The Stars Fell For You

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/77358591.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Yuna Hollander, Hayden Pike, Jean-Jacques Boiziau | J. J. Dagenais, Gilbert Comeau, Sorren Miitka, David Hollander, Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau, Roger Crowell, Svetlana Vetrova, Scott Hunter
Additional Tags:	Pop Star AU, Bodyguard AU, Pop Star Shane Hollander, Bodyguard Ilya Rozanov, Romance, Stalking, Kidnapping, Near Death Experiences, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, gun shot wounds, hurt ilya, Hurt Shane, occasional smut, Pining, no AI was used in the writing of this story, As a great man once said fuck AI to death, Author just has an unhealthy attachment to em dashes.
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Game Changers Pop Star Universe
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-09 Completed: 2026-03-10 Words: 86,809 Chapters: 21/21

The Stars Fell For You

by SuburbanRhythm

Summary

Pop star Shane Hollander is no stranger to crowds and success, but when an anonymous gunman at a press appearance threatens his life, the safety of his upcoming tour is called into question. Desperate to keep their cash cow not only safe, but happy, League Records hires former Spetsnaz operative Ilya Rozanov to provide 24/7 personal security for Shane. As the two spend time together, Shane Hollander realizes that the real threat to his life, to his career, is his own heart...and the way that he feels for the very man he is depending on to keep him safe.

Notes

I was so inspired by that picture of Hudson Williams arriving at The Tonight Show that I got right to work on this. I am pulling from both the TV show and books as serves the needs of the story, but if something is glaringly out of place, please let me know!

The first chapter is more of an intro than a "real" chapter, but please bear with me.

My plan is to update at least on a weekly basis, rating subject to change.

Chapter 1: Chapter One

Shane Hollander had never loved the spotlight. What he loved was the music, the way the pen felt in his hands when he wrote lyrics, the way the keys felt beneath his fingertips when wrote melodies.

With his boy band, The Metropolitan Men, it had been less of an issue. Yes, the spotlight had been there, the craze had been, but there had always been four other guys right there with him, including his best friend Hayden Pike.

Now, he was alone, staring down a long sea of fans between him and the entry to 30 Rockefeller Plaza, and he felt like he might throw up.

When The Metros, as their fans had called them, had broken up, no one had known what was going to happen. It was unclear who would soar, who would flame out, who would have a bountiful career, and who would fade into obscurity. There had been constant whispering about who would be the 'Justin Timberlake,' the 'Harry Styles,' but Shane had never thought that it would be him. His branding had been chosen for him, but it had served him well. He was the shy one, the mysterious one, the quiet one, the one who cared more about the *music* than anything else. He was the one who interacted with the fans the least, so when it had been *his* debut album that had blown up, he had been shocked.

That shock was still with him now as he prepared to announce his debut solo tour on *The Tonight Show.*

Shane hated doing press alone. He had never had to say much with the rest of the guys around, they were all louder, more rambunctious, eager to take center stage. Their dynamic had worked so well…right up until it *hadn't* anymore, and now Shane was here by himself.

Not entirely by himself, of course. His team was with him, a bodyguard the label sent with him to appearances to keep the fans in line, his mother, who doubled as his manager and also his greatest sense of calm and comfort, and his publicist, Farah, who seemed so intensely worried about his ability to market himself that she had insisted on coming along.

All that he had to do was walk, smile, and wave. He wasn't supposed to stop for pictures, for autographs, for any of it, he was just going into a building to do his job. He had done this a thousand times, and god willing, he would do it a thousand more.

With a deep breath, Shane stepped forward, letting a bodyguard guide him along the barricade set up to protect him from the screaming fans. He put on his best face, his publicity smile, the one that didn't reach his eyes, but no one would know that, no one would see it through his designer sunglasses.

He was halfway there, the entrance in striking distance, when a loud crack burst through the crowd. Screams rang out, people ducked down to the ground, and Shane felt himself being

practically tackled through the building doors by his bodyguard before he even had a chance to process what was happening.

Chapter 2: Chapter Two

“No one was injured. All they found at the site were BBs.”

“Right, right.” Yuna Hollander had not sat down since she had entered the conference room.

It had been 24 hours since someone had fired off a BB gun while Shane attempted to enter the studio, and what a 24 hours it had been. He had gotten through his appearance only because he was so severely media trained from his time with The Metros that he could have followed a press appearance script in his sleep. After that, he had been taken straight to his New York hotel while security posted up all around, and he had stayed there until about an hour ago, when he and his mother had been called in for a meeting with the label…or rather Yuna had *demanded* a meeting with the label.

“And what about the threat, hmm? Whoever fired those shots got away, so this danger is still very real.” Yuna slapped down a typed note that had been sent anonymously to Shane at the hotel. “Are you going to put his tour on hold?”

This was a warning. Cancel the tour, or next time the bullets will be real.

“We have a plan to keep Shane safe,” Roger Crowell, executive of League Records, attempted to stare down Yuna - a feat few had succeeded at. Roger Crowell did *not* join their ranks. “We value him greatly here and his safety is, of course, of paramount concern to us. At this time, we have no intention of doing anything other than follow through with the tour plans in place. The venues are set, presale sign-ups went live after the announcement last night and interest is already through the roof. *Hat Trick* is League’s top selling record of the year and that’s putting it mildly. I would hate to see Shane’s career take a hit because some idiot fired off a BB gun.”

“Okay,” Yuna folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t disagree fundamentally, but at the end of the day, my son’s life is more important than his career.”

“I don’t want to cancel the tour, mom.”

Roger and Yuna both looked at him. Shane had been sitting quietly, saying nothing, while the two of them duked it out, but this mattered to him, *this* he wanted to say.

“I don’t want to disappoint my fans.”

“Of course you don’t, sweetheart, I just want to make sure that they, and *you*, are safe.”

“Look, in no uncertain terms, Shane is very valued here at League Records,” Roger said. “And we are prepared to spend what we have to to keep him not only safe here, but happy.” Roger handed Yuna a spiral bound packet. “I had my team up all night creating a new security plan. The security budget for the tour has been doubled, there will be sweeps of every venue where Shane performs and every hotel that he stays at, every event that he attends. There will be plain clothes and uniformed officers at every tour stop and every hotel,

and if there are any signs of credible threats, we will postpone that specific tour date. He will fly private. We will charter a jet specifically for him to mitigate airport security risks, and he will be transported by only the most trusted, top rated car services in every city. You can find a breakdown of each company in security plan details."

"I see." Yuna began flipping through the packet. "I will look this over and get back to you, let you know if it is acceptable."

"That's not all," Roger said.

Yuna set the packet down, looking across the table at the man with one eyebrow arched impossibly high.

"One moment, please." Roger headed for the door, exiting the conference room and leaving Shane alone with his mother.

"You don't have to do this tour," Yuna said, turning to her son. "We can put it off, force their hand, I know your contract says-"

"I want to do it," he said. "I'm proud of my songs, I want to be there for my fans, and we both know I'm not good at just sitting around." Keeping busy had been crucial to Shane for the bulk of his life. He had barely known a moment of downtime when he had been with The Metros, and while he had retreated to his private cottage for a month following the breakup, he was ready to work.

He didn't want that to be cut short.

"I trust you to find any holes in the security plan. If it's good enough, then I trust it, I trust *you*. If it's not good enough." Shane shrugged. "I have no doubt you will make them go back to the drawing board until it is."

"True," Yuna said, a slight smile gracing her face for the first time since they had entered League Records.

"And it's like they said. I'm an asset. Right now, I'm bringing in buckets of cash for them. I'd be no good to them dead, so it's in their best interest to keep me safe."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," Yuna said with a gentle sigh.

"I know, mom, but it's true. I'm a number here, and right now, it's a big one. I mean you saw what happened with Scott Hunter after his last two albums underperformed," Shane reasoned, naming League Records' previous golden boy. "They aren't rolling out the red carpet for him like they used to. No one is making hundred page bound security plans or funding a stadium tour for him. I'm probably a lot safer going on this tour with League protecting me as…as an asset than I am anywhere else."

Yuna let that sit for a minute. Her son was right, and she knew it. These careers could be flash in the pan. You could be on top of the world one minute and all but sidelined the next. Right

now, Shane was on top, and if someone *was* intending to hurt her precious son, well, that would be a lot more difficult if he was surrounded by top notch security.

She was about to speak, to praise her son's pragmatic approach to such a tense situation, when the door opened and Roger Crowell returned.

"This is Ilya Rozanov."

Crowell gestured to the man that had followed him in. It was all Shane could do not to gape as his eyes fell on the most beautiful man he had ever seen in his life.

Ilya stood tall, his posture perfect, hands clasped in front of him. He wore a pressed black suit with a crisp white shirt and black tie that fit him so perfectly Shane was certain it had been expertly tailored. Moles dotted clear skin, a large one on his cheek practically forcing attention towards his perfect cupid's bow lips. Gentle blonde curls framed his face, and the steely look in his blue-green eyes did nothing to detract from his beauty. There was an intensity about him that Shane was not yet able to put a name to, but there was no denying that he was stunning.

"Rozanov works for Vetrov Private Security, the best money can buy," Crowell continued. "They are known for the utmost discretion, elite clientele, and the most highly skilled guards in North America. Rozanov is former Spetsnaz, Mrs. Hollander. He *will* keep your son safe."

Shane said nothing, but he didn't have to. Yuna was across the room and inspecting Ilya within seconds.

"Why *former* Spetsnaz?" She asked suspiciously. "You're young."

"I was injured, ma'am," Ilya said. His English was clear, despite a relatively thick Russian accent. "Released with honors."

"And this injury was severe enough to prevent you from returning, but it will not prevent you from protecting my son?" She asked.

"That is correct. I have rehabilitated it, but I did not wish to return to the military. There is better money in private security."

"I can assure you," Crowell said. "Vetrov has the best reputation in private security. Here." He held out a card. "If you have questions, you can contact their VP, Svetlana Vetrova, but I have been assured that Rozanov is their most promising talent."

"You," Yuna stood to her full height in front of Ilya. "You are confident that you can keep my son safe?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Would you take a bullet for him?"

"Mom-" Shane tried to interject, but Ilya responded quickly, and Shane's words were lost.

“If it were necessary, yes.” Ilya gave a single, curt nod. “That was my training, that is my job.”

Shane gulped. There was something about Ilya’s tone, about his resolute gaze, that made Shane believe his words, and Shane wasn’t sure how he felt about it. Of course the term “I would take a bullet for you” was in his vernacular, but he had always heard it used in unserious, almost playful terms - a display of friendship rather than a hard and fast statement of the truth.

This was different. This was real. The bullet Yuna was asking about was not metaphorical, and here was this man - a man that Shane had never met - stating that, yes, if it came to it, he would take a bullet for Shane.

At the very least, it was discomfiting. At the most, downright terrifying.

“We have reached out to every hotel. Every suite that Shane stays in will have an adjoining room so that Rozanov will be right there. He will have a bunk on the tour bus, he will not leave your son’s side. His is high value, 24/7 around the clock protection. Starting right now, he is never off the clock.”

“That sounds…expensive,” Yuna stated.

“Like I said.” Crowell looked overly pleased with himself. “Shane’s safety is a top priority to us. No expense will be spared.”

“Hm.” Yuna let out a soft huff followed by a shrug before returning to sit next to Shane. “Can I have a moment with my client?” She asked.

“Of course.” Crowell nodded.

Shane watched as Ilya, never breaking his poise, held the door open for Roger Crowell before exiting behind him. Through the frosted glass, Shane could see Ilya’s silhouette, legs slightly apart, back to the door, hands undoubtedly still clasped in front of him, on guard and alert.

“What do you think, sweetheart?”

“Huh?” Shane tore his gaze away from Ilya’s outline and refocused to his mother.

“What do you think about all of this? The security plan, the bodyguard?”

“Oh. Right. Well, you already know how I feel about the security plan,” Shane reasoned. “And…as for the bodyguard, I don’t know. It’ll be weird having someone on me - *around* me,” he corrected quickly, decidedly *not* needing the mental image of Ilya Rozanov on top of him to populate in his mind. “It’ll be weird having someone around me like that all the time,” he clarified. “But I don’t want to cancel the tour and he seems…professional.”

“I’m going to call that Vetrova woman,” Yuna said. “Get a little more information on his injury.”

“Of course you are,” Shane said, his features relaxing into a gentle smile.

“I just want to make sure it won’t prevent him from keeping you safe,” she said with a sigh. “Honey, I don’t like the idea of someone out there trying to hurt you.”

“I know, mom, and I don’t either, but it’s hardly the first time, I mean remember all the kidnapping threats me and the guys used to get when I was in The Metros?” He asked. “Nothing ever happened. Not once.”

“Yes, but no one ever took a shot at you then, either.” Yuna reached out, putting her hand on her son’s shoulder.

“It was a BB gun,” Shane pointed out. “Probably just someone’s idea of a prank.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t funny.” Yuna sat back in her chair, arms folded resolutely across her chest. “So you’re okay with this? The tour?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure? Because if you’re not, I will get you out of it. I made sure there were clauses in your contract-”

“Mom.” Shane’s tone was calm, even. “I’m sure. I’m not a kid anymore, okay? I know what I want. I want to do this.”

For all of his anxieties, when Shane was on stage, he came alive. He knew what was expected of him and he knew how to do it. His songs were good, his voice was far better now than it ever had been, years of vocal training boosting him to new levels. He was finally playing *his* songs that *he* had written, and he couldn’t deny that he wanted it. If he cancelled this tour, he might never get this chance again. Money had been spent, and if he lost it for the label, his talent may not matter. There would always be another pretty boy with a pretty voice that could be turned into a superstar. Cancelling this tour would make him a liability, and he knew that.

He did *not* want to be a liability.

“Okay.” Yuna nodded. “If you’re sure, you’re right. I’m sorry, you know, sometimes I look at you and I still see that 16 year old boy with stars in his eyes, inking his first record deal.”

“Yeah, well. A lot has happened since then,” Shane said with a gentle smile, thinking of the near-decade that had passed since that day.

When Shane and four friends that he had met at a music performance workshop had formed a group, they had never expected it to take off. He could still remember the long meeting their parents had had when their first record label came knocking, wanting to sign them. With reluctance, they had been allowed to do it and the whirlwind that followed had been nothing short of a fever dream.

Their first released single, *Heart on Ice,* had absolutely blown up. It became the title track to their first album. Their first North American tour had sold out in only a few days, leading to their first world tour. Several of the other parents quit their jobs to tour with their sons,

wanting to make sure they were properly cared for, but it was Yuna, with her sharp mind, confident stubbornness, and bulldog attitude that had managed the band.

