

Root Rot

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Root Rot

by [Content_Scrapbooker](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander loved Ilya Rozanov, so much that it was going to kill him. He has to make the most of the time he has left after the Olympics, before the roots really take hold.

AKA your basic Hanahaki Disease fic, full of pining, mild body horror, sex, and eventually some well-earned comfort.

Notes

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

Chapter 1

The doctor posted the scans up on the LED box while Shane sat silently on the consult table, resisting the urge to cough. He'd been doing that a lot lately, since Sochi. The petals though, they arrived this morning.

"Well, if the petals weren't proof enough..." the doctor trailed off, sounding professionally sympathetic. Shane forced himself to look at the X-Ray scans – his scans – that showed a small fibrous network of roots spreading through both lungs. The roots only spanned a little bit at the top of his lungs, but were already spreading downwards, forming a white mass clearly visible in the x-ray.

Early stage of Hanahaki disease.

"Fuck." Shane rasped, throat still raw from the coughing. He clutched the red carnation petals that he'd spat up before the appointment in one hand, crushing them between his fingers.

The doctor moved to sit in front of Shane, with a sad look in his eyes. Shane wondered how many cases like him this man had seen. He wondered how many this man had tried to save. *How many had he failed to save?*

Hanahaki only had two known cures; reciprocated love or surgical intervention. But the surgery had a cost, one that was too high a price for most to pay. You didn't just lose the love for the person for whom you held your affection, you lost love entirely. The treatment wasn't specific enough to target only one source of love, so despite the cure's existence, only a small percentage of people actually accepted the treatment. Which made Hanahaki one of the most voluntarily fatal diseases in the world.

Shane already knew now that he wouldn't have the surgery. He couldn't give up love, because he loved hockey. He loved his parents. He loved friends, his team, his country...

And he apparently loved Ilya Rozanov.

Which was the whole problem.

Shane hadn't seen Ilya since February, that night in the Sochi Olympic stadium, and hadn't talked to him really since a month before. Congratulatory texts to the Russian had gone unanswered back in April, which had really driven home the message that the Russian didn't want anything to do with him outside of sex.

And now, in two days, he'd have to get on stage and present an award with the man, while fighting to keep down the petals in his throat.

"So..." Shane trailed off, resignedly. Looking the doctor in the eyes, he took in a shaky breath, feeling totally unprepared for this conversation. "How long?"

“There isn’t any chance I can convince you to get the surgery?” The doctor asked weakly, already knowing the answer.

“No.”

The doctor sighed, and shrugged. “It depends on the person. For some people, it’s a short process. I’ve seen cases where the condition evolves over a matter of days. For others, it is a long, drawn-out process that can take years, a decade even! Factors like emotional fluctuations, physical activity, exposure to the subject of your affections...” The doctor looked back at the scans. “For you, given you identified the coughing back in February, and where you are now, I’d say two years, give or take. But that’s not a solid answer, especially given your profession.”

“Yeah.” Shane hung his head.

“You know this could affect your performance?”

“I do.”

“You want me to call your team doctor?”

“No.” Shane snapped, saying it too quickly. “Sorry, I uh...no. Our season is over for the year, I can build up resistance for managing it in the meantime. But I don’t want to give up on my job, just yet. And if they knew...” Shane sighed. *To be honest, he didn’t know what the team would make him do. Would they bench him? Cancel his contract? Would they fire him? He didn’t want to find out. He didn’t want anyone finding out.*

“Shane, I must stress that you cannot *work* your way through this. Hanahaki doesn’t go away, not without some pretty specific changes to your love life.” The doctor explained. “Right now, you can still breathe, and occasionally, you’ll cough up petals. But eventually you’ll choke up fully formed flowers, stems, and leaves. And if that doesn’t kill you first, it will start to hurt when you breathe, eat, exercise, and sleep, which will affect your daily life. We’re talking long-term chronic pain. And all the meanwhile those roots are going to grow deeper and wider and denser until eventually, your lungs burst. Trying to play a sport like hockey will damage you a lot faster and the last thing you need is to suffocate on the ice...”

“I know!” Shane cut the doctor off, feeling overwhelmed and nauseated by the graphic description. “I know. But hockey is my life. It’s what I love to do, it’s what I was born to do!” He could feel tears welling up behind his eyes. “I’d much rather have less time doing that than having longer without two things I love.”

The appointment ended soon after that and Shane got home with a heavy heart and a bag full of painkillers and antidepressants. On his bed, a half-packed suitcase waited, complete with the suit that he was supposed to be wearing on stage.

With Ilya.

Shane sighed, dropping the pills into the case, before collapsing on his bed, feeling the tears that had been burning his eyes soak the pillowcase. Somewhere, his phone buzzed, and just

for the slightest, painful moment, Shane hoped it would be Ilya. But when he pulled his phone out, it was just a text from his mom, reminding him to pack the watch he was supposed to wear to the Awards.

Shane's stomach clenched. He wondered if he should tell her and let her know about what was happening. But Shane couldn't even let himself entertain that thought, because he wasn't sure if he could watch her plan his death while both of their hearts were breaking. He typed back a brief platitude and sent it off, throwing down the phone just in time to roll himself over enough to let another round of coughs wrack his body. It was the kind of cough that made everything hurt from head to toe, and Shane's eyes watered even more as his lungs gasped for air between the petals in his esophagus.

His chest ached and his muscles seized, forcing Shane to curl up as his limbs jerked helplessly against the forceful contractions of his respiratory system. His head hurt more with each cough until finally, the petals were expelled. Shane watched them flutter to the floor, panting harshly to recover the lost air.

A mixed bag of emotions pooled in his stomach, flooding him with anger, grief, fear, and regret.

He was angry; angry at himself and at Ilya. He was angry at the League, at the world even, for it being the way they were. He wanted to admit his feelings and have them be reciprocated, and have the chance to be in love with someone without rotten flowers trying to kill him.

He was grieving; grieving the life he'd wanted to have. The one where he'd have a long, successful career as a hockey player, a Stanley Cup winner, as a partner to someone he could settle down with. He grieved for his parents, knowing soon they'd be preparing to bury him, after everything else they'd done for him.

He was scared; of everything, if Shane was being honest with himself. Of what the next year of his life would look and feel like, or what would happen a year on down the line, of what people would think of him. He worried about the League and the fans and his team, whether they'd be angry when Shane couldn't do it anymore, whether they'd shun him for this or for the truth about his sexuality. He worried about Hayden, and what he would say? What would they tell the Pike children? Would they even remember him? And what Ilya would think?

He had regrets; regrets about not being able to tell Ilya he loved him. Regrets about letting Ilya push him away in Sochi, letting the press set them up against each other. Maybe if they weren't the rivals they'd been destined to be, it would've been easier.

~~He regretted loving Ilya Rozanov.~~

No, he didn't. Shane forced himself to admit that truth. He could argue to everyone that he didn't want to lose his love of hockey, but only to himself could he admit he didn't want to lose his love for Ilya. That beautiful, sad man with a golden glow and a sharp tongue that above everyone else made Shane happy.

He couldn't let that go.

He didn't regret loving Ilya Rozanov for one second.

With an exaggerated huff, Shane got up and started hobbling around his room, getting back to packing his bags. He couldn't lay there feeling sorry for himself any longer, not when he had so much to do. He literally didn't have the time to waste.

Ilya gripped the counter of the backstage bathroom at the NHL awards, trying desperately to recover his composure. He knew people were looking for him, that any minute now he would be expected to be on stage, but right then in this very second, Ilya couldn't make himself move.

Not after he'd seen Shane.

He'd thought about Shane Hollander every day since that conversation in the stands at Sochi. Not for a lack of trying, but because everything he did now reminded him OF Shane. He played hockey, he thought of Hollander. He had sex, his mind turned to Shane. He saw something boring, and he thought Hollander might like it. He'd forced himself to delete every text he drafted addressed to Shane because he was sure if he sent even one, he'd send thousands.

And then today, his heart had skipped a physical beat at the sight of the other man standing in his position early like the goody two-shoes he was. Wearing a form-fitting tux and an expensive watch, no less, looking every inch of the millionaire Shane was.

The suit was tailored perfectly to him, adding sleek lines to his lithe build that made him look powerful in a way that people wouldn't expect. Even from behind, Shane looked gorgeous, and Ilya wanted nothing more to drag him off back to his hotel room and spend an age taking that suit off of Shane's perfect body to worship him.

But he couldn't. And so, Ilya had to run.

He tugged on the tie around his throat and combed the loose strands of hair escaping his ponytail back, trying to make himself look presentable, hearing the PAs searching for him outside of the bathroom, mustering the courage needed to force himself to move.

He exited the bathroom, making brief eye contact with the panicked PAs tasked with finding him before stepping into Shane's field of view, finally catching a glimpse of Hollander's face this time. Shane's expression changed instantly, going from something sad and passive that Ilya couldn't quite name to angry with a hint of desire.

"Fuck, Rozanov!" Shane swore. "What the fuck? We're on in like five sec—" A harsh cough shook Shane's body and he turned away to hide his face, covering his mouth with his hands.

Ilya waited patiently, the lecture doing little to affect him, although he was mildly concerned about the fact Shane was sick and had still chosen to attend. "We are on in fifty," Ilya shrugged. "We are fine."

Shane glared at him, still slightly red in the face from the coughing fit. “Does it matter to you that everyone backstage has been having a heart attack looking for you?”

Ilya shook his head. The only thing that mattered to him was how much Shane’s freckles stood out in this lighting. He looked paler than usual, and maybe hadn’t been out in the sun as much, but those beautiful marks on his face stood out in such a way that made Ilya want to kiss each and every single one of them, then and there.

“Where were you, anyways?” Shane sighed, trying to settle himself.

Ilya smirked. “Busy.”

“Oh yeah?” Shane’s voice took on a fragile edge. “With who?”

Ilya loved jealousy on Shane. It was one of his best looks; the way it made his eyes narrow and darken, the way tension scrunched up his shoulders and made Shane’s jaw go stiff. He loved that Shane WAS jealous, even though he had no reason to be. Ilya could stare at that look forever, even if Shane tried to kill him. But they didn’t have time for that now.

“We are on.” Ilya deflected, walking towards the stage with a practiced smile on his face, and Shane stumbled behind him, regaining composure at the last second. They took place at center stage, and Ilya did his best to avoid squinting under the hot lights as he spotted the teleprompter. “Sportsmanship,” he read cheerfully. “...is very important.” The audience laughed, and Ilya waited for Shane to read his bit.

“I didn’t know you knew what that word meant, Rozanov,” Hollander read. He actually sounded authentically angry with Ilya, and for the briefest moment Ilya was impressed with Shane’s acting skills. He was usually so terrible at it.

“Of course I know. It is like when I steal the puck from you and score a goal, you are not a sore loser about it.” Ilya made the scripted tease sound so natural, but Shane didn’t even respond, his eyes locked on the crowd ahead of them.

“Or when I score a hat trick against your team, and you graciously accept defeat.”

“Or,” Ilya said obnoxiously, “when I win the Stanley Cup and you are impressed by my achievement.”

That got a lot of laughter, but for the briefest moment Shane flinched. Ilya’s gaze sharpened. “Anyway,” Hollander said grumpily. “Here are this year’s nominees.” Shane read out the names fluidly, and Ilya shoved his hand in his pocket, thumbing the unlock button on his phone, waiting for the cue.

“Hey,” Ilya interrupted “Before we give out the award, can I get a selfie?”

“What?”

“Just a quick one. I mean, when will this happen again, right?” Ilya pressed, looking all too pleased with himself. He was having fun riling Shane up for the audience.

Shane rolled his eyes and nodded. “Fine, but hurry up.”

Ilya was excited for this part. He took out his phone, the camera app already ready to go, then wrapped one arm around Hollander’s shoulders while holding the phone out with the other. He could see Hollander’s irritated expression on the phone screen, but that didn’t stop Ilya from taking several photos, the loud haptic noise coming from his phone’s speakers picked up by the microphone, which only made the audience laugh harder.

If he was being honest, Ilya was glad to have these photos, even if Shane didn’t look happy in them. Not just because he’d finally have a reason to have photos of the two of them together, but because in private, he could pretend it wasn’t just them. Ilya could pretend that it was them, out in the world where they were accepted, together.

He curled his fingers against the soft fabric of Shane’s tuxedo jacket, feeling the hard muscle beneath, and turned his head slightly just to bring his lips momentarily closer to Hollander’s hair, picking up on the slight scents of mint and citrus, just as he had the last time Ilya had been this close to him. There was also an underlying floral scent that Ilya couldn’t identify, but Ilya ignored that, in case it was from someone else and the scent had just lingered on Shane.

Ilya let his fingers brush across the back of Shane’s neck as he removed his arm, not missing the tiny gasp that escaped from Shane’s lips. Shane was so responsive, Ilya marveled, salivating at the idea of just a single touch having such an impact.

When they finished their segment handing the trophy off, Shane led the way offstage, practically dashing for the same bathroom Ilya had been hiding in earlier. Ilya sauntered, casually following behind at a slow pace, more than happy to watch him go, but faltered as he opened the door and found Shane bent over a toilet bowl gagging violently.

“You are alright?” Ilya asked, frowning. Shane groaned, acknowledging his presence, carelessly wiping his mouth with the back of his jacket sleeve.

“Fine.” Shane grumbled. He flushed the toilet he’d been kneeling over and stood up, turning back to Ilya, still looking as unhappy as he had on stage. Still looking as beautiful as Ilya remembered him. Staring at him now, Ilya was struck at how much he’d missed Shane.

“Well?” He asked, looking Shane up and down.

“Well, what?” Shane snapped.

Cockily, Ilya pointed to the floor. “Are you not going to suck my dick? Might give you better taste in mouth.”

“Fuck you! Why don’t you suck mine?” Shane actually looked offended, and to be honest, Ilya couldn’t blame him. The bathroom floor looked disgusting.

But Ilya didn’t reveal any of that in his expression, humming thoughtfully. He wasn’t adverse to the concept of blowing Shane tonight, but he wasn’t going to do that here. Pressing himself

up against Shane's body, he reached up to caress the shorter man's smooth jaw, clocking the fact that Shane was actually trembling. "Maybe ask nice." Ilya whispered.

There was just a moment where Ilya wondered if he'd taken it too far. Shane was pale, almost too pale, and the look in his eyes kept wavering between lust and anger, like Shane couldn't decide if he wanted to push Ilya away.

"Please." Shane breathed, and internally Ilya grinned. *He had Shane on the hook now.*

"You want me to kneel on this dirty bathroom floor? You have to ask nicer than that, Hollander."

"Please," Hollander said again, his voice strained and hoarse. "Get on your knees and suck my dick. Please."

Ilya's hand came up to cup the crotch of Shane's slacks, where his obvious bulge was protruding into Ilya's leg. Shane shuddered, closing his eyes as he unsteadily took in a breath, and Ilya took a moment to fully drink in the sight of Shane taking such pleasure, before leaning in to say "No."

Shane startled, whining as Ilya stepped back, removing himself from Shane's space. "What?" He looked adorably confused and hurt.

"No. I will not do anything to you in here. We will go back out there, sit in our seats, da, and then go to party. And then, when you have been waiting all night for it, you will come to my hotel room. And I will maybe do more than suck your dick."

"You're really going to leave me like this?" Shane looked almost desperate.

"Yes. For now."

Shane maintained eye contact, mentally trying to plead with Ilya to change his mind, but it was not going to work. "Fine."

"Aww," Ilya cooed. "I will make a deal; if you win MVP tonight, I will blow you, fuck you... whatever you want."

Shane stared at him, clearly mulling the idea over, but before he agreed, he asked something so predictable. "And if you win?"

Ilya grinned. *Tapping into Shane's competitive nature made this so easy. Ilya loved it.* "I will let you know."

Ready to make an exit, Ilya couldn't resist pecking Shane on the lips, not noticing how Shane froze underneath the touch. He left without making the kiss too intense, despite wanting to, throwing a "Good luck tonight." over his shoulder without looking back.

If he had, he might have noticed Shane turning around to cough in the toilet bowl again.

Shane was actually suffocating on the bathroom floor, clawing at his throat as he felt his body painfully try to eject the foreign bloom in his airway.

His stomach roiled as his lungs seized, eyes watering from the oxygen deprivation until finally the touch of petals against his uvula triggered Shane's gag reflex. It was almost a relief just to be able to throw up, and Shane deposited his entire stomach contents over the flower in the toilet, suddenly grateful just to be able to breathe again.

