards show? Eye palette, with glimmery colors? Svetlana has some in gold, and it looks very pretty when she wears it with the thick eyeliner."

Shane smiled, placing his hand on Ilya's face. He tapped lightly on his temple, not close to his eye (he had no idea where the glitter had come from or if it was even body safe) and left behind incredibly faint traces of silver. "Gold would look good on you," he said, "with your eyes and your tan. It's your color."

Ilya's eyes went heady, and he slipped his arms around Shane's waist. Shane couldn't resist glancing in the mirror to see them together, their bodies worked to the brink from weeks of relentless exercise and shredded as a result. They looked *good* together. All the little ways they were different, and the ways they were the same. "Gold looks good on both of us," Ilya said.

"Too bad the Stanley Cup is silver," Shane said with a fake sigh, feeling a faint thrill every time he reminded himself that they had actually *done it*. They had actually won.

And next year, they would get the chance to do it all over again.

"Hmm, yes, is a shame," Ilya said. "Should I get gold watch to match with Bears, or silver to match the Cup? Decisions, decisions."

"You should get silver as a reminder that you are the second-best player in the league," Shane quipped with a grin. He didn't want to look away from the mirror. Ilya's side profile as he gazed down at Shane was irresistibly beautiful.

Ilya gasped theatrically, seizing Shane by the waist and lifting him up. "You are terrible, terrible," he said, depositing him on the counter. "Bully." But his face was buried in the crook of Shane's neck, pressing wet kisses to his skin, still sleep-warm. "So mean to me. Everyone should know how terrible you are and how much I must put up with."

"Isn't it worth it, though?"

Ilya rolled his head to the side. They found each other's eyes, even though the angle was awkward. "So fucking worth it."

"You don't have to decide," Shane said, squeezing his shoulders. "I'll talk to Rolex. Get you two watches. Probably by the time we touch down in Vegas."

"God," Ilya drawled. "I really am a gigolo, huh? My rich, three-time Stanley Cup-winning boyfriend spoils me so much."

Shane pouted. "And all you got me for my birthday was a blowjob," he teased, "which you would've done, anyway."

"Lies! Liar! Slander! Is libel!"

"It's definitely not libel—"

"I gave you two blowjobs and rimjob," Ilya said confidently, straightening so he could kiss him. "Very different."

"You're awful," Shane said, grinning against his teeth.

"Was the middle of fucking playoffs, I'm supposed to go shopping? What, with Rose Landry?" he demanded. "I got you Stanley Cup *and* championship ring, didn't I?"

"Excuse you! I got those for myself."

"Ah, you are so rude! Never appreciate my wonderful gifts!" He blew a raspberry against Shane's cheek, and Shane shrieked with laughter, trying to shove his face away. "I'll get you something, don't worry."

Shane turned the shove into a grip, holding Ilya's cheek and chin in his hands and bringing him close to his face. "I don't need anything," he said. "I don't need *anything*."

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Shane would never get tired of seeing Ilya in a tux. Not all the guys in the NHL cleaned up well—some people, Shane thought, were too muscular for a fitted suit to look good on them, but that was not the case with Ilya. His shoulders filled out his jacket and strained his undershirt, and the low collar of his vest made his waist look sinful. And his thighs....

"You are staring," Ilya teased in a sing-songy voice, doing a bad job of hiding a smug grin behind the rim of his champagne glass.

Shane knew he was blushing and hoped he had enough stage makeup on that it wouldn't be obvious (probably not, though: he had told the network-provided television stylist not to cover his freckles, just in case Ilya won the MVP award that night). Ilya was not wearing the golden eyeshadow he had talked about, but Shane wondered if one day he would, maybe at this very event a few years down the line. Or even next year. "Am I not allowed to stare?" Shane asked.

“Is very allowed,” Ilya said, “and you are very obvious. But then, I look very good, so no point denying it.”

“It’s unfair,” Shane said quietly. “You look good sweating through your gym shorts. You look good in European streetwear and those awful tracksuits. You also look good in a Saint Lauren tuxedo. It’s literally not fair.”

“Just to be clear,” Ilya said, “I look best in nothing.”

“You two are very conspicuous,” Yuna said, appearing over Shane’s shoulder and shoving a glass of water into his hands. Shane almost yelped in surprise. Ilya chuckled under his breath. Yuna gave Shane a searching, reproachful look. “Anyone with a brain could tell that you are flirting.”

“We’re not—we were not-”

“Shane is a very respectful flirt,” Ilya said, accepting the refilled flute she handed him. “Very polite. You have raised a true gentleman, Yuna.”

“Ilya,” she said, rolling her eyes, but even she couldn’t resist a smile. When he tried, Ilya could charm anyone, even reserved and career-focused mothers. “Come on, boys. They’re about to start ushering everyone to the tables, and we don’t want to be late. Oh, Shane,” her eyes suddenly turned glossy. “You look so handsome.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Shane said, kissing her cheek. “You look beautiful, too.”

“A gentleman,” Ilya teased as they turned and moved to the table with the rest of their Boston cohort and Shane’s dad.

The award show was slow and boring, full of poorly written and awfully acted skits, but the food was decent and the alcohol flowed. Shane switched from water to beer once he had eaten something and tried not to visibly frown at the awful jokes the presenters read off the teleprompter. At least this year, he and Ilya had both turned down offers to present, so they didn’t have to go backstage.

Shane cheered, and Ilya laughed way too loudly when Hayden won the Lady Byng Award for outstanding sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct—a first in his career, as Hayden had, in the past, been prone to jumping into fights even when he did not start them. Shane watched his season recap video with a smile: Hayden hovering over the rookies, checking up on them each time they got checked or boarded, Hayden scoring goals and setting up assists for JJ, and, of course, Hayden guiding Shane off the ice when he was injured in Montreal, circumventing the brawl.

Miitka won the Vezina for best goaltender, which he deserved for carrying the team on his back for two seasons. “Can’t believe fucking Voyageurs got two awards,” Ilya grumbled.

“The Voyageurs got nothing,” Shane said. “The *players* earned them.”

Ilya was awarded the Rocket Richard, and Shane the Art Ross Trophy: those awards, tracking goals and assists, were empirical. No one could shortchange them on that, at least.

Shane's speech was short. "I have loved my time in Boston," he finished after thanking a long list of names to take up most of his time, "and playing with the Bears and winning a Cup together has been one of the highlights of my career already. I'm happy to receive this because it means that I have returned to them a fraction of what they gave me: friendship, family, and a real home, for the first time in a long time. Thank you."

"Should have ended, 'And fuck Montreal,'" Ilya told him as he settled back at the table, the auditorium still ringing with applause.

Shane fiddled with his bowtie, then leaned to the side to let Yuna re-straighten it for him. "I basically did."

"Not so loud," LeClaire said with a smirk, but it was disingenuous, and he raised a proud salute to Ilya and Shane. "Best first line in NHL history," he said. "And that's a fact. Congratulations."

The MVP Award was one of the last of the night. Shane applauded when Leah Campbell, one of the best players in the Women's League, took the stage to present it. He had met her in passing a few times over the years and during the 2014 Sochi Olympics, and knew that she was openly married to another player in the league and far from the only openly queer player; it was one of the intrinsic ironies of his and Ilya's situation and emphasized the double standards faced by men and women in their shared sport. Her skit was a little more sentimental and earnest than many that had preceded her, and Shane was pretty sure she caught his eye in the crowd as she raised the envelope.

He and Ilya were both finalists.

"And the winner of the Hart Memorial Trophy for most valuable player is--"

Shane slid his shoe against Ilya's beneath the table.

There was a pause. Leah finished, "Avery Wilson."

Shane applauded. He was one of the first to do so. Many of the people in the room looked surprised, including Wilson, captain of the Colorado Mudslides and first-time nominee for the MVP award. He stood up after a delay and glanced toward Shane and Ilya as the applause gradually picked up before finally heading for the stage.

Shane politely fixed his expression into a small smile. Ilya, on the other hand, looked furious, and Shane knew that it was not because Ilya himself had lost.

"It should have been you," Ilya whispered furiously, probably loud enough to be overheard by their entire table. But they were sitting with LeClaire and the managers and the owner of the Bears, who all looked equally put out that, despite having two nominations, the Hart Trophy had not come to their team. Yuna looked nearly as furious as Ilya and David looked devastated but, like Shane, not shocked. "It was supposed to be you."

“It was never going to be me,” Shane said calmly, just quiet enough for Ilya to hear. “It’s amazing that I was even in the top three. I’m just surprised it wasn’t you. Clap, Ilya.” Reluctantly, Ilya obeyed.

Shane really was not surprised. He was more surprised that Ilya had reacted so strongly. He thought they were on the same page about how the league and the world of professional sports at large felt about Shane.

“You were MVP of the entire league,” Ilya said beneath the aggressive sound of his palms meeting, lingering a little too long as the rest of the room’s applause began to die out. “Responsible for more goals than anyone else. Responsible for *three* of four most recent Cups. Only player to *ever*—”

“I know all that,” Shane said calmly. Ilya blinked. “You know that. Most of our fans know that. Even Montreal knows that. Do you think I give a shit if they want to pretend otherwise? I’ve won that award, Ilya. I’ve won it twice. I know who I am. I don’t need them to tell me.”