The Metropolitan Men had lasted for eight years, six studio albums, four world tours, countless photo shoots, benefits, appearances, and interviews. There had been guest spots on television shows, marketing deals, a constant non-stop barrage of requirements fueled by their catchy pop songs and near-perfect branding.

Five good looking young men with vocal talent ranging from decent to fantastic and dance skills ranging from horrifying to passable, paired with boyish charm and a marketable chemistry had been an easy sell on the world. They each had their parts to play; there was Gil Comeau, the heartthrob, J.J. Boiziau, the bad boy, Hayden Pike, the boy next door, Sorren Miitka, the loveable goofball, and Shane Hollander, the quiet mystery.

Most of their songs had been written for them, churned out by the *pop machine*, as Yuna called it, but sometimes they got to put some of their own work out there. By the end of their run, all five of them had at least one solo writing credit…and perhaps that was where it had fallen apart.

A song that Hayden had written, a cheerful, earnest, folksy love song inspired by the girl who would later become his wife, burned through the charts to become their biggest hit ever, and it had all gone downhill from there. Hayden had been approached to release a solo EP, and when the five song record *Jackie* debuted, jealousy began to spread through the band.

Side projects that had been whispers became realities. Hayden announced that his wife was pregnant and that he wanted a break, and soon it became evident that The Metropolitan Men could be no more. Their breakup announcement was released in tandem with the announcement of five solo projects, five albums to be released by different labels over the next year, poised to launch solo careers for some, or hopefully all, of the boys.

Hayden's album was an indie darling and he was finding more than decent success playing smaller venues. JJ's R&B album and Sorren's rock album had found moderate success, slowly climbing their way up their respective charts. Gil's pop record had bombed, and Shane's? Shane's had absolutely exploded, his pop album *Hat Trick* mirroring the overnight success of *Heart on Ice* as it shot straight to the top of the charts…and stayed there.

Managing success without his best friends by his side was difficult, but at least he still had his mom by with him, not just managing him, but keeping him grounded and sane.

"Okay." Yuna gave Shane's shoulder a gentle squeeze and went to the door, beckoning Roger Crowell, and by default, Ilya Rozanov, back into the conference room. "We'll accept it."

"That is excellent news," Crowell began with a smile.

"I'm not done." Yuna remained standing, refusing to take any of this sitting down. This was her son's safety, her son's *life*, and if she was going to be trusting the label to take care of him, she would make sure they knew there would be hell to pay if they were to fail. "We will accept this with the caveat that I still have to review the security plan and approve it, and that I have to call Vetrov Private Security and vet Mr. Rozanov's competency myself. *If* those two

things prove satisfactory, the tour will go on as planned. If not, any issues will be resolved before the tour begins, or the tour will not go on. Lastly, if *anything* should fail and something happens to my son, you won't just have a sour manager on your hands, you will have a feral mother. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," Crowell said with a fake, sickly sweet smile.

The smile on Shane's face, however, was very, very real.

"Good." Yuna brushed the slacks of her pantsuit. "Then I suppose we are done here."

"I suppose so. To help bolster our intentions, I have chartered a plane to return you to Montreal so that you can rest for a few days before your rehearsals begin. Take Rozanov with you, I trust you have space for him?"

Shane's Montreal penthouse had plenty of space. It was the entire top three floors of a high security building with a private elevator and more bedrooms than he realistically needed. While Shane's parents still technically lived in Ottawa, they had purchased, or rather he had purchased for them, a condo in the same building.

Between the two homes, there would be plenty of room for one more body.

That would give Shane a little time to adjust to having a shadow before they left for tour. Sure, he was used to being surrounded by others - his parents, his former band mates, but this was different. This was someone who's sole job was to watch Shane, to keep him safe, and Shane knew that it would take him a beat to learn how to exist around that.

Ilya was silent as Shane and Yuna were escorted out of the building and towards a waiting car. As Yuna walked around to the outside, Shane felt Ilya's hand on his lower back, guiding him into the backseat, and for a brief moment, all of the air left his lungs.

Quickly reminding himself to breathe, Shane slid into the car, staring straight ahead as Ilya put a backpack and duffel into the trunk before taking his own seat.

Touch was a complicated thing for Shane. For his entire adult life and about half of his teenage years, millions of people that he didn't know had wanted a piece of him. Girls had thrown themselves at him and even a few boys had been bold enough to attempt to throw their hats into the ring, but by the time The Metros' fourth studio album had come out, one thing had been made abundantly clear: Shane Hollander did not date.

The media made assumptions, of course, social media users and bloggers alike attempting to link him to Hollywood starlets, supermodels, and perhaps most alarmingly, with his own band mates. Never, though, had he been caught so much as holding hands with anyone, and the only track anyone had found was his high school girlfriend, Jessica. J.J. didn't even try not to get caught. He had been photographed about town with every model, actress, pop princess, and socialite he could find. Hayden had fallen very hard (and courted very publicly) his now-wife Jackie. Sorren and Gil had each publicly dated a smattering of beautiful women, but Shane? He had always been focused on the music. There wasn't time to date, he

would say with a shy smile, eyes just avoiding various talk show hosts, there was work to be done.

The reality of it was much more complicated. Shane had known that he was different from a young age, and when he was just Shane Hollander, he had tried to ignore that by dating Jessica and convincing himself that he would grow into her. He hadn't realized until he was older that the vast difference he felt inside of him was an attraction to men, not women, and by the time he figured it out, he was signed. His career and the careers of his four best friends hinged on his marketability to women, and he had shoehorned who he was, what he felt, into the quiet mystery man that had intrigued so many.

It worked. It kept him marketable and desirable while allowing him to keep his secret safe within his own chest. Sure, some people found him aloof and arrogant with unreasonably high standards, but most seemed to find him more intriguing than anything else.

Many had dug into his love life, but none had turned up anything of value. There was simply nothing to find.

As they pulled up to the hotel, Shane tried not to watch Ilya work, but it was fascinating. When they exited the car and entered through the back of the Park Central, Ilya was alert. His eyes were darting everywhere, though his neck and body rarely moved. There was a calm indifference about him that would fool someone paying little attention to him, but Shane could see it in his eyes. Ilya was watching, analyzing, *anticipating*, and while Shane had experience with many bodyguards throughout his career, not a single one had been like Ilya Rozanov.

While Shane and Yuna packed up their suite, Ilya checked the windows, the vents, the mirrors, and any potential point of access before posting up just inside the door, his back to it, gaze focused on the primary windows. He was thorough in a way that made Shane feel somehow incredibly safe and ill at ease all at once.

He had *never* checked the vents or mirrors in a hotel room and he had stayed in hundreds of them. Now he was wondering if maybe he should have been.

"Wow, he's good," Yuna had to admit, her voice a low whisper as she zipped up her suitcase.

The way that Ilya's eye twitched just slightly, however, made Shane believe that Ilya had heard her.

"Yeah." He nodded. He knew that he was staring at Ilya, perhaps a bit too much, perhaps a bit too long, but he hoped that his mother would chalk that up to Shane's own curiosity and assessment of the situation. That *was* half of it, Shane supposed, but it wasn't all of it.

He would adjust, he told himself. He would get used to seeing Ilya. The sight of the man would cease to be jarring and distracting. He had been around beautiful people before, frequently. *Constantly*. This wasn't different. This *couldn't* be different.

He focused on that, a mantra as he finished packing, as they took the car to the airport, as

they walked to the private hangar. All the while, Ilya kept his eyes everywhere, looking for any sign of a threat, clearly ready to pounce at any moment, and Shane was certain that the first time he saw Ilya relax was after take off.

For 90 minutes, Shane did his level best to focus on his phone and not on the conversation his mother and Ilya were having to discuss not only the security plan that League Records had presented her for the tour, but Shane's safety leading up *to* the tour.

"So you will stay in one of Shane's spare bedrooms," Yuna dictated. "You will ensure that he gets to and from all of his tour rehearsals safely. You will travel with him to and from every event, every appearance, and then when the tour starts," she tapped the packet in front of her. "You stick to this plan to the letter."

"Yes, ma'am." Ilya nodded.

"And you are never off the clock?"

"Never, ma'am. Not until job is done."

"What about sleep?"

"I am very light sleeper, ma'am."

"How much are they paying you?" Yuna narrowed her eyes, and honestly, Shane had been wondering the same thing.

How much did this cost? 24/7 around the clock security, one man, never taking a day off, never taking time for himself, until Shane's tour was complete. It would be months of constant vigilance.

"Enough," Ilya said with a shrug. "With all respect, ma'am, I am very capable. Nothing is going to happen to your son, not while he is under my watch."

"That's a big promise to make." Yuna's tone was akin to warning, her glare hard and focused, but Ilya did not shy away.

"It is a big promise that I intend to keep."

Ilya's glance shifted to Shane, who instantly looked away, attempting to appear engrossed in his phone, but so far, it seemed that Ilya Rozanov missed nothing. He probably hadn't missed Shane watching him.

"I assure you. Shane Hollander will be safe with me."

Shane gulped hard. Just hearing his name in Ilya's thick accent, the sentiment that this man was vowing to protect him, made his gut twist. Shane didn't fully understand *what* Ilya Rozanov was doing to him, but he did know one thing: if he didn't get it under control, he was going to have a serious problem.

Chapter 3: Chapter Three

“It is a nice place you have here,” Ilya said, looking around Shane’s penthouse as they exited the private elevator.

“Thank you.” Shane’s own eyes darted around, trying to find anything other than Ilya to look at.

His home should have been comforting to him, and in many ways it was, but the stark realization that someone else was going to be *living* here with him for the next few weeks leading up to his tour was hitting hard.

The desperation that Shane had had for a home of his own during the height of The Metros craze had been intense and unrelenting. This penthouse, as silly as it may seem, was his sanctuary. Sure, he had hired a designer and a decorator to make the place look nice, and a cleaning service that came weekly kept the home even more immaculate than Shane himself did, but it was *his*. The furniture belonged to him, the art belonged to him, the books on the shelf? His. The food in the fridge? Tailored to his diet. For someone who belonged to the entire world the way that Shane did, this safe haven was not just a bonus, it was a necessity.

Now, though, seeing Ilya inspect every inch of his living space, it felt excessive. He was one man who lived alone. Why did he need three stories? Why did he need five bedrooms and six and a half bathrooms? Why did he need a $50,000 couch? Sure, Ilya was looking for security weaknesses and probably *not* judging the fact that his dining table cost more than some people made in a year, but it left Shane feeling self conscious. It had been a long 30 hours, and while it was still too early to go to bed, Shane was glad he wouldn’t have to leave his home again until tomorrow.

“Um, there are four guest rooms,” Shane said. “Three on the second floor, one on the third, so you can take your pick.”

“The one closest to your room, I think.” Ilya turned from where he had been carefully looking over the windows, to face Shane. “For your safety.”

“You don’t…you don’t actually think someone is gonna try and come in here, do you?” Shane asked.

“Honestly, no. Probably not. Building security is pretty good, and it will be much better once I make some changes. It would not be a smart or likely place for anyone to attack you, but still.” He shrugged. “I am here to keep you safe. I can best do that if I do not have to run up stairs to get to you.”

“Okay.” Shane *did* take comfort in Ilya’s words. He didn’t seem like the sort of person who would lie about this, and if he was lying, he was very convincing. “Well, um, this way then.”

Shane led Ilya up the two flights of stairs to the third floor. His own room, the primary suite, took up the majority of the floor, but there was a second bedroom down the hall of decent enough size.

“I hope that you’ll be comfortable here,” Shane said softly, pushing open the door to the room. It boasted a comfortable and expensive king size bed and a full en suite bathroom. Like all of his guest rooms, it had a desk, a dresser, a TV, and plenty of space for someone to make themselves at home. “The towels in the bathroom are clean, there should be basic toiletries and shampoo and stuff in there but if you need *anything*, just let me know.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hollander.” Ilya set his bags down at the foot of the bed. “I will be just fine. It is nice room,” he said approvingly.

“Okay, well I’m just down the hall.” Shane gestures in the vague direction of his own room. “The house is yours. There’s a small gym on the second floor, the living room, kitchen, help yourself to anything in the fridge, I think I have a grocery delivery coming tomorrow but I didn’t…know you were going to be here so if you put together a list, I’ll make sure it happens. My assistant usually takes care of that stuff.”

“You trust this assistant?” Ilya asked, tilting his head to the side.

“Yes.” Shane nodded. “Completely.”

“I will run thorough background check anyways,” Ilya said with a casual shrug.

“Okay. Well.” Shane paused. “I’m gonna go take a shower, please make yourself at home.”

“Okay.”

Shane turned to leave, but Ilya spoke again.

“Oh, Mr. Hollander?”

“You can call me Shane.”

“Mr. Hollander.” Ilya spoke with a tone pointed enough that Shane didn’t push the issue. “At some point I will need to get into your room and check it over. Whenever is good and comfortable for you.”

“Oh, right. Yeah.” Shane blinked twice, trying not to let his mind wander about thoughts of Ilya Rozanov in his bedroom. It was just his job. “After I shower you can get in there.”

“Alright. Have good shower, Mr. Hollander.”

Shane didn’t know how to respond to that, so he didn’t even try. He ducked his head and saw himself out.

It wasn’t until he was safely in his massive rain-water shower that he really felt the full weight of everything that was going on.

Someone had fired shots at *his* event. Someone had frightened *his* fans, was threatening *his* life. This didn't feel like the stalkers that he and the boys had had to deal with in his Metros days. This didn't feel like an obsessive fan, this felt like hate.

Someone wanted to hurt him, and he had no idea who.

Until this moment, he had let his mother do the bulk of the worrying. He knew that she would do everything that she could to keep him safe, and if that meant going toe to toe with Roger Crowell to get him the best possible security, then he was probably in good hands.

And then there was Ilya Rozanov. He was just down the hall, probably unpacking his things, getting set up in Shane's guest room where he would live until the start of the tour. It felt like a lot, but at the same time, it *did* make him feel safer.

He stayed in the shower for too long, the too-hot water leaving his skin blotchy and red. He wrapped a towel around his waist and reached for his phone, Googling *Spetsnaz*. He had heard the word before, but he had been too embarrassed to ask what it meant in the presence of, well, Ilya. Now that he was alone, he could do a little research.

Russian elite special forces. Holy shit, this guy was *way* over qualified to be a bodyguard, wasn't he? It must be weird, going from whatever sort of missions he had been going on to protecting a whiny, spoiled pop star.

Shane tried to relieve himself of those thoughts, because they didn't matter. Ilya was being compensated well for the work he was doing. This was a business transaction, nothing more. He was about to put his phone down when the screen lit up with a call.

Hayden Pike.