He loosened the tie and buttons around his neck, panting heavily as he tugged at the fabric, overwhelmed by how much he felt the world pressing in on him. Panic from the choking and his heated exchange with Ilya had blurred his vision brought fresh tears to his eyes while the ache in his throat and chest ebbed through his body.

At some point during the coughing fit, or perhaps in the immediate aftermath — he wasn't sure which — Shane had collapsed against the wall of the stall, sliding down to sit on the dirty bathroom floor, unable to do much more than breathe.

It took him a while to move, and half-heartedly reached up to flush the toilet, not bothering to look at the contents. He was sick of the sight of flower petals anyways.

Summoning his strength, Shane forced his limbs to press against the wall of the cubicle and the toilet bowl to get himself out of the bathroom, and back to his seat just in time for them to announce Ilya as the season's MVP winner. Shane couldn't even bring himself to care that he'd lost. He watched as Ilya swaggered to the stage and accepted the award, and then walked out, not caring to see the rest. Amidst the applause and celebration, Shane also left, heading immediately back to his room, where the painkillers were.

He knew medicine was by no means a fix for Hanahaki. But with the right dosage and combination, they were powerful enough to suppress both the pain and strong emotions, thus delaying the spread and the symptoms for just a little while.

And since Shane was going to see Ilya tonight, he was going to need all the help he could get.

He dry-swallowed the pills, feeling them scrape his already raw throat as they were forced down, while he stripped off the tie, watch, and cufflinks he was wearing. He turned to leave, intent on heading straight to Ilya's hotel room next, but just as he was on his way out, Shane caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and stopped short.

Shane looked awful. He was thankful for a moment that the cameras hadn't panned to him during the nominee category, or everyone in that ballroom would have seen just how off his appearance was. His eyes were immediately drawn to the trail of blood smeared out of the corner of his mouth, which only highlighted just how pale Shane looked. His skin looked lifeless and his eyes were red, accented by the dark circles underneath them.

But beyond his face, Shane kept seeing flaws. His posture was off, his breathing rapid and uneven. His hands were trembling. Everything was wrong, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it!

Nothing he could do fixed it. Shane spent too long staring in that mirror, trying to find something to fix, some way to make his problem disappear, to the point he found himself picking apart every bit of his appearance. Shane hated everything about himself in that moment, hated that he had let this happen, hated that he was still letting it happen.

But what else was he supposed to do? Sick of everything, Shane mindlessly wandered out of the room, getting in the elevator to head in the direction of Ilya's room. Standing in the hallway before Ilya opened the door usually made him feel breathless, but this time he was so more than usual. His stomach turned, and his nerves fried themselves with endless possibilities.

And then Ilya opened the door.

Ilya looked good. The Russian had already shed most of his ensemble, with his jacket and tie missing, allowing for his dress shirt to hang loosely in its unbuttoned state, thus exposing Ilya's chest. His shirt sleeves were also unbuttoned, and the belt that had been around his waist had been removed. Ilya's shoes and socks were also absent, baring his feet to the luxurious wooden floor of the penthouse suite.

Shane felt overdressed.

"Here to congratulate me?" Ilya crooned, taking a sip of vodka from the glass he was holding, and Shane's eyes flicked to the way Ilya's throat moved, swallowing the alcohol.

"I guess," Shane shrugged. Ilya raised an eyebrow, and spread his arms, as if clearly waiting for something, and it took Shane far too long to catch up. "Congratulations." He finally said, drawing a smile to Ilya's face.

"Thank you. Now, take off your clothes."

Shane was actually disappointed. Part of him had hoped that Ilya would do that, or at the very least help him, but as Shane stepped into the room, Ilya just put more distance between them. *It was probably for the best*, Shane reasoned. *Shane didn't even really want to touch himself right now.*

Without questioning Ilya further, Shane rid himself of the dress jacket and shirt, carefully draping them over the back of the hotel suite's sofa, quickly followed by his shoes and socks. He could still feel his heart racing, and he knew it wouldn't be long before the urge to cough again became imminent. And the more naked he got, the more insecure he felt.

"Shouldn't we—" Shane hesitated, finally removing his pants until he was wearing only his boxer briefs, feeling totally exposed under Ilya's watch. "I mean... there are windows."

"We are on the sixteenth floor." Ilya retorted bemusedly.

"Yeah, but..." Shane couldn't even come up with a counterargument, and felt stupid. Without a word, Ilya turned and headed in the direction of the bedroom. Shane followed, waiting for further instruction. Tonight was happening on Ilya's terms and they both knew it.

Turning to Shane with a raised eyebrow, Ilya gestured to the bed, ordering Shane to get on it. Shane didn't even question it, settling in the middle of the mattress, propped up by the decorative throw pillows. Ilya closed the bedroom curtains, and for some reason, that actually helped Shane relax. He watched as Ilya continued to move around the room, and expected him to join him on the bed next, but then watched with surprise as Ilya left.

Shane tried to cough as delicately and quietly as he could, easing the tension in his throat while waiting for Ilya to return. When he did, he had a chair and a full glass of vodka. The chair was dragged up to place against the wall, and Ilya settled into it, his entire body placed to face Shane. "I am impressed with this hotel," Ilya remarked. This vodka is not so easy to find. Now, touch yourself."

Shane's eyes blew wide open. "What?"

"Show off for me," Ilya clarified. "Let me watch you."

Shane was not any less confused. "You—what?"

"Is my special night, Hollander. I want to watch you."

Blush spread across Shane's cheeks and down his neck to his chest. Looking like he did, that had to be the LAST thing Ilya wanted, but he wasn't going to argue. He just wasn't sure what to do. "I—I've never..."

He'd wondered earlier, what else was even possible for them to do, to make tonight special, since they'd already given each other handjobs, blowjobs, and gone all the way to fucking, but Ilya had clearly found his answer.

"I thought maybe not. So, show me; how do you touch yourself, Shane Hollander?"

"Give me some of that vodka, then," Shane finally said, his throat feeling too dry. "I'm too sober for this."

Ilya looked entirely too satisfied, shaking his head. "No. The vodka you can have after. As reward."

"Fuck. You." Shane rasped, and Ilya grinned, baring all of his teeth.

"Is good vodka! Come on. Look at your poor dick, Hollander. Give him some attention, yes?" Ilya teased, and Shane resisted the urge to flip him off. He wanted Ilya to be giving him attention, taking Shane's mind off of everything, but clearly, that was not happening any time soon.

"Close your eyes," Ilya said encouragingly, and Shane obeyed. "Pretend you are alone. How do you start?"

Shane faltered, only made more nervous by how intrigued Ilya sounded. He wanted a show, to watch Shane undo himself and bare himself to him, so that when Shane was at his most desperate, Ilya could swoop in and take him with no effort.

Aiming to please, Shane forced his hands to creep over his body, pressing one down over his throat as the other drifted over between his legs. The reaction was immediate, a soft moan coming out of his mouth at the gentle pressure on his erection. He could feel his vocal cords reverberate as his hand stroked his dick through the soft fabric of his underwear, and arched his back to really push into the movement. He parted his legs, bending them at the knees slightly so he could plant his feet flat on the duvet, letting his toes curl as Shane got the support he needed to roll his hips.

His breathing quickened with the rush of pleasure, and his eyes fluttered, unable to decide between staying closed and being open, but curiosity got the better of him. He glanced in Ilya's direction to see if any of what Shane was doing had had an impact on the other man and found himself surprised.

Ilya was leaning forward in the chair, his lips parted and his pupils dilated at the sheer sight of Shane. His vodka was loosely gripped in one hand, but apparently forgotten in Ilya's entrancement. But the best part, was the sight of the tented fabric of Ilya's pants. "Come on, Hollander," Ilya said, once he noticed Shane looking at him. "Show me."

Armed with a renewed confidence at Ilya's reaction, Shane hooked both of his thumbs into the waistband of his briefs, sliding them down over his legs to reveal his dripping cock, and just to retaliate slightly, he threw them right at Ilya's face.

The Russian caught them one-handed, smirking. "Stroke it," Ilya ordered, voice deep with lust. "Make yourself come for me."

Shane did just that, wrapping his hand loosely around his dick, feeling the drops of pre-come slip down his length, thumbing his slit knowing that if Ilya asked him to do much more, then he would come, and the moment would be over.

And Shane wasn't ready for that yet.

"There is lube in the drawer, beside the bed."

Shane repressed a groan, already knowing what Ilya was getting at. "Get it for me?" He asked, hoping that would finally entice Ilya to participate and touch him. Ilya got up, not even putting his glass down to open up the drawer and remove the contents, only to cockily drop it just out of Shane's reach. Shane glared at him, irritated by the fact he would now have to move to get it, which only seemed to amuse Ilya further.

Shane had to repress a whine, watching as Ilya turned away to return to the chair while he retrieved the lube, further venting his frustration at the Russian's distance, before ultimately deciding he would simply have to work harder to break Ilya's composure.

"Would you like to know how it feels?" Ilya asked, distracting Shane from reaching that floaty feeling he got as he reached back to circle the rim of his hole with a slick finger.

"How what feels?" Shane asked.

"The Cup. Do you want to know what it feels like to hold the Stanley Cup?"

Shane froze, and his stomach dropped. “Oh fuck you.” He snapped, wanting to get up, get dressed, and leave because that wasn’t fair. *He might never even get to hold the Cup now, and it was all because of the man teasing him right now. But he didn’t. Because he couldn’t blame Ilya for that.*

That was all on Shane.

Ilya laughed. “I cannot describe it anyway. Impossible.”

“I’ll find out for myself soon enough.” Shane feigned confidence, hoping Ilya didn’t hear his voice crack.

“Of course, now show me how you like it, Hollander.”

And Shane did. He relished in the pleasure, working himself open with one hand while fucking the other until he couldn’t take it anymore. “Please!” He sobbed, begging for Ilya to touch him. He just needed a touch. “I– I need...”

“What do you need, Hollander?”

You to love me back, Shane wanted to say, knowing he couldn’t. So instead he just said “You. Fuck me. Please!”

Ilya snuck another sip of vodka, and then removed his shirt, stepping up to the edge of the bed, finally getting closer. Unable to resist, Shane crawled to him, dragging his body along the duvet until he was pressing his nose against the front seam of Ilya’s pants.

“Pochemu eto dolzhna byt' imenno ty?” Ilya swore under his breath, but Shane didn’t stop, mouthing over the bulge in Ilya’s pants. “Pochemu ty takaya ideal'naya? Eto prosto uzhasno.”

Not for the first time, Shane wished he understood Russian, if only so he could understand Ilya when they did this. He wanted to know so badly if he had the same impact on Ilya that Ilya did on him, but instead he relegated himself to undoing the zipper on Ilya’s pants just so Shane could see any proof —the proof even — that Ilya wanted Shane in some capacity. He delicately pulled out Ilya’s erection and opened his mouth to wrap his lips around it, letting his hot breath wash over the sensitive skin before taking it all the way to the root.

Ilya’s hand threaded through Shane’s hair, and Shane pressed up into it, unable to help himself. “Fuck, Hollander.” Ilya moaned, feeling Shane’s throat tighten around him. “You love it! So good for me, look at you!”

Not good enough though, because the next thing Shane knew, Ilya was pulling back again. He whined, only sated by the order to turn over, which he did, far too eagerly. But Shane needed this man; in him, on him, with him, for as long as he could get. And that was why he was still here, even knowing his proximity to Ilya would make the Hanahaki worse. Because Shane was selfish.

Ilya pressed his dick against Shane’s rim, slotting into Shane like he belonged there. Shane barely had any time to adjust before Ilya started pistoning his hips so hard, they could feel the

aftershocks of the thrust rocking the bed. A hand pressed down at the center of Shane's back, forcing him harder into the plush sheets, but it did nothing to muffle the words coming out of his mouth. "Please, please, please!" Shane begged, prompting Ilya into going harder and faster until pleasure overtook them both.

And then it was over. Shane felt a cold chill rock down his spine as Ilya rolled off of him, and subtly moving closer until he was touching Ilya again. They laid there, just enjoying the post-coital moment in silence until finally Ilya found the breath to speak. "Jesus, Hollander." Ilya's accent was thick, his tone light and happy.

"How about that vodka?" Shane asked, feeling his heart ache and the urge to cough return. He needed that drink now, otherwise he was going to spit up petals right there and ruin the moment.

Ilya laughed. "Yes, give me a minute." He got the vodka as promised, handing Shane the glass before lighting up a smoke, watching as Shane sipped the high-proof alcohol, desperate for some relief. Ilya's eyes flicked to him, almost surprised by how eager Shane was to drink.

"So," Shane grimaced. "Are you heading back soon?"

"Back?"

"To Russia. For the summer." Shane clarified.

Ilya's features shuttered. "Yes."

"Oh. Why?" They both were surprised by the question. Shane didn't even really mean to ask it, but now it was out there.

Ilya inhaled a long puff of smoke from his cigarette. "It is home."

"But...do you like going there?" Shane couldn't seem to stop himself. This wasn't what he wanted to ask at all. He wanted to ask Ilya to join him at his cottage this summer, beg him stay with Shane in Canada, but he couldn't get the words because if he did, a petal might slip out too.

"I should sleep." Ilya didn't answer the question, and the dismissal was clear. Shane felt even colder.

"Oh." Shane had nearly managed to forget about this part. "Yeah. I should...I need to get going, anyway."

He hurried around, trying to hold back tears, glancing back at Ilya who already seemed to be on the verge of sleep, eyes closed, uncaring that he was leaving.

"See you," Hollander said from the other room, now redressed, but Ilya made no move to stop him, no matter how much Shane wanted him to.

"Goodbye, Hollander."

Shane left.

The stumble back to his own room was tedious and painful. By the time he reached the door and got it open, he collapsed on the floor, unable to maintain balance as painful chokes forced their way out. Something hard was in Shane's throat, totally blocking his airway. Shane's vision darkened, and with a shaking hand, forced his own mouth open, clawing his fingers inside past his teeth, trying to rip the obstruction out. His jaw ached and his throat seized and seconds seemingly turned into minutes as Shane's lungs burned for air. He could feel himself getting weaker and weaker with each passing moment, and in a panic, pressed his other hand to his throat to externally force the obstruction out.

Finally, it came loose. Shane got a grip on it and ripped it free, gasping as the world got brighter and less blurry again. The panic never faded however, and the ability to move seemed to have been taken from him, the episode having sapped his strength entirely. Shane faded in and out of consciousness, and he wasn't even sure how long he laid on that hotel room floor for.

But when he awoke, he could still feel the offending object in his hand, and with a weak effort, pulled his hand up to finally take a look at it, knowing already what it was

A complete flower. The red bloom was coated in spit and blood, torn in places from where Shane's nails had dug into the fragile material. In his hand, it looked so much smaller than how it felt when it was stuck in his throat, and yet it wasn't a small thing at all.

Shane wanted to resolve to himself that he never see Ilya again outside of the matches. That they never have sex again, that they never share that afterglow, that they never kiss...

It was only then that it struck Shane that they hadn't kissed tonight, and his heart ached even more. How could he give up Ilya Rozanov? How could Shane have let this happen? Crushing the flower in a fist, he might as well have ripped his own heart out of his throat.

That was how much it hurt.

Chapter 2

Shane pressed through the next season without coughing up another intact flower.

The press called him a beast on the ice, with a renewed determination that took Montreal all the way to the Cup in 2015. He'd wanted to scream when they handed him that trophy in April, to turn to the world as if to say "Look what I achieved! I'm dying for a man and I still did it!"

But he didn't.

He told no one. Not his parents, not his friends, and definitely not Ilya, despite their renewed casual hookups. Despite his doctor's encouragements to share with those closest to him, and the open offer to join a local support group, Shane kept his diagnosis to himself. He incorporated new elements to his already-comprehensive training schedule, working on improving his lung capacity using the same methods as deep-sea divers and astronauts. He stayed on the anti-depressants and the painkillers as well, which as an added bonus, also helped with his anxiety.

He kept it up for the season after that. Even his doctor was impressed by Shane's progress, and started asking him to keep journals about what his daily experiences were, even though the Hanahaki hadn't regressed at all. Shane liked that his journey might be useful for others, so he did that, and more. He donated significant amounts of money to medical research handling Hanahaki and even privately funded the first ever hospice center for people with the condition.

His mom called it good PR. His dad clapped him on the shoulder and told him to keep on with the charity work. Both of them were still in the dark about the fact there was an open room for Shane at that center when he would eventually come to need it.