Ilya stared at him, brow furrowed.

Wilson’s speech about camaraderie and perseverance was short and stilted. Shane wondered if he had prepared it beforehand and was certain that he had not practiced it. Ilya, as the highest scorer of the season, the winner of the Conn Smythe, and captain of a two-time Stanley Cup-winning team, had been the shoo-in.

Shane was genuinely surprised he hadn’t received it, but it wasn’t unusual for the voting body to award the Conn Smythe (playoffs MVP) and the Hart Trophy (league MVP) to different players.

And it wasn’t unsurprising that in a democratic vote cast by sports pundits and journalists, Shane had not been the most popular option.

“I’m furious,” Yuna murmured when Wilson wrapped up his speech. Her hands were visibly trembling on the table. “I—I can’t even speak. I am so furious.”

Shane set his fingers over hers, trying to stop her shaking. “I am, too,” he admitted, because he was.

But he had been prepared to feel this fury, this impotent anger. He had gotten used to it.

“Ah,” said the owner of the Bears’ franchise, an ancient billionaire CEO who probably still couldn’t remember Shane’s first or last name and certainly had not been tracking the conversation happening around him through the noise of the applause. “You’ll get ‘em next year, Romanoff.”

Shane laughed loud enough to draw the attention of nearby tables and the cameras alike. The owner did not seem to notice, peering with a confused expression into his empty wineglass, but Ilya snorted, then broke into a grin with a roll of his eyes. Yuna had to close her eyes and take several deep breaths, but her hands stopped shaking. LeClaire and David looked shockingly alike when they were both trying to stifle snickering.

Shane knew there were probably cameras on them, catching this strange moment of the Bears' reserved table breaking out into constrained laughter following the unjust losses of their captains, and he didn't really care. Let them speculate. Let them wonder. They would do it regardless.

Still smiling, Shane caught Wilson's eye as he headed back to his table. He raised his glass in a salute, hoping genuinely that he communicated a sense of no ill will. Wilson, who had a crooked nose and an easy smile, looked visibly relieved.

He wasn't a bad guy. Shane remembered that Wilson was one of the captains who had gone out of their way to be friendly to Shane during the end of last season.

There were problems with their world and their career—systemic issues that went all the way to the top, to a commissioner who could be forced to stomach one queer MVP if his hands were tied, but would discourage two in a row. And Shane faced very different obstacles from most of the league, including Scott Hunter and Ilya. A little diversity was good, but too much could quickly become unpalatable in their world.

That was just how things were—for now. Shane didn't believe it would be that way forever. He would overcome, and the world would change. Things would be better eventually. He was sure of it. He had faith. That was something he had learned in the past year.

Their shoes were pressed together. He put his hand on Ilya's thigh and smiled at him when he turned.

"It doesn't have to be perfect to be good," he reminded him.

"But you *are* perfect," Ilya insisted.

There were good people and bad people in their lives and their profession, but Shane was lucky to be surrounded by the very best.

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He found Hayden at the bar when the awards had concluded and they broke off to mingle.

Hayden turned and wrapped him in a tight hug. "You're incredible," he said tightly. "I'm glad you know that already, or I would have had to storm that stage to remind everyone."

Shane laughed, returning the embrace for a moment before they both pulled back. "It didn't surprise me," he reassured. "It fucking pisses me off, but it's what I expected. I thought Ilya would get it, but, you know, whatever. Wilson is a good player to lose to, at least."

"Yeah, he seems nice," Hayden said. "I don't know him well, but Jackie's talked to his wife, and from what she's heard, he seems better than a lot of the guys in the league."

"It's getting better, I think," Shane said. "Obviously, my situation is unique," he added, a little drolly, because not only was his outing widely publicized, but he was also Asian-Canadian and one of the best players in the league, all factors that set him well outside the herd, "but I think it's getting better in some ways. Compared to the racist shit I used to hear

all the time, especially in Juniors—it doesn't always feel that way, but I do think it's better. I've already seen improvements in my lifetime, so I can wait for a few more." He took a sip of his drink. "Not that I really have a choice."

"I'll accept better," Hayden said with a grimace, "but I wish it was just good."

"I know." They were silent for a moment. "Congrats on the Byng, though. You definitely deserved it."

"Honestly, it feels like a dig against the other Voyageurs," Hayden said, grinning like that pleased him. "You know what I mean? Like, 'To the guy on the worst team who was the least bad.'"

Shane laughed. "I hadn't thought of it like that, but you're kind of right." He took another sip. "Things haven't... gotten any better?" Hayden's contract was going to expire that summer. They hadn't talked about it since Shane's stay in the hospital.

"Not really." Slowly, Hayden shook his head. "No, I'm not re-signing with the Voyageurs," he said quickly, answering Shane's unspoken question. He took a slow sip of his drink and Shane watched him quietly, trying to read his face. "What we talked about, when you got injured—I took it to heart. I can't keep playing with those guys. They aren't all terrible, but the management is. It's just rotten. It got to the point where I was thinking about waiving my no-trade clause, just to get out, but I couldn't be far from the kids, and I didn't want the drama. So. After the trade deadline passed, I more or less told them straight up that I wasn't interested in a new contract. I'm not technically allowed to start negotiations with anyone else until July, obviously, but," he scanned the room, and Shane waited eagerly, "I think I've got a plan."

"Yeah?" Shane asked.

"Yeah," Hayden said. "Again, this is all hypothetical, but my manager has put out some feelers."

Shane took a sip of his drink. "Where?"

Hayden grinned. "Ottawa."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Not officially," Hayden said quickly. "But, you know, on the down-low. Don't get me accused of collusion, dude, but yeah, that's the plan. That's what I want, or what I'm hoping for, at least."

Shane breathed out slowly, eyes wide. "Wow," he said, "the Centaurs are terrible, though."

"Jesus Christ!" Hayden laughed, seizing him in another hug as if he couldn't resist the urge and clapping him on the back. "You still haven't worked on your fucking poker face, you know that?"

“No, I mean, I mean, that’s huge! Hayden, really, that’s great.” He looked at him closely, mostly confused, but Hayden was smiling. “I mean... that’s great, right?”

“Oh my god, dude,” Hayden said, but he said it fondly, and he didn’t take his hand off Shane’s shoulder when he leaned back against the bar. “You are hopeless. *Yes*, it’s good. I mean, nothing is official, but I think it’s good.”

“Ottawa,” Shane repeated.

Hayden huffed a laugh. “*Hypothetically*,” he began, “it’s close to Montreal, so even if my family doesn’t move, it’s easy for me to get back to them during the season, and if they do move, we’re still not far from Jackie’s parents,” Hayden said. “And they’ve got no superstars on their roster, so I’m actually expecting a pay bump. I mean, being on a team like that might even make me look better by comparison, you know?”

“You’re good, Hayden,” Shane said immediately. “People who don’t believe that are stupid.”

“Well, then, maybe I can improve them, too,” Hayden said, shoulders straightening a little at the compliment. “And they just signed Hayes, who’s a great goalie. I’m not talking about a playoff run or anything, but maybe we can actually win some games if he keeps it up and I get their scoring average higher.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, seeing the vision. Whatever happened, Hayden would not be far from his family, and winning had never meant as much to Hayden as it did to Shane. He would be fine. He would be close to home, and that was what mattered most to him. “The Centaurs.”

“Their logo sucks,” Hayden admitted, “but my daughters like it, so.”

“I thought this was hypothetical,” Shane said with a laugh.

“It’s *mostly* hypothetical,” Hayden said, grinning.

“Right, right, I believe you,” Shane laughed.

“Well, we can’t all have magical coincidences that ship us straight to our boyfriend’s house,” Hayden mocked.

Shane smiled. “It was pretty magical. We were together when we found out about the trade.”

Hayden reared back, eyebrows raising. “Holy shit. Wow. I can’t imagine that.”

“It was,” Shane took a breath, “it was like... breathing, after spending months drowning. Even before—the Bears are great, they are so great, but even before I knew that, just... knowing I would be with him meant everything. It was miraculous. Oh, my god.” He was surprised to find his eyes welling with tears and blinked quickly to send them away. “Whoa, I guess I haven’t thought about it in a minute. But yeah. The best moment of my life, maybe.”

“Wow,” Hayden said quietly. “I’m glad. Shane, buddy, I’m so glad.”

Shane nodded. He wanted to find Ilya suddenly. He wanted to talk about that moment with the person who had been with him when it happened, and remember how glorious and sunlit it had felt, their wild embrace and the explosion of their lives that somehow landed with all the pieces in place, ready for them to build a future around. But he had one last thing he needed to say to Hayden. “I know I’m not responsible for all this,” Shane said carefully, “but... I’m sorry. I just am, even if it’s not my fault. So many people got dragged into this mess, and that never should have happened.”

“It shouldn’t have,” Hayden agreed, “and it wasn’t your fault.” He sniffled. Shane smiled. “I need a do-over, a fresh start, to just get away from it,” Hayden said. “Like you. It’s not *my* trauma-”

“Some of it is.”