Shane pressed the green button and raised the phone to his ear.

"Holy shit, dude, we just got back from Jackie's parents house and you know how they are about phones - someone *shot* at you?" Hayden's words filled the air before Shane even had a chance to say 'hello.' "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Hayd, I'm fine, they didn't shoot *at* me, just near me, and it was a BB gun. No one got hurt."

"Did they catch the fucker?"

"Not yet."

"Jesus. That's kinda fucking terrifying."

"I guess, but the label is taking it really seriously so I think that's good. I'm just fine, Hayden."

"Well, shit, man. Let me know if you need anything. Jackie'll make a casserole or something."

“Hayden, I don’t need a casserole, I’m fine.”

“Oh, so now you don’t like my wife’s cooking?” Hayden teased.

“You know that’s not what I said.” It was nice how easily Hayden could win a smile out of Shane. In this moment, and so many others, he was grateful that their friendship had survived, strengthened, even, after the dissolution of The Metros.

“She’s already got the casserole dish out, man. It’s game over. I’ll send it around tonight.”

“Fine. Thank you. Tell her thank you.” He paused. “Actually can you hold on just a sec?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Shane muted his speaker and pulled on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, padding downstairs in bare feet to find Ilya checking the windows in one of the other guest rooms. He was still wearing his slacks, but the blazer of his jacket and tie were gone. His white shirt fit perfectly over his broad chest, and he had undone the top collar button of his shirt, revealing a mole near the low center of his throat that Shane had trouble pulling his gaze away from. Ilya had also rolled up his sleeves, revealing muscular forearms and the dotting of enough moles that Shane’s mind briefly wondered if his entire body was covered in them.

This wasn’t the time to think about that, though. There *wasn’t* a time to think about that, and Shane told himself that he was just flustered from everything that he had been dealing with. The attraction to Ilya couldn’t be real, it was probably more akin to that feeling people get when they live through something hard or scary and crave sex in the aftermath.

Yeah. That was probably exactly it.

Sated in his ability to remove himself from his wandering thoughts, he cleared his throat.

“Hey, are you allergic to any foods?” Shane asked. “Or like vegetarian or something?”

“No, I eat everything. Why?”

“My friends are sending over a casserole, I just wanted to make sure you could, you know.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Okay.”

Ilya’s tone was curt, leaving little room for discussion, and Shane took his leave as Ilya went back to the windows.

“Still there?” Shane switched his phone from ‘mute’.

“Yup. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, we’re good, no allergies here.”

“Wait. Who are you with? Shane, do you have a girl over?”

“What? No, fuck off.” Still, Shane felt his cheeks growing hot at Hayden’s implications. “League is being hyper vigilant, they got me this bodyguard, like 24/7. So he lives here now, I guess. It’s…weird.”

“Dude, that’s fucking insane.” Hayden snorted.

“Yeah, he’s former Spetsnaz,” Shane said quietly.

“Come on, man. You and I both know I have no idea what that means.”

“Russian special forces. Like military or whatever.”

“Oh fuck. So this *is* serious! Shane, what the fuck aren’t you telling me?”

For a hot second, Shane’s mind went in the wrong direction. He wasn’t telling Hayden a lot of things. He wasn’t telling Hayden that he felt hot under the collar when he looked at his new bodyguard. He wasn’t telling Hayden that the Shayden shippers who had spent years writing fanfiction about him and his best friends only had it *half* wrong.

But he also wasn’t telling Hayden about the threat on his life, and he realized as he focused in, that *that* was what Hayden was talking about.

“Um.” Shane rubbed the back of his neck. “There was a threat. After the BB gun.”

“Why do you always make this shit like pulling teeth,” Hayden groaned. “Come on. Get it the fuck out.”

“I got a note that just said if I didn’t cancel my tour, the bullets would be real next time, or something.”

“Dude.”

“It’s gonna be fine, don’t worry.”

“*Dude!*”

“The security plan League came up with is nuts, and honestly I’m pretty sure this Spetsnaz guy could kill someone just by looking at them wrong.” Shane gulped, the image of the intense stare in Ilya’s ocean-colored eyes unwillingly filling his brain.

“Okay, well, we’re definitely sending you a casserole. Let me know if you need anything at all, okay?”

“Well, I could use an opening act for my tour,” Shane teased.

“Get fucked, I’m a headliner and you know it. I-oh fuck, baby’s crying and it’s my turn. Enjoy the casserole when it gets there. Love you buddy.”

And just as he had spoken before Shane had the chance to say ‘hello’, Hayden hung up without giving Shane the chance to say ‘goodbye.’

Shane envied the easy way that Hayden said ‘love you’ to his male friends. Hayden was so secure in his masculinity, in his *heterosexuality*, that he didn’t even think about it. Shane, on the other hand, struggled to say it back, his anxious mind consistently overthinking the potential implications.

Still, it was nice to hear.

Just as promised, three hours later, a courier showed up with a ceramic casserole dish, including instructions for re-heating in Jackie Pike’s perfect handwriting. Alongside the casserole was a Tupperware of sugar cookies that had clearly been decorated for “Uncle Shane” by Hayden’s young children.

Shane would never eat the cookies, but the smudged, lumpy icing and sugar decorations did bring a smile to his face.

“I have finished checking your room. It seems fine. Smells good in here.” Ilya entered the kitchen as the casserole was reheating.

“Yeah, Jackie’s an incredible cook. I don’t know how she finds the time - she has five children to manage.”

“Hayden and Jackie Pike have only four children.” Ilya furrowed his brow in confusion.

“Oh, I was counting Hayden.”

Shane felt a jolt of electricity spark at him as the briefest of smiles flickered onto Ilya’s face before disappearing without a trace.

“Wait.” Now it was Shane’s turn to screw his face up in confusion. “How do you know that?”

“Background checks, I am still getting up to speed, this was rush job and all, but I have to know your life,” he admitted. “Anyone around you who might be a threat.”

“Okay, but Hayden and his family aren’t a threat,” Shane said, tone breaching defensive at the implications made towards his best friend. He and Hayden had been in the trenches together, and sure, Hayden might be a little dumb, a little cheesy, but he was an excellent friend.

“I am just being thorough. I promise you I am not accusing anyone of anything, so you can take deep breath. You look like angry kitten.”

“What?”

“Like you are mad, but you are also Shane Hollander, so really it is not so threatening, and is more adorable.”

“I’m not adorable.” Shane folded his arms across his chest, frowning at his bodyguard.

“I think rest of world disagrees with you there. Being big and scary is not really your brand, no? But suit yourself.”

“Being adorable isn’t really my brand either,” Shane muttered.

“No, quiet and mysterious, which is good. Harder for someone to get at you if you keep what you can private.”

God, if only Ilya knew just how much Shane was keeping private.

Mercifully, Shane was spared from having to think up a good response to that by his phone timer going off, signifying that the casserole was ready.

The show that Shane made of busying himself in the kitchen was melodramatic, but if Ilya noticed, he didn’t say anything, and for that Shane was grateful.

“This is good,” Ilya said, shoveling a forkful of the casserole into his mouth.

“Yeah.” Shane agreed, but only after fully swallowing the much smaller bite that he had taken.

“Look, I am sorry I implied that your friend was a threat,” Ilya said. “If someone said that about my best friend, I would probably react same way.”

“Okay.” Shane set his fork down, looking across his too-large dining table at the other man. “Are you sorry that you called me an adorable angry kitten?”

“No,” Ilya said, the ghost of a smile gracing his features. “That I am not sorry about. That is true. I will not apologize for telling the truth.”

“You could have just not said anything at all,” Shane pointed out.

“I was just trying to help you calm down. You seemed like you needed it. I did not realize being called adorable would be so upsetting to you.”

“It wasn’t upsetting, it’s…” Shane sighed. Why *had* it ground his gears so much? People said things about him all the time, commented on his appearance, called him names both good and bad. Why had it raised his hackles so much when it had been Ilya?

Certainly not because he wanted Ilya to see him as strong and capable, rather than weak and, well, adorable.

“It is okay, you do not have to explain it to me. You do not have to explain anything to me, Mr. Hollander, unless it directly concerns your safety.”

“Right.” After all, that was for the best, wasn’t it? They should keep this to a working relationship. They didn’t have to be friends, Shane didn’t need to defend himself to Ilya, and Ilya probably shouldn’t be calling him names. That being said, Shane didn’t want Ilya to quit.

Maybe he was distracting and so far, mildly infuriating, but he was also a very promising bodyguard. If Shane's life *was* in danger, having Ilya Rozanov around probably wasn't such a bad thing.

In fact, it was probably a very *good* thing. Just because Shane didn't want to think about the reality of what had happened outside of 30 Rock didn't mean that it *hadn't* happened. The truth of the circumstance was clear. Someone had fired a gun, BB or otherwise, in an attempt to threaten and scare him. That person hadn't been caught, and they had made a demand that Shane and his team were consciously choosing not to obey. Someone had already taken a risk to try and frighten him, and they had gotten away with it. What was really stopping them from doing it again?

"It is okay to be scared, you know."

"What?" Shane snapped out of his thoughts and back to his dining room, back to where Ilya was looking at him with an odd expression on his face.

"It is okay to be scared," Ilya said again. "About, you know…" he gestured with one hand, scooping another forkful of the casserole with the other, though he let it hover just by his mouth until he finished his sentence. "Someone making threats against you."

"I'm not scared." The defensive edge to his tone was probably greater than the situation warranted, likely giving off the air that Shane was protesting too much, but he couldn't take it back now.

"Okay, well it would be okay if you were, then," Ilya said with a shrug.

"This isn't the first time I've gotten threats. People used to send them all the time when I was with my band. It's just a part of the job, it never means anything."

"Okay."

Shane looked back down at his plate, suddenly very decidedly *not* hungry anymore. Had his fear been so evident on his face that Ilya had felt the need to point it out, or was the other man trying to antagonize him again? Did it matter either way? Shane *was* a little scared, but not here, not in his home. He knew how good the security in this building was, and with Ilya here, he was confident that nothing would touch him. Outside, though? There were so many factors in the real world that were out of Shane's control, out of Ilya's, out of League Records', even. Sure, everyone would do the best that they could to keep him safe, but there was never a 100% guarantee of something like that.

If someone really *did* plan to kill him for going on tour, there was always a chance that they would succeed. Shane just hoped that chance was incredibly slim.

Unable to stomach the thought of any more food, no matter how delicious Jackie's casserole was, Shane got to his feet, clearing his plate.

"It's been a long day, I'm going to just…go to bed. If you could just put your dishes in the

dishwasher when you're done…that would be nice." This was awkward. For the next few weeks, this was Ilya's home, but Shane liked things a certain way and clean was definitely one of them. Hopefully, Ilya would be tidy. "Oh, and there are cookies in the blue container on the counter, help yourself. Actually, please eat them. I won't, and I'd hate for them to go to waste."

"Why would you not eat the cookies?" Ilya asked.

"I'm going on tour in a few weeks," Shane reasoned. "I need to be in good shape for that."

"I see." Ilya nodded. "Well, in that case, I will make sure the cookies do not go to waste."

Shane opened his mouth to respond, but anything he could think of to say in response ranged from mildly idiotic to incredibly stupid and he felt he had embarrassed himself enough in front of Ilya for one day.

He stored the portion of casserole that he hadn't eaten in the fridge and put his plate and fork in the dishwasher before turning and heading back upstairs.

Only once the door to his bedroom was closed behind him did a sense of calm begin to wash over him. Nothing about Shane's life had been normal for a very long time, but he supposed that he had grown accustomed to many of the ways in *which* his life was unusual. Maybe he wasn't like other people, but things had worked for him. Now, there was a threat against his life that was apparently credible enough to warrant a massive security update to his tour, and there was a man living in his house with him.

Shane knew that he should be grateful, knew that he had things that many would sell their souls for, but as he lay in bed, staring up at his ceiling, invasive thoughts pushed through to him. Maybe he had no business doing this. Maybe he had taken things too far, and he needed to cool it. He had kept every compartment of himself in neat little boxes that lived in his head, in his heart, but never on his sleeve, never where anyone could see them. Without the buffer of Hayden, JJ, Sorren, and Gil, it would be more difficult to keep those boxes to himself.

With Ilya in his personal space, it might prove damn near impossible.

At some point, sleep found Shane, but it was fitful and riddled with bad dreams. After waking for the third time, he gave up, pulling himself from the covers to find that it was not yet 4 AM. With a heavy sigh, he changed into shorts and a dri-fit top, making his way to his home gym. He started out on the treadmill at a slow pace, but as his anxieties and fears crept in through the quiet night, the only sounds around him that of his shoes on the treadmill and his own breathing, he upped the speed. There was so much that he felt he needed to get out of his system right now, and there were two ways that he could do that: working out and writing music. His mind was too scattered right now to write, so working out it was.

He was on his third mile when the door opened and Ilya Rozanov came in, wordlessly taking the stationary bike beside the treadmill.

Shane turned to look at him, brow furrowed. Ilya was wearing a tight black tank top and shorts, and it was, by far, the most of him that Shane had gotten the chance to see. He was pretty sure that, if he took a longer, closer look, the answer to his question about Ilya's moles may well be answered, but as Ilya looked at Shane, raising both of his eyebrows quickly, just once, Shane instantly jerked his head forward. He willed his eyes to remain in front of him, looking nowhere but at the wall directly ahead of the treadmill.

Not a word was spoken between the two of them as Shane completed his run, completing seven miles before feeling spent. He left the gym with Ilya still on the bike, doing everything he could not to think about it as he entered his shower.

Shane was exhausted. He had barely slept in the last 48 hours - something that he was used to when it came to touring, but this was different. This was an emotional exhaustion, an existential exhaustion driven by unknown circumstances, and much to his chagrin, fear. He was too tired to hold back on his wants, his needs, and as the warm water poured over him, he let his hand slide down his chest and to his own cock. He closed his eyes and tried to think of anything *but* Ilya Rozanov in that tight black tank top.

It was no use. When Shane came with a shudder, he was partway through trying to count the moles on Ilya's arms from memory.

As he wrapped himself in a fluffy towel, hands braced on the counter, staring at himself through the steamed-up mirror, he told himself that was it. Now he had gotten Ilya Rozanov out of his system.

Even as he stared himself down, willing it to be true, he knew that it was a lie.

Chapter 4: Chapter Four

There were only two days of down time before tour rehearsals began again. Prior to going to New York, Shane had only done a couple of days, most of that spent around finalizing the setlists so that his stylist could get to work on the costumes and his choreographer could get to work on the choreography.