But things weren't all great. His scans over those two seasons showed significant advancements in his condition, the roots growing past his fifth rib to invade a significant portion of the lung tissue. With each appointment, the X-Rays only got muddier.

Shane could see it in his doctor's eyes every time they talked.

He didn't have much time left.

In truth, Shane didn't even need the doctor to tell him that anymore. The cough was a permanent affliction, presenting every night before bed, and every morning when he woke up. It happened during practice, and when he was on the ice. And beyond that, other symptoms had shown up. His teammates made fun of how much he slept when the team travelled, not knowing that Shane was permanently exhausted. He began missing shots during practice, finding it harder and harder to concentrate. Headaches became a regular occurrence, and his fingernails started changing color. And that said nothing of the pain in his chest.

It never went away. As long as Shane was breathing, he was hurting. A persistent ache in his ribcage that flared and ebbed without warning. It got so bad that sometimes Shane couldn't even move, and there were days during the off-season when he didn't even bother to try.

It was getting harder and harder to hide, and in his heart, Shane knew that whether he liked it or not, the 2016-2017 season was going to be his last.

He still wanted to make the most of what time he had left, however, which is how he ended up here, walking through the Montreal Biodome with his best friend, as they watched Shane's godchildren, or rather Hayden's children.

"Jackie is pregnant." Hayden finally admitted, having clearly had something on his mind the entire outing.

Shane stopped dead in his tracks, turning to look at his best friend with a bewildered expression. "Again?" He asked, aghast, unable to help the subtle glance at Arthur, who was barely a year old and still in the pushchair that Hayden was currently driving.

Shane did not know how women did it sometimes. Shane struggled with a root system invading his lungs, so how could anyone handle a 6-14-pound baby crushing the rest of their organs and then forcing it's way out through your pelvis? And Jackie had carried twins in her first pregnancy.

"Jesus, thanks." Hayden was mock-offended, but Shane corrected himself anyways.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I mean, congratulations."

"Yeah, you sound super happy for me." Shane didn't even need to say anything, watching out of the corner of his eye as the girls barreled towards the touch tank. "I know," Hayden sighed. "But Jackie's happy. I mean, she's fucking bored, right?"

Shane raised an eyebrow. Raising four kids under the age of four did not sound boring. A nearby family glared at Hayden, who flushed and apologized. "Sorry, I really gotta watch my language."

"Hazard of our occupation." Shane brushed it off, still keeping an eye on the twins, who were getting ready to soak each other with the touch tank water.

"I know. I—hey! Jade, sweetie, don't splash your sister!—I need a swear jar or something at home." Hayden rubbed the back of his neck, looking stressed.

"I don't think you can afford that." Shane said sympathetically, wondering if he should set up trusts for Hayden's kids. He was trying to figure out what to do with the rest his money after all, after he was...

Well, he still had some time yet to figure it out.

"Jackie's sister is visiting and they wanted to go shopping and shit..."

"Swear jar," Shane interrupted, smirking.

“Right. Shopping and stuff. Anyway, it’s hard going anywhere with these three monsters, so I appreciate the help.” Hayden sounded actually grateful, and Shane felt guilty all of a sudden. He wondered if he should tell Hayden he wouldn’t be around much longer to help with the kids. He had to start telling people at some point.

“My pleasure, man.” Shane choked out. It was almost on the tip of his tongue, he could say it right there, but before he could get a word out, Hayden was suddenly distracted.

“Oh shit—I mean, shoot—looks like Ruby is trying to steal a starfish. Here, you watch Arthur for a second, okay?” He was running toward the touch tank and the twins before Shane could reply.

Shane watched him go sadly, but knelt in front of the stroller to smile at the sleepy-eyed little boy who was waking up from a nap. “Hey, buddy,” he whispered. “You having a good time?”

Arthur blew a raspberry and tried to mobilize his hands, reaching out for Shane, making his heart melt a little. Shane reached out a finger, letting the little boy grab it with all his strength.

Shane laughed. *He was going to miss this.*

“Okay,” Hayden announced his return, carrying a twin under each arm. “Let’s go see some penguins!”

“Penguins!” The girls screamed, and Shane clapped, mimicking their enthusiasm.

“All right, children. Follow your big brother Shane.” Hayden set the girls down, and Shane reached out to take their hands, hearts clenching as he realized just how small they were. Pulling them along, Shane led the family to the Antarctic room, before unleashing the girls up to the tank where the penguins were actively diving. Hayden and Shane sat on a bench with the stroller parked next to them while the twins were entranced, making it the perfect time to strike up conversation again.

“So, Jackie has this friend...” Hayden said.

“No,” Shane said, losing the smile on his face. *He already knew where this was going.*

“I know, but listen. She’s gorgeous, and she’s cool. She’s a yoga instructor. You like yoga, right?”

“I’m sure she’s great, but I’m really not interested in dating anyone right now.”

“Why the f—I mean, why on earth not? You’re young, you’re rich, you’re famous, you...look like you.” Hayden didn’t understand, and Shane couldn’t take it anymore.

“Because I’m sick.” Shane snapped.

Hayden recoiled. “What?”

Shane gaped. *Okay, he hadn’t meant for it to come out like that.* “I— I’m sick. This is my last season, Hayden.”

Hayden's eyes were wide. "What do you mean, sick? Last season?! Buddy, you make it sound like it's terminal!"

"It is." Shane admitted quietly.

Hayden let out a noise like he'd been punched. Shane looked over at the girls, who were happily babbling to each other as they gave the penguins their own names. "What is it?"

"Hanahaki."

"Fuck."

"Swear jar."

"Fuck that," Hayden clapped a hand over Shane's shoulders. "When did you...? Who is...? I—"

"I got diagnosed back in 2014. It's pretty advanced now."

Hayden was silent, and Shane felt the need to keep going. "I haven't told anyone. Not the team, not my parents. You're... fuck, you're like the first person to find out outside of me and my doctor. Sorry, I shouldn't be telling you this now, I didn't mean..."

"Shane, stop." Hayden's voice was uncharacteristically firm, and Shane's mouth shut with an audible clack. "Don't fucking apologize for needing to tell someone! I mean, I wish you'd told me sooner! Are you okay?"

"No," Shane laughed. "No, I'm not."

Hayden flushed, realizing that was perhaps a stupid question. "Do you know how long you've got..."

"I meant it when I said this would be my last season." Shane sighed. "I'm already past the deadline my doctor gave me when I got the diagnosis. He told me two years. It's been two years and three months now. I probably won't get to meet the baby, sorry."

"So, any day you could just..." Hayden trailed off, looking horrified.

"I don't think any day." Shane explained. "I'm managing, for now. But playing is getting harder and more painful, and as my doctor's explained, the last thing I want is ripping my own lungs open in the middle of a match."

Shane winced, and glanced around, hoping no one was listening. *That was a little too explicit for here.* Hayden didn't know what to say, glancing between Shane and the girls. "Fuck, Shane, I'm so sorry. Can I ask who..."

"No, and I won't tell you." Shane looked him in the eyes, with the most serious a tone as he could summon. "Please don't ask me to tell you who."

"Okay," Hayden accepted immediately. "Have you considered..."

“Can you imagine what I would be like if I didn’t love hockey anymore?” Shane interrupted, seeing the question coming.

Hayden faltered. “You wouldn’t be a person anymore.”

Shane flinched. *He didn’t know why, but that sounded more like an indictment than a conclusion.* “Yeah. So, no, I haven’t considered that.”

“So, what, you’re just gonna... die?” Hayden was aghast, but Shane nodded.

“Yeah. Doing what I love the most in this world, while I still can. Is that...wrong?”

“I’d say you need some more self-preservation, but no. I get it. You gonna tell others, now you’ve told me?”

“I don’t know, maybe?” Shane admitted. “I’ve got to tell the team management at some point, and my parents...”

“Wait, your mom doesn’t know?” Hayden interrupted, looking shocked.

“Nope.”

“That’s illegal Shane! I can’t know something she doesn’t! Yuna Hollander knows everything!” Hayden claimed. Shane knew Hayden’s faux-panic was an attempt to make him laugh, and to his credit, it was actually working.

“She does not know everything!”

“Shane. Buddy. Boy-o. My best friend in the whole world. Your mother is an omniscient being who knows everything, one way or another.” Hayden pressed. “She could have me arrested and convinced I’m guilty of something with a single eyebrow. You gotta tell her, man!”

“I know,” Shane relented. “I just...”

“Just...?”

“It doesn’t feel real, sometimes? Like there are moments when I can actually forget about it and pretend it’s not there. And then my nerves wake up and the pain comes back and it’s just *awful*, but still it’s at least private. I haven’t told people because the minute I do, it’s not a secret anymore. It’s reality.”

“Shane, it’s always been a reality.” Hayden pointed out. “You’re holding onto this secret that is getting bigger and bigger by the day, and that’s too much for you to carry. On some level you must recognize that, otherwise you wouldn’t have told me.”

Shane was silent. Hayden was right, whether he admitted it or not. “You’re not alone in this world, Hollander. Let us help you! Let your parents help you!”

“Excuse me...” Someone approached them, interrupting the conversation, and Shane and Hayden looked up to see two teenage girls gawking at them. “Are you Shane Hollander?” One of them asked timidly.

“Erm...” Shane glanced at Hayden, who just rolled his eyes, and turned his attention back to the girls. “Yeah.”

“I knew it!” One of them hissed to the other. “Can we get a selfie with you?”

“Sure. It’s pretty dark in here, though...” Shane glanced towards the exit, wondering if they could make a run for it before others started realizing what was going on.

“Please?” They begged, and Shane relented.

“Okay. What are your names?”

Twenty minutes later, Hayden and Shane had successfully extracted themselves from the mob of fans that had inevitably formed around them after that first selfie, now finally making their way out of the exit to the parked van Hayden drove these days. “Those assholes.” Hayden grumbled.

“They’re fans, Hayden.”

“Not big enough fans. They didn’t even recognize me!”

“I’ll take a selfie with you?” Shane teased, taking Arthur to load him into his car seat while Hayden looked in the twins.

“Fuck off. Do we have all the kids? I feel like I’m missing one!”

“Ruby’s hiding behind you.”

Hayden slapped his forehead. “I can’t believe we’re having another one.”

Because Shane couldn’t help himself in antagonizing Hayden, he stood up and smirked, glancing at the twins with a knowing look. “You sure it’s just one?”

“Don’t even joke about that, Hollander. And just for that, if it’s a boy, we’re naming him after Rozanov instead of you.”

“He’ll be flattered. Also, please don’t name any of your future children after me.” Shane deflected, ignoring the flash of pain from his chest at the sheer mention of Ilya.

“Too late. It’s already decided. Ilya Shane Pike, the fourth of his brood.”

“Leave the naming to Jackie, she had the right idea using a jewelry store for references.”

“Fuck you. What are you doing after this? Wanna stay for dinner?”

The new season was back in full swing, and Ilya was full of anticipation. Boston had had a pretty good start to the season so far, and tomorrow they were playing Ilya's most anticipated opponents; Montreal.

And tonight, Ilya was expecting company.

Jane: I'm here

Ilya gave it a moment to at least make it seem like he wasn't waiting by the door, and tugged down the waistband of his sweatpants just enough to expose more of his hips and happy trail for maximum sex appeal.

But whatever airs he'd put on in the seconds before opening the door, disappeared the moment he caught sight of Shane. Ilya tried his best not to gawk, but Shane looked...

Beautiful.

The Canadian wasn't wearing anything special; just a nice jacket over a t-shirt paired with some dark-washed jeans, but he was stunning in Ilya's eyes. Shane's eyes were wide, the brown irises perfectly capturing the sunlight that was so often absent during their meetups. His flawless skin looked soft, accented by his perfect freckles, of which there seemed to be even more than the last time Ilya had seen him, sending a rush of blood down below Ilya's waist at the mere sight. He couldn't even say anything, lest he feel the urge to jump Shane in the doorway.

But he knew the other man would not appreciate that, so silently, he turned and let Shane follow him inside.

"The fuck is this?" Shane asked from somewhere behind him as Ilya lead the way all the way into the bedroom. "You're not speaking to me anymore? Just expect me to follow you like a dog?"

"Shh," Rozanov said, turning around to embrace the other player, pushing the door closed behind them. Shane was so...so touchy, so angry, so fire-y. Ilya loved it, and then loved watching that anger melt into something else when they kissed.

Shane slipped his hands into the back of his sweatpants, letting his forearms embrace Ilya's hips, immediately clocking his commando status. Ilya's mouth readily accepted as Shane's tongue forced its way past his lips, then closed his jaw ever so slightly to trap it between his teeth just to keep it there. They worked together on bereaving Shane of his jacket, followed by his t-shirt, which carelessly ended up on the floor.

Tired of waiting, Shane suddenly pushed Ilya down onto the bed, falling to his knees between Ilya's thighs to readily yank Ilya's sweatpants down with the intent to take his manhood into his mouth. "Jesus, Hollander," Ilya panted, placing a hand on the side of Shane's face, while letting his head fall back and his eyes closed. "Couldn't wait, could you?"

Shane didn't respond except to whimper, letting his vocalizations massage the head of Ilya's dick, gradually working it deeper and deeper into his throat. The heat and the vibrations was

already too much, and Ilya had to grip Shane's soft hair to pull him back. "Stop," Ilya ordered in a low voice, waiting for Shane to obey. "I'd like to look at you tonight, I think. You on top?" Ilya asked, hoping Shane would not deny him this.

At this point, not that Ilya knew it, Shane wouldn't deny him anything.

"Okay," Shane said, already sounding nervous. Ilya could understand why. It was usual from their different positions where Ilya always took Shane from behind. He wondered if Shane found that easier, or pretended that Ilya was someone else when they did that, but for today, he couldn't stand to doubt.

Shane stripped down, taking off his pants and underwear, making sure to fold them neatly nearby, and also arranged his previously-shed clothes to add to the pile, eventually standing ready for Ilya to tell him what to do next.

This boy was going to kill him, Ilya exhaled at that realization. *He was so good, so patient*. Raising an eyebrow, Ilya glanced at Shane's cock, which was hard and ready for some attention. Shane blushed, muttering for Ilya to shut up, despite Ilya having not actually said anything. Leaning back on the bed, Ilya brought his hands up to rest behind his head, supporting his skull just enough that he could track Shane as the other man climbed over to straddle him.

Shane knelt into position, and gently guided Ilya's dick towards his hole, feeding it in until Shane could sink down on the length. Ilya's eyes widened at the immediate stretch, realizing that Shane must have prepped himself ahead of time just for them, and watched as the reaction overtook him. Shane's mouth dropped open and his eyes slipped closed, letting his head fall back until his entire back was extended into an arch.

Ilya could do little more than watch, overwhelmed by the sight ahead of him, and the wet heat enveloping his cock as Shane sunk down halfway down the length. It took Shane a minute to adjust so that he could sink all the way to the root, letting out cute little wheezes with each miniscule movement that had Ilya desiring to kiss him again, but was forced to keep his distance as Shane moved to brace himself against Ilya's chest, planting a hand in the middle of Ilya's sternum to support himself while Shane seductively rolled his hips.

"Fuck!" Ilya swore. Shane was a natural at this, his hips loose from years of hockey stretches, skating, and yoga, the fluid movements supported by powerful legs that flanked Ilya's hips. The pleasure felt so good, and Ilya had to force himself to not thrust up into Shane so he could drive the pace for now. But that wouldn't last long.

Ilya's instincts won out all too quickly, and without warning he flipped them both. His hands came up to support Shane from under his knees, folding the smaller man nearly in half so that he could pound into Shane the way he wanted to.

Shane's mouth hung open, allowing desperate moans and grunts to come out freely, the conflicting amounts of pain and pleasure stringing him along. This position was painful, contracting his lungs to the point that it felt like he was being stabbed from the inside out, but the repetitive thrusts to his prostate had his brain flush with electricity. He gasped, trying to adjust himself under Ilya's weight to relieve the pressure, struggling for breath as he

straightened his back and lifted his hips, unsure if he wanted to ask Ilya to stop. But he didn't need to.

Shane came without warning, letting out loud moans as his release spurted over Ilya and himself, dripping downwards towards his face as Ilya fell over the edge too, finishing in the condom while still thrusting into Shane.

"Yes, sweetheart," Ilya gasped as he came, pulling out to let Shane's body unfold, coming to a rest on top of the Canadian man so that he could position himself for another kiss while the two of them rode out the aftershocks in a tender embrace.