“Okay, some of it is.” Hayden rolled his shoulders. “Jackie wants me to talk to a therapist,” he confessed. “I think I’m gonna try it once my insurance comes from a different franchise. Honestly, she thinks you should too, but she’s too polite to say so.” Shane had never considered the concept of therapy seriously. He was surprised that Hayden had, but then, Hayden was married to one of the most sensible people on the planet: if anyone could make a hard-headed hockey player see sense, it was Jackie. “But you don’t have to think about that right now, obviously,” Hayden continued. “But for me, yeah. This is a good thing. You and JJ were my only friends on the team anyway, and me and JJ are too different to ever really click. I want more than that. I think I can find something better with a new team. Well, I know I can, because there aren’t many teams worse than Montreal right now.”

“Toronto,” Shane suggested.

They both shuddered and, in unison, said, “Vegas.”

“Okay, but still,” Hayden said, “the bar is *not* high. So, I’m willing to try. I’m excited, actually. I’m really excited. I don’t think I was excited about a single game all year.”

“Hayds,” Shane said, voice trembling.

“We’re all gonna get our happy endings somewhere,” Hayden said gently, smiling, and Shane had one of the rare moments when he abruptly saw the *Dad* in Hayden’s countenance. “We just have to keep looking for it, you know?”

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Shortly after the awards ceremony, Shane and Ilya flew back to Boston to attend the wedding of Victor and Amanda St. Simone. He had just won the Stanley Cup and she had completed her PhD, and off that string of unimaginable shared victories, they were getting married. Cliff was the best man. He cried like a baby throughout his speech.

Ilya wore his new Rolex to the wedding and the reception and obnoxiously checked the time every five minutes.

Shane's wedding gift, per St. Simone's request, was to bring Rose Landry as his plus-one to the reception. Amanda almost fainted when she saw her sitting with them, and Pummel stumbled into the table holding the chocolate fountain and nearly upended the entire thing.

"Oh my god," she said, her hand fluttering near her neck, unintentionally showing off the wedding, engagement, and Stanley Cup rings decorating her ring finger and thumb. Her tattoos were bright and wonderful in contrast to her white dress, and her mouth hung open. "Oh my god, you're—"

"You must be Amanda!" Rose gushed. "Hi, it's so nice to meet you! I promise, I'm not crashing—Shane let me tag along as his very platonic date."

"*Very platonic,*" Ilya repeated tersely.

"Oh my *god,*" Amanda repeated breathlessly while St. Simone smiled smugly at her side.

"I've heard so much about you," Rose continued happily, used to this kind of attention from fans. "You just finished your PhD, right? American history? That's so incredible!"

"Oh my *god.*"

"I am officially the best husband ever," St. Simone laughed, wrapping his arm around his wife's waist and kissing her cheek while she continued gawking at Rose.

"Pretty sure Shane did most of the work," Ilya said. The wedding wasn't terribly large, as far as pseudo-celebrity weddings could go, but St. Simone's and Amanda's extended families were all present (Shane had been in high demand helping translate for many of his French-speaking cousins all night), so they kept a slight space between their bodies. Not much, but enough. An inch or so. Honestly, it was impressive that Ilya was managing even that, given the way he had grumbled about Shane inviting Rose as his date, despite the entire world knowing just how gay he was and how completely incompatible she and Shane were. "Don't think that makes you all that special, Vic."

"Was my idea! You're just jealous, Rozy. I am basically an American citizen now, you know?" He winked. "You should try it. Dual citizenship, it does feel nice."

Ilya rolled his eyes. Shane blushed. "I don't think it would work like that for me, but thank you for your input."

"Can I get your autograph?" Amanda asked.

"Of course," Rose said.

She ended up signing a few things, including the guest book.

"That thing is going to get stolen," Ilya said, peering at his signature next to Shane's and Rose's. "In twenty years, it will probably be worth a million dollars."

"Extra wedding present," Cliff said, popping up. "Hey, do you mind if I introduce you to someone? Both of you?" he specified, looking at Ilya meaningfully with what passed for

subtlety on Cliff's expressive face.

"Come on, Marly," Ilya said, gesturing broadly with his champagne flute (and coincidentally showing off the extremely expensive watch on his wrist, the asshole). "Introduce us to your niece."

Cliff's eyes widened and his mouth fell open. "How did you know?"

"Rocks," Ilya said, rapping his knuckles hard on Cliff's temple, causing the enormous defenseman to flinch away with an appalled gasp. "Your skull is full of *rocks*."

"Ouch, dude, what the fuck!" Cliff said. He grabbed for Ilya, as if they were going to start grappling each other's thousand-dollar suits like they were jerseys, but Ilya dodged.

"Ey, ey! I am wearing Rolex! You do not fight a man wearing Rolex! Rude!"

Shane sighed. "Cliff," he prompted. "Your niece?"

Cliff lit up. "Oh, right!"

Cliff's niece, Elly, was wearing a suit that was slightly too long in the pants but fit well around her shoulders. She had a bruise high on her cheek, and Shane smiled when he saw it. A hockey player, indeed. She watched them approach from across the room, her brown eyes wide in awe.

Cliff laughed, clomping an arm around her and jostling her. She snapped out of her daze, teeth suddenly flashing, and dug her elbow fiercely into his side. "Knock it off!" she growled while Cliff stumbled away with a dramatic *oomf*.

Ilya laughed, delighted. "You are enforcer?" he asked, holding out his hand.

She scowled briefly but took his hand and shook it enthusiastically, the light returning to her eyes as she glanced quickly between him and Shane. "Fighting is discouraged in the Canadian Women's Hockey League," she said, but she said it like a chirp, and winked at Ilya.

"Discouraged!" he crowed. "Who the fuck cares about discouraged? This is fucking hockey we are talking about!" He held up his fists like a boxer.

Cliff shoved his shoulder, laughing. "Don't fucking square up with my niece, bro."

"Yeah, she'll take you out," Shane said. "I heard you were a fan, Elly. Thank you for your support. It means the world to me—to us."

She shook his hand. Shane's smile softened. She was young, only fourteen or fifteen, but her grip had the same calluses as a professional hockey player. "Yeah," she said quietly. "I'm a huge fan, but, I mean, of course, Leah Campbell is my actual favorite player."

"Of course," Shane agreed, nodding seriously.

"But if I had to choose someone from the NHL—"

“It would be me!” Cliff interjected.

“No, you’re number five,” Elly quipped. She still looked nervous, but that was probably because she was conversing with several adult men she idolized. Shane kept his smile gentle and hoped it would comfort her. “I really, really look up to you, Mr. Hollander,” she confessed. “I... I was so happy when you came to Boston. My whole team was.”

He leaned in a little. “I was, too.” He grinned. “And I think you can call me Hollzy if you want—you’re practically an honorary Bear, right?”

“Excuse you,” she said, “I’m going to play for the Blades one day!”

“I’d put money on it,” Shane said emphatically, and she grinned.

They took several pictures together before Elly seemed to get a little overwhelmed, and they let her go without comment. “Probably texting her girlfriend,” Cliff snorted when she darted away. “They’re fucking attached at the hip.”

“Does she know?” Ilya asked curiously. “About me? Us?”

“Oh, yeah, I told her,” Cliff said, then grimaced. “Sorry. But she’s chill! She knows not to tell anyone-”

“It’s fine,” Shane reassured him. Ilya nodded.

The dance floor was filling up as the excitement from the ceremony and conversations quieted down. The live band was playing something sweet and gentle. Ilya glanced at Shane. Shane smiled at him sympathetically, feeling a quiet pang of longing in his chest. Quiet, but louder than it used to be.

Cliff made an abrupt, loud noise. “Hey!” he yelled. “Hey, Saint Vicky, over here! Benji, Pummel, brothers, gather roud!”

The nearby Bears all reacted to his call, drifting in, but Cliff pointed at Saint Vicky directly. “As your best man, I demand a dance with you,” he declared, grabbing Vicky around the waist and tugging him aggressively toward the dance floor. “Come on, bro, don’t let me down!”

“Ah, you will step on my shoes!” St. Simone whined, but he took Cliff’s hand without argument and pulled back enough to drop into a bow over it. “Anything for my friend!”

“Fuck it,” Benji said. His wife was sitting at a table, holding their one-year-old daughter in her lap, and he waved at her before holding his hand out to Aliue. “Everyone down for a Bears dance?” he asked the group, eyes skipping over everyone before winking at Ilya.

Shane melted.

Aliue rolled his eyes but let himself be dragged onto the dance floor. Pummel and Sidney, no longer first-year rookies, followed a little less aggressively, their hands settling into positions around each other’s shoulders and waists more naturally than the borderline tug-of-war St.

Simone and Cliff were engaged in. Shane watched in surprise as a few other Bears paired off as well, including Varkov and Carmichael, some of the oldest players on the team, although they kept a dramatic foot and a half of space between them and immediately started talking loudly about ESPN licensing rights. From the corner, mostly recovered from her shock, Shane heard Amanda laugh hysterically as Rose extended her hand in invitation, and they joined the fray, bright spots of color swaying amidst the dark suits.