Dancing had never been Shane's strong suit, and the last two days spent in his penthouse hiding from the world and dancing around Ilya had perhaps highlighted that. Ilya was an employee, not a guest, and the two of them rarely spoke, save to go over Shane's daily schedule. Shane spent his time hunched over his notebook working on lyrics, or on the treadmill practicing his set while running to get back in the habit of doing cardio while hitting all of his notes.

Ilya spent most of his time on his laptop or on the phone, sometimes speaking in English, sometimes in Russian. Shane did his best not to eavesdrop, but sometimes it was challenging. He was impressed by how much of the conversations, at least those in English, were being had about the security plan. Shane knew how much he put into his music. He would leave everything out on that stage every single night of the tour and it seemed as though Ilya had a similar work ethic. Shane could admire that.

Mostly, though, Shane was grateful for the rehearsals to start up again. The location of his rehearsal space had miraculously managed not to leak, at least so far, and he was able to take the stage and focus wholly on what he was creating. A solo tour was completely different from a Metros tour, where he had been able to hide, at least to a degree, behind the others. This was all him. All eyes would be on him, and if he made a mistake, everyone would notice.

So it was simple, really. Don't make mistakes.

He had the music down. He knew every beat, every lyric. These were *his* songs, his babies, and he was getting there with the choreography, though that was slower, clunkier, more challenging for him.

"Stop, stop, look, honey," with a sigh, his choreographer, Michelle, walked over to him. "You can't go stiff every time one of the dancers touches you. This is supposed to be steamy, sticky, hot. You look like a surfboard, and not like, a sleek, sexy one. You look like a surfboard that washed up on the beach after a shark attack."

Ouch. Out of the corner of his eye, Shane could almost swear he saw Ilya snickering, but he pulled his focus back to Michelle and the task at hand.

"I'm sorry. Sorry. Run it again, I'll do better this time." Backup dancers were new to him, too. When he had had the other boys there hadn't been a need for them, but god, there sure as hell was need for them now, though every time one of them reached out for him, he felt like

he was going to crawl out of his skin.

Since when did dance involve so much touching?

“No, no.” Michelle shook her head. “Honestly, I think that’s enough for today. I want you to go home, I want you to take a long bath, I want you to have a glass of wine, or no, fuck it. I want you to have a shot of tequila, maybe three shorts of tequila, and I want you to watch Shakira music videos until your hips are ready to tell the truth all over this stage.”

“I…” Shane sighed, pushing back his sweat-slick hair. “I don’t…”

“You can do this, sweetheart,” she said with a wide smile. “You’re in great shape, your face is to die for, your songs are good, your voice is peak. Just loosen up that body, Shane, and no one’s going to be able to take their eyes off of you.”

“Okay.” He gulped. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Shakira music videos!” She called as Shane walked off stage, accepting a towel from one of the stage hands and wiping the sweat from his face and neck.

“Come on, we’re leaving.” Shane didn’t even look at Ilya as he spoke, but out of the corner of his eye, he could see his bodyguard following behind him.

As Ilya held open the door to the waiting car, Shane turned away, looking out the heavily tinted window, hoping that Ilya couldn’t see the way that frustrated tears were pricking at his eyes. He was embarrassed that he couldn’t get the movements right, frustrated that he couldn’t control his body better, but he simply wasn’t *used* to being touched. Sure, his mother hugged him, Hayden slung an arm around him constantly, he put his arm around fans for photos, but that was different. This? The way that the dancers were supposed to drape themselves all over him, touch his body, open his shirt - he understood that he had sex appeal, but he wasn’t as comfortable acting on it.

With The Metros, that had never been his job. Gil and JJ had always been the ones that tore their shirts open, that swiveled their hips, that made the girls scream. Shane had been more swoon worthy, his buttery, perfect voice and not his sex appeal being what got him the most attention.

Now, he had to be the entire package…and he simply wasn’t sure that he had it in him.

Though he kept his gaze averted, Shane was all but certain that he caught Ilya glancing at him as the driver took them back to Shane’s building. Getting back to the penthouse was the first time since Ilya had been assigned to him that Shane wished he would go away. He was ashamed of his performance, doubting his skills, and he wanted nothing more than to be truly alone right now, and yet here was this other man in his space. Sure, Ilya was quiet, he stayed out of Shane’s way, but he was still *there*.

Shane opened the fridge, grabbing a Gatorade from it and slamming the door shut so hard that he was sure he heard some of the condiments in the door rattle and possibly tip over.

“Okay, so you had bad rehearsal, no need to take it out on poor refrigerator,” Ilya pointed out.

“Can you…can you please just *not*?” Shane asked, turning to Ilya as he opened the bottle, downing about half of it before taking another breath.

“Just saying, you will not be less upset if you have to spend your evening looking for a replacement appliance,” Ilya said with a shrug.

“Let me guess.” Shane narrowed his eyes. “You’re gonna compare me to an angry kitten again?”

“Well, I mean, if the shoe fits.”

“Fuck you.” Shane took another sip of his drink, though something about the teasing way that Ilya was speaking to him brought a slight smile to his lips. He did his best to hide it.

The last thing that either of them needed was for Ilya to learn that Shane found him endearing, even if it was only a little bit.

“I just…I can’t have off days,” Shane said finally. “If I don’t get this figured out, the tour won’t be any good, and then…well, who knows. If my tour underperforms, if I underdeliver, then what? This isn’t like what it used to be, with the guys. I wasn’t at front, center stage the whole show, with people dancing around me, I wasn’t…the main attraction.”

“Well, now you are.” Ilya shrugged. “So figure it out. An off day in your job, you have bad rehearsal. An off day in my job, someone dies, so really, you *can* have an off day.” The ghost of a smirk appeared on his lips. “But I cannot.”

That shut Shane up. He wasn’t sure how Ilya could joke about something like that, but the way that he was smirking made it seem like he really was trying to be funny. Wait…was he trying to make Shane feel better?

“It’s not your job to stroke my ego.”

Ilya looked around, then back to Shane. “I do not think I saw any stroking of anything. I just told you the truth. You had bad rehearsal, you were stiff as fuck on that stage. I do not think me telling you that is stroking your ego, I just do not think that one bad day is end of the world.”

“It’s gonna be that bad again tomorrow,” Shane murmured.

“Maybe you should do what she said. Maybe you should have a shot of something, try to loosen up.”

“No.” Shane shook his head. “Too much sugar.”

“Back to my point about loosening up…”

“You won’t lie to me, right?” Shane asked.

“Probably not.”

Okay, so that wasn’t quite the answer that Shane had been hoping for, but he did appreciate Ilya’s honesty.

“Am I fucking this up?”

“What?” Ilya’s face screwed in confusion. “The dancing? Yes. Absolutely, but you have time to fix it, you will get there, you work very hard.”

“No, not the dancing. I mean, that’s part of it, but all of it. You’re the only one who’s seen my rehearsals who isn’t on my payroll.” He paused. “Well you are, but not creatively, and it’s like you said, you weren’t stroking my ego. I think everyone else in that room would, if it came to it.”

“What is your point, Mr. Hollander?”

“Do you think I can do this? Do you think I can get on stage every night and give the fans what they want? What they deserve?”

“Mr. Hollander, we both know that I cannot be the one to tell you this. I barely know you, but you have what, four world tours under your belt? Countless music videos, live shows, public appearances, the only difference is, what, that you’re alone now? So what? You are the most talented one. You always were. Focus on the music. Do not over think the moves, do not over think the other dancers, just think about your music. Let the rest follow.”

While Shane seriously doubted that Ilya had spent a lot of time watching clips from The Metropolitan Men world tours, he did *not* doubt that Ilya had seen some of it while doing his seemingly endless research on Shane’s life.

“You’re not just saying that?” Shane said. “You’re not just gassing me up?”

“Not my job to gas you up.” Ilya shrugged. “It is my job to keep you from getting shot, that’s it.” He paused. “Well, shot, stabbed, kidnapped…”

“Okay, I get it.” Shane grimaced. “I get it.”

“You are just overthinking it,” Ilya said. “You have rhythm. Dance is just rhythm, yes? Find it, and I am sure you will be fine.”

Shane said no more, but took a slug of his Gatorade, trying to avoid watching Ilya. He wasn’t sure if he could trust him or not, he was sure that Ilya was probably a truly fantastic liar, but the things that he had said were kind and encouraging. Shane didn’t know if it would have much of an impact on his rehearsal the next day, but at least he felt better tonight.

Maybe having Ilya here wasn't such a bad thing after all.

It was easier after that - not easy, but *easier*. He still tensed when he was touched, but if he closed his eyes and let the music run through him, he could do the steps. Yes, he knew that he would have to open his eyes eventually, that he couldn't perform his entire tour with them closed, but for now, it was helping him get them down. Whatever worked was…good enough.

And if he was pretending that the hands on him were Ilya's? Well, that was something that no one needed to know.

***

"I hate these things." Shane sighed as his mother batted his stylist out of the way to straighten Shane's tie herself.

"I know you do, honey, but luxury brand deals are highly sought after and this is a great one. All you have to do is show up, smile, be photographed with your watch on full display, and then you can leave."

Shane knew that she was right. He made a lot of money right now, but that could dry up quickly, and he just wanted to make sure that if it did, he, his parents, and everyone he cared about would be just fine.

That, and he had to admit, he liked being successful. Who wouldn't?

That being said, this wasn't about the music. This was an event where he was selling *himself,* or rather, Rolex, not his songs, and he had never enjoyed that much.

He knew what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to walk the fan line into the event, then take off his blazer and roll up his shirt sleeves so that the incredibly expensive, shiny Rolex on his wrist would be the focal point of his outfit. He was to have his picture taken by the event photographers in such a way where it *looked* candid, but displayed the timepiece. By the next day, social media accounts run by "Shaniacs" all over the world would have sourced the watch and where it was from. Rolex would get a huge boost, and Shane would get his paycheck.

He got to keep the watch, too, but that mattered less to him.

It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, Shane was just tired from a morning of rehearsing and an afternoon of being glammed up. By the time his car pulled up to the event, the thought of walking down the line of screaming fans felt incredibly daunting, especially considering how things had gone down the last time he had been in this position.

Ilya got out of the car first, exiting the door farthest from the carpet and walked around so that he could open the door for Shane. He was back in his crisp black suit and pressed white shirt, either the same one that Shane had seen him in at the League Records office, or one that was identical. He looked good, but in an inconspicuous way, the sort of way where he would blend in with the crowd, while the more outlandishly styled outfits would garner attention.

Shane's own outfit was relatively classic, but flashier. He was wearing a three piece suit in a deep ruby red, the ruby and gold patterned waistcoat designed to match the face and band of the watch on his wrist, everything coming together in a look that would be cohesive. He wore no other accessories.

"Mr. Hollander." Ilya opened the door to the car and held his hand out to Shane.

Other bodyguards had done this countless times, and yet for the briefest of moments, Shane hesitated. Still, he took the offered hand, allowing Ilya to help him out of the car.

The fans were deafening. If the screaming had been loud before, that was nothing compared to the high pitch shrieks that came next. Calls of *"SHANE! SHANE HOLLANDER, OVER HERE! LOOK OVER HERE", "SHANE I LOVE YOU!",* and *"SHANE SIGN THIS!"* rang out through the crowd.

Ilya put his hand on Shane's back to guide him through the crowd, and as he did so, he leaned in, whispering one word into Shane's ear.

"Breathe."

Shane could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as the low whisper coursed through him. Maybe it was the encouragement, maybe it was the hand on his back, maybe it was simply the fact that Ilya was *there*, but the anxiety that had begun to build up inside of him slowly faded. His photo-face took over. Shane smiled in the direction of flashing lights, periodically taking something from the crowd, signing it, and handing it back as Ilya helped to keep him on pace, pushing him through the doors of the high end venue that had been rented out for the GQ party.

Inside wasn't much quieter, but it was a different kind of noise. There were no screaming fans, no paparazzi haranguing for a photo. Instead, the noise came from the live band on stage and the sea of conversations happening as the elite of Montreal, and really North America in general, rubbed elbows.

Like Shane, most people there were probably rocking some sort of celebrity endorsement, but some were merely there selling themselves, or to have a good time. The drinks flowing freely were top shelf, the food being passed around on catering trays looked gourmet, and if one wanted to network, well, this would be one hell of a place to do it.

As planned, once Shane had been photographed in his proper full suit, he removed the blazer, slinging it over one shoulder and instantly rolling up his sleeves to not only showcase the watch, but to give him the sense of youthful, boyish charm that he was still able to get away with…at least for a couple more years.

As predicted, Ilya blended into the crowd. There was plenty of security there, and this party had been vetted by League's security plan, as well as Ilya Rozanov himself. Shane was certain that he was safe here, and yet after every conversation, every bit of small talk made with someone whose name and face he knew, but who he would never really *know*, he found

himself looking for Ilya. His shoulders relaxed as he spotted the Russian bodyguard, though he hoped it was not obvious. Ilya, a consummate professional, remained alert. He kept a wide stance, moving very rarely, but his eyes were everywhere - something Shane had begun to grow used to.

Ilya Rozanov missed nothing, and he never took his eye off the ball.

Once, Ilya caught Shane looking. Shane turned so quickly that he almost knocked into one of the cater-waiters as he attempted to avoid Ilya's gaze, and god. He should not have done that. It was normal, right? To seek out your bodyguard in a crowd? To make sure they were still there? It was definitely weirder that he had hurried to avert his eyes. Still, Shane rested in the half-comfort that Ilya would not bring it up to him, and that, due to his NDA, he wouldn't be able to bring it up to anyone else, either.

It didn't take long for Shane to get his photographs. He found other shiny, famous people that he could talk to, people that would attract the attention of the event photographers, and he would pose with them, holding his blazer over his shoulder with his right hand in a way that would draw the most possible attention to his watch. Yuna had trained him well, and he knew that. While he may not be sure how to navigate these parties as well as he had when Hayden had been beside him, he knew that he was doing a good job with his brand deal.

He stayed for an hour - for one glass of champagne, two stuffed mushrooms, and a crab cake - before seeking Ilya out. There had been nothing wrong with the party, but he was ready to get out of there, and having the car brought out to the front would be the better option for him. Now that he wasn't attempting to enter the party, he would be able to take photos with more fans and sign more things while he waited for the car to be brought around. Maybe the noises and the pressure made him anxious sometimes, but Shane truly did love his fans. He knew that he would be nowhere without them, and he wanted them to feel as important as they had made him feel.

"Stay close, Mr. Hollander."

As they exited the party, Ilya did not put his hand on Shane, but his words were clear, and Shane obeyed. He took his time walking down the line of fans, turning for selfies, signing autographs, and smiling for the occasional paparazzi shot, though he never strayed far from where Ilya hovered, his eyes watching the crowd for any signs of a threat.