It took Ilya a moment to realize just how cold Shane felt beneath him, and with a sudden panic, realized that Shane's lips were tinged blue. Shane was also shaking and breathing abnormally. Ilya frowned with concern, immediately rolling off of Shane to give the smaller man a chance to breathe freely.

"You are alright?" Ilya checked, and Shane nodded, still breathless. It wasn't reassuring, and Ilya kept staring at him with concern.

"Mm' fine..." Shane slurred, looking half asleep. "Just dizzy from the rush. Was good."

Ilya wasn't convinced, but decided to let things be. He moved off to the bathroom, knowing he would need a shower, and hoped it would give Shane more time to recover. When he came out, Hollander was still lying where Ilya had left him, staring blankly up at the ceiling.

"Would you like shower?" Ilya asked gently, offering his hand to Shane with the intent of helping him up, subtly checking him for injuries. He hadn't seen any wounds earlier, or bruising, and there was nothing to see now, but something still felt wrong. He nearly missed the way Shane was weakly nodding while still struggling to catch his breath, and so when Shane grabbed Ilya's hand to climb up, Ilya nearly tumbled over.

Catching himself, he pulled Shane up, watching the Canadian stumble his way in the direction of the bathroom on wobbly legs. Ilya watched as Shane made it into the shower, wondering if he should offer to help, but Shane closed the shower door behind him, turning on the water without looking back.

Ilya still couldn't brush off the feeling that Shane was hiding something.

Getting dressed in the same sweatpants he'd been wearing earlier, Ilya remade the bed, moving Shane's clothes from the floor to the mattress where they would be easier for him to pick up, and then laid back down, turning on the television to find something to watch. He flipped aimlessly between channels, keeping a keen ear out from the bathroom in case Shane called for help or fell, but nothing happened.

When Shane finally came out of the bathroom, he looked lost. He glanced between his clothes and Ilya, like he was deciding if he should stay. Ilya hoped he would, but tried not to let those hopes grow too ambitious to save himself the disappointment if Shane simply got dressed.

But Shane surprised him, climbing back into the bed with Ilya. He was still naked, and still slightly wet from the shower, but Ilya didn't mind. He was just thrilled to have the proximity. They weren't close enough to be touching, but Ilya could sense Shane's body heat and that was enough for him. Disregarding the television, Ilya rolled over, propping himself up on his elbow to get a better look at Shane.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the freckles again. One day, he hoped he'd get the opportunity to count them, taking all the time in the world to have an excuse just to drink the sight of his lover in. He hoped one day, they would have the chance to sleep together, and then wake up next to each other, like it was the most mundane thing in the world. He hoped that this fantasy would be enough, in the absence of anything real.

Shane stared back up at him nervously, like he was waiting for Ilya to do something, and Ilya just couldn't resist. He leaned in, and pulled Shane closer for a heavy kiss, moving on to press gentler kisses to Shane's cheeks, nose, eyelids, and forehead. Shane let him, unconsciously relishing in the touch, melting under Ilya's hands. "Ostat'sya navsegda." Ilya whispered to himself, feeling Shane stir.

"Hm?" Shane asked sleepily, staring up at Ilya with his big, beautiful brown eyes.

"Stay. You could stay here, tonight." Ilya could barely control his voice, hoping Shane didn't pick up on how much he meant it.

Shane frowned, pulling away. "You want me to stay here?" *Like he couldn't believe Ilya was asking that. Like the answer was already no and they both knew it.*

"I'm not done with you yet." Ilya covered, trying not to be disappointed.

"Oh." Shane seemed to mull it over. "I can't stay, you know that."

"You could," Ilya pushed. "The game is tomorrow afternoon. No morning practice."

"I told Hayden—"

Ilya rolled his eyes, barely keeping back a noise of disgust. *Always an excuse with Shane.* "Is Hayden your mother?"

"No." Shane recoiled. "But he's...expecting me. I told him I was meeting a friend."

Ilya snorted. "That was a lie. Stay."

Shane's gaze wavered, an emotional war breaking out on his face. He was so easy to read, and Ilya was delighted to realize that Shane was actually considering it. "Okay." Ilya pulled Shane into another kiss, pulling the naked man on top of him, the two of them making out until Shane had to pull back so he could breathe a full lung's worth of air again.

"Are you hungry?" Ilya asked, noticing again that Shane was struggling.

"For?" Shane asked, like he was expecting the answer to be dirty, and Ilya laughed, pushing him off.

“Food. Come, let’s eat something.” Ilya got out of bed, heading for the kitchen. “I got...ah, ginger ale? You like that, yes?”

“Yes?” Shane looked confused, sitting down at the kitchen island, staring at the ale Ilya handed him like it was a present. “I do? Do you want to order takeout, or—“

“Do you like tuna melts?”

“You want...to make me a tuna melt?” Shane asked like he couldn’t quite believe this was happening.

Ilya was thrilled it was happening. “I’m making one for me. I can make two. There is more ginger ale in fridge if you need some.” Shane nodded his assent, and Ilya got to work, getting out the ingredients for the meal, secretly pleased when Shane popped open the can tab to take a long drink.

“You head down to Florida after this game?” Ilya asked. He already knew the answer, but he wanted to make conversation, and with Shane, hockey was always a good place to start.

“Yeah. Couple games down there. Then over to Dallas and up to St. Louis.”

Ilya nodded. “We are in town here for this week. Then out west for a while. Ginger ale good? Cold enough?” Ilya was looking forward to playing in the western conference. The time difference would mean that he would actually get to watch Shane’s games live for a change. Not that he could admit that to Hollander.

“Yeah, it’s great. Thanks.” Ilya tried to hide the grin, knowing he’d made the right move in getting the ginger ale for Shane, and refocused back on the sandwiches, assembling them and popping them in the oven, before grabbing himself a soda from the fridge and moving into the living area to turn on the television.

“Ready in ten minutes,” Ilya called out, finding a hockey game to put on, hoping Shane would join him on the couch. A moment later, Shane did, padded out to pick a spot on the sofa just a little too far away for Ilya’s liking, but neither of them commented on it. It was surreal for Ilya, having the chance to just hang out with Shane like this, and he didn’t know what to do with himself. He didn’t want to say anything lest he scare Shane off, but he also hoped it would lead to more opportunities to have this time with him. Focusing on the game, Ilya watched as Ryan Price checked another player into the penalty box, tipping the other player over the boards like he was a toy. “Jesus,” Ilya gestured at the tv. “You know that guy? Ryan Price?”

Shane shook his head. “I mean, just from playing against him. And, you know, not wanting to fight him. You played with him, right?”

“Yes. For one season only. He was...not what you would think.” Ilya remembered the plane ride, and the book, *Anne of Green Gables*. He’d found a copy in Russian, to read himself, finding the story charming, and wondered why it appealed so much to Ryan.

“What do you mean?” Shane asked, curious.

“Like...quiet. Doesn’t make friends, really. But not a bad guy. Just...weird. Sort of.” Ilya said dismissively.

“Well, he does seem to get traded every season. It would be hard to make friends that way.” Shane reasoned, and Ilya grimaced. He wondered if perhaps he should reach out to Ryan, and try to regain their brief camaraderie. *He knew a little something himself about being alone.*

“He is probably hoping he gets traded again. Buffalo is terrible.”

“They definitely are.” Shane laughed, before devolving into a harsh coughing fit. Shane immediately took a drink of the ginger ale, wiping his mouth roughly, before rasping “What’s your favorite city to play in? On the road?”

Ilya hummed. He’d never really thought about it before. “I like New York. Because it is New York. They fucking hate me there.”

“They hate you everywhere.” Shane deadpanned, and Ilya laughed. Hollander wasn’t wrong, after all. Ilya was very good at having that effect on people.

“They like me in Florida! Is all Boston fans down there!” Shane laughed at that, and Ilya found himself wondering what Shane’s favorite was. So he asked.

“I like Ottawa, because it’s my hometown. Toronto, because of the history between our teams, and I guess...anywhere warm. Y’know?”

“L.A. is good,” Ilya agreed. “Beautiful women.” he tacked on, just to watch Shane’s nose flare with that jealousy again.

“Sure, yeah. There’s beautiful women everywhere, really.” Shane did not sound convinced by that, and Ilya rolled his eyes.

“When you are rich and famous, yes.” Shane didn’t seem to have a response to that, and a new train of thought occurred to Ilya. “There was a girl in New York. I used to see her when I was in town.”

“Used to?” Shane was very bad at pretending he wasn’t interested or antagonized by the topic of conversation.

“She is getting married.”

“Oh...” Shane internalized, looking genuinely sad for him. “Are you upset about that?”

Ilya frowned. *That was not the point he was trying to make.* “What? No. Was not like that. Is just convenient to have reliable woman to sleep with in New York. With three teams to play against there, we are there a lot.”

Shane seemed to relax slightly. “You think she’s the only woman in New York that would be willing to sleep with you?” Shane teased, and Ilya smirked.

“I think I will find someone.”

That must have been the wrong thing to say, because Shane tensed up all over again, his easy smile disappearing. Ilya didn't know what to expect, whether to ask Shane if he too found comfort with regular people on the road, but Shane did not seem keen to offer more information, as per usual. The timer went off for the tuna melts, saving them from any more awkward silence.

Ilya got up. "Stay, I bring it here." Shane nodded absentmindedly, his eyes fixed to the screen, entranced by the hockey. Ilya almost smirked to himself. Hollander didn't even need a woman on the road, hockey was what got his rocks off, Ilya was sure. His only love, outside of that cottage he was proud of. He wondered if he should ask Shane about the documentary, before ultimately going back to his original query.

Ilya returned with the sandwiches, handing Shane his plate. "So, do you like them?"

"Tuna melts?" Shane frowned, looking so cute when confused.

"No, girls." Ilya spelled it out, honestly amazed at why Shane was offended when people called him boring. The man had such a one-track mind.

"Oh? Uh...sure. Yeah. I like them, of course. As uh, friends. Colleagues."

"Not lovers?"

"No. I don't take...uh...lovers." The sheer word seemed to disgust Shane, but Ilya found the answer surprising for different reasons.

"What am I, then?" Ilya teased.

"A problem." Shane deflected with a passive expression, except for a mild twitch of his lips. "A thorn in my side, a pain in my..."

"Asshole?" Ilya smirked. Shane laughed, taking a bite of the sandwich.

"Sometimes. Not if we do it right."

"So outside of me, you do not..." Ilya tried to ask, feeling his chest grow tight, mixed emotions pooling in his stomach. He was a little flattered, possessive, and turned on by the notion.

"I keep my sex life private." Shane sniffed, not answering the question. "Like a lot of things."

"I like girls."

"Yeah, no shit." Shane muttered, having clearly seen the articles about Ilya's escapades. Ilya was not ashamed of that. He enjoyed their company, and the sex. But... "I also like you."

"Well, lucky me," Shane grumbled.

"Not as a person, of course," Rozanov teased, suddenly feeling like the conversation had wandered into dangerous territory. "But you have a good mouth."

Shane opened his perfect mouth, on the verge of responding to that when Ilya's phone rang. Checking the screen, he swore at the sight of his father's contact. "I have to take this. Sorry."

"It's fine," Shane said, because of course it was. Ilya hated it, hated the way his mood switched on a dime at the sudden interruption. He hated the way his father made him feel like he was doing something wrong from halfway around the planet with a mere phone call. Answering it, Ilya put the phone up to his ear, already knowing what he was about to hear. His father was rambling, not even letting him get a word in, asking him nonsensical questions about what time he would be back and to make sure there was groceries in the fridge.

Ilya gritted his teeth, trying to placate his father, but it did no good, with the man only getting more distressed and angrier, until Ilya just hung up. He couldn't deal with this right now, and he shot off a quick text to his brother, telling him to handle it. "Sorry," Rozanov said again when he sat back on the couch, noticing Shane aggressively brushing his mouth. "My father."

"Oh?"

Ilya frowned. Shane looked...scared, almost. "Is everything okay?"

"What? Yeah. Of course. Um...is your dad all right?"

"Yes," Ilya said, a little too quickly and dismissively. "Fine." He didn't want to tell Shane what was going on, about his father's illness and his troubles with his extended family. That would just ruin the day.

"Is he—?"

"You're not eating," Ilya said, gesturing toward the mostly untouched plate of food on the coffee table in front of Shane.

"Sorry. It's good! I was just, um...distracted by the game."

Ilya nodded, but watched all the same as Shane took more bites of the food, until he was reassured when the plate was empty. Picking up the dishes, Ilya took them back to the kitchen and then sat back down on the couch, this time placing himself a lot closer to Shane, easily and readily wrapping an arm around Shane's shoulders.

Shane jumped beneath the touch, but settled in against Ilya, resting his head on Ilya's chest. The position was perfect, as Shane had put himself in the prime spot for Ilya to sniff the other man's hair. It smelled like Ilya's shampoo, which made Ilya unreasonably happy, and he threaded his fingers through the straight black locks to revel in how soft Shane felt beneath his hands.

Eventually, Ilya moved his other hand to slide up Shane's thigh and cup him through his jeans, skillfully massaging his erection enough to draw a soft moan from Shane. *He loved that Hollander was so responsive. He loved the noises Shane made under Ilya's hands, the way his delicate eyelashes fluttered, the way his lips parted just enough to be inviting to Ilya's advances.* Opening the zipper of Shane's jeans, Ilya was pleased to find that Shane too had forgone underwear, pulling out his erection to stroke it slowly. Shane squirmed under the

ministrations, thrusting his hips up into Ilya's hand, clearly hoping that would get Ilya to pick up the pace, but Ilya wanted to take his time.

He wanted to savor Shane Hollander.

Pressing kisses into Shane's hair, inhaling the scent of his own shampoo again, he continued jerking Hollander's cock, working him closer and closer to a finish, but Shane was too impatient. Forcing himself up, Shane straddled Ilya, kissing him hard as he ground onto Ilya's lap, threading his fingers into Ilya's own hair, dangerously pulling in the strands. Ilya loved it. The sudden aggression was such a turn on, and Ilya let out a wanton moan, letting Shane use his body to finish himself off. Using his powerful legs, Shane had all but trapped Ilya to the couch, grinding and swiveling until he was nearly there. Until they both were.

"Why do I need this so much?" Shane whispered under his breath, and Ilya stopped breathing. *Shane needed this? Needed him?*

"Need what?" Ilya asked, hoping he could get Shane to admit it, or at the very least say it again, but Shane didn't answer, instead adjusting their positions so that Shane could access Ilya's cock, bringing their erections together to jerk them both off simultaneously.

"Fuck, Hollander." Ilya threw his head back, collapsing on the arm of the couch, and Shane took the opportunity to kiss and lick and bite his neck. "Yes. Do that," Ilya moaned. It was hard and fast, but near exactly what Ilya wanted. "Wait." He stopped Shane just enough to bring Shane's hand back up, and without hesitating, spat on it. Shane's eyes went black, and reached back down to touch them both again with renewed vigor.

"You like that?" Shane growled, his voice sounding totally wrecked. "You gonna come for me, Rozanov?"

"Fucking make me, Hollander." Ilya gasped, and Shane's stroking became even more frantic and sloppy until it pushed Ilya over the edge. "Oh god. Shane..." Ilya choked out, coming in hot bursts, unaware of just what he had said, not knowing it was his voice that sent Shane over the edge immediately next.

"Ilya..." Shane whispered, finally bringing light to what had just occurred. Ilya glanced up, seeing Shane going sheet white, both of them struck by the sudden fear.

Ilya didn't know what to do, so, he kissed him. Shane went stiff underneath Ilya's touch, physically shaking to the point that he felt so fragile, Ilya didn't dare touch him apart from where their lips were connected.

"I should go."

"Go?" Ilya blinked, suddenly startled by the frantic way Shane ripped himself out of Ilya's embrace, dashing back in the bedroom in search of his clothes.

"Yeah... I...uh, I shouldn't stay. I can't. We can't. This is..."

Ilya stared at him, trying hard to hide the hurt and anger at how quickly Shane seemed to want to get away from him. “This is nothing, Hollander.”

Shane coughed. “I know. I just...team meeting in the morning. I forgot.”

Ilya laughed, cruelly and coldly. *After all this time, Shane was still a pathetic liar.* “You forgot about a team meeting? Sure.” He said sarcastically, gritting his teeth as Shane rushed to dress, pulling on his shirt and zipping up his pants.

“Thanks for the tuna melt. Um...” more coughs were forcing their way up Shane’s throat.

“Good night, then.” Ilya challenged, knowing better than to ask any more of Shane. The other man had clearly made up his mind.