“Wow,” Shane murmured, blinking very quickly when his eyes grew suspiciously wet.

Ilya held out his hand. Shane took it. “I told you,” he said, pulling Shane onto the floor in the middle of their teammates. “They are good guys.”

“Like family,” Shane agreed, letting his head drop for a moment to rest on Ilya’s shoulder as they danced.

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They left the reception together because they had arrived together. It wasn’t so different from what they had been doing all season. It wasn’t different at all, really.

Shane pondered what it meant to live with an open secret like theirs, to be in a room where half of the occupants knew the truth and the other half didn’t, but might have been able to guess from how they acted. He thought about paparazzi and privacy hedges and curtainless windows.

They were walking a balance now, and the middle ground was sweet and bitter, but Shane wondered how long they would stay there.

He thought about weddings.

Ilya took his hand as they walked to the nearby parking lot. They were a lot further than twelve steps away from their car, but Shane didn’t even think about letting go.

He squeezed Ilya’s palm, then refolded their hands so their fingers were laced together, knuckles tucked between knuckles, shared callouses mirrored against each other. “Let’s go home,” Shane said.

This time, Ilya didn’t need to ask where he meant.

Chapter End Notes

I resisted putting a chapter count because I wasn't sure if I'd have to break up this chapter, but yep, turns out! I didn't want to keep dropping 8k+ chapters and I didn't want to cut anything, so it had to be done! so we're going to the cottage (again), next chap TOMORROW (if ao3 isn't down yikes), i wrote them together so i could see the length, and it just needs editing! Thanks for reading!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

(small thing to note: I have made minor edits to the end of "something you can fix" and canon bc i think i understand a little better how trades/contracts work more in the nhl now. Just semantic differences really, but i've made it so Ilya and Shane were BOTH on the last year of their contracts in the 2017-2018 season, not just Ilya)

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

A year ago, Shane lost to the Admirals. He drove back to his apartment in Montreal, where Ilya was waiting for him, and then they went to the cottage together.

This time, they were both Stanley Cup Champions. They won, together, shoulder to shoulder, and they had not been apart since.

Maybe next year, they could do it again.

It was a six-hour drive from their home on the outskirts of Boston to Lanaudière, but they had done more than enough flying in the previous few months to last a lifetime. They hired crews to clean out the house and the apartment for the summer, too busy and too exhausted, emotionally and physically, to do it themselves, so they arrived back from Las Vegas to a clean house and an empty fridge. They each packed two more suitcases to join the ones they had stashed in Shane's jeep as soon as they got back from the airport.

"I should've told Pummel he could house-sit for the summer," Ilya said. Shane was still running around, doing last-minute, unnecessary checks, but Ilya was standing in the living room, staring at a framed photo of the cottage's lake on the side table next to the couch. It had been there for months, since before they came out to the team: a quiet sign of their relationship, their shared lives and shared homes, hidden in plain sight. "House will be lonely without us all summer."

Shane stopped. He took a moment to look Ilya up and down. The blinds were all drawn, and they were not blackout curtains, but they shaded the usually bright room in a calm, dim grey light, almost fuzzy looking. Ilya was staring hard at the photo.

Shane walked up and kissed his cheek. "Next year," he said, "we should redecorate."

Ilya huffed. "Again? Jesus, Shane, you want to change everything about this fucking house one step at a time, don't you? That is secret plan? You hate my interior design style but are too Canadian to say it?"

"You don't have a style, asshole," Shane said. "And I meant photos. We're not hiding anymore, so there's no reason we can't hang some pictures up." Ilya glanced at him.

“I don’t have many pictures of you,” he said. “Even less of us.”

Shane hummed. He pulled out his phone, opening Google. “Here,” he said, showing a picture of Ilya embracing Shane fiercely on the ice, the Stanley Cup beside them. “We can start with this one. You know, it’s sort of our whole brand right now. Being open, how we want, just without telling everyone explicitly.” Ilya watched him swipe through the photos. “And this one,” he said, showing Ilya a professional shot of Yuna and David hugging them both at the same time, Yuna on her tiptoes to reach around Ilya’s shoulders and David clutching the back of Shane’s head tightly. “I don’t know if you saw, but there were a lot of rumors about these,” Shane said quietly.

“Rumors,” Ilya repeated, eyebrows climbing. “You do not mind?”

Shane shook his head. “No,” he said. “Not really. Not anymore.”

Ilya took his hand. “We should take lots of pictures this summer,” he said, and Shane nodded immediately. “Lots and lots. Obnoxious amounts of photos. I want a whole gallery of nothing but close-ups on your freckles.”

“That *definitely* wouldn’t fit your style,” Shane said, but he added, “As long as I get one dedicated to your moles.”

Ilya smiled. “Your pretty eyes.”

“Your curls.”

“And your back dimples.”

Shane laughed. “Your shoulders,” he confessed, biting his lip. Ilya leered.

“Your juicy ass with the tiger stripes, and then I will have to lick the glass because I am so tempted-”

Shane laughed again. “No,” he vetoed. “Not that one. But the rest? Sure, why not?” He squeezed Ilya’s fingers. “It’s our house. It’s our life.”

Ilya looked almost dazed. “It is,” he said, looking around like he was taking it all in for the first time. “Fuck, Shane. It *is*.”

“Come on,” Shane said, tugging his hand gently. “Whole summer ahead of us. Let’s get going.”

“Can’t wait,” Ilya said eagerly.

They slipped on their shoes, hands on each other’s shoulders for balance. Ilya opened the door, late afternoon sunlight flooding in, not blocked by the curtains. Shane put his hands behind Ilya’s neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

Ilya pressed his lips to Shane’s ear. “Race you to the car,” he whispered, then shoved Shane so hard he went sprawling across the foyer with an indignant shout as Ilya whipped outside,

suitcases flying behind him, laughter echoing over the hedges and through the neighborhood.

“You fucking asshole!”

But he didn’t mind losing the race. Or, rather, Shane knew he hadn’t lost anything.

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They took a call with Farah, their new shared agent, during the long car ride.

“Okay,” Ilya said to her as Shane focused on the road, both hands on the wheel. “Okay, so then everything is settled? I am sick of negotiations.”

“Everything is settled,” Farah said calmly. “You’ll get the necessary paperwork in the mail-”

“And the address is correct?” Ilya asked. “For both of us?”

“Yes,” she said patiently. “But I was going to say that you will also receive an email with all the same information. You can sign it online, so there is nothing to worry about.”

“Good, good.” Ilya put his hand on Shane’s thigh. “Then we are all good here,” he said with emphasis.

Shane nodded.

It was the last year of both of their contracts, so they had been in negotiations all season. Conversations had dragged out longer than anyone would have liked, but both Shane and Ilya had been reticent to commit to re-signing early on, and the Bears’ management had been emphatically opposed to trading either of them when they were embarking on a legendary playoff run. At the beginning of the season, Shane had no idea what playing for the Bears or living in Boston would be like. He was prepared for the worst, ready to muscle through an awful year and get out at the end of it.

But Boston wanted to re-sign him. Shane hadn’t been sure if they would want that either.

When he first got the news of the trade, Shane had ambiguously believed and planned that he would return to Canada after the season, maybe somewhere out West even, to Edmonton or Calgary if he was lucky. Plenty of teams would take him, even if it meant that Shane would most likely lose his chance at more playoffs and Stanley Cups. It had hurt him to imagine, but he wouldn’t have stayed if Boston had treated him like the Voyageurs had. He would never subject himself to that ever again.

He had never expected what he had found.

Contract negotiations were complicated. Shane and Ilya were both massive superstars in the NHL, and they both had enormous market values to match: taking Shane’s contract had required them to trade away two impressive players on their roster, neither of which had been on cheaper Entry-Level Contracts. Next year, however, a few of the Bears players were aging out of their ELC contracts, which meant substantial salary increases, and Shane and Ilya weren’t the only impressive people left on the roster, nor the only players currently in

negotiations. Everyone had a salary that needed to be paid, and only so much could fit under the cap that limited how much every franchise in the league was allowed to offer its players.

“We could accept the pay cuts,” Ilya mentioned months ago, quietly, like he was taking a risk as he interrupted Shane in the middle of a rant about pay caps and upper management profits while aggressively typing out an email to his mom. Shane’s mouth had snapped shut at the suggestion, though it had been the obvious solution, if unsaid up to that point. Shane had glanced at Ilya, inexpressive. “We would not be the first to do it,” Ilya continued gently. “Lots of good players accept pay cuts to play with better people on their team, you know? Winning the Cup is maybe more important than just a salary, and fans will know why we are not being paid our market worth.” He carefully picked Shane’s hand off his keyboard so he could hold it. “But I know you don’t want people to think that you are worth less now than before.”

Shane had bristled. “That’s not-”

“It is important,” Ilya had interrupted carefully. “It’s important to you. I get it.”