Fortunately, he found nothing, and the second the door closed on the black Escalade, Shane reached for his tie, loosening it and undoing his top collar button.

"Wow." Ilya smirked across the car at Shane. "Did the tie murder your family?"

"No, I just…don't really like neckties," he admitted. "Even when they're tied perfectly, I feel like I'm being choked."

"Ah, well, some people like that, or so I have heard," Ilya teased.

He was probably just trying to lighten the mood, to help dispel any anxiety Shane was

feeling, but Shane felt his blood run hot. Any memories of the party vacated his mind, replaced with the mental image of Ilya's large, strong hand wrapped around his throat, and *fuck.*

That was something that Shane had not realized he had wanted until now.

Since his solo session in the shower several days ago, he had managed to keep those sorts of thoughts of Ilya at bay, but now, in the back of this hired car, they came rushing back with a vengeance. Shane could feel the heat rising in his face, and with Ilya right there, he knew there was no way that the other man had missed it.

Rather than say anything, however, Ilya handed Shane a sealed water bottle from a basket provided by the car service. Embarrassed, Shane took the bottle, his breath hitching in his chest as his fingers brushed against Ilya's.

"It is a nice watch."

Just as Shane was about to pull his hand back with the water bottle, Ilya took his wrist so that he could examine the gold timepiece. The numbers on the ruby face of the watch had been replaced by diamonds, more of which surrounded the outside face of the watch.

"They sent it to me as part of my…my deal." Shane gulped.

Slowly, Ilya turned his wrist, examining the clasp. It was small, so subtle that it was barely noticeable, making the luxury watch look even more seamless and perfect, but Shane was not paying attention to the watch. His entire focus was on holding himself together while Ilya's fingertips danced over his wrist, looking at the piece of jewelry.

Unable to take it any longer, Shane snatched his wrist away under the guise of unscrewing the cap to the water bottle and bringing it to his lips.

Did Ilya know what he was doing to Shane? Did he suspect that he was making Shane sweat? Was he doing it for fun? Shane could tell that Ilya enjoyed antagonizing him at least a little, and he was certain that was what this was. Ilya was antagonizing Shane, getting under his skin where he could, and Shane couldn't blame him. He had to be so serious in his line of work, and he was on the clock all of the time. Ilya had to find some kind of entertainment, and Shane was certain that after several days of having to observe his tour rehearsals, Shane performing was not cutting it.

"Ah, yes." Ilya chuckled, leaning back in his seat. "I suppose that is one of the perks of your job."

"It's not really my taste," Shane admitted.

"No?"

"No. It's like the neckties, I don't…" he shrugged. "I'd rather be in sweats and a hoodie, I'm more of a sports watch kind of guy, but that's just Shane. Shane Hollander, the pop star?" He

gave Ilya a small smile. “The fancy clothes, the watches, it’s a costume, helps me stay in character.” Quiet, mysterious, soft spoken, but always kind to fans, and always, *always* well dressed. It was expected of him.

When the stylist had first begun working with the band, that had been a part of his allure - he was quiet, withdrawn, but he always looked perfect, not a hair out of place, to maintain his appeal with the fans. Now that he was solo, his team saw no reason to change it up, and Shane was fine with that. He didn’t mind it, honestly. He liked keeping pieces of himself back. The world couldn’t have all of him, they wouldn’t have liked him very much if they did. It was just…easier this way.

“I see.” Ilya’s pale gaze was fixed on Shane. “I get it. Mine is more uniform than costume, but…I get it.” He paused a moment before speaking again. “Then again, maybe if your tour clothes were more comfortable to you, your hips would be looser.”

The serious look that had been in Ilya’s eye just moments ago vanished, and a little glint of… something replaced it.

That something, Shane was certain, was joy at prodding the pop star.

“Shut up.” Shane lifted the water bottle back to his lips in an attempt to hide his smile from Ilya.

“No, I think you like it.”

Shane was so caught off guard that he almost dropped the water bottle.

“Excuse me?”

“I think you like it when I play with you,” Ilya said with a shrug. “I think…you are Shane Hollander, famous pop star, and everyone around you bends the knee, kisses the ring - or the Rolex, as it were. They tell you what you will like to hear, they do what you want them to do, and they do not treat you like real person, so…I think you like it when I tease you.”

Shane’s jaw tensed, not because he was offended, but because Ilya was *right*. In just a few short days, this man had come into his life, watched him, and figured him out, at least in part. He had known that Ilya was observant when it came to security concerns. He hadn’t realized that Ilya’s skills transferred in such a personal way.

“Um.” Shane shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay.” Ilya leaned back into his seat in a way that told Shane he *knew* that he was right.

Shane opted to pull out his phone, busying himself texting his mother that the event had gone well, half-relieved that Ilya had dropped the issue, but half-mortified that he had been so perceived by someone he barely knew.

The tour was still weeks away, and it would last for *months*. The Ilya Rozanov Problem

wasn’t going to go away anytime soon. The even bigger problem?

Shane was no longer sure that he wanted it to.

Chapter 5: Chapter Five

“Okay, looks like we have another caller.” The radio jockey flipped the call to live. “You’re on with Shane Hollander!”

“Hi. Thank you for taking my call,” the voice of a man filled the studio. “What would you say to fans who are nervous to come out and attend the tour following the shooting at *The Tonight Show*?”

And that was the problem with radio interviews taking live calls. Wasn’t someone supposed to be vetting this shit?

“Well,” Shane said slowly. “I would tell them that we are taking security very seriously. My team has completely re-vamped their security plan for the *Hat Trick* tour. I would also remind them that that was a prank - it was a BB gun aimed at no one, fired into the air. There will always be people in the world who want to ruin things for other people. I would also say they often target the interests of children and young women because they feel that those are vulnerable fields to attack, and I know that’s the main demographic. The last thing that I want is for my fans to feel threatened, or like they can’t enjoy the things they love. We are doing everything that we can to ensure that this tour is safe for everyone. I would say if you truly don’t feel safe, you have to do what feels right for you, but if you choose to come out to the tour, well,” Shane forced a smile, hoping it would be clear over the air. “We have one hell of a show planned for you.”

“I thought you handled that very well, sweetheart,” Yuna said in the car on the way back.

Shane didn’t respond. He looked out the heavily tinted window, his face stony and set. He had hoped that this wouldn’t be brought up again. He had hoped that the fear wasn’t beginning to build in his fans. The last thing that he wanted was for anyone to feel unsafe coming to one of his shows. Well, no. The last thing that he wanted was for anyone to get *hurt* for coming to one of his shows. He had to calm his mind, though, to remember that League was doing everything to make it as safe as possible.

It was difficult to be certain, though, and Shane did *not* feel like talking.

“A courier brought this for you.” The doorman cheerily held out a package to Shane.

“Thanks.” Shane gave the doorman a terse smile, taking the package - probably another baked treat from Jackie that he wouldn’t eat - and entered the private elevator to the penthouse.

Fortunately, Yuna saw that Shane was in no mood for company, and she went off to her own unit, leaving Shane and Ilya alone and wordless in the elevator. Somehow, though, silences with Ilya were never awkward, and it may not have been much, but it allowed Shane to relax a little.

Shane went straight to his room, not wanting to force his bad mood on the other man, even though he got the feeling that Ilya was sort of…impenetrable. Shane was also fairly certain that if he wanted to talk about the radio interview, he could. Ilya had signed an NDA, and he wasn't a therapist, but he had managed to pull little bits of things out of Shane before, and right now, Shane didn't want *anything* pulled out of him.

Being around Ilya was something of a vulnerability and he just didn't think that he could handle that right now.

With a heavy sigh, Shane sat down on the bed, opening the package that had been couriered. Instead of the cookies or brownies that he had been expecting, the package contained a doll. A doll with the head pulled off, lying next to it in the box.

More specifically, it was The Metropolitan Men Kendoll Collection *Shane Hollander* doll.

Shane dropped the box, jumping to his feet and involuntarily letting out a scream that he would have been more ashamed of were he not so frightened.

Ilya was at his door in seconds.

"What is wrong?" he asked, eyes darting around the room for the threat, quickly spotting the dropped box on the floor.

Ilya's movement was rapid, putting himself between Shane and the horrible present in a matter of seconds. He crouched down, lifting the two pieces of the doll.

"This is meant to be you, yes?" Ilya asked, looking up at Shane, concern lacing his tone.

"Y-yes." Shane nodded.

"Fantastic." Ilya looked back into the box, pulling out a note that had been resting beneath the doll, something that Shane had been too frightened to notice. Thick black letters were typed on the white paper, just like the initial threat sent to him.

I told you to cancel the tour. There is still time.

"I will do what I can to find out who sent this." Ilya shoved the doll back into the box, closing the lid so that Shane would not have to look at it.

"Wait." Shane gulped. "Don't…can you…don't report it. Please."

"What do you mean don't report it?" Ilya frowned.

"I don't want my mom to worry."

"Someone sent you a threatening doll and you want me, your bodyguard, to not tell anyone?" Ilya asked.

“I mean. I just…I don’t want her to push me to cancel the tour. No one is threatening the fans, they’re only threatening me, and…I have you.” Shane straightened up, attempting to appear more confident than he felt. “You can still look into i., I mean, I would be grateful if you did,” he admitted. “But I don’t…think the nature of the gift needs to leave this penthouse.”

Ilya didn’t respond right away. He studied Shane’s face, then looked at the closed box in his arms.

“If I have any reason to believe that telling someone will directly assist your safety, I will tell someone. If I do not see reason for that to be the case, fine. At least for now, we can keep this between us, but Mr. Hollander,” he warned. “You are not the one signing my checks. I work for League Records. I do not work for you.”

“I know, I understand, I just…*please*, Rozanov.”

“I will do what I can. No promises.” He looked Shane up and down. “Are you alright?”

“Fine.”

“Wow, you are…really bad liar.” Ilya cocked his head to the side. “You were not fine even before you received the doll. You are definitely not fine now.”

“If you already know that, then why did you ask?” Shane snapped.

“I wanted to give you the chance to talk about it.”

“Well then maybe I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then you do not have to talk about it.” Ilya raised the hand that wasn’t holding the box in a placating fashion. “No one is forcing you to talk, just…offer is there. If you want it.”

“That’s…really not your job.”

Again, Ilya hesitated before responding.

“I know.”

He turned, taking the box with him and once again leaving Shane alone.

It was foolish, Shane realized, to think that there would be no more threats made against him. It was hubris, perhaps, for him to assume that, just because it had been almost three weeks since the initial incident, and the tour opening night was creeping closer, that it was over.

Someone had it out for him, and he didn’t like that they knew where he lived. In this day and age, with the internet and Social Media so prevalent, that was a difficult thing to keep under wraps, but to have used a courier service that Shane trusted? One that would get through to his doorman?

That made Shane worry that whoever was doing this was someone who knew him…or at least someone who knew enough *about* him to get this close. Had someone been watching him? Unnoticed in the shadows, planning this? Privacy was so close to a myth these days that such a fear was there.

The only sense of peace that Shane felt was knowing that, if they had been around him lately, Ilya would have noticed them.

Sitting on the bed felt wrong now, so Shane did the only thing he could really think of. He changed into his workout clothes and hit the gym. He ran, literally, through his whole setlist twice before, panting, he practically slid off of the machine. The endorphins from the run made him feel a lot better, and as he gulped down a bottle of water, a wave of exhaustion washed over him, his day finally catching up to him. He had been up early for rehearsals, then whisked off to the radio station for the interview. After that the negative excitement of the fucking doll paired with the workout he had just done had sealed his exhaustion. At least he had a shot of sleeping tonight.

That hope was short-lived.

Shane woke minutes before 3 AM, jolted from his sleep by a nightmare. The headless doll, a version of his *own* headless body, had animated and grown to full size, chasing Shane down the aisle of a concert venue. As Shane tried to reach the door, the aisle kept extending and extending, yielding a seemingly never-ending chase. Thankfully, he had awoken before learning what the doll-come-to-life would do to him if it caught him, though the thought of trying to go back to sleep was unpleasant at best.

With the intention of making a cup of tea, Shane threw off his bedclothes, pulled a shirt over his bare chest, yanked a pair of sweats over his boxers, and slowly padded his way down the stairs.

“Jesus Christ.” He started as he turned the corner to see Ilya Rozanov sitting at the kitchen counter in a tank top, basketball shorts, and nothing else, hunched over the glow of his laptop. “Do you ever fucking sleep?”

“Not much, no,” Ilya said without looking up. “And definitely not when my charge is sent threatening package.”

“Wait.” Shane frowned. “You’re up…looking into the doll?”

“Yes, what else would I be doing?”

“I don’t know, it’s almost 3 AM. I think the normal answer to that question would be ‘sleeping.’”

“You are not sleeping.” Ilya turned on the barstool, facing Shane. “You had bad dream?”

“What?” Shane’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wh-how…how did you know that?”

“You were shouting.”

“Oh.” Heat rose in Shane’s cheeks, embarrassment that Ilya had heard him crying out in his sleep creeping through him. If Ilya wanted to antagonize him, well, here was a fucking great opportunity.

“Makes sense. Frightening doll, threatening message, long day.” Ilya shrugged. “I would have had bad dreams, too, probably.”

“Okay.” Shane’s shoulders relaxed a little, glad that Ilya was not, it seemed, going to prod at him. “I was going to make some tea.”

“Do not let me stop you.” Ilya turned back to his laptop.

“Do…would you like some?”

“Tea?”

“Yes, tea.” Shane did his best not to roll his eyes, because…wasn’t that what he had just said?

“Sure. Yes, thank you.”

In only a few minutes, Shane was seated at the counter beside Ilya, setting down two steaming mugs of tea.

“So, have you found anything?” Shane gestured to Ilya’s laptop.

“Mmm, no, not yet. I have reached out to the courier but they said they were called to pick up the package from a hotel and it was left there with the concierge. The concierge on duty was no longer working when I called the hotel, so I will have to wait for them to get back to me, but I am looking at security footage.”

“The hotel gave you their security footage?” Shane asked, surprised and a little impressed.

“Uh, no.” Ilya shook his head. “But I have it. That is what matters, no?”

“Rozanov…”

“My job is to keep you safe, yes? You hire - or rather League Records - hired private security and not police for a reason. You could have had police escort, a car parked outside your door, but no. They pay me to do things the police will maybe not do, and some things the police will definitely not do.”

“Oh.” Shane stared at the steam escaping his mug. “But you wouldn’t…I mean…none of the stuff you’re doing is gonna hurt anyone, right?”

“Not anyone who does not try to hurt you first, no,” Ilya assured him. “My job is to keep you

safe. I have no interest in harming anyone just for the sake of harming them."