Shane wavered, but another cough broke the moment, and Shane seemed to just collapse on himself. “Good night,” Shane whispered regretfully, taking one last long look at Ilya that said something Ilya just couldn’t interpret. And then Shane was gone.

And Ilya was struck by the fact that he wanted Shane to come back.

Shane ran all the way back to the hotel, despite his lungs burning for oxygen, but Shane didn’t dare stop. If he did, he’d never make it.

He needed to get back to his hotel room, where he could break down in private.

Except, once he got there, he remembered one very crucial thing; Hayden.

“How’d it go?” Hayden asked, grinning sleepily at him, only to stop short at the sight of his best friend. Shane wheezed, letting out a panicked choke as he dropped to the floor, eyes rolling into the back of his head.

Hayden leapt off the bed, dashing straight for his best friend. He realized quickly that there was something in Shane’s mouth, and as an experienced parent, Hayden didn’t even hesitate, squeezing the sides of Shane’s jaw, reaching in to pull on the object. Hayden resisted the urge to vomit, squirming as he withdrew a whole flower, stem and all from Shane’s throat, it making a gurgling, suction-like noise as the obstruction was removed. But it wasn’t enough.

Shane was still gasping for air, despite the flower being gone, his eyes bloodshot and glassy, and Hayden realized he had to move faster. There was still something else in Shane’s throat. Laying Shane down on the floor, Hayden remembered the basic first aid training he’d had when he’d first started playing hockey enough to force his hands down on Shane’s lower stomach, locking his elbows for maximum force, until wads of petals laden with blood clots were forced out.

Shane gasped, finally taking in air, color immediately returning to his face. Hayden exhaled in relief, trying to get Shane’s attention. “Shane, buddy, can you hear me?”

“Head hursss...” Shane slurred, clearly unfocused. Strings of blood trailed out of Shane’s mouth, and Hayden briefly wondered if he should take Shane to the hospital, game tomorrow

be damned.

“I bet. You just keep breathing buddy,” Hayden fussed, looking around for his phone before giving up and just taking Shane’s. “Shane, passcode.”

“Hmm?”

“I need your passcode. We need to call for help.”

“M’ fine.”

“The fuck you are.” Hayden growled. “Passcode. Now.”

“Fourteen ten.” Shane rattled off.

Hayden unlocked the phone and scrolled through the contacts, looking for the coach’s number when a text came in.

Lily: You left your jacket here. The door is unlocked if you want to come back for it 😊

Hayden startled, realizing this Lily person was who Shane must have been with just now, and he resisted the urge to type out an aggressive message asking her if she knew what she’d done to his friend. It then occurred to him that this Lily might be the reason Shane is like this at all.

While Hayden was distracted, Shane came to just enough to see Hayden staring at his phone.

“What are you...”

“I’m looking for the coach’s number.” Hayden said frustratedly, forcing himself to look away from the text. “I don’t know what you’re supposed to do to get medical help when we’re on tour!”

“Hayden, I’m fine.” Shane snatched the phone before Hayden could find anything incriminating, not that there was really anything incriminating to find. Shane deleted anything he thought might be dangerous for other people to see.

“You’re not!” Hayden shouted, his voice cracking. “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but I just performed the goddam Heimlich on you!” Shane flinched. “You passed out, on the floor, and I pulled a whole fucking plant out of your throat.” Hayden hissed, brandishing the bloom, missing the way Shane’s eyes widened at the size of it. “And there’s blood all over it and your face, so no, you’re not fine. And that Lily person, whoever you were just seeing, she’s the reason!”

Shane physically recoiled, putting immediate distance between himself and Hayden. “How do you know...?”

“I don’t know who she is, but I saw her text you.” Hayden spit out. “I know you’ve been texting her for a while, or at least I assume it’s been her, right?”

“Hayden...”

“Shane, you nearly died just now.” Hayden said, trying to drive that home. “You can’t do that to me again. You can’t see her again, I’m begging you. I know you’ve can’t help your sickness, but please...don’t!”

“It’s okay, Hay...” Shane rasped, crawling back just enough to pull Hayden into a hug, saying nothing as tears soaked the shoulder of Shane’s shirt. “I don’t think I can see her again either. Today...ended badly.”

Shawn was lying through his teeth, just in an effort to placate him and they both knew it. Hayden snorted. “Only you, Shane.” Shane pulled back, cocking his head to stare back at Hayden quizzically. “You fell in love with someone you can’t have, and rather than lose them, you’d do anything to have them for as long as you can, even if it kills you faster. You never go halfway on things, do you? Never take the easy road?”

Shane sighed. “You have no idea.”

Chapter 3

Shane was regretting picking a sport that required teammates. They seemed to be a major problem, especially when they convinced him to do shit like going to a party on a random Tuesday.

Not to mention, there was an open bar, which means he was expected to drink, which meant he couldn't even take his painkillers later. *Could this evening get any worse?*

"Please tell me you're hungry?" Someone unexpectedly sat down at the table in front of him, interrupting his moment of peace in all the chaos to put down a tray of fritters, fragrantly filling the air with the smell of fish and oil. Shane nearly did a double-take upon realizing the woman was famous actress, Rose Landry.

"The chef just handed me these fritters and they look delicious, but I can't possibly eat them all." She popped one in her mouth, melting at the taste, letting her genuine reaction dictate her entire body language. Shane grinned. He barely knew Rose Landry and he already liked her. "Oh my god! These are so good! You have to eat some."

It took her a minute to realize she hadn't introduced herself, or that Shane hadn't said anything yet and wiped her hand with a napkin before extending it. "Sorry," she said. "I'm Rose, by the way!"

Shane smiled and shook it. "Shane," he said. "Nice to meet you. I'm a fan."

"Well," she said, leaning in a bit, "Would you be surprised to know I'm a big fan of yours?"

"You like hockey?" Shane asked, surprised. She really didn't look like the type.

"I was born and raised in Michigan," she said. "Damn right I like hockey!"

"Oh! Well...thanks." And that was a lesson on Shane, not to stereotype. But he supposed he shouldn't be surprised. All you'd have to do is look at Rose, and know she has good taste.

"You're welcome. Eat a fritter, Shane Hollander." And what could Shane say to that? Popping a fritter in his mouth, Shane too savored at the taste. He and Rose continued to eat, the conversation flowing easily between the two of them in a way that Shane rarely had the opportunity to experience. They had a lot in common.

"Have you been to Montreal before?" Shane asked.

"Once," Rose nodded. "I was shooting a role in a super terrible FBI versus terrorist whatever movie. I can't even remember what it was called."

"Under Dark." Shane responded on instinct, pulling the name from nowhere.

She looked mortified. "Oh my god. Shut up. You saw it?"

Shane shrugged, and grinned. It really had been terrible, but that hadn't stopped him watching it all the way through. He'd seen worse. "I fly a lot. Watch a lot of movies."

"Thankfully it was only a small role. But I was only in Montreal for a week that time. And it was summer."

Shane laughed. "It's a little different here in the winter."

"Michigan, remember? Winter can't scare me." Well, she had him there. Shane had played in Michigan during the winter. It really *wasn't* that much different from Montreal.

"So, you gonna be in town for a while this time?" Shane asked, picking up another fritter.

"Yeah, we're here for a few weeks. If you'd like to meet up...?"

"I'd love to." Shane replied earnestly, only to then falter. "I have to tell you something though." She leaned in, anticipatory. "I'm not looking to start something with you." Shane tried to explain. "I like talking to you, Rose, but I can't..."

"You don't do relationships?" She seemed surprised.

"I *can't* do relationships." He corrected. "People wouldn't want to stay if they knew the truth."

"And what is the truth, Shane Hollander? Is hockey's favorite child secretly an asshole?" She teased, but Shane didn't rise to her bait.

"No, the truth is... I'm terminally ill." Shane genuinely did not know what possessed him to tell her that, then and there, but to Rose's credit, she took the news well.

She processed that for a moment, wiping her face delicately, and then asked "Do you wanna get out of here?"

Shane relaxed, and let out a relieved sigh. "God, yes!"

They walked out together, mostly unnoticed by the rest of the party-goers, finding themselves walking into a little park not far from the restaurant. Rose offered for them to sit on a bench, and Shane made the effort to wipe it clean before they both sat.

"So, what does that mean?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have dumped that on you..."

"Don't apologize." She instructed, taking his hand to squeeze it. "Can you tell me what..."

"Hanahaki." Shane answered, and Rose grimaced. She was an artist by trade. Artists, and actors especially were tragically afflicted by Hanahaki a lot. She likely even knew someone who had died from it.

"You're a nice guy, Shane Hollander. Nice guys like you don't deserve endings like that."

“Thanks. But it’s just what I’ve been dealt, I guess?”

“That must make it hard, finding connections with people?” She asked.

Shane thinned his lips, and looked down at the ground. “It can be. But I think I just resigned myself to not having that at all, hoping it would make things easier.”

“Do you want to be friends?” She asked abruptly, surprising him again. “Like actual friends? Let’s be best friends. Because I really do like you a lot, Shane. And I feel like you might not have anyone else to talk to about...certain things.”

“I’d like that. You’re right. I don’t. And I like you to! We’ll be friends. You have my number. Text me. Text me all the time. Please.” Shane grinned, genuinely thrilled by this outcome.

“Can do,” She laughed, and leaned her head on his shoulder. “Can I have box seats to your next home game?”

“I think I can make that happen.”

Svetlana was flipping through the channels on Ilya’s television, clad in only his shirt when she came across a repeat of the Montreal-Calgary match. Both she and Ilya had seen the replays before, but with not much better to watch, as proven by her disgust of Colorado’s playing, this was what Ilya found himself watching.

The match coverage had panned to shots of the crowd, showing off the fans, who were all too happy to get riled up for the camera. “Pah, fluff coverage.” She spat, making Ilya laugh. “Bring back the hockey.”

“You do not like hockey fans?”

“I am a hockey fan,” She glared at him. “I see no reason to waste my life watching other people when I could be watching hockey.”

“Even if it is Montreal hockey?”

She shrugged. “Montreal is good this year. And I like Shane Hollander.” Ilya glared at her, causing her to cackle with laughter. “You do not approve?” She teased.

“No.” Ilya did not approve of anyone claiming they liked Shane Hollander. It wasn’t fair to him, when they could do it and he could not.

“I love Shane Hollander.” She rolled the letters off her tongue like a purr when she said Shane’s name, openly mocking Ilya now.

“Traitor.”

“He’s a beautiful skater. Such talented hands. And so cute.”

“Now you are trying to make me angry.” Ilya grit his teeth.

“You can’t argue those facts, Ilya.”

“No,” Ilya said, grinding the butt of his cigarette into a small plate he was using as a makeshift ashtray. “I can’t argue them. He is very good.”

“And cute.”

“If you say so.” That was the closest Ilya could get to an admission, that he found Shane Hollander attractive.

“Rose Landry must think so as well, apparently.”

Ilya frowned, not understanding where that had come from, only to see that the game coverage had panned to the box seats, focusing in on actress Rose Landry, who was waving for the crowd while wearing a glamorously-styled Hollander jersey. The footage then cut back to the players box, the crowd still cheering for Rose in the background, making sure to get a shot of Shane, who seemed to be grinning stupidly in her direction while his teammates clapped him on the shoulders and helmet.

Ilya’s stomach wrenched. *Was Shane DATING Rose Landry?* He hadn’t heard from Shane since their poorly-ended hookup, and the boring Canadian had been frustratingly present in his mind ever since. His jacket from their encounter was still hanging up in Ilya’s closet.

“You are playing with Shane Hollander this year, right? In the All-Star Game next week?”

“Yes.” Ilya was short with her, still stuck on the notion of Shane and Rose being together, trying to hide how much the idea upset him, even though it shouldn’t. *Had Shane lied to him, when he was last here, about not liking women?* He wondered if Rose would be making an appearance at the All-Star Game, or going to future matches with him from now on. He wondered if one day, they would marry?

Those thoughts spiraled in his head long after Svetlana left, and in the dead of night, as Ilya lay awake in his own bed, he realized that he was no longer looking forward to next week.

Shane preemptively took his medication before heading out towards the hotel bar, where the other players were assembling before they arrived, and instinctively checked his appearance one more time before he left the room.

Rose had actually been a godsend, helping Shane use various tricks to hide the more outward and obvious symptoms of his Hanahaki. She’d also recommended a stylist, who had helped him manage his image a little better, much to his mother’s delight, which covered the obvious muscle mass Shane was starting to lose.

Walking down into the hotel bar, Shane was greeted by loads of familiar faces but not quite the one he wanted to see, until finally he spotted a familiar head sat at the bar, casually enjoying a drink.

Shane beelined for Ilya, a million different lines running through his head, varying from apologies about how their last interaction had ended to enthusiasm about playing together on the same team for the first time. But ultimately, what came out was “Hey, teammate.”

“Hello, Captain.” Ilya said suavely, eyes roving up and down to get a good look at Shane, before glancing off elsewhere. A knot formed in Shane’s throat at the casual indifference, and he immediately flagged down the bartender for a drink, ordering whichever sparkling water they had on tab.

“So, this should be fun, huh?” Shane asked. “Always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team.”

“Have you?” Ilya sounded casual, but Shane could see there was something off about him, like the Russian was debating in his own head whether to say something.

Shane changed the subject. “Nice that it’s in Florida this year, eh?”

“Mm.” Shane’s drink arrived, and in the middle of that first sip, Ilya clearly lost the battle in his brain. “Did you...bring anyone? With you?”

Shane blinked in surprise. “No. I mean, my parents thought about it, but they’ve already been to so many of these things, and they’re going to Mexico next month, so...”

“Ah.” Ilya actually sounded relieved, although Shane couldn’t identify why.

“Nice shirt.” He remarked, grinning at the pattern. It was very bright, covered with palm trees, that felt very appropriate for their host state.

“Thought I’d get in the spirit, y’know?” Ilya sipped his drink, and Shane raked his eyes up and down Ilya’s body, catching the barest hint of a tattoo peaking out from underneath the open shirt collar.

“You can pull it off,” Shane complimented. “It looks good.”

“Jesus, look at this!” A loud booming voice interrupted the conversation, and a pair of giant arms ensconced Shane and Ilya, pulling their heads together in an awkward hug. Shane glanced up to recognize Mike Brophy, one of the defensemen playing on his line, grinning down at them with a thrilled (and slightly inebriated) expression. “This is what it’s all about! Fucking Hollander and Rozanov working together! Love it!”

Shane wriggled loose from Brophy’s strong grip, smiling up at the Jersey player. “Should be fun, yeah!”

“Don’t listen to a word this fucker says though,” Brophy pointed at Ilya, who adopted a mockingly offended expression. “Can’t trust this asshole. Whatever he tells you, he’s probably fucking with you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Shane laughed internally, waiting for Brophy to leave before he started snorting, causing Ilya to break out into chuckles as well. “I think we can expect a lot

of that kind of thing this weekend,” Shane sniggered, leaning slightly closer into Ilya until their shoulders were brushing.

“They should give us a chance to get to know each other,” Ilya teased. “We might even have something in common. You look good too, did someone take you shopping?”

Shane looked at him, biting his lip. “If I tell you something, do you promise not to tell anyone, or make fun of me?” Ilya actually looked terrified, giving Shane the side-eye as he agreed. “I uh...hired a personal stylist.”

Ilya stared at him, processing that confession for a moment before bursting out into laughter. “Fuck off!” He yelled, entirely too loudly.

Shane rolled his eyes. “I shouldn’t have told you.”

“No, I love it! Got tired of looking like shit?”

Shane tried not to take that personally. “I didn’t– I just mostly wore, y’know, athletic stuff, I guess? Some guys in the league are so fashionable and I just thought...I could use some help.”

“Has nothing to do with Rose Landry?”

That made Shane do a double-take. He knew there had been some speculation online about him and Rose after her appearance at the game, but he didn’t think Ilya would have seen it, or even cared. “What? Why would it?”

“I thought, you might be seeing her, no? She come to game in number 24 jersey.”

“We’re just friends. We met at a restaurant, through an acquaintance of JJ’s.”

“Just friends, like how you and I are just...” Ilya trailed off. “Or actually just friends?”

“*Actually* just friends. I told you, I’m not interested in...that.” Shane felt awkward, mentioning a conversation topic from when they had been in Ilya’s apartment together, surprised with the fact he actually answered such a brazen question in public. “Anyways, I should say hi to everyone,” he stepped away from the bar, and Ilya nodded, giving him one last smile before turning back to his drink.