Shane sighed through his nose. He’d had a hard time meeting Ilya’s eyes. “I know it’s stupid,” he said. “We have more money than we could ever spend, and the pay cut wouldn’t be *that* much, but... if I come out as gay and then my salary is immediately slashed following three Stanley Cups, I just—I just hate how that looks. God, I know it sounds crazy and greedy but, I just, I want to be paid what I’m *worth*—and I want you to be paid what you’re worth.”

“I know,” Ilya said. He brought Shane’s hand to his mouth and pulled his clenched fist apart so he could kiss his palm. “I can take the cut.”

“No,” Shane said immediately. He closed his eyes. “No. That’s absolutely not what we’re going to do.” He forced his shoulders to relax by focusing on the warmth of Ilya’s breath coasting over his palm. “You’re right, of course. The salary cuts are negligible, and it doesn’t matter, anyway. Neither of us needs the money. It’s an optics thing, but I need to work past that. I need to stop caring so much about what other people think.”

“You only need to care about what I think,” Ilya said.

“That’s the only thing that actually matters to me,” Shane said earnestly.

Ilya had smiled. “I promise it won’t be massive,” he said. “Varkov will retire probably after next season, so I think management is happy to go right to the cap now. We have very strong team; they want us to be happy. They want us to stay. Money is a numbers thing, easy to track, but they want *you*, and you are irreplaceable.”

“I know they do,” Shane said, blinking quickly. “I know. They’ve made it very clear.”

“They send you the fruit baskets, too?” Ilya asked.

Shane chuckled. “A few.”

“Do some extra Rolex gigs,” Ilya said. “I will hang out with the jungle cats dressed in Armani with some awful perfume or whatever. Will make up the difference in a jiffy. And, when we sign, we will get to say no trades. No more fucking trades. We are adults with fucking lives, not Pokémon cards. This is our city as long as we want it. No fucking trades.”

Shane kissed him.

That was how things settled: next season, Ilya and Shane would both be paid less than they might have been on another team in the league, but in the grand scheme of things, it was negligible. They both had the right to demand no-trade provisions, which were swiftly granted; the Bears were not eager to get rid of either of them, not when they had the deadly combo of Art Ross and Rocket Richard winners on their first line. And they signed on for four years. As veterans, they could have signed for seven or eight years, pushing the contract limits, and the Bears might have agreed to one or both, but they had decided not to. Given the cost of their combined contracts, no one had had a problem with that either.

“Short contract,” Ilya said, “no trades. Is like the perfect compromise. They cannot surprise us, but we are not trapped for forever if we get sick of the city.” He squeezed Shane’s shoulder. “If you want to come home.”

It was so complicated, Shane thought more than a little morosely. He was trying to plan out a future with the love of his life through numbers, years, and signed contractual obligations. “I just want to be with you,” he said, voice cracking with exhaustion. “That’s all I want.”

“Same for me,” Ilya said. “But you are homesick sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” Shane admitted, wincing.

“My pretty Canadian,” Ilya cooed. “He misses his home.”

“I love Boston,” Shane said. “I mean, I’m surprised by how much I love it. But....”

“It’s not home. I understand.”

“You are my home,” Shane said easily. He put his fingers on top of Ilya’s chest, just the fingertips first, then spread them out, splaying his fingers wide over his heart. “Um, I’ve thought a lot about something you said when I first moved here. You were talking about roots, having shallow roots in some places and deeper but less... I don’t know, fulfilling roots in Moscow. I know it’s sappy, but-”

“Sappy is like trees,” Ilya interrupted. Shane glanced up, frowning at him, but Ilya was smiling, broad and happy. He put his palm on Shane’s chest, mirroring him. “Trees have roots. All my roots are wrapped around you, Shane Hollander.”

“Yeah,” Shane croaked, throat tight. “That’s exactly what I was trying to say.”

“Everywhere I go,” Ilya said, dragging his fingertips down the front of Shane’s body, trailing like he was drawing invisible map lines across him, “you feed me.”

For now, that would be Boston. For both of them.

In Boston, they had people they loved—friends like Cliff, Benji, St. Simone, and Amanda, and family, in Svetlana. There were places that they loved in the city: their house, their apartment, TD Garden, Bova's, the yuppie dog park near their house, which they always jogged through because no one had ever recognized them there. They had a team who wanted them and saw them and knew them, and accepted every part of their lives. They had each other.

(That last part was a given, but it was nice to guarantee.)

"Sounds good," Shane said to Farah, fingers finally relaxing on the wheel as something settled in his chest. He smiled at Ilya. "We're staying in Boston. Officially."

Ilya flashed him a grin. "Officially," he agreed, squeezing his thigh.

It was home now, after all. And so was the cottage. And so was Ilya.

Shane was so, so lucky to have so many places he belonged to.

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These days, Shane and Ilya regularly shared three beds: at the house, the apartment, and the cottage.

It used to be *Ilya's* house, and *Shane's* cottage, but those sorts of delineations didn't make much difference these days. The team was aware, and so was management. Shane could probably make Ilya's house his permanent address, just so picking up his mail wasn't such a chore on weeks he didn't make it back to the apartment.

Shane liked consistency, and he liked routines. In all three of their spaces, he kept the same kind of toothpaste and toothbrush, and all his other hygiene and skincare products, so he wouldn't have to cart them back and forth, and put the same brand of sheets on all their beds. Other things he couldn't control, like the angle the sunlight came through the windows, or the sounds of the neighbors or wildlife. But some differences were nice, Shane was learning. When they woke up in the apartment, it was almost always because they had morning skate or a team event in the city, and it became part of his routine to wake up in the apartment and get out of bed immediately—like a subconscious cue that he had business to attend to. The cottage was the opposite. If Shane heard the gentle rustle of a forest, the distant lapping of water, and the sounds of quiet birdcalls, his body knew it could relax even as the room grew brighter around him and the day waned on.

It became such a familiar pattern, despite the changing environments, that even the act of opening his eyes in the morning, wherever they were, brought Shane a deep, abiding comfort that seemed to settle inside him, relax his shoulders, and calm his breath.

Some things changed, and others stayed the same. They were better off for it.

They shared three beds together, and every night, they fell asleep wrapped around each other.

(Three beds, and, of course, there was his parents' cottage, with Shane's old bedroom, which they slept in when board game nights ran late. And Svetlana's couch, which was wide enough that they could sleep on it comfortably since they didn't mind lying half on top of each other. And Hayden's guest bedroom, and Shane was sure wherever he ended up in Ottawa, there would be room for them there, too. And hotel rooms across the country, and the comfortable seats on the Bears' private plane or the back of the team bus, and on the dock where they napped in the afternoon without worrying about boats or nosey neighbors.)

The details didn't really make a difference.

Waking up with Ilya felt the same wherever they were.

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"I love you," Shane said. Ilya was making them both smoothies because they were still planning to work out today and would need the extra nutrients and protein, but there was also a plate of poached eggs, cut fruit, and toast in front of Shane. Whole-wheat, but buttered.

Compromise.

Ilya looked over his shoulder, grinning over the rattle of the blender. "Oh, you do?" he teased, flexing his lats because he was, as usual, shirtless. Shane smiled, letting his eyes run over the pattern of moles on Ilya's skin, even warmer than usual because of the days they had spent in the lake and lying out by the pool and on the dock.

"I do," Shane said slowly.

"Prove it, Hollander," Ilya goaded him.

Shane took a bite of his eggs. "Pretty sure I already have."

+++

Ilya loved swimming, and he loved the lake in particular. Shane was a stronger, faster swimmer (and he proved it every time Ilya foolishly challenged him to a race), but Ilya enjoyed it more recreationally. From his stupid, crooked handstands to spitting water at Shane like a dolphin while he yelped about pollutant runoff and fish poop, Ilya wanted to spend at least an hour of almost every day in the water.

Shane was less infatuated, maybe because he had grown up with the lake in his backyard, but when he didn't feel like joining Ilya, he was happy to sit on the dock or the shore with a book, glancing up every now and then when Ilya called for his attention, or when Shane just felt like looking.

He was, for once, reading a book that wasn't about hockey (it was about the history of lacrosse, which Ilya had still mocked him for), when Ilya made his way back to the dock. The water was shallow enough that he could stand waist-deep at the end of the floating dock and he walked up slowly, standing there for a moment, hands braced on either side of Shane's feet, until Shane reached the end of his paragraph and looked up expectantly.

“You look so happy,” Ilya said simply. His muscles flexed and his skin shimmered—like the surface of the rippling water in sunshine, like glitter—as he pulled himself out of the lake and crawled, hands and knees, over Shane’s prone body, kissing and mouthing his way up from his ankles to his stomach. Shane probably looked terrible from the reverse angle, neck craned and double-chinned so he could watch Ilya’s enchanting progression, but he didn’t care. He let his head fall back onto the folded towel he’d been using as a pillow when Ilya made it to his chest. “Happy, happy Shane,” Ilya murmured around his nipple, humming to make Shane shiver. “So happy out here.”

“I really do love Boston, but this is my favorite place on earth,” Shane murmured, quickly moving his book far away from the water sloughing off Ilya’s muscles.

Ilya glanced up at him, letting Shane’s nipple slip from his plush, gorgeous mouth. “I love it too,” he said, kissing his chest. “I love seeing how you are here. So relaxed, so free. So pretty, pretty, all for me and me only,” he cheesed, smile pressed to flesh.