"Okay. Sorry, I don't mean to judge, I just…didn't really think about it, I guess."

"Well that is why you have me. So that you can sing your songs and not have to think about these things." Ilya closed his laptop and looked at Shane. "I should probably not have told you that I was doing this, with the security footage, but I wanted you to know that I am doing everything I can to find this person and to make sure that they no longer pose a threat to your well-being. I am good at my job, Hollander."

"I know, I can tell that you are, I…I see you-" he paused. "When you're looking around, you don't miss anything, which can sometimes be really annoying."

"Like how you look away when I catch you looking at me?"

"I was just making sure - I just like to know that you're there, okay? That you didn't like, switch sides or run off or anything. I don't like surprises, so. It's not…it's just…"

"Mr. Hollander, you do not have to explain."

"You can call me Shane, you know." The last time he had prompted this idea had been weeks ago, and Ilya had ignored him, but they had talked a lot more since then, and it beared repeating.

"I do not think that is such a good idea, Mr. Hollander."

"No?" Shane lifted his tea, finally cool enough to drink, to his lips. "So you can call me an angry kitten, but you can't call me by my first name?"

"Is different." Ilya shook his head. "Is…complicated, I guess. But it was more a statement, a commentary, than a name."

"Okay. It just feels weird, I mean…we're sitting here in our pajamas drinking tea at 3 AM, and calling each other by last names."

"It is good to have some boundaries, I think, yes?"

"Probably." Shane sighed. "I guess my work is so different. The boundaries between me and everyone that works for me, and the fans, and all of that, it's all so different than I think a normal career would be."

"Well, my career is not exactly so normal, either," Ilya admitted.

"No, I guess it's not. How long have you been doing the bodyguard thing?"

"Just over a year."

"Since your injury?"

“Hmm?” Ilya paused. “Ah, yes, my injury.” He nodded. “There was that, and then some time getting a visa to come and work…where I work, though my employer mostly takes care of these things.”

“Sounds shady.”

“It does,” Ilya agreed. “But is actually not. Is all above board. The visa stuff. Not necessarily everything that I do.”

“So if you got caught, you could get deported? Sent back to Russia?”

“Are you going to report me, Mr. Hollander?”

“Oh god, no. No.”

“Then I think it does not matter. I will not get caught.”

“Because you were Spetsnaz and you know how to do a bunch of shady shit?”

“Pretty much.” Ilya took a sip of his own tea. “But I cannot talk about that.”

“I didn’t think so,” Shane admitted. “I won’t lie, I am curious, though. I did a little googling and it seems…interesting to say the least.”

“You googled me?” Ilya asked, surprise evident on his face.

“No, not you, just, you know, the Spetsnaz stuff. I didn’t know much about it, and…I still don’t.”

“I think that is more or less the point. If people know everything that they - that we - were doing, then the whole thing would sort of be useless, no?”

“I guess. Maybe. I don’t know.” Shane shrugged. “I’m just a pop star.”

“Just a pop star.” Ilya nodded. “A pop star that your record label is bending over backwards to protect.”

“That is because I am making them a lot of money right now.”

“Your songs are not bad, I will admit.”

“You listened to my songs?”

“Yes.” A soft smile crossed Ilya’s lips. “Every day, while you rehearse them on stage, and then again, when you rehearse on treadmill.”

“Oh god, right.” Shane winced, color, shame, returning to his cheeks. “So um, what happens

if you catch this guy before the tour is over?" Shane quickly changed the subject, hoping that the late hour and the switch in focus would make Ilya forget his idiotic statement.

It was foolish of him to think that Ilya might have listened to Shane's songs of his own volition.

"I suppose that will be up to League Records. I am contracted through the entire tour, if they wish to dismiss me sooner they will have to buy out the contract, but also they could move me somewhere else."

"Oh, yeah, that makes sense." Shane nodded, squirming a little on his barstool.

"Mr. Hollander," Ilya angled his body just slightly towards Shane. "Do you not want me to be moved somewhere else?"

"No, it's not that…" Except it sort of was *exactly* that. "I just feel safer with you here."

"Ah, I see." Ilya turned back to his own tea. "Then I am doing my job."

Shane sat with that, reminding himself that yes, this was Ilya's job. Maybe not everything that he was doing was legal, but he was doing all of it to keep Shane alive not because he cared about him, but because he was being paid to do it.

Shane hadn't forgotten that, how could he? Pretty much everyone in his life was on his payroll, even his mother, though he knew that she was doing it because she loved him and not the other way around. Sometimes, though, Shane hated how difficult it was to make real connections, and that was why he valued his friendship with Hayden so much. It was real. Even if Shane wasn't telling him everything, it was real.

"It really bothered you, huh?" Ilya broke the silence after several minutes.

"What?" Shane asked.

"The doll."

"I mean." Shane didn't really know how to answer that. "I just can't stop thinking about it, and it's not just…I mean, yes, the headless doll of, you know, *me,* was a lot. On top of that, though, they used the same courier service that Hayden uses, they knew *how* to get that package to me without it getting vetted by my team. This…I can't shake the feeling that- you

know what? It's silly, never mind."

"No, tell me." Ilya turned, angling his body towards Shane, his brow furrowed in focus. He was listening intently, wanting to know what Shane might have to say that might help with this situation.

"It's stupid."

"It might be, it might not be."

"Okay." Shane sighed. "I just can't shake the feeling that it's someone I know."

Ilya nodded. "Honestly, I had been wondering the same thing. This has never felt like a deranged stalker, this does not seem like someone who loves you, it feels…personal. Like someone believes they have been wronged by you, and as result, they want to ruin you."

"Yeah."

"So who have you wronged?"

"What?" Shane frowned. "Nobody."

"Well, clearly, someone has reason to believe otherwise."

"I mean, I haven't…done anything to hurt anyone," Shane said. "But…"

"But there are plenty of people who might resent your success?" Ilya tilted his head to the side. "Perhaps the others from your band?"

"What? No." Shane shook his head. "No. I may not be as close to JJ, Gil, and Sorren as I am to Hayden, but we are still close, we're friends, none of them would do this to me."

"A scorned lover, then?"

"There are no scorned lovers." Shane felt his cheeks heat up at the implication. Ilya was just doing his job, and of course, he had valid reason to ask that, but…no. Shane could at least say with confidence that it wasn't that.

"You are certain, none of the others from The Metropolitan Men?" Ilya asked. "You have outweighed all of their successes."

"I'm sure. I spent every minute of every day sardined with those guys for years. I would know if one of them were capable of this, and they're just…not."

Ilya studied Shane's face, saying nothing as he took in the intensity of Shane's expression, his steely gaze, his set jaw.

"Okay." Ilya nodded. "You sound pretty sure about that."

“I’m *very* sure.”

“Okay.”

“That’s it? Just…okay?”

“Well, see, I remember how up in arms you got when I implied Hayden might be a problem.” Ilya chuckled. “It is late, and I do not wish to unleash the angry kitten.”

“Um, excuse you,” Shane said, taking a sip of tea, the hint of a smile beginning to curl up at the corners of his lips. “You’re forgetting something.”

“Oh, and what’s that?”

Shane got up from his stool, lifting his still half-full mug of tea.

“You know.”

“Say it.”

“Adorable.” Shane flushed again, if anything, his cheeks growing hotter.

“Ah, but I thought you said you were not adorable.”

“Shut up.” Shane took a sip of his tea. “I’m going to try and get back to sleep, you should do the same.”

“There is still work to do.”

“Rozanov.” Shane shook his head. “Go to sleep. Whoever sent that doll will still be there in the morning, and like you said, you have to wait for the hotel concierge to be back on shift anyways. I don’t want my bodyguard exhausted, underslept, and unobservant.”

“I do not get unobservant,” Ilya challenged.

“Go to sleep, Rozanov.” Shane turned, heading back for the stairs.

“Goodnight, Kitten!” Ilya called after him.

For a split second, Shane stopped, freezing at the nickname, before he kept walking. He sat on his bed, legs crossed as he took a sip of his tea. Instead of lying back down, however, Shane rested the tea on a coaster by his bed and lifted the notebook from his bedside table, opening it to a blank page.

Shane wrote in clips, lines that he would squirrel away until the right melody hit, and as he sat on his bed, notebook resting on his thigh, words about Ilya’s eyes, his curls, his moles, bled from his subconscious onto the page. It would never come to fruition, never amount to

anything, but it was better out than in, and Shane was certain that he wouldn't get any sleep if, every time he closed his eyes, the intense gaze of Ilya Rozanov's ocean-colored eyes stared back to him from behind his closed eyelids.

Shane had written love songs. He had written tons of them, but they had all been gleaned from the experiences of others, inspired by a pair of lovers he had seen at a cafe, or two people whose eyes had met across a crowded room. He didn't know their stories and he never would, but that didn't mean he couldn't steal their feelings for himself and turn them into a gold, or maybe even a platinum record that would keep himself on the top of the charts. More than that, he wrote songs that would keep his fans convinced that he was a sweet, sensitive, secretly romantic, and perhaps most incorrectly, a heterosexual, man with whom they might one day have a chance.

This felt different. These feelings were his own, the ones that had been bubbling at the base of his gut since his eyes had first fallen upon Ilya Rozanov.

Shane had felt used. He had felt poked, prodded, he had felt like a product or a cash flow to so many people, but Ilya made him feel safe. Ilya made him feel things that he had forced himself not to feel for the sake of his career, for the sake of his own heart, because he wouldn't know what to do with a man if he had one.

It had been easy to keep these feelings away. Despite what a specific subset of fans felt, Shane had never had desires or intentions towards any of the other Metros, and everyone else had been all too easy to keep at arm's length. Ilya Rozanov, however, was right there. He was in Shane's kitchen in a tank top and basketball shorts, skin exposed, feet bare. He was a real person, at least to a degree, and Shane was having a lot of trouble shaking his want for those large, capable hands on him. He wanted that perfect cupid's bow mouth pressed against his own, he wanted to touch the perfectly toned shoulders that Ilya's tank top tonight had revealed.

He wanted to drop to his knees in front of Rozanov and thank the man for keeping him safe.

With a frustrated sigh, Shane closed his notebook.

He couldn't write a song about Ilya Rozanov. He couldn't let himself go there, because he was on the brink of too far, and if he crossed a line, even if it was just in his own head, he might never get back across it. Shane rarely let himself want things, but as he leaned back on his too-big bed, he was having more and more trouble denying the fact that he wanted Ilya Rozanov.

He needed this tour to start. Once he was taking the stage every night, traveling between cities, meeting fans, making appearances, he wouldn't have a second to himself, he wouldn't have a moment to think about the curve of Ilya's neck as it met his shoulders, or the way his eyes lit up, just a little, when he teased Shane.

Or the way that he had called him 'Kitten'.

As he pulled a pillow over his face, attempting to use it as a way to somehow block images of

Ilya from his mind, he knew that sleep would not be returning to him tonight.

Chapter 6: Chapter Six

It was strange, the way that Shane only felt like he could truly breathe again once he was back on tour. He had not expected it, not on his first solo run, but as he exited the stage after opening night in Victoria, BC, he felt electric. He felt *alive*.

“Oh, you were so wonderful!” Yuna pulled him into a hug. “All of that worry for nothing, Shane. This tour is going to be a big hit!”

“Thank you.”

“Da.” Ilya tilted his head to the side, his eyes momentarily, but notably, or at least notably if you were watching him as closely as Shane was, flitting down to Shane’s hips. “Looks like those Shakira videos paid off.”

“Shut up,” Shane said through a smile.

He felt good.

The show had sold out, nothing had gone wrong, apparently he hadn’t looked like he was going to die of shame or discomfort when the dancers had touched him…it was a rousing success. It was almost a shame that he had a full day in between this and his next show. It would be a hotel in Victoria tonight, then the bus would leave early for Vancouver, giving them the day off in the city before performing again the night after, but Shane wanted more. He felt so out of place so often, but when he had been on that stage the nerves had depleted. It hadn’t mattered anymore that it was just him, that the other boys weren’t by his side. Every song that he sang was his, every word was *his*, and the crowd was screaming those words right back at him.

It just felt good.

“Mr. Hollander.” Ilya put his hand on Shane’s back, guiding him through the crowd and towards his dressing room. “I will make sure that the car is ready to take you to the hotel, so that we can leave whenever you wish. I will do my best to protect you from screaming fans, but…” Ilya leaned in just a little closer. “You look very pretty tonight, so I think they will be screaming quite a lot.”

Shane, who had been reaching for the door knob to his dressing room, fumbled with it, his hand dropping from it entirely at Ilya’s words.

Without saying anything more, Ilya reached out, opening the door that Shane had just failed to and holding it so that Shane could walk through. The dressing room was just how he had left it, except that on the table sat a large bouquet of red roses, a card sticking out from them.

Shane lifted the card, assuming that they were from his parents, pleasantly surprised to find

that was *not* the case.

Congrats on your first night, man. I know you fuckin' killed it, I wish I could have been there. The fam and I will be screaming our heads off in the stands when you hit Montreal.

-Hayden (and Jackie + the Pikelets)

P.S. I know that the roses probably won't help with the 'Shayden' shippers, but fuck 'em.

"Wow," Ilya looked at the flowers. "48 roses. Someone must be very in love with you."

"They're from Hayden and Jackie," Shane said with a smile.

"Ah." Ilya nodded. "He is very lucky to have such successful friend. It will be nice for him to have you to fall back on when his career fails and he needs a loan for all of those children."

"Oh my god." Shane nearly choked on the sip of water he had just taken. "What did Hayden do to you?"

"Nothing." Ilya shrugged. "I just think he is lucky to have you as a friend, is all."

"Okay…" Shane wasn't really sure that answered his question, but he let it go. He was still riding the high of the success of his first show, and still trying to shake off the sound of Ilya's voice in his ear telling him he was pretty. He didn't need to add to the maelstrom of things happening inside of him right now.

"I will be right outside," Ilya said. "Just let me know when you are ready and we will go."

Ilya took his leave and closed the door, leaving Shane alone in the dressing room. He found himself oddly comforted by the fact that Ilya was right outside, probably holding his usual stance, and watching like a hawk to make sure no one came near Shane.

He had been making a joke, right? When he had called Shane pretty, he had been teasing him. He had followed it up by immediately talking about his fans so yeah. A joke. That had to be it.

Not wanting to keep his team waiting, and struggling to ignore the pangs of hunger he was beginning to feel, Shane showered quickly and changed into more casual clothes. He arranged with one of his roadies to have the flowers from Hayden and Jackie put on the tour bus so that they would all have something nice to look at on the road tomorrow, and he allowed himself to be directed towards the exit…and the throngs of screaming fans.

Ilya had not been wrong.