Shane caught Ilya's reflection in the mirror behind the bartop, noticing just how *happy* Ilya looked as he walked away. And something in his chest eased.

For most of the Saturday, Shane spent his time beside the pool, watching as the various assembled hockey players hung out, some with their families. The children were especially entertaining to watch, interacting with some of the biggest hockey stars of the season.

It also gave him an excuse to watch Ilya.

Ilya was easily the most popular person at the pool to play with, challenging the children to all sorts of games. He was good with them, being very sportsmanlike as he “lost” little races he set with them, accusing them all of cheating with a mocking tone that had all of the kids bursting with laughter.

“Hollander!” Ilya shouted, getting his attention. “You gotta watch, okay? Make sure none of these cheaters cheats.”

Shane grinned and gave him a thumbs up, and Ilya pointed him out to all of the children. “You kids know who that guy is?”

“Shane Hollander!” The kids yelled in unison.

“Really?” Ilya pretended to be surprised. “You’ve heard of that guy?”

One of the braver children brazenly said “He’s the best player in the league?”

Ilya’s mouth dropped open, and he pointed to the pool entrance. “Okay, you are out of the race. Out of the pool. Out of Florida. Goodbye. Where is your parent?”

The children just laughed more and Shane joined them, slyly giving an encouraging gesture to the brazen child who had mocked Ilya to his face, receiving a shy grin in response before the race started. Naturally, Ilya lost the race again, pretending to sink or that he was being eaten by a shark, Shane couldn’t tell, but the children ate it up, swarming him with reminders of his promise to get them candy bars.

“Hollander, I need like...\$10.” Ilya yelled, and Shane wrinkled his nose. *Why was HE paying for the candy bars?*

“Did Boston stop paying you or something?” He retorted, and Ilya climbed out of the pool, gesturing to himself. There wasn’t any room for a wallet, given that Ilya was shirtless and wearing only tight pool shorts that flatteringly clung to his wet frame. Ilya stepped closer with a wry grin, until he was standing right next to Shane.

Shane very nearly did get his wallet out, when Ilya ruined the moment by aggressively shaking himself off, spraying Shane with water. “Knock it off!” Shane resisted, stopping himself only at the last second from swearing as the kids continued to laugh at them. But Ilya didn’t stop there, actually pulling Shane into a hug, deliberately soaking him with even more water. Shane shoved him off, feeling a little breathless at the touch, but he couldn’t find it in himself to be annoyed. “You ruined my shirt!”

“Sorry.” Ilya didn’t even look remotely sorry, looking lighter and happier than...well, more than Shane had ever seen him. Ignoring the way water droplets dripped down his skin, sexily accenting every curve of his muscular form, or the way the sun diffused in his hair to make it look soft and golden, Shane found himself entranced even more than he already was with Ilya Rozanov.

There must have been something heavy in Shane’s look, because Ilya immediately turned away, scouting out for someone else to torment instead, and Shane pressed a hand to his

stomach, feeling his heart pound. The casual hug had made Shane breathless, and the lump in his throat returned. Shane sincerely hoped that this weekend didn't kill him, even though it was entirely possible it might.

Everyone had wondered if Shane and Ilya would be able to put aside their "rivalry" to play on the same team with each other before the weekend started, but by the end of the weekend, there was no question about their ability to collaborate. If anything, they were saying it was probably a good thing the two hadn't been on the same team sooner, otherwise no one else would even stand a chance.

They had been a powerhouse unit out there on the ice, and Shane had savored every minute of it.

He'd had to.

Being out there with Ilya had felt like nothing else Shane had ever experienced before, with someone matching him in both skill and speed at every turn, while being connected with them on an emotional and physical level. For the briefest moment, it felt like a fantasy, especially after they won the final match and Ilya unashamedly kissed Shane on the cheek center-ice. A fantasy where Shane could be loved in turn by the man he loved, doing the sport they loved, for the world to see.

And for just that moment, it felt like Shane could breathe again.

And then it just got worse. After each match, Shane watched as Ilya walked away, never once inviting Shane over or sparing him a glance, and the pain in Shane's chest increased tenfold with each moment. He was too close.

His body *ached*, in the kind of way that made Shane just want to lie down and never get back up. Pain flared from every joint, every nerve, pressing down on him like a vice at all hours of the day. Being on the ice all the time was endlessly exhausting, and while no one else had brought it up to him yet, Shane could tell he was slowing down. His shots were weaker, his speed was lesser, and his reactions were too damn slow.

Even the pills that he was taking were barely causing a dent now when it came to managing his pain, and he knew he was taking too many just to get more time that he didn't have. And on his worst days, he'd dream of taking too many.

It was all too much now. Too much pain, too much noise, too much grief...

That's why he was out here, on the beach, while everyone else was inside celebrating. Shane really didn't feel like partying, not when it was this bad. He told himself it was so he could process everything, but the truth was, he wondered what it would be like to die here.

The sun setting on his life, the end of his career, cemented as a two-time Stanley Cup Winner and a record-setting All-Star, it felt almost poetic. Shane dug his toes into the sand, listening to the water as the waves lapped against the beach, letting the impending night start to consume him a little. He could feel himself getting tired, and let his body relax as the quiet

rhythms of the world faded all around him, his heartbeat thudding in his ears as his vision got a little darker...

"Found you." A familiar voice interrupted the moment, inadvertently pulling Shane back from the edge. Ilya sat down on the sand next to Shane, just in Shane's peripheral vision.

"You were looking for me?" Shane rasped. Ilya glanced over at him with a concerned look, blatantly staring at him with a serious look. Shane coughed again, trying to clear his throat and distract him from asking anything painful. "When do you fly out?"

"Early."

"Me too. Columbus." Shane elaborated, not sure what else to say. But Ilya surprised him, moving his hand until his thumb was brushing up against Shane's, fine grains of sand abrasively rubbing between their fingers. It was the first physical contact they'd had since that hug at the poolside. Shane ignored his instinct to pull away, letting himself have the touch for just a moment, when a sudden rush of fear flashed through him. Bravely, Shane laid his head down on Ilya's shoulder, catching a whiff of the other man's scent. Shane barely had a moment to commit it to memory when Ilya stiffened underneath him.

Shane pulled back, feeling his chest ache all the more. "What room are you in?" He asked, operating purely on instinct, trying to cover, and make it better. *What was he doing? He couldn't manage a hookup right now? He could barely handle holding hands, and if they had sex tonight, Ilya would notice, and Shane would have to tell him and then everything would be worse...*

"1217." Ilya answered, accidentally interrupting Shane's mental spiral.

Shane closed his eyes. "See you soon."

He watched as Ilya got up and walked away, and not for the first time since his diagnosis, Shane wondered about telling him.

He wondered if Ilya would care that Shane was dying. He wondered if the Russian would pity him, or tell him to get the surgery. He thought about what it would be like to say those three important words to Ilya, and what it might even be like to hear them back.

Shane indulged himself with thoughts of romance and a happy life, a longer life, free of pain and heartache. A life where he could introduce Ilya to his parents, and kiss him on the ice properly, and they could get married and have a family.

But that could never happen.

And he wouldn't let his own feelings or his body get in the way of one of the best things to ever happen to him, not with so little time left.

Shane couldn't even admit he was *in love* at all, so how could he ever expect Ilya to love him back?

Ilya paced on the inside of his hotel room's entrance, waiting for Shane to arrive. He'd avoided the other player so far this weekend hoping that Shane would come to him, and make up for how they'd left things the last time they were together. But Shane had stayed removed, never coming to team celebrations or just to hang out after the games.

And unable to stay away forever, Ilya had gone to find him.

Without the styling and the performative airs Shane put on at the bar on that first day, Ilya truly saw him, and he didn't like what he saw.

Shane did not look well. He'd clearly lost weight, and even from a distance, he looked like he was in constant pain. Those large coughs shook him violently, and when Shane breathed, he rattled.

Ilya wanted to say something, shout at Shane for coming to another event sick, but then he saw the look on Shane's face, and it haunted him into silence. It was the same look he'd last seen on his mother. It was a look that didn't seem right on Shane's soft features, and that terrified Ilya all the more. Something was going on with the Canadian player, and Ilya was going to find out what.

There was a knock on the door, and Ilya ripped it open, dragging Shane inside. Shane blinked, letting himself be manhandled until Ilya shoved him down to sit on the edge of the bed. "Woah, are you..."

"What is wrong with you?" Ilya asked bluntly, and Shane's mouth clicked shut. "You are pale and skinny. You cough, you wheeze, you are sick. I can see this. What is wrong?"

Shane actually looked surprised for a moment, and then slouched, sighing with defeat. "You're right. I'm sick. I'm...really sick actually. I'm supposed to be announcing my retirement at the end of the season."

Ilya seethed. "You did not tell me."

"I haven't told anyone. My parents and Montreal don't even know yet."

That only made Ilya feel marginally better, but not by much. "It is that serious?"

"Yeah..." Shane trailed off, looking up at Ilya with a sad look. "It's uh...terminal."

Ilya's stomach sank to the floor. "What?" He breathed out, sitting on the bed next to Shane.

"I got diagnosed a while ago, but I've been keeping it hush the whole time. And the treatment, it's only getting me so far. My doctor thinks I can go a little longer once I'm off the ice, but they're sure at this point there's not much more they can do for me."

"Is treatment outside of Canada more promising?" Ilya wondered aloud, and Shane shook his head.

"I've already consulted with a team of specialists. They all said the same thing."

“You should tell your parents.”

Shane’s lips thinned. “I will. I just...wanted to finish the season on a high note.”

“How long have you known?” Ilya asked, feeling himself get angry. Angry at Shane for hiding the diagnosis and prioritizing hockey, for the doctors not doing more, for Shane’s family and team not noticing his condition, and at the world for letting this happen to Hollander at all. And at himself.

“Since 2014. I found out two days before the NHL awards in Vegas.”

Ilya turned to stare at him, recalling that night, with the two of them up there on stage and their night together after. “You...? This whole time, you know you were sick?! And you said nothing!”

“I couldn’t!” Shane shouted, his eyes tearing up. “I had to play!”

“Hockey is not worth you.”

“Hockey is worth everything to me. I couldn’t lose it; do you understand that?”

“NO!” Ilya shouted. “You could have stopped, gotten better, and come back! Nothing wrong with taking a break!”

“I’m not going to get better, I knew that from the start!” Shane claimed. It finally hit Ilya like a brick, the full truth in what other man was saying. Shane had been dying this whole time, and had just carried on playing because there wasn’t anything else he *could* do.

“Why?” Ilya knelt in front of him, shakily reaching out a hand to cup the back of Shane’s neck. “Is that why you left? In Boston?”

Shane nodded, letting a single tear slip down his face, and Ilya brushed it away with his thumb. “It was so nice, and I just...I could feel my symptoms flaring up. I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

“You didn’t want your rival seeing you like that, you mean?” Ilya repeated dejectedly, and Shane leaned forward, putting his own hands around Ilya’s neck.

“No, I didn’t want *you* to see me like that,” Shane pressed, touching his forehead against Ilya’s. “For some reason, it’s actually really important to me what you think of me, and I didn’t want you thinking I was weak or fragile.”

“I could never,” Ilya breathed out, surging up to kiss him. Shane kissed him back, his fingers moving down to clutch Ilya’s shirt, pulling him up until Shane was lying flat on his back, legs still hanging off of the edge of the bed while Ilya’s body caged him in. Ilya forced his tongue into Shane’s mouth, and Shane was receptive, readily submitting to him.

“For what it’s worth...” Shane breathed, letting Ilya trail kisses down the side of his neck, letting his eyes slip closed as he pressed his head back into the mattress. “I’m sorry I left, last time. It was nice. It felt like we were...more.”

Ilya's heart panged. "We can't be more, Hollander." It hurt to say that, knowing what he now did about Shane.

"Would you want to be, if we could?"

Ilya pulled back, feeling himself on the verge of tears himself. This wasn't fair. "We can't!"

"That's not what I asked."

"It doesn't fucking matter!" Ilya hissed, pounding a fist on the nearby dresser. "You cannot ask me this! We cannot be anything. Not only because of your...condition, but we are us! We are rivals, we are hockey players! We cannot be gay, not in public. And I...I would not be able to go home."

"Your family?"

"Russia." Ilya snapped. "I could not go home to Russia."

Shane startled, as if he had never considered that. "What would happen to you?"

"I do not want to find out."

"Would your parents...help?"

"My father is a cop." Ilya retorted, as if that explained anything. "My brother is a cop."

"Jesus," Shane whispered under his breath, going pale. "And your mother?"

"Dead." Ilya sat back down on the mattress, watching as Shane flinched.

"I'm sorry," Shane whispered, reaching out to grip Ilya's leg.

"I was young," Ilya waved his hand dismissively. "I have a stepmother. She is...very young for my father. My mother was very young for my father. He...was not ever an easy man to live with, is set in old ways. Very strict. My brother is much like him. But now my father is sick."

"Sick, like can...?"

"No. Alzheimer's."

"I'm so sorry," Shane whispered, pulling at Ilya's clothes in an attempt to bring him closer, and Ilya let him, until Ilya was tucked into Shane's chest with the Canadian's arms wrapped around him.

"You reminded me of her," Ilya whispered, pressing a kiss to Shane's sternum. "On the beach. I suppose I knew, then, that something was wrong."

"How did she..." Shane started to ask, but he cut himself off. "Sorry, you don't have to talk about her if you don't want to."

“She had an accident.” Ilya said, thinking back to how his father had explained it. “She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills. Oops. I was twelve, at the time, when I found her.”

Shane threaded his fingers in Ilya’s hair, taking that in. “Jesus, Ilya, I am so...so sorry.”

“She would have liked you, I think.” Ilya deflected. “I don’t want you to think she was weak. She wasn’t. She was...amazing, but so sad. And my father was so hard on her.”

“I don’t...think she was weak. I think she’s where you get your strength from.” Shane whispered. Ilya scoffed, but Shane repeated himself. “You are, you’re so strong! And you’re incredible! It’s no wonder that I...”

Ilya stopped breathing.

Shane stopped talking.

They both knew what Shane wanted to say — what he had very nearly said. If Ilya had been braver, he might have even said it back.

“I can’t stay,” Shane mumbled. “I have to go.”

“Do you?” Ilya asked, pressing another kiss to Shane’s body. “Stay.”

“I can’t.”

“No one will even fucking notice. This weekend has been chaos, and is nearly over.”

“Ilya, I...”

“When will I have you, for as long as I want?” Ilya asked, feeling his heart break.

“As soon as possible.” Shane lied loud enough for both of them to hear it. They both knew what the real answer would be. *Never*. “Are you going back to Russia this summer?”

Ilya collapsed in on himself. “Yes. Where will you go?”

“To my cottage, mostly. And then after that...” Ilya almost didn’t want Shane to tell him. He wanted to imagine Shane recovering miraculously, looking out on that peaceful lake that had shown up in that documentary, and coming back heartily for the next season.

“I’ll see you in a couple weeks, yeah?” Shane asked, his voice cracking.

Ilya reached for his hand and pressed a kiss into Shane’s palm. “Of course. I will beat you, of course. I cannot be taking things easy on you.”

“Don’t you dare, not that you could beat me anyways.” Shane grinned, and pulled away, getting off the bed.

Ilya snuggled into the warm spot that Shane had just vacated. “Good night, Shane.”

“Good night, Ilya.” Shane replied, opening the hotel room door from behind his own back, just so he could drag out the sight of the Russian for as long as possible, until it finally clicked closed.

The sound of that click broke both of their hearts.

All-Star Weekend had changed something, for both of them, with Shane and Ilya exchanging more texts than ever. It was no longer limited to veiled innuendo and hookup plans, but rather actual conversation. Ilya told Shane things about his life, things that happened with his teammates. Shane told him all about Hayden’s kids, and offered commentary on various hockey-related topics. Ilya never asked him how he was doing, and Shane never offered anything more.

But it was nice all the same, just to talk.

Which is why it was so surprising when Ilya disappeared the night after their match (a brutal loss for Montreal). Shane couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, and kept checking his phone to see if the other man had reached out.

He hadn’t.

And Shane was sick of waiting. So he called.

“Hollander?”

Shane had half-expected to be sent to voicemail, so he didn’t know what to say at first when Ilya unexpectedly answered. “Yeah...? Hi! Are you okay?”

Ilya’s laugh sounded dangerously hollow. “I don’t know.”

“Where are you?”

“Home.”

“In Boston? Are you sick?”