“You need more sunscreen,” Shane told him.

Ilya groaned. “Okay, Mother.” He smirked. “Whatever you say, Captain.”

Shane carded his fingers through his hair. “Want me to help you reapply it?”

Ilya smiled.

Shane ran his hands over Ilya’s body. He didn’t object when Ilya slid his swimsuit and lakeshoes off, sprawling over their towels totally nude. If a helicopter or a drone swung by, they would be fucked, but who could care about that when Ilya Rozanov was spread out before them, ready for the taking? Shane certainly wasn’t strong enough.

He took his shorts off as well and settled over Ilya’s hips, massaging sunscreen into his stomach. Ilya put his hands behind his head and flexed. “Fuck me?” Shane asked.

“Blyat, I fucking love you.”

There were lube and condoms in the bag Shane had brought with him, and antiseptic wipes, because he was always prepared. Ilya snorted. “Boy scout,” he said fondly, wiping his hands off before touching Shane.

Shane leaned down and kissed him.

He rode Ilya slowly on the dock, confident that they were alone and happy to be outside. Ilya’s hands settled on his hips, rocking him slowly in place, like they were just part of the landscape, no different from the water lapping at the shoreline. He stayed lying down, back arched so that they could continue kissing as he moved rhythmically on top of Ilya, letting the build rise and rise until they came together.

“Take a nap with me,” Ilya ordered once he had cleaned Shane up.

Shane, half asleep already, had no problem with that. “Set a timer,” he mumbled, “for sunscreen.” Ilya chuckled but agreed, draping a clean towel over their laps.

They woke up when the sun was going down, and probably ruined their sleep schedules as a result, but that was okay. They didn't have any obligations until August. Three more weeks of bliss.

Eventually, Ilya's growling stomach forced them up off the dock. "Come, come," he said, pulling Shane to his feet and laughing when he wobbled. "You do not get to complain about being sore or stiff," Ilya said. "You were already sleeping on the ground when I found you."

"I'm not complaining," Shane grumbled.

They walked up to the house over the winding stone path, Ilya carrying the towels and Shane hauling his bag. Shane took out his phone, turning it between his palms. "I will cook the pelmeni tonight," Ilya declared as they stepped onto the back porch. "We are in bulking season now, and you will not complain either about eating my fucking carbs." He turned and started walking backwards so he could pinch Shane's biceps. Shane swatted him away. "Put some meat on your bones," Ilya said, ogling him, "since I already put *my* meat in you."

"Gross," Shane said, but he couldn't help his smile, and he could not help how fond the word came out. "You're disgusting. I can't believe I put up with you."

Ilya preened happily as he opened the back door.

Shane hesitated on the deck, watching Ilya move behind the glass. "I'll be there in a sec," he called, beginning to slide the door shut. "Mom phoned. I just want to call her back real quick."

"Okay," Ilya said before the door snicked shut. "Be quick! I am waiting and I am not a patient man, Shane!"

Shane toyed with his phone anxiously as he walked to the firepit, dropping to sit on the weatherproof cushions. He thumbed open Yuna's contact info and took a deep breath. He looked up at the stars, thinking about the evening when he had received the news that he was going to Boston. He remembered the joyful way Ilya's voice cracked when he asked, "*Really?*"

Shane hit call. "Hi, Mom. Remember that, um, stuff I asked you to look into?"

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They spent the next day hiking the myriad trails that surrounded the cottage and the lake, something that they hadn't done last summer. The trails were technically public, and they had decided not to risk running into anyone who might recognize them, but that didn't really matter anymore.

The hype around Shane's outing had died down over the ensuing year since (actually, more than a year, but Shane had been too busy with the team to even notice the anniversary of the leak passing him by). People might recognize the name Shane Hollander, and he was slightly more recognizable for being Asian in such a predominantly white sport, but he just wasn't

actually that famous, and most people, even in Canada, didn't care. It might have even helped that he no longer played for a local team.

And if someone did recognize them, it still didn't matter. The infamous rivalry between rookies Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, started when they were still in Juniors and catapulted by their draft round, had died a quiet, unobtrusive death the second they joined forces on the first line of the Boston Bears. There had been a press conference before the start of the regular season when they had officially announced that they had never felt anything but professional competitiveness against each other, but even that was unnecessary. Anyone with eyes who knew how to watch hockey and how a team worked together could see that there was no iota of animosity between them. They worked together like a unit, a single entity, always in step. People had accused them of being able to read each other's minds, and there had been rumors about their chemistry since even before the leak, after the All-Star game.

Really, they were pretty obvious. They couldn't help it.

If someone spotted them on the trail, so be it. They were friends, they were teammates, and there were already people out there, in certain communities on the internet, who were convinced they were in a relationship. Shane had learned this when he made his return to social media— 'Hollanov' was not a popular hashtag, but some of its proponents were impressively dedicated to spreading the message. There was fanart, there were stories, there were compilations set to all kinds of music of their behavior on the ice and in interviews, catching the moments when Ilya got touchy and Shane didn't shy away, or their undeniable joy in each other's presence. (Shane had watched them. He had almost accidentally liked a few, which would have been a hell of a way to reveal themselves to the world.)

(He had not told Ilya about that idea, and he had carefully not introduced him to the Hollanov subreddit either. Ilya would probably get way too into it.)

Shane loved hiking, although he rarely had the opportunity to indulge in the hobby outside of the summer months. It was good cardio, but it wasn't time-efficient for his purposes during the season. One of the details he regretted about their lives was that they had the opportunity to travel so much and yet got to see so little; he had never hiked the Grand Canyon, or gone up to see the Hollywood sign, or walked through the National Parks. But maybe one day he would find the time. He hoped so.

Ilya whined and complained about bugs and sweat and branches, but Shane knew he loved it. The summer heat was oppressive, even in Canada, and they wandered the trails, occasionally coming right up against the water, freed from the burden of a cellular connection. Ilya tried to convince Shane to let him fuck him against a tree, and Shane considered it for far too long before turning him down.

But, maybe, *one day*.

That was becoming his motto. Shane thought it was sort of hopeful.

They arrived back at the house in the early afternoon, having set off at dawn to avoid the hottest hours of the day.

“What do you want for lunch?” Shane asked as they walked up the winding path to the deck after emerging from the woods. He was starving, which meant Ilya would be voracious.

“Entire pizza,” Ilya said, proving his point as they reached the door. “No, wait, two pizzas, stacked on top of each other—but not folded like a sandwich! No, I want cheese on top and in the middle.” He used his hands to demonstrate.

“Okay, good luck with that,” Shane snickered. “Maybe you can just put the slices on top of each other instead of the entire pizzas? I’ll see what we have in the freezer. Will you check the mail, babe?”

Shane flushed. Ilya cooed, “Babe.”

“Shut up. You call me names in Russian all the time.”

“Moy pomidor,” he agreed, reaching out to pinch Shane’s cheek.

Shane smacked him away, turning around so Ilya couldn’t see his smile. “Check the fucking mail, Roz.”

Shane ducked into the bedroom to change out of his hiking clothes, replacing them with a soft shirt and cotton pajama pants. He wandered back to the kitchen and smiled when he saw that Ilya. Shane didn’t get much mail at the cottage, but he saw a few bills and the local newspaper he was subscribed to on the dining table. Ilya was flipping through the contents of a manila folder, a smile on his face.

Shane frowned a little in curiosity as he walked up. He didn’t see an address on the folder, and it was unsealed, so it couldn’t have been delivered with the rest of the mail. “What’s that?”

He was surprised by the earsplitting grin Ilya turned on him.

“Do you have secret California lover I do not know about?” Ilya asked, slapping the file shut and waving it quickly in front of Shane’s face, a stupid grin on his face and excitement in his eyes despite his next words, which were, “I swear to fucking god, if this is about Rose Landry, I burn down this entire cottage and the forest with it, Shane!”

“What?” Shane spluttered, trying to snatch the folder away from him. “What the fuck, Ilya? No, what are you—give that to me!” They ended up wrestling for it, and Shane knew it was on purpose when Ilya finally surrendered the folder to him. Shane danced away quickly, into the kitchen, and opened the envelope.

He had already guessed its contents, but he felt his ears turn bright red when he saw the bolded heading on the first page:

Confidential Marriage Licenses in California, Marriage Outside Canada, and Sponsoring Permanent Residence for Citizenship: Quick Facts

“Oh my god,” Shane muttered.

It was clearly typed up by his mother. Skimming down the first page, a bullet point table of contents, Shane saw numerous references, footnotes, and parentheticals that pertained to Canadian and foreign nationals getting married in California. She must have dropped by while they were out and just, what, left it on their front step? Shane's cheeks were flaming, and his mouth was dry.

"Yuna Hollander," Ilya said, wrapping his arms around Shane from behind and perching his chin on his shoulder so he could look at the notes, obviously having drawn the same conclusion. "Does she ever sleep?"