Practically the second the door was opened the screaming began and Shane felt a tightness in his chest.

The threats had not been forgotten, and Ilya had not been able to figure out who had sent the

doll. The hotel security cameras had not picked up any real features, and the concierge at the hotel apologized, claiming they had been so busy that they had barely looked up to see who had left the package.

The line of fans was where the shooter had struck the first time, and Shane couldn't help but worry that, in this sea of people, was a threat to him and to his fans.

"You can go," Ilya said.

"I know." Shane paused. "Yeah, I know."

"We will go quickly."

As though he could sense - and he probably could, Shane realized - the anxiety coming off of the other man, Ilya's hand was on his back again, pushing him through the barricaded lane. There was a level of pressure that Ilya had not used before, speeding up the process, and though Shane smiled and waved at his fans, he didn't stop, allowing Ilya to push him along at a rapid pace and through the door of a waiting car.

Shane didn't bother to watch as outside security made sure the area around the vehicle was clear before it took off towards the hotel.

"Fuck." Shane raked a hand through his hair.

"What, it is hard being so adored?" Ilya questioned.

"Sometimes, yeah." Shane nodded. "Just…a lot of pressure. And…"

"And you were worried doll-sender would be waiting for you."

"Maybe a little of that, too." Shane bowed his head, embarrassed that he was still letting himself be frightened by that.

"You have more dreams of the headless lifesize doll chasing you?" Ilya asked.

"No, and I regret telling you about that," Shane admitted…though the third time he had woken from the same nightmare screaming, it had been more difficult to hold the truth back.

He still didn't know, thankfully, what would happen to him when the doll caught him. He had had the dream a handful of times and had always managed to wake up before learning his fate.

"It is okay, you know," Ilya said, his tone softening. "I think that most people would be screaming if they were being chased by a life-sized, headless version of themselves. Even if it was dream."

"That's…true." It was impressive, really, how Ilya seemed to know when teasing would push Shane too far. He toyed with him enough to get him out of his own head, but never enough to

push him over the edge. Was that something he had learned in Spetsnaz? How to read people? To make sure that you interacted with them in just the right way to get what you wanted out of them?

Probably.

The teasing was probably to put Shane at ease, not because it was Ilya's way of flirting. Shane just had to keep reminding himself of that.

Except sometimes it was difficult. Sometimes, he felt like he caught Ilya watching him when he didn't have to be, sometimes, he was almost certain that he caught Ilya smiling at him. The expression always vanished in a millisecond, however, leaving Shane doubting what he had seen at all.

One thing was for sure. Ilya Rozanov was a tough nut to crack, and Shane wasn't sure that he would be any better off if he learned how to do so.

***

The first run of the tour went by in a blur, playing six cities in British Columbia and Alberta in almost as many nights before they had their first real break…or at least break from performing. They had three nights and four days to make the 13 hour drive from Calgary to Winnipeg.

It took almost eight of those hours to get from the hotel in Calgary to The Hotel Saskatchewan in Regina, and when Shane got off the bus, he was feeling bleary and more than ready to be off the road. Ilya, however, seemed sharp as a tack.

"No." Ilya shook his head. "This is not the room that he has booked."

"I understand that," the hotel manager spoke patiently to Ilya. "But this comes from higher up in the Marriott-Bonvo chain than me. I was told to upgrade Mr. Hollander to the best room in the place, which happens to be The Royal Suite. They were surprised he wasn't booked there already."

"No, this is just one bedroom, no adjoining," Ilya argued. "This was not the plan."

"You are still welcome to the luxury suite that was booked, Mr. Rozanov, but we truly believe Shane Hollander would be more comfortable in our finest accommodations."

"What's wrong?" Shane walked over to where Ilya and the manager were arguing.

"They want to upgrade you," Ilya said.

"And that's bad because…"

"Because the room they want to give has no second bedroom and no adjoining rooms," Ilya said. "And it is not the room that I scoped out."

“Okay.” Shane nodded. “I see how that could be a problem, but they’ve gone through the trouble of making it available,” Shane reasoned. The last thing he wanted was word getting out that he had thrown a diva fit over a hotel room. Sure, maybe it was his bodyguard throwing the fit, but that was *not* what the tabloids would say.

“It is security risk,” Ilya insisted.

“I assure you, our hotel is very safe,” the manager said, his smile growing more relaxed and less tense now that Shane was a part of the conversation.

“I have no doubt,” Shane said. “You’ll have to forgive Mr. Rozanov,” he added. “He is very focused on my safety, and I am very, very glad to have it that way.” He looked to Ilya, making direct eye contact. He was about to go over Ilya’s head, and he wanted to make sure that, before he did so, Ilya knew that Shane really was grateful for him. “Mr. Rozanov, why don’t you do a sweep of the room before I check in, and if you deem it satisfactory, there we go. No issues.”

“Yes, issue,” Ilya insisted. “Room can be as safe as possible, but there is still no place for me.”

“I’m sure it’s a very large room,” Shane said with a smile. “No second bed?”

“No second bed.” Ilya shook his head. “I have studied hotel floor plan, I know every room. There is one king bed in the royal suite.”

“We could…provide a very high end rollaway bed,” the manager offered. “If having your bodyguard nearby is of utmost importance. There are plenty of rooms in the suite, you would still have your privacy from him, Mr. Hollander.”

“Well?” Shane turned to Ilya. “What do you say? You sweep the room, if it gets your seal of approval, they bring in a rollaway bed. I know it’s not as nice as a comfortable hotel bed, but-”

“I do not care about such comforts, I am working. My job is to keep you safe. The hotel changing things last minute makes this…not so safe,” he shot a glare towards the manager. “But fine, if you want the stupid royal room, I will check it over.”

“Thank you.” Shane smiled at Ilya before turning to the manager. “I would be honored to be put up in your Royal Suite. Thank you.”

“Of course, Mr. Hollander. Anything you need, honestly,” the manager said. “My girlfriend is a huge fan, and she would absolutely have my hide if I didn’t roll out the red carpet for you.”

“Oh, well, that is very touching. I’m flattered,” Shane said. He was well trained, well rehearsed. “Do you have your phone on you? I would love to make a greeting video for her, maybe win you some points?”

“Really?” The man’s whole face lit up.

“Yes, of course. Mr. Rozanov can check the room out and we can make a video for your girlfriend.”

“Oh, she is going to love this!” The manager pulled his phone from his pocket, opening up the video function.

Half an hour, one *very* thrilled doorman, and one begrudgingly sated Ilya Rozanov later, Shane was walking through the door of The Royal Suite.

“Oh.” His eyes widened. “This is…”

“Ridiculous, yes.” Ilya nodded.

Shane felt as though his jaw were going to drop right through the floor. The hotel had taken The Royal Suite very seriously. It looked like something right out of a royal palace in a movie that was, perhaps, attempting to mimic the halls of Versailles in an overly decadent, ostentatious fashion.

As he looked up, noticing the *stained glass* ceiling of the foyer Shane couldn’t help but laugh…and moments later, as though Shane’s reaction were contagious, a huff of laughter escaped Ilya as well.

“This is…I have stayed in a lot of hotel rooms, but this one is…wow.” He flopped down on the burgundy velvet couch in the expansive living room. “There is a China cabinet in the dining room.”

“Yes, well, you feel like a king?” Ilya asked.

“I mean.” Shane shrugged. “I don’t *not* feel like a king. I’m sorry about that, by the way - downstairs. I know…you were just doing your job and your only priority is that - my safety. I have other things I have to factor in, though, like my image, and I just didn’t want…” he sighed. “I didn’t want rumors that I was throwing a tantrum about a hotel room getting out.”

“But you were not throwing tantrum, I was.”

“Yeah, but…you’re…”

“Ah. I see.” Ilya nodded. “I am nobody. They will not care if I throw a tantrum. Only that a tantrum was thrown on your behalf.”

“Yeah. Sorry, I mean you’re not nobody,” he said quickly. “You’re *not* nobody. At all. You’re definitely somebody, Ilya Rozanov. I don’t know, badass bodyguard Spetsnaz operative.”

“Relax, Mr. Hollander,” Ilya said with another huff of laughter. “I am not offended. I know that I am not a famous pop star. I am not delusional and I am relatively tone deaf.”

“Yeah, well,” Shane shrugged. “Doesn’t stop everyone.”

“Maybe not,” Ilya said, his eyes lighting up at Shane’s joke. “But it should. Not you, though. You are real deal.”

“Excuse me?” Shane asked.

“You are a good singer, Mr. Hollander, good song writer.”

“Oh.” Shane gulped. “I…well, thank you.”

“Did you not know this?” Ilya asked, a tone of melodramatic concern lacing his words.

“Oh shut up!” Shane laughed, grabbing one of the over the top gold throw pillows from the couch and throwing it at Ilya.

“What?” Ilya caught the pillow with lightning fast reflexes. “You seemed surprised to hear it!”

“Not surprised to hear it,” Shane reasoned. “But…surprised to hear it from *you*, maybe.”

“It is surprising to you that I like your music?”

“Well…yeah, kind of,” Shane admitted.

“You are one of the top selling artists in the world, it should not be surprising to you that people like your music. You famous people, all very, very strange. Or maybe is Canadian thing? Being humble when your songs are literally everywhere. Very polite. *Very* Canadian.”

“God, you’re such an asshole,” Shane said with a chuckle. “But no, it’s not that, I just didn’t think…honestly, I don’t know what I thought. I just hadn’t imagined you listening to my music.”

“Oh,” Ilya nodded. “So what *have* you imagined me doing, then?”

That stopped Shane dead in his tracks. He hadn’t been prepared for Ilya’s words, and he could feel heat creeping up his neck, to his jaw, through his cheeks. There was absolutely no way in hell that he could hide the look of brief, but clear terror on his face at the question.

“I should go shower,” Shane said. “The bus…it’s been a long day.”

“Of course.”

Ilya made no moves to stop Shane, but as Shane hauled himself off of the sofa and towards the bathroom, he could feel the Russian’s eyes boring into him. God, if only Ilya knew the things that Shane had imagined. Then again, judging by his teasing question, and the way that Shane’s face had, at least momentarily, told the truth, maybe he *did*. At least he must have some idea.

Shane took his time in the shower, hoping that the hot water would wash away some of the embarrassment that he felt from the conversation, but no. Finally, he gave up trying to cleanse himself of his own mistakes. He dried off, changing into sweats and a t-shirt, taking out his contacts and swapping them out for his glasses. It was rare these days for Shane to go for his glasses.

It was another piece of himself that he kept for, well, himself.

“Whoa,” Ilya spoke the second Shane made his way back into the palatial living room.

“What?” Shane asked.

“You wear glasses.”

“What, your Shane Hollander dossier didn’t reveal that?” Shane teased.

“I mean,” Ilya shrugged. “Not really relevant. Maybe it was in there, but it was not information that I needed to keep you alive.”

“Right. Well.” Shane shifted, feeling awkward under Ilya’s gaze. “I’m going to order room service, do you want anything?”

“I will have whatever you are having,” Ilya said with a shrug.

“Um, are you sure? I’m gonna get a quinoa bowl with like, beets and stuff.”

“Oh my god, Hollander.” Ilya groaned. “Do you hate yourself?”

“No,” Shane frowned. “I just…like to be healthy when I’m on the road. I don’t want to get sick and have to perform at less than full capacity. My fans don’t deserve that.”

“Ah, yes.” Ilya nodded. “I understand. It would absolutely be letting your fans down for you to have cheeseburger.”

“Maybe!” Shane argued, his face growing hot again. “Besides, I like this stuff.”

“Suit yourself.” Ilya shrugged. “I think I will have cheeseburger,” he said, reaching for the room service menu. “Oh, and parmesan truffle fries. You enjoy your yoga soccer mom bowl, though.”

“I will,” Shane said defiantly.

He wasn’t sure exactly what it was about Ilya’s constant poking and prodding, but it was really getting under his skin and…yeah. Maybe it hadn’t been such a great idea to share this suite. Ilya’s rollaway bed was out in the open, and while there was plenty of space in the colossal suite, it was starting to feel…small.

The food arriving was a massive relief, and Shane was able to busy himself with the harvest bowl that he had ordered. Shane had to admit, though, that Ilya's cheeseburger, and especially the truffle parmesan fries, smelled a lot better than what he had ordered.

At least he could settle in knowing that he wouldn't get a stomach ache from the grease.

He also wasn't sure how Ilya Rozanov could eat like that and have the body that he did, but Shane also knew that he couldn't *ask* that question without revealing that he had spent time paying a great deal of attention to Ilya Rozanov's body.

"You know that they will not kill you, right?" Ilya asked.

"What?"

"French fries, they will not kill you."

"Well, that's not technically true," Shane said. "Like eventually…"

"Oh my god, you are so boring." Ilya rolled his eyes. "Well, just know that you can have one if you want."

"Thank you," Shane said, hesitating for a just a moment. "But I'm good."

"Whatever you need to tell yourself."

Shane told himself that he did *not* need one of his body guard's french fries, and instead focused on the rather delicious, albeit very healthy, meal that he had chosen for himself.

"Do you really think I'm boring?"

"What?" Ilya looked up.

"A few minutes ago you said I was boring. Do you really think I'm boring?"

"Do I think that you, an international pop star, are boring?" Ilya asked. "Yes, absolutely, yes I do."

Shane couldn't help but smile at that.

"Okay."

"You were actually worried I thought you were boring?"

"I…worry that I'm wasting your time," Shane admitted.

"I am doing my job, that is not a waste of time."

"No, that's not what I meant." Shane sighed. "Sorry, I'm bad at this."

“Bad at…”

“Talking, sometimes. Music comes easier.”

“Okay.”

“I just meant that, I mean, given your background, this could feel like a waste of time. Like you went from doing important things to serve your country to babysitting a spoiled pop star.”

For perhaps the first time since Shane had met him, a nearly wistful look crossed Ilya’s face.

“It is more complicated than that. My work in the special forces, sure, it was important for Russia. It was very dangerous, and I cannot say much, but it was not…not work that I enjoyed doing.”

“And you enjoy this?” Shane snorted.

“Being paid to eat truffle fries with one of the most famous men in the world?” Ilya asked. “Yes, I enjoy this better than being shot at while going three days without proper meal or sleep.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right. Sure.” Shane gulped. “I just…I don’t know what I thought.”

“Just because something is important to Russia does not mean it is important to me,” he repeated. “There are many things that are important to Russia that are not important to me, and that is part of why I came here after my discharge. I did not want to be there anymore, I wanted to be here.”

“In Saskatchewan?” Shane teased.

“In *not* Russia,” Ilya rolled his eyes. “There are things that I am that I cannot be in Russia, and the older I get the more I want to be me more than I want to be Russian.”