“No, home. In Moscow.”

Suddenly the pieces clicked into place. “Oh. Is it...your father?”

“Yes. Dead.”

“Ilya, I—”

“What are people saying about me?”

“Nothing. The media has been very secretive. The Bears must have—”

“I will be back by the end of the week.”

“You could take more time. If you wanted.”

“I don’t. Goodbye Hollander.”

“Wait!” Shane pleaded. “Just...call me, alright? If you need to talk? Or text, whatever. But I’ll listen. I want to help, if I can.”

“You did. Thank you. I...I will call. But I must go.”

Shane didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye, as the dialtone rang in his ear.

Two days later, that call came. Shane answered it immediately, ducking into a stairwell to accept the call. “How are you doing?”

“Bad.” Ilya didn’t beat around the bush, and Shane closed his eyes, heart wrenching empathetically.

“How is your family treating you?”

“Like I should not be here. They never forgave me for leaving, for playing in America, and for not being here while he was sick.”

“That’s ridiculous. He was your father.”

“Yes, well, I am paying for everything, so that makes me of use.” Ilya replied glibly, and Shane could feel a flash of anger in his gut on Ilya’s behalf.

“How’s your—I mean, how’s his wife?”

“Upset, but not about him. Everyone thinks so, but no. She is scared for herself.”

“Because there’s no money.” Shane recalled. Ilya had spoken some more about his family back in Russia, about their financial troubles, and how much Ilya resented funding their lifestyle.

“What about you? Are you...upset?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya sighed. “Maybe. About the wrong thing?”

“You wish things could have been different?”

“I wish...I wanted him to...I don’t know. English is too hard today.”

“I’m sorry, I wish I spoke Russian.”

“You could probably learn it in a week, perfect, no accent.” Ilya grumbled and Shane laughed. He’d tried it, back when things between them had gotten more serious, but after his diagnosis, it had fallen to the side. It, like everything that reminded him of Ilya, had hurt too much.

“I don’t think so. Where are you now?”

“Walking. A park. I needed to get out.”

“Cold?”

“Fucking freezing.”

Shane was suddenly struck by a ridiculous idea, or maybe a brilliant one. “Tell me everything you want to say...uh, in Russian. I won’t understand, but maybe it’ll help?”

Ilya was quiet for so long, Shane wondered if he should say something else, or try to take back the offer, but then Ilya choked out a brief “Okay,” and let out a litany of Russian that had Shane’s head spinning. He’d never heard Ilya speak for so long, and at some point during the speech, Shane let his head press against the phone, eyes slipping closed just so he could savor the sound of his lover’s voice.

“Ya khochu tol'ko tebya. I vseгда tol'ko tebya. Ya tak sil'no tebya lyublyu i ne znayu, chto s ehtim delat'.” Ilya finished, and Shane let out a long exhale. He couldn’t understand what Ilya was saying, that was true enough, but he could feel the meaning, and what Ilya had said...

It just felt important.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

There wasn't a day passing where Shane didn't think of Ilya Rozanov now, and he didn't know how to feel about that, outside of his usual flare ups. Every day was still a struggle in terms of pain management, but Shane couldn't bring himself to take any more painkillers after hearing about Ilya's mother.

So instead he relied on hockey, trying his best to seek out distractions where he could. Shane threw himself into every practice and every match, working harder and longer to get himself in the best shape he could be in the lead up to the playoffs. After two back-to-back Cup wins, Montreal was determined to defend their Cup for a third time, and Shane would not let them down now.

But tonight was different, because tonight, Montreal was going up against Boston.

There was no distracting himself from Ilya today, because this was the closest they'd been to each other since the All-Stars match. And Shane was desperate to see him. He skirted around the edge of the ice, sticking to the boards during the warm up while casually glancing over to the Bear's bench, waiting for Ilya to come out of the tunnel, trying not to make it look like he was loitering, but clearly wasn't doing a good job, because the next time he glanced over, Ilya was on the ice looking back at him.

Shane's heart jumped.

He cursed himself for having such an intense reaction, which must have manifested physically somehow because the smirk on Ilya's face only grew. Shane looked away, trying to slow his pulse, which had been fast all day/. Shane told himself, but his heart knew differently. The warnings from his doctors to stay away from the source of his longing didn't echo in Shane's ears anymore. Shane had stopped caring. He didn't know how much time he had left and he didn't want to, as long as he got to spend it with Ilya.

In seconds, Ilya was toeing the red line, whispering to Shane about their plans tonight, and Shane was honestly just trying his best to keep breathing. "Hey," He asked, noticing just how tense Ilya looked. "You all right?"

Ilya didn't, or couldn't, respond. Shan could see a look in his eyes that scared him, and for a moment, Shane worried that Ilya was about to do something reckless. The answer to Shane's question was clearly no, but whatever Ilya needed to say clearly couldn't be said here. "We'll talk later," Shane reassured him, and Ilya let out a long exhale, nodding.

"Yes, later." Ilya's voice cracked, but he skated off before Shane could say anything more.

The game started soon after, and for the fifteen glorious minutes, Shane and Ilya battled it out on the ice, both of them in their natural element. Shane had won the faceoff, and taken off with the puck, but Ilya wasn't too far behind. Ilya managed to take the puck from him for just the briefest of moments before Shane took it back, glancing back at Ilya with a delighted look as he soared towards the goal.

And then everything happened in slow motion. Cliff came out of nowhere, crashing hard into Shane's side, slamming him against the boards. Ilya stopped in his tracks, along with everyone else on the ice, and the refs dragged Marlow off to check on Shane, but the Canadian was barely moving.

A medic dove in, getting a brace around Shane's neck, when they shouted something urgent in French that Ilya couldn't understand; at least until he saw Shane's face. Shane's chest was seizing underneath the medic's hands while blood dripped out of his nose and mouth, pooling on the ice below. Somewhere in the distance, someone screamed, and the medics wasted no time. A backboard was shoved under Shane, while one of the other paramedics forced something down Shane's throat with such abruptness that Ilya wanted to gag himself. But they didn't leave the ice. Instead one of them took position next to Shane's chest, placing their hands interlocked on top of his ribs, and slammed their entire upper body weight down hard.

"Fuck, no no nononono!" Hayden Pike was a blur next to him, streamlining for Hollander, while Ilya stood there frozen. "Shane, buddy, you gotta wake up! Shane! Stop! Get him up!"

"Pike, get back!" One of the refs yelled.

"You have to make them go! He needs surgery!" Hayden screamed. "The roots, he's torn something internally!"

The paramedics froze, and one of them whipped around to stare at Hayden, while the other continued to provide chest compressions. The fans watched listlessly, camera phones flashing, as Shane lay still under their ministrations.

"You said...roots?" The frozen paramedic asked, and Hayden nodded.

"Hanahaki."

That one word from Hayden was enough to spur them into action. Shane was dragged off at top speed, blood still dripping behind them as they exited the ice. Ilya watched them go, still motionless, trying to understand. He didn't know what Hanahaki was, at least not in his language.

"Roz," One of the coaches tapped him on the arm, tugging on his jersey. "Roz, come on."

"What was wrong with him?" Ilya asked, his mouth dry.

"I don't know. But we have to get off the ice."

"Suspending play?"

“Until the next set of paramedics get here.” The coach said assuringly, but that was no comfort to Ilya. He wanted to leave, find Shane and find out what was going on, because this couldn’t be it. The last time he saw Shane couldn’t be here, not like...not like that.

“I can’t...I can’t...” Ilya couldn’t find the words to explain it.

“Roz, get back to the locker room. Take a breather.” The coach instructed. “I’ll check on you and Marlow in a minute, okay?”

Ilya nodded. And then paused. “And Marlow?”

The coach grimaced. “He thinks he killed Hollander. He saw them start CPR, and went straight off the ice, down the tunnel.”

Those words echoed in Ilya’s head, over and over. *Killed Hollander. Killed...Hollander. Killed. Hollander.* Ilya felt like he would throw up. *Shane couldn’t be dead. He couldn’t cope with someone else dying.*

But then he remembered. Shane *was* dying. After everything had happened, he’d managed to push that to the back of his mind. All those conversations, all of those games, and Ilya had never addressed it. He slowly inched off of the ice, blindly aware that everyone in the stands was watching him. A Zamboni passed him as he was en route, and Ilya glanced back just in time to see it drive right over a pool of blood. *Shane’s blood.*

Ilya ran. Right off of the ice, straight towards the locker room, not even hesitating to speak to Marlow as he beelined straight for the bathroom to vomit. “Roz?” Marlow rasped, following him. “Is he...”

“They took him off the ice. Stopped CPR.” Ilya spat, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Not dead, I think. Not yet.”

“Fuck!” Cliff shouted abruptly, slamming a fist against the wall. “God, I didn’t mean to...I never...fuck, what did I do? Roz, what did I do?” He wailed, sinking down to the bathroom floor with tears in his eyes.

“I don’t know.” Ilya whispered, still too focused on the events of the last few minutes to comfort his teammate. “What is Hanahaki?”

“Wh— what?” Cliff looked up at him as Ilya turned to face his distraught linemate. “Why the fuck are you asking me about that?”

“Pike said it, on the ice. The paramedics whisked him off ice after.”

“Hollander has Hanahaki?” Cliff blinked, the fear coloring his features turning to confusion. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“I am asking what is it?” Ilya replied, frustrated. *He really hated English sometimes.*

“It’s the love curse,” Cliff gestured to his own chest. “Y’know, the one where flowers grow inside? Unrequited love, or something like that. Until it kills you?”

Ilya blinked, finally understanding. *He'd heard of it now, of course he had. But why would it apply to...*

The realization hit him like a brick. Shane had never told him *what* he was dying of exactly, back at the All-Stars. Had only skated around the issue, and Ilya, damn him, had never asked. He'd let his anger get in the way, and had only asked the basic follow up questions. He should have asked, he should have *pushed*.

"I'm not going to get better, I knew that from the start!" Shane had said. It explained everything; the coughing, the weakness, the coldness, the ill pallor, and now... the blood. Every moment, every conversation he'd shared with Shane rushed back through Ilya's head as all of the pieces finally fell into place.

"It's no wonder that I..." Shane had tried to say back then at the All-Stars game. Ilya dashed back into the stall to vomit some more.

Shane wasn't dying because of Cliff Marlow. He was dying because of Ilya.

Ilya went straight to the hotel after the match. Boston had won, of course, with Montreal too shaken without their captain to recover, but neither Cliff or Ilya went back on the ice. Ilya had managed to pull himself together enough to comfort Cliff and drag him back to the hotel, but now Ilya found himself in his own room, determined to drink himself blind on the shitty Canadian liquor in the mini-bar.

At some point, he pulled out his phone, only to hesitate at the sight of the text thread between him and Shane. The last text Ilya had sent Shane before the game still remained unanswered. Ilya debated texting again, wondering if Shane would even be capable of replying soon, and then decided against it. He exited the chat to navigate to Svetlana's contact instead, but his hands kept shaking, and he couldn't think straight enough to spell out what he needed to say, so he called her.

"Is he dead?" She asked, picking up straight away, and Ilya choked. "Fuck, sorry, that's not... Is he actually...?"

"If not yet, he will be." Ilya finally forced out. "Do you know about Hanahaki?"

"Yeah, but what does...oh. *Oh*. Does Hollander have...? Did the hit cause—"

"Hollander is Jane. It is my fault." Ilya bit his tongue, waiting for her to shout, scream, or even say anything. *He deserved her ire. He deserved a beating. He deserved...something.*

"You and Hollander?" She gasped, her accent getting heavier on Shane's name. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't!" Ilya pleaded, silently begging her to understand. "We couldn't tell anyone, and now it is my fault! He's dying. Soon, if not tonight! He told me too, at the All-Star game. This was going to be his last season."

“And you think you’re who...” She didn’t even bother finishing her question. “How long has this thing been going on between you?”

“The summer...” Ilya’s voice cracked. “The summer before our rookie season.”

“And it has been love this whole time?”

“No...” Ilya shook his head, even though she couldn’t physically see him. “But I think it has turned into that. Now. For him. And for me too.”

“You will tell him, yes?”

That shook Ilya to his senses. “No! I cannot. Because he never told me! This whole time, he was dying, and never told me. He clearly did not want me to know, or want things between us getting more serious.”

“Is it possible he didn’t because he thought you didn’t feel the same, and didn’t want you feeling obligated?” She asked gently, but the question still hit Ilya like a ton of bricks. *Because that was something Shane WOULD do.*

Ilya wavered. He couldn’t decide. “Look,” she sighed into his ear. “The worst thing that could happen is he dies, yes?” Ilya couldn’t even answer that, barely able to even entertain the concept. “But if you say something, and you are what you think you are to him, Ilyusha, you could *save him!*”

Ilya’s breath caught in his throat. That was the catch. The flowers grew because the love that seeded them went unreciprocated. But if it was...the flowers would wilt, wither, and disappear. And Shane...

Shane would live.

Ilya bypassed the desk in the hospital wing, not even bothering to check in with the nurses as he walked through the Recovery Ward. He’d managed to wrangle the details out of the coaching staff as to Shane’s location, throwing in a line about sportsmanship and responsibility just to convince them, and now he was nearly there.

That’s when he spotted Yuna Hollander conversing rapidly with the doctors in the hallway outside of what was meant to be Shane’s room. Ilya briefly considered turning around, but the woman clearly had their focus, and so Ilya took the distraction while he could, ducking into Shane’s room without being noticed.

Shane lay on the hospital bed, sleeping, but roused as Ilya reached for his hand. “Il-y-aah...” Shane slurred loudly, looking up at him with a soft expression.

“Shhh,” Ilya soothed him.

“Mm-sorry I didn’t texts you...” Shane’s words were blending together, making it harder for Ilya to understand him, but he managed all the same, smiling a little as Shane’s fingers curled around his own.

“It’s okay,” Ilya whispered. “If anyone should be sorry...”

“How’s Marly?” Shane asked, stopping Ilya’s self-depreciating spiral. “Clean hit. Bad aftermath.”

“I...” Ilya was almost resigned. This was Shane to a fault, endlessly kind and still thinking of his fellow hockey players, even from a hospital bed. “He is fine, Hollander, you...”

“Shane.” Shane corrected, pouting. “I like ‘t when you say m’name. Loved it, n’ Boston. Loved it so much I couldn’ breathe.”

Ilya faltered. “You did not say.”

“I know...” Shane trailed off, and Ilya brushed a hand down the side of his face, which Shane nuzzled into unabashedly. “Felt guilty, I guesss...an’ scared.”

“I am scared. You scared me.” Ilya claimed, sitting on the bed with Shane. “I saw the blood and I worried...”

“Hey...heyyyy...” Shane interrupted, reaching for Ilya’s hands, only to get stuck navigating around the wires hooking him to the medical equipment. “Mm’okay.”

“You’re dying.” Ilya reminded him bluntly. Shane didn’t even flinch.

“Not yet. Out for the season though, so...last game ever, I guess.”

“It doesn’t have to be.” Ilya squeezed Shane’s hand. “Does it? Hanahaki has cure.”

“M’not having the surgery. I already told my mom that.” Shane shook his head, his brows furrowing together, finally looking distressed.

“I was not talking about surgery.”

Shane continued to frown, trying to understand what Ilya was talking about. And then he gasped. “Oh. But that’s not...you don’t...”

“I love you Shane Hollander.” Ilya confessed, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane’s knuckles, being mindful of the wires. “I am sorry I did not say before now but...”

“You did though.” Shane interrupted. “You said it during that phone call, didn’t you? I didn’t understand then, but after your father passed, I haven’ coughed up a flower since...” Shane licked his lips, mouthing words out silently. “I didn’ notice until today, but I think I knew.”

Ilya let his entire body relax with relief. “So you are not dying?”

“Not sure. But I love you too.”

Ilya didn’t even hesitate, guiding himself down to press his lips against Shane. The kiss wasn’t intense, but it was meaningful, and Shane let out a satisfied noise as he chased after

Ilya's mouth. Only for both of them to freeze as the door burst open and Yuna Hollander, followed by two doctors, marched inside.

"Oh..." She stopped, noticing Ilya's presence. "I'm sorry, we weren't expecting visitors. Mr. Rozanov, this is a surprise."

"To you..." Shane sung. "Not t'me!" *That was not helping, Shane.*

Ilya fidgeted under her intense glare. "I came to see Shane after hit. One hockey captain to another."

"Going up for a sportsmanship award, are we?" She asked. "Either way, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"No." Ilya surprised himself with how quickly he said it, and Shane's fingers wormed their way back into his hand.