"I'm so sorry," Shane said, closing the file shut and using it to hide his face. "I don't know what she was thinking—oh my god, obviously this is not what I—how I wanted to—"

Ilya turned him around with a grip on his hips. When they were facing each other (though Shane's eyes were still closed), Ilya slid his hands to the backs of Shane's thighs. Shane recognized the gesture intrinsically enough that when Ilya pulled him up, he jumped onto his tiptoes and let Ilya easily plant his weight on the counter. He lowered his hands, setting the folder next to him. Ilya sidled in between his thighs, pressing close as he murmured, "Tell me what it is about?"

Shane could hear the excitement in his voice, the boyish giddiness.

(Shane hadn't *actually* been worried, but that did help him relax.)

Shane groaned in embarrassment, pressing his palms to his eyes and refusing to look even though Ilya was literally standing between his legs, their bodies pressed together from hips to chest, and he had already instinctively settled his foot in the dip of Ilya's back. "It's—it's a list of options," he began. "Options for us. How we could... how we could get started..." He took a deep breath and started again. "California will legally issue completely confidential marriage licenses that never get filed in the public record, and Canada recognizes all valid marriage licenses performed in the US without needing to re-register them in Canada. We wouldn't even have to submit the license or anything until we needed to—I mean, not *we*, you know, just people," he stuttered, losing his stride again.

"*Just people*," Ilya said, snickering.

Shane pressed his fingers to his eyes. "It's completely private and we wouldn't need to bother trying to get a court to seal our marriage license or whatever, which you can only do in a few states anyway and not even in Canada—or, it's even more complicated here, I think, and it would involve a lot of paperwork and petitioning and that's not exactly subtle either. In California, if you get married confidentially, people can only request access to those documents by court order, and they never go online or anything, but it's still legally valid. I mean, like... if we got married in California," his breath hitched; Ilya leaned closer, "it would be recognized in Canada. It might still take a long time before you could become a citizen because we don't live here, but if there was ever an emergency..."

Shane finally dropped his hands but kept his eyes closed. He needed to touch Ilya. He put his hands on his shoulders, feeling the flexing muscles in his neck tendons, then slid inward, tugging at the hem of his t-shirt and settling his fingertips against Ilya's pulse.

“If we were legally married, I could protect you,” he promised quietly. “We should also see about getting you American citizenship the normal way, since you’ll be in Boston for a while regardless, but if anything *happened*—I could keep you here. Safe. There are more visas and resident statuses you could apply for, and we could just do it so much quicker and with fewer questions and obstacles if we were already married. Unless you committed a crime or something, they wouldn’t have cause to deport you right away, and we would have time—or I think that’s how it works—I don’t know, Ilya, it’s so complicated.” He slumped, head falling to his shoulder, next to his hands, still gripping his shirt collar like a baby. “My mom’s assembling us a team of immigration lawyers and marriage specialists,” he admitted. “I’m not losing you.”

“No,” Ilya agreed. “You promised. You said you would hold on to me.”

“No matter what,” Shane agreed.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya whispered. Lips found the skin below his ear, and Shane shivered. “So. Is this... just for safety, or...?”

Shane breathed. He opened his eyes. At first, all he could see was Ilya’s smooth, golden skin and his familiar mole-dotted neck. He turned a little, peering up, and caught sight of bright, slightly wary eyes gazing down at him. “Not *just*,” he said carefully. “Can I be honest?”

“I think you should be very, very honest right now.”

“Good. Okay.” He straightened, one hand moving to Ilya’s cheek, holding him steady the way Ilya had often done to him. “I know it feels ridiculous to say, but maybe we have moved pretty quickly.” Ilya immediately smiled, and Shane returned it even as he insisted, “I’m serious. Obviously, what we’ve felt has been intense for a long time, but we went from seeing each other maybe a dozen times a year to living together in six months. And it’s been wonderful.” He stroked his thumb over Ilya’s cheekbone, feeling his strong, perfect bone structure. “It’s been the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Me too,” Ilya murmured.

“But it was still quick,” Shane said. “It’s been less than a year and a half since we actually started... being honest with each other. Just a year since we actually talked about being exclusive. That’s *fast*, Ilya. And our life together isn’t going to be quick, you know?” Ilya’s breath stuttered, so Shane pressed on. “We’re going to be together for a long time. We’re going to be together forever. We’ll be one of those old married couples that gets to brag that they’ve been married for fifty years, but really it’s been longer, and be so obnoxious about how there was never anyone else-”

“There never was,” Ilya agreed reverently.

“And I don’t need to rush through that,” Shane said quietly. “I want to take my time. I want every moment to last forever. I want to have milestones to look forward to. I want to be your everything at every stage of your life.”

“You are mine,” Ilya said. “You’ve been everything for so long.”

“For forever,” Shane repeated. “I think if we have a wedding right now, I’m always going to think about it in terms of your safety. Making sure that you’re safe. And I want to get married when the only thing I’m thinking about is how much I fucking love you. Does that make sense?”

“You are still scared,” Ilya said softly, kind and reverent in equal measure. “Scared for me. Marriage can wait for when you aren’t.”

“The wedding can wait,” Shane corrected. “I want to get married, Ilya. I’d get married to you right now if you wanted. For the legal protections, yes, but I just want to be married to you so badly I can’t breathe sometimes.” He shuddered, as if to prove it. “It’s just—it’s just the wedding and announcing everything that I think I want to keep private. For now, *not* forever. Fuck, I know it’s not romantic, and you deserve all the romance, but for now, I think we should get married so that you’re safe and we know that nothing can ever come between us. And everything else—well, we have the rest of our lives to figure out everything else.”

“Good,” Ilya said, still smiling. “One second.”

“What?” Shane said, surprised when Ilya pecked his lips and pulled away.

Ilya flapped a hand at him. “One second, I said! Have patience.”

Shane slid off the counter, brow furrowing. “Ilya—”

“Stay,” Ilya repeated, still smiling, so Shane stayed. “Good,” Ilya said, backing out of the room with his hands held out like he was commanding a dog. “Good, stay right there. I will be back.”

“Ilya, just tell me!” Shane called, but Ilya was darting up the split-level stairs toward the bedroom. Shane wanted to follow him, but his feet wouldn’t move. He bit his lip and waited.

Ilya reappeared a moment later, a small box clutched between his hands that Shane’s eyes immediately latched onto. “Good boy,” Ilya said when he saw that Shane hadn’t moved an inch.

“Oh,” Shane said. Ilya walked around him, knocking their shoulders together as he stood by the corner of the counter, and Shane turned with him, eyes on the box, which Ilya set on the granite surface.

It was flat and square and about three inches wide. Ilya slowly tapped two fingers on the lid. “I don’t have a ring,” he admitted softly, sliding the box toward Shane. “But in my plan, you know, I was supposed to propose to you.”

It looked almost identical to the box that Ilya had given Shane his house key in, small and black and tied together with a golden bow, except this one was wooden instead of cardboard. (Shane still had that bow from the first box. He kept it in his travel toiletries bag, folded into a neat circle and pinned together so that it would never get rumpled.)

He undid the matching ribbon on this box carefully, fingers smoothing out the joints in the ribbon where the knot had sat, already planning to iron out the wrinkles later.

“Is not so dramatic as a house or an apartment this time,” Ilya said sheepishly, “and if we do not want nosy Bears in our faces, maybe subtle is good for now.” He was nervous. Shane could tell. “Why are you waiting? Open it!”

Shane obliged, lifting the lid on its hinges.

A golden necklace was draped across a pristine, satin white interior, in slight disarray from the jostling, but delicate, small, and plain.

“Is same chain,” Ilya told him softly, “as mine. I figured out who was the designer and found this on eBay. Moya babushka gave this,” he said, hooking a finger through the chain around his neck, the one he never took off, no matter what he was doing, “to my mother as an engagement present. Now, I give you one, too. I think the guys will be too blind to notice they are the same, but still. Who cares? They do not know what it means. It is just for us.”

“You were going to propose?” Shane asked softly, gently slipping a finger beneath the delicate gold chain and lifting it. The light struck it at just the right angle, and it lit up, each link sparkling. It was small and simple, but he could tell it was well made. The links slid together like butter, even though it must have been thirty or forty years old at least.

“I told you,” Ilya said. “That was always the plan. I propose to you. You really were not listening, huh?” He nodded his head toward the window. “I was gonna do it on the dock, remember? Was going to ask at the end of the summer. But your mother stole my thunder, which is so embarrassing for both of us.” He pouted. “I had the same idea as you, don’t worry—we keep it to ourselves until we are ready, and then I wanted to shop for rings together.”

“That sounds wonderful, Ilya,” Shane murmured. “Help me put it on?”

The touch of Ilya’s fingers brushing the back of his neck was achingly familiar. How often had he done this in the locker room, before anyone even knew? Just a quick brush over his nape, a tickle through the short, sensitive hairs, a glide. A reminder.

He did the clasp with the expertise of old familiarity and the chain settled, cool but quickly warming, into the hollow of Shane’s clavicle, right at the dip. He set his fingers against it, feeling his pulse beneath the metal. It was unobtrusive. The chain was light, a barely there pressure and tickle on the back of his neck, but sturdy. Ilya’s chain had survived almost a decade of professional hockey, so Shane was confident it wouldn’t accidentally break. Shane had never worn much jewelry, but he didn’t think the chain would overstimulate him. It was more like the familiar press of his shoulder pads, he thought, which Ilya always managed to adjust perfectly.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” Ilya murmured into his hair, “for a while.”