"Mr. Rozanov, my son needs to speak with his doctors, and your presence is..."

"Totally necessary." Shane interrupted again, turning everyone's attention back towards him. "Ilya 'sstaying."

"Well," Yuna gave Ilya a disgruntled look. "Maybe he can help me convince you to get that surgery."

"Ah..." One of the doctors interrupted. "Actually, he doesn't necessarily need it."

Yuna turned to glare at the doctor instead. "Excuse me? You told me, when we got here, that my son was dying of Hanahaki disease, and that the roots in his chest had pierced his lungs to the point of internal bleeding. And you don't want him to have the surgery that would fix it?"

"There won't be much left to fix, ma'am." The doctor explained quickly. "Mr. Hollander's most recent scans would indicate that his condition is in remission. The roots that caused the damage, well, they're dry and shriveling up. They were so fragile, that there was no internal give when Shane was hit. We removed the debris when repairing the internal bleeding, but..."

"He loves me back." Shane grinned, gripping Ilya's hand with as much strength as he could muster. Ilya couldn't even find it in himself to be embarrassed as the doctors nodded in agreement. Yuna's mouth hung open, her eyes shining as she finally realized what Shane was trying to say. She looked back at Ilya with a completely different expression on her face, one that made Ilya's gut twist.

"We'll leave you to it." One of the doctors said politely, holding the door open for himself and his colleague to exit. They waited until the door clicked shut, and then Yuna took a seat. Ilya sat back down on the bed, next to Shane, facing her.

"So, you're the person my son was in love with." She raised an eyebrow.

"Is." Shane tsked, glaring at her.

“Is,” Yuna conceded, correcting herself. “And you love him, in turn?”

“I do.” Ilya confessed. “I do not hurt him on purpose. I did not know about flowers.”

“You and me both,” She glanced reproachfully at Shane, who seemed to be staring at the lights as part of a semi-lucid avoidance tactic. “So how long has this been...?”

“Since the summer before our Rookie season.” Ilya answered, and Shane’s heartrate monitor jumped. Both of them turned to look at him with concern, but Shane was only staring back at Ilya with a sappy expression, completely unaware that he’d just scared the shit out of them.

“This whole time?” Yuna asked, sounding faint.

“Sort’ve.” Shane joined in. “Was just...fun at first. Love came later.”

“And that’s why you didn’t tell us.” Yuna realized. “Because of him.”

“Didn’t tell anyone. Couldn’t admit it t’myslf, le’ alone other people. So I hide, m’good at that.” Shane mused. “Wasn’bout him. Not really.”

“So, no one else knew.” Yuna frowned. “Oh, Shane...”

“Hayden knew.” Ilya added, and that made Shane flinch. “You told him, yes?”

“He found out. I didn’t meantuh tell ‘im.”

“Found out how?”

“Mmm...he ripped a flower out’ve me. Choking.”

Ilya squeezed Shane’s hand tighter, not wanting to even picture that image, but his brain conjured it anyways. It terrified him to think of Shane struggling to breathe to the point that Hayden had to intervene. Almost as much as it had terrified him watching Shane go down on that ice.

“Your doctors told me you found out nearly three years ago. And in all that time, you only ever told one person?” Yuna was aghast.

“Two. Rose Landry also knows.”

“And now paramedics, refs, Cliff Marlow, and friend of mine know too.” Ilya admitted, before doing a double take. “Wait, Rose Landry?”

“Shhh...” Shane mocked sleepily, still looking at Ilya adoringly. “You told people?”

“I think I’m more concerned that *you* didn’t, Shane.” Yuna scolded. “We had a right to know! Your coaches and your team had a right to know!”

“Would’ve made me stop.”

“You’re damn right they would’ve!” Yuna looked angry, and Ilya’s throat tightened. He didn’t like where this conversation was going. “You nearly died out there, you understand that, right? At any point, any hit, any check, could’ve killed you! You could have died, on the ice, or alone, and we wouldn’t have even known why!”

“Don’t care.”

“WHY?” She shouted, and Ilya leapt to his feet, stepping between Shane and Yuna.

“Not now.” Ilya said lowly. “Not the time, or place.”

Yuna froze, and then sighed, deflating. “No, you’re...you’re right. I’m sorry, this isn’t the time or the place. But I would like to talk about it. Soon.”

Ilya nodded, even though he wasn’t sure when or how they would have that conversation, but Shane gasped. “We can have it at the cottage!”

“Cottage?”

“Right,” Shane corrected dopily. “Should ask first. Will you come to my cottage this summer? Don’t go to Russia. Come to my house, it’s so quiet and private, no one will know...”

“Shane.”

“We could have a week or maybe even twooooo...together?” Shane looked so hopeful and Ilya couldn’t find it within himself to say no.

“Maybe. We’ll see. I will try.” Ilya knew right then that he’d move heaven and earth to be there anyways, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it outright. Not in front of Yuna.

“Yay...” Shane trailed off, looking exhausted, and Ilya could tell Shane was on the verge of falling asleep. “I will come back later, yes?”

“Nooo, ssstay....!” Shane pleaded loopily, hands reaching for Ilya but missing laughably short of any of Ilya’s limbs. Behind him, Yuna let out a tiny snort, that was so reminiscent of Shane when he was trying to hide his own laughter.

“Shh, you must sleep moy lyubimyy...” Ilya brushed a hand down the side of Shane’s face, carefully caressing the smattering of freckles on his cheeks.

“You’ll come back, right?” Shane asked, eyes slipping closed.

“Nothing could keep me away.” Ilya promised, almost certain Shane hadn’t been awake enough to even hear the answer. Ilya backed away from the bed, giving Yuna a glance before leaving the room. She followed him, the two of them stepping out in the hallway.

“I am sorry,” Ilya chose his words carefully, facing her. “But he was in no condition...”

“You hardly need to apologize for defending my son. I’m sorry that you had to. He gets it from me, that panic spiral, and I just...”

“It has not been easy, for him, to hide this.” Ilya remarked, shutting her up. “Don’t make it seem like it was.”

Yuna faltered. “The doctor told me he was diagnosed back in 2014. For three years, my son hid...”

“Shane has been hiding more than that, for much longer.” Ilya reminded her, and she flushed. “I think you are okay with the other thing, though, yes?”

“Of course.”

“Remind him of that,” Ilya gestured back to the hospital room. “When he is sober. He will freak out, or spiral as you said.”

She looked at him contemplatively. “You are not what I expected. But you’re good for my son.”

Ilya swallowed the knot in his throat, appreciative of his words. “I am trying to be.”

“I look forward to seeing you again this summer.” She nodded, reaching back for the door into Shane’s room, and Ilya stepped back. “Goodbye, Mr. Rozanov.”

“Mrs. Hollander.” Ilya nodded, and walked away, refusing to glance back in Shane’s direction lest he find an excuse to never leave. Ilya didn’t stop until he was out of the hospital and back in his car before he finally let out the breath he was holding and called Svetlana back.

“Is he dead?” She asked, no longer feeling bad about opening the call that way.

“No. He will be fine. Remission.”

“You saved him.” He could tell even from over the phone that she was smiling.

“I nearly killed him.”

“You saved him.”

“He has invited me to stay with him, during the summer break.” He said, and she hummed in agreement.

“Good. You two should talk.”

“I don’t think I am going back to Russia.” Ilya whispered.

“No. I think not. But if there’s anything I can bring you...”

“I will ask.” He nodded, hanging up the call.

And then he forced everything else out of his mind. He had a Stanley Cup to win.

Boston did not win the Cup.

Ilya had flown out to Ottawa two days after that last match, unable to stay away from Shane for much longer as Shane recovered from the concussion and the dangerous side effects of the Hanahaki. They were both staying with Shane's parents, which was a bit of a shock for Ilya, but the two had welcomed him with open arms. Yuna, as Ilya would find out, truly was like her son in so many ways, especially when it came to hockey, but David was nowhere near as boring as Ilya had expected, surprising Ilya with the good vodka on the second day.

Ilya was certainly appreciating the vodka now as they watched the final match of the Cup playoffs. He would tell anyone who listened that New York didn't deserve it, but in truth, they did. The Admirals had not had the best start to the season, but they'd been properly motivated to take the lead after Montreal was knocked out of the running. Ilya could admit that he knew Scott Hunter wanted it, especially after losing out for nine seasons running.

That didn't mean he had to watch.

Yuna and David were cuddled up on the main couch, while Ilya sat next to Shane; who in Ilya's opinion, was a far worthier candidate for attention. Earlier that day, Shane had had his last appointment with his Hanahaki specialist, and he'd taken Ilya to the appointment just so they could both hear the news they were hoping for; that Shane's condition was completely gone. The doctor had warned Shane there might be some residual scarring on his lungs, and that he should still watch out for the long-term side effects of the disease, but neither of them were too concerned in that moment. All they'd heard was that Shane had fully recovered.

Ilya was still staring at Shane when the final buzzer rang, marking New York's final victory, but it wasn't until Shane sat forward with his mouth hanging open that Ilya turned his attention back to the screen. "Who is that?" Yuna asked, sounding equally surprised, as if that wasn't the question everyone else had.

Scott Hunter was kissing a man on tv.

Shane grabbed Ilya's arm, regaining the Russian's attention just in time for Ilya to register that he was about to be kissed. Shane thrust himself into Ilya's arms, and Ilya obliged, wrapping them around Shane's waist to pull his partner into his lap, neither of them breaking away from the kiss. Neither of them could say in that moment just what they were feeling, but both of them knew just how important it was. Later, they would both draft up emails to Scott, and they would make sure to find him at the NHL Awards which would be coming up soon, but for now, they just took comfort in each other and the possibilities of a previously-inaccessible future.

"Shane, if that's going to go any further, we're gonna need it to happen elsewhere, okay bud?" David laughed, and Shane groaned into Ilya's mouth, faintly blushing at the insinuation.

Ilya smiled and pulled back, resting his forehead against Shane's. "Is okay. We can wait."

“I might have a better idea.” Shane whispered, looking sly. “I’d like to go somewhere, with you?”

Ilya nodded, curious, and Shane got up off of the couch, smiling softly at the tv which was still showing Scott and his partner’s post-win kiss. “C’mon.” He reached down, pulling Ilya up. “We’re going to head out. Don’t expect us back anytime soon, okay.”

Yuna raised an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything, just nodding. David gave them both a thumbs up. Ilya followed Shane dutifully, watching as he picked up their bags from their room. “We are going somewhere?”

“I think I recall inviting you to my cottage this summer.” Shane smiled. “And I’m sure I said something about it being totally private…”

Ilya grinned. “You did. Are you sure?”

“I am.”

They made it to the cottage in one piece, but the bags didn’t make it out of the car as Shane dragged Ilya inside. “This is my favorite place in the world,” Shane said, showing off the property. “I used to dream about bringing someone to spend time with, but after a while, I knew if I wanted anyone else here, it would be you.”

“I saw it once, in documentary. You did yoga on dock.” Ilya mused, looking around. It was not what he expected a cottage to be like, but the sleek, modern design felt very *Shane*.

Shane blushed. “You saw that? I couldn’t bring myself to watch any of it, I thought it was boring.”

“Very,” Ilya agreed, wrapping his arms around Shane’s waist. “But still nice.”

“Oh,” Shane ghosted his mouth over Ilya’s, smiling as the two of them closed their eyes. “I’m glad. Now, take me to bed, please.”

Ilya didn’t even hesitate, easily picking Shane up off of the floor. His teammates had been impressed at how much Ilya benched in recent years, the highest of anyone on the team, but he would never tell any of them it was so he could do exactly this. He carried Shane down the hall, waiting for whispered instructions on where to go, until they made it finally to the bed. Ilya unceremoniously dropped Shane on the mattress, and his partner crawled backwards, centering himself on the bed as Ilya crawled on top of him.

“I need you to fuck me.”

“I will do one better,” Ilya slipped his hands under the hem of Shane’s sweater. “I will make love to you instead.” The sweater came off, and Ilya wasted no time in divesting Shane and himself of their remaining clothes, the two of them relishing in their embrace as their bodies were pressed together.

Ilya's hands skated down past Shane's waist, until they were securely gripping where thighs met hips, his blunt fingernails digging into the soft skin. Shane gasped, pressing his chest up into Ilya's as his back arched, and he spread his legs so that Ilya could fit between them. Ilya ground down, making their erections rub ever so slightly, but then Shane surprised him, flipping them both over until Shane was straddling Ilya's waist.

"The last time you touched me like this," Shane rubbed his hands down Ilya's chest, his fingers caressing the line art of his tattoo as they moved down to settle over his abs. "I couldn't breathe. I was riding on top of you, and then you flipped me over and pounded into me so hard my lungs stopped working. Literally! I got so dizzy my vision went black at one point, and I think you noticed my lips went blue. I should've told you to stop, but I didn't want to. And then you made a tuna melt after."

Ilya's breath caught in his throat. They hadn't talked about this — about Boston, about Shane's disease, about them — any of it, really. He'd been waiting for Shane to get better, for everything to be fully okay, and...

Ilya still wasn't ready.

"And I couldn't tell you how every second of that day just *broke* me. The doctor said I had to stay away from you because it would just kill me faster. And each time he did, I wanted to scream at him that I couldn't. I was — and am — in love with you, and even when that was killing me, it was the only thing I wanted to live for. And I was so scared by the idea that you wouldn't love me back, I could never bring myself to confront it. Which is why I left, that day in Boston, before I made it worse, and I'm sorry for that."

Ilya sat up, cupping the back of Shane's neck. "You do not need to...you did not make it *worse*, moy lyubimiy. You were dying. Because of me."

Shane shook his head. "No, never because of you. I could never blame you for..."

"I blamed myself." Ilya admitted, cutting Shane off. "To know you were in that much pain, for so long, because of me..."

"It was my privilege."

Ilya shook his head. "Please don't say that. Ever again. I never want you to die for me, Shane Hollander."

"So let me live for you instead. Let me make it up to you, and let us make the most of our time now." Shane requested, and Ilya nodded, leaning in to kiss him. Shane's hand worked its way between their bodies, gently grasping both of their erections with his fingers. Ilya moaned, his hot breath washing over Shane's face, and Shane used his unoccupied hand to grasp Ilya's curls and pull him in for another kiss. A deeper one, a longer one, that spoke of years-worth of apologies and pain that was being finally let go. Ilya's hands scraped up and down Shane's back, teasing the sensitive skin just above his hole, and whispered "Lube?"

"Side table. Can you prep me?" Shane pleaded, and Ilya rolled them, trapping one of Shane's legs up high, exposing him completely. Shane reached blindly to open up the drawer,

successfully producing the lube, and passed it over to Ilya, who opened it expertly with one hand. He slicked up two fingers, and reached down to tease the rim of Shane's ass, watching as Shane's eyes fluttered at the touch before slowly pressing one in.

Ilya took his time, watching every little reaction Shane had to the intrusion — reactions that only got bigger and louder with the introduction of his second finger. Shane's hips canted, thrusting dryly up to meet the penetrating thrusts of Ilya's hand while small whines came out of his mouth. "More..." Shane begged, and Ilya smiled. Obliging, Ilya released Shane's leg and introduced more lube to the area, making it slick enough for him to comfortably add another finger inside.

Shane's head pressed back into the pillows, exposing his throat in such a way that made it impossible for Ilya to resist. He bent down and bit at the skin, nipping around Shane's clavicle and Adam's apple, increasing the speed and intensity of his thrusts until Shane's moans were reaching a new decibel. "Please," Shane gasped, his eyes blowing open. "Need you."

Ilya didn't even hesitate. Pulling his fingers out, he slicked himself up with the lube still coating them, and angled himself until he could thrust right into Shane. Shane's hands flew up to grab Ilya's hair, threading through his curls, while Ilya brought his hands up to hold Shane's legs in place, nearly folding him in half. The position was so reminiscent of the last time they had done this, and on instinct, Ilya checked Shane's face to make sure he was still okay.

"Still breathing for me?" Ilya asked.

"Better than ever."

Chapter End Notes

This was such a hard chapter to write, and I really feel like I did not do it justice, but I think if I'd tried to re-write it anymore, I'd have lost my mind, so here you go! I hope you all enjoyed this fic, and thank you again to everyone who kudos-ed, bookmarked, subscribed, and/or commented! I have some more fics in the works for y'all so be sure to keep an eye out for me again if you liked it!

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, and a huge thank you to those who kudos, bookmark, or comment. Your engagement means so much!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!