Shane smiled. “How long is ‘a while’?” he asked, turning around so he could wrap his arms around Ilya’s neck.

Instead of answering, Ilya kissed him. “Okay,” Ilya said, and Shane laughed breathlessly. “What? Just said ‘okay.’ What’s funny?”

“You,” Shane said. “Everything you do.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, but he was grinning so hard that they were mostly shut and it was hard to tell. He leaned in and kissed the base of Shane’s neck, lips touching skin and metal. Shane returned the gesture, finding Irina’s cross and holding it between his thumb and his finger. He wished he could have thanked her, just once, for giving this to him. He pressed his thumb hard against the symbol, hoping it would indent into his skin.

One day, they would string matching rings onto their necklaces. Maybe during the season, they could carry each other’s.

“Okay,” Ilya said softly, watching as Shane let the pendant fall gently back to his chest. “So we can save big fancy wedding ceremony and rings for later, and we start with paperwork.” He kissed him. Shane kissed back hard, flooded with relief at the understanding and longing he could feel in Ilya. “I love paperwork,” Ilya said when he pulled away a minute later. “It reminds me of you.”

Shane laughed. “Paperwork now, or soon, and the rest can wait,” he agreed quietly. “And then, when...” Shane closed his eyes again. “When I get some professional help, like, you know, therapy, and I actually process what happened last year, and I actually start to feel like I’m *out* instead of always *outed*, and when we know that we can keep you safe, and—then maybe that’s how we can announce it. To everyone. So that we never have to hide again.”

“With a wedding, you mean?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “We’ll have a wedding, and we can do something dramatic and possessive like posting photos of each other on Instagram and then deleting all our social media apps before the honeymoon.”

“I love this word, by the way. ‘Honeymoon,’” Ilya murmured. “We will go to paradise.”

“We can go wherever you want,” Shane agreed.

“It will be paradise with you.”

“It already is,” Shane said.

“See?” Ilya asked, teasing. “You can be the romantic one sometimes.”

Shane huffed. “And here I thought proposing a confidential marriage agreement in California so that nosey reporters can’t out our relationship was very casual of me.”

“So casual, Mr. Hollander,” Ilya purred.

Shane bit his lip. “You’re really okay with this? You know what I mean, right? Of course, I want to be married to you, I just—”

“I know,” Ilya cut in smoothly. “I know. I love it. Is very you, this plan.” He rolled his shoulders, shrugging, and Shane knew that he did understand; they both understood each other. Marriages were, after all, a legal document. It didn’t change how they felt about each other, or the promises they had made and were planning to keep, or their love. It was just another contract that they needed to sign before they could proceed fearlessly with the rest of their lives.

Ilya smiled. God, Shane loved his smile. “We went so slow and then we went so fast. Maybe now, this time, we can try for a normal pace, okay?”

“Normal,” Shane huffed, knowing that he was grinning like a fool and unable to do anything but stare into Ilya’s eyes and try to pull him even closer. “Well, I’ll have you know, most people consider normal to be pretty boring.”

“Good thing I fucking love boring.”

“You really do, don’t you?” Shane asked breathlessly.

“Depends,” Ilya said. “Is it boring waking up every morning with my boyfriend—or husband?” he asked, a smile curving his lips. “Is boring if every day, I wear the crazy expensive watch my pretty husband bought me, and he wears the necklace I gave him, and secretly we both know it is better than any ring? Is it boring if we get a dog together, and we promise to take turns walking them in the morning, except you always wake up first and you have big heart, so you fail to the puppy eyes and take them out first thing? Is it boring if you make terrible smoothies and are so annoying about your diet, and all I can feel is so very fond of you?”

“It’s a little boring,” Shane said, heart beating fast.

“Okay,” Ilya said. “Then yes. I love boring.”

“I love you,” Shane said.

“Can I still call you my husband?” Ilya asked, tilting his head. “Not to reporters. Maybe not even to whole team, although probably LeClaire should know for any medical things that come up. But to our friends? Svetlana, definitely?”

“Yes,” Shane said. “Yes, of course. Ilya.” He steeled himself. He had been trying to find the right words for so long, and suddenly, in that moment, they came to him fully fledged: “What the world gets from us and what we choose to give it are two different things,” he began. “I don’t... I don’t want my fear or my trauma about being outed to make me feel like I owe everyone an explanation for my life. I didn’t have control over that. But I like the idea of being with you, and not hiding, and just trying to... live. I like that. I want that. If that means that sometimes paparazzi snap photos of us together when it’s not the season or when we’re not working on the charity, or if our fans are suspicious, then that’s okay. As long as we’re safe, it’s okay. It’s great. Wonderful. Everything is wonderful with you.”

“Good,” Ilya said, leaning in close enough to brush their noses together. “Because I keep almost slipping up.”

“What do you mean?”

“Almost calling you my husband,” Ilya said. “I have done it, like, a dozen times in the past two months. You only haven’t noticed because you are just as oblivious as the rest of the team.”

“What?” Shane asked, pulling back. “No, you haven’t!”

“Absolutely have,” Ilya said, nodding seriously. “You think my English is much worse than it is because I am always cutting myself off and stumbling. Very embarrassing, Shane, do you see what you do to me? I can’t even speak English anymore because I want to be married to you so bad.”

Shane couldn’t do anything but smile.

(They both knew the truth, of course. Even if they purportedly agreed to keep their marriage on paper, to give themselves more time to grow into their relationship, and to wait to exchange rings or vows or throw a party to announce it to the world, they knew the truth. About themselves. About each other. About their home, and what they had built together.)

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Well, even if we’re delaying a proper ceremony, we’re more or less onto steps, what, six through ten I think?”

“We have sort of thrown the order around,” Ilya said, clearly trying to remember the details of his own plan. “Was step eight a second Stanley Cup?”

“I think so. But technically, I think you wanted to tell the world first? And we haven’t done that yet.”

“Okay, whatever,” Ilya said, rolling his eyes. “Sorry am not following plan to the letter, I should have known better when I said it, you are too literal. Screw the plan.”

Shane gasped in mock outrage. “Screw the *plan*? I’m sorry, do you have any idea what kind of family you’re about to marry into?”

“Oh, I know,” Ilya grinned. “Crazy family who is obsessed with lawyers and paperwork and statistics and plans and cannot live in the moment because they are so controlling and weird. Your mother leaves legal documents in obvious places to tell us to get a move on, Shane. You are all psychotic.”

“Not true,” Shane said. “My dad is very normal.”

“Your dad is boring,” Ilya corrected, but he kissed Shane before it could ever seem like an insult. “And you are the best of both of them.”

Shane smiled at him like an idiot. “Do you want to make a new one together?”

“New plan?” Ilya asked.

“Yeah. Since you forgot the last one, apparently.”

“Eh, I don’t need a new one.” He kissed Shane’s cheek with a loud, *Mwah!* “I can take whatever life throws at us. It’s worked out pretty perfectly for me so far.”

Chapter End Notes

(confidential marriages are a real thing in California! I did some very cursory research and I do not at all know if this plan works in reality, but Canada does recognize valid marriages in the US so theoretically I think it might be sound, especially as an emergency “have the marriage license signed and in place and ready to deploy” option—and even if it’s not, this is fiction, yippee! In this story, they get their happy ending!)

I love the idea of a soft launch for Shane and Ilya (a la, cjr2’s very famous fic “Fanning the Flames”) where instead of a dramatic declaration or another traumatic outing, Ilya and Shane have the right legal protections in place that they can just go about living their lives, acting how they want to, and being authentic about the aspects of privacy that actually matter to them, and ignore rumors and potential paparazzi and media speculation just to live how they want for a while. That’s what happens in this universe! They just get to be together, and they learn not to worry about the rest of it :)

A few hockey related credits for the story overall: Hockey Psychology on YouTube, @marissakumari on tiktok who made a lifesaving series on hockey for beginners right when I needed it most, and again circ_bamboo’s hockey guide on ao3 also linked in the first fic!

More Long and Unnecessary End Notes: it’s been a very long time since I wrote fanfiction of this length, especially sharing it while I was writing it (I, like many of you in the comments, am astounded by how much I’ve been writing). I had an outline and the first half partially written when I started updating, but I decided to commit to WIP because I knew I wouldn’t finish it without encouragement—and you guys were the most encouraging ever. I have no words! It was so much more fun than I could have ever imagined to be writing alongside all your wonderful comments and thoughts, it was an actual delight to see what you were seeing and noticing and focused on and nudge my outline and certain scenes to fit your ideas. It’s so much fun to write for such an engaged audience and I had such a blast (and ignored several other things I probably should have prioritized more because I was having so much fun. Worth it tho). Thanks to everyone who read along and the literally hundreds of people commenting, and thank you to everyone who is reading it now that it’s complete! I hope you enjoyed! Thank you thank you thank you!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!