For the second time since entering the Royal Suite, Shane was rendered speechless.

This was, perhaps, the first truly personal thing that Ilya had said to him. Sure, there had been teasing, there had been little nudges, maybe little glimpses of a personal history, but this was the first thing that Ilya had said out loud that indicated that he might be what Shane was…or at least a version of that.

“Yeah.” Shane gulped hard. “There are things that I am that…sometimes I feel like I can’t be, too. So I know it’s not the same, but I get it. I understand. Or at least I think I do.”

“Yes.” Ilya studied Shane for a moment. “I think that you do, too.”

“Look, I’m not gonna tell anybody.”

“I am not worried that you will,” Ilya shook his head. “But…I do appreciate it. I am still Russian citizen, so…”

“I understand,” Shane said again. “Thank you, um…thank you for telling me that.”

“I did not really tell you anything.”

“Well,” Shane shrugged. “You kinda did.”

“Yes.” Ilya nodded. “Maybe only kind of. But you…kind of told me something, too.”

“Ah, yes, but you have signed an NDA.”

“I would not tell even if I had not,” Ilya said. “Who you are, who you get to be when the cameras are not flashing should be protected. You may be famous, but you do not owe the world every piece of yourself just because of this.”

“I wish…more people felt like that,” Shane admitted. “Sometimes I feel like they resent me for having even a small amount of privacy.”

“And for not telling them that you are secretly and lovingly fucking Hayden Pike for many, many years?”

“Oh god, you know about that?” Shane asked, mortified.

“Oh my god, rumor is true?” Ilya looked equally horrified.

“No! No, no, no, I mean you know about the *rumor*! It’s not true, it was never true, it’s never gonna *be* true. Hayden is one of the nicest people I have ever met, he is my best friend, but we never - no. We don’t have feelings like that for each other, never did. He’s pretty straight, and even if he wasn’t, he’s not my type.”

“Ah, so you do not go for cheesy?”

“Oh my god, what did Hayden *do* to you?”

“Released cheesy love songs that make my teeth hurt.”

“Okay.” Shane snorted with laughter. “I guess it’s sort of difficult to argue that one. His songs are good, but they’re definitely sappy.”

“Is good, I guess, that he loves his wife so much,” Ilya said. “Not sure we all need to hear about *just* how much.”

“I’m telling him you said that,” Shane challenged.

“Go ahead. I can take him.”

“Yeah.” Shane set his bowl down, leaning back against the horrific couch. “You could take all of us. We are media trained, vocally trained, dance trained…to a degree, but not…” he waved his hand in Ilya’s direction. “Whatever *you are* trained.”

“And this is why they will pay me the big bucks to keep you safe.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Shane nodded, tilting his head to the side as he looked at Ilya. “You’re not like I thought you would be.”

“No?”

“No.” Shane shook his head. “You’re…playful, you’re sweet.”

“Well, did you think I was just strong and scary?”

“Honestly, at first…kinda, yeah,” Shane admitted.

“Well, I am that, too.”

“You’re a lot of things, Mr. Rozanov.”

“Ilya.”

“What?” Shane looked at him, eyes wide.

“You can call me Ilya.”

“Will you call me Shane, then?” Shane challenged.

Ilya didn’t respond right away. He took a good, long look at Shane, his pale eyes focused on the other man’s brown eyes, locked in a decisive and clear contact, before he finally spoke again.

“I will try.”

Chapter 7: Chapter Seven

The scream that woke Shane was so piercing that he only realized it was his own when the door to his bedroom flung open to reveal a figure standing in the doorway. The figure, thankfully, didn't give Shane much time to panic before flipping the light switch, revealing himself to be Ilya Rozanov in a white t-shirt, boxer shorts, and a wild look in his pale eyes.

"What is emergency?" Ilya's eyes darted around the room though all he could see was Shane tangled up in too-fancy bedsheets in this overly opulent hotel room.

Shane's breathing was heavy, ragged, as he pulled himself up into a sitting position, raking a hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry," Shane said, shaking his head. "No emergency. I'm fine. It's nothing."

"Well, you do not look fine." Ilya crossed his arms over his broad chest. "It was dream again? Evil doll?" Ilya asked, his shoulders beginning to relax as it became apparent that the threat was in Shane's head and not physically in the room with them.

"It got me." Shane nodded.

"What?"

"The doll got me. It's stupid." Shane felt his cheeks growing hot and perhaps worse than that, angry, embarrassed tears were starting to gather in his eyes. "Go back to bed."

"After scream like that? I do not think so." Ilya shook his head. "You will go back to sleep?"

Shane looked over at his phone on the bedside table. ***4:47 AM***.

"No." He shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

"Does it happen to you, too?" Ilya asked.

"Does what happen to me too?"

"If you have bad dream and you go back to sleep you wind up back in same dream?"

"Oh." Shane rubbed the back of his neck. "Sometimes. Not often. Wait." He paused. "Does… that happen to you."

"Often, yes." Ilya nodded, his tone casual, but something about it seemed off. "Come on. I will make you tea."

"That's not - you don't have to do that."

“I was going to make a cup for me, I can make two,” Ilya said with a shrug. “Besides.” Ilya’s eyes flitted over Shane, making the other man suddenly starkly aware of his bare torso. “You look like you could use it.”

Mercifully, Ilya turned from the doorway, leaving Shane to take several deep breaths before willing himself from the bed. He found the nearest t-shirt and pulled it on over his chest, finding sweats and tugging them over the boxer-briefs that he was wearing. He had already felt too exposed, too vulnerable, and with Ilya, he was trying to pull back on those feelings.

There was just something about the other man, and Shane couldn’t shake the feeling that if he let Ilya all the way in, it would become very difficult to shut him out again.

“So, what happened?”

The two of them were sat on the ostentatious red couch, sipping steaming mugs of tea, Shane’s with honey and lemon for his throat, Ilya’s plain.

“What do you mean?”

“You said the doll finally got you.” Ilya looked at him with a pointed expression in his eyes. “What happened?”

“Oh.”

Shane would really rather not think about this, but what was he supposed to do? He had woken Ilya up with his screams. If he denied him his answer now, that would just be selfish, right?

“It grabbed my neck, it squeezed, it…” he shuddered. “It squeezed until my head popped off, but I didn’t…it didn’t kill me. My head just flew into one of the stadium seats and was staring at me, blinking. It was like in the dream I had two sets of eyes, but I was headless and my head was staring at me, but I could tell? Like I could still see it? That’s…that’s when I woke up.”

“Ah.” Ilya nodded. “Well, maybe doll just wanted headless buddy to hang out with? Maybe he was lonely.”

Shane snorted with laughter - a surprised reaction that he hadn’t anticipated, but that made him realize that telling Ilya about this was the right move. The other man was going to be able to make him feel better and maybe it drove Shane a little bit crazy that Ilya even *had* that capability, but he was glad that someone did.

“Yeah, maybe,” Shane said with a gentle smile. “I guess we all get a little lonely from time to time.” Shane took another sip of his tea before looking at Ilya. “Alright, I told you mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you my dream. You said when you have bad dreams, you wake up, but if you go back to sleep, you’re back in them. Do you have one like this?”

“Like this? No. I have no Ilya Rozanov headless dolls chasing me.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” Shane narrowed his eyes slightly. Ilya was dodging his question and he knew it, but it was late. He had just told Ilya a lot, and he knew that he probably wasn’t going to get a straight answer from the other man, but he *wanted* to. He had to try.

“Yes, I know.” Ilya sighed. “Is just…”

“What, unprofessional?”

“Well, yes, that. Also is personal.”

“And mine wasn’t?”

“Not the same. Your bad dream will not happen. I am not saying nothing bad could happen to you though I will do my very best to stop it, but a doll the size of, well, *you* is not going to come to life and pop your head off.”

“So your bad dream,” Shane started softly. “Your dream could happen?”

Ilya looked at Shane a moment, the saddest, most pained smile Shane had ever seen on anyone’s face crossing his beautiful features as he did so. All of a sudden, Shane felt invasive, like he was asking something of Ilya that was so irrational that he should be punished for even thinking about it. The look on the other man’s face was so raw; it felt like something that Shane shouldn’t be seeing, that *no one* should be seeing, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to look away.

“My bad dream has already happened,” Ilya said finally, his voice a low whisper. There was a timbre to his tone that somehow perfectly matched the look of visceral anguish on his face.

It was heartbreaking.

Something *awful* had happened to Ilya Rozanov, something far worse than being chased by a headless Ken doll. Probably something worse than having a BB gun fired in his near vicinity, and Shane was paralyzed with confusion. What was he supposed to do here? Was he supposed to ask Ilya what his dream - or his reality - was? Offer him a space to talk about it? Was he supposed to reach out, to comfort him? Was he supposed to walk away, to give Ilya space to process whatever thoughts were running through his head.

Before Shane got the chance to make a decision, however, the expression was gone, wiped from Ilya’s face so quickly that Shane had to blink, trying to figure out if it had even been real.

It must have been. There was no way that Shane could have imagined an expression that

wounded.

“Ilya,” Shane started, but he didn’t know how to follow it up.

“I am hungry,” Ilya said, getting to his feet and going to find the room service menu. “Are you hungry? We will order breakfast.”

“Uh…” Shane wasn’t hungry. Shane was in a version of shock that he wasn’t sure how to get out of. He had seen that look on Ilya’s face. He had heard his tone, the way that a sense of overt suffering had laced his words.

My bad dream has already happened.

Now, though, Ilya was up, flipping through the room service menu at five in the morning as though he didn’t have a care in the damn world, and Shane felt like he was stuck to the sofa, a weight pressing down on his chest that wouldn’t let him up, as he stared at the other man.

He spent almost all of his time with Ilya Rozanov these days, and yet he knew nothing about the man. There was layer after layer of mystery there, and Shane wanted to grab him. He wanted to peel back those layers.

To his horror, he wanted to find out what awful thing had happened to Ilya and he wanted to fix it. He wanted to fight whatever person or thing had hurt this man.

He wanted to destroy it.

He *never* wanted to see that look on Ilya’s face again.

=====

Ilya didn’t show the expression again.

The *Hat Trick* tour dipped into the US, starting in North Dakota, then hitting Iowa, Indiana, and Michigan before pulling back up into the Great White North for a handful of dates in Ontario, including Shane’s home town show in Ottawa.

The hometown shows had always been Shane’s favorite. Of course, since The Metros hadn’t met in school or anything like that, every one of them had had a different hometown, so Ottawa had always been Shane’s. He had never had to share Ottawa with anyone else. It had always just been his - his hometown. His safe space. His audience.

The crowds came out in droves. The Canadian Tire Centre would be full of people. It was the first tour date that had sold out, though it had been followed quickly by many others, and Shane had been looking forward to it this whole time. He loved playing in front of the home crowd. He loved seeing people that he knew in the videos after - his elementary school science teacher, or the family of his childhood best friend, the cashier who had sold him his first chocolate bar with his first allowance.

These people had helped raise him, and he wanted to give them everything. This would be the best show of the tour - it had to be, it always was, and he would do everything to make sure that didn't change.

"You seem excited," Ilya said as Shane waited in the wings to take the stage.

"It's home, you know?" He shrugged.

"Yes." Ilya's face plastered on a smile that Shane could tell was fake. "Home. Well, you show them that you are the King of Ottawa."

"I will." Shane chuckled and gripped his mic, taking a deep breath before the cue to his first song hit, and he ran out on stage, crushing his first notes as he pushed Ilya's forced smile from his mind.

He could leave everything on the stage tonight, because once he was done, he would get to go home and shower in his childhood bathroom, sleep in his childhood bed. He would get to return to a place that meant so much to him, and…he would get to see Ilya in that place…not that he could allow himself to consider such things.

The applause was raucous, the energy electric, and as Shane took his final bow before exiting the stage, he felt so incredibly alive.

"Wow. You were…honey." Yuna pulled Shane into her arms, holding him tight. "You've been doing well this whole tour, but that was…wow."

"Yes, wow. Just absolutely wow. Shane, we are so proud of you." David put his arms around his son and wife, holding them both in a group hug.

"Can we go home?" Shane asked, wriggling out of the hug and looking between his parents.

"We can." David grinned. "I even made your favorite. Fresh spaghetti from scratch."

"Dad, you know-"

"If you're about to say that whatever tour diet you're on doesn't allow pasta, just don't. Ottawa doesn't count, okay? You're home for two nights. You can eat the damn pasta. I'll make your gross smoothie for breakfast, but tonight, just eat your favorite."

"Yeah." Shane smiled. "Okay. Let me just go get cleaned up and we can go."

"I will make sure car is ready," Ilya said with a nod.

A security team had already been sent to the Hollander's Ottawa home to make sure that it was safe, but that was standard. Shane always preferred to stay at home when he was in Ottawa, sick of hotel rooms and eager for the comfort. It was a bit of a nightmare for the security team, but it was in his contract and League Records had not balked when they had signed it, thank god, because Shane didn't want to be anywhere else right now.

“I will have to do sweep of entire house, you know,” Ilya said as they walked through the front door. “Double check that the security team didn’t miss anything.”

“I know.” Shane nodded, watching as Ilya began to inspect the home, every door, every window, every room.

He had watched Ilya do this many times, but it was different now. This time, his childhood pictures were on the walls, his books lined the shelves, old trophies and participation ribbons from elementary school reading challenges and peewee hockey littered the space. There were framed photos of his first show with The Metros, a platinum record hung in the living room, but this was a family home. This home was Shane and Yuna and David, all three of them were all over this place.

Shane was all over this home, and not the Shane that Ilya knew now. All 26 years of Shane’s life existed on these walls, on these shelves, and he hated that he was excited for Ilya to see it.

All of it.

While Ilya swept the house, Shane set the table for dinner, making sure that Ilya knew he had a place at the table before the other would get the chance to suggest that he take his meal elsewhere.

Ever since the hotel in Saskatchewan, Shane had wanted to make sure that Ilya knew that he was included. He still didn’t know what had happened to him, but he knew that it was something - something bad - and he wanted to make sure that he didn’t make it worse.

“I did not know you played hockey,” Ilya said as he took his seat at the table.

“Just peewee,” Shane said with a laugh.

“He was good,” Yuna said. “Could have gone all the way, if he hadn’t chosen music.”

“Mom…”

“What? It’s true,” she said. “You were very good.”

“I was eight!”

“Yes, well, where do you think other players start out? When they’re older?”

“Yuna loves hockey,” David explained.

“Yeah,” Shane snorted. “It damn near broke her heart when I chose music.”

“Oh it did not.” Yuna took a sip of her wine. “Okay, maybe it did, but I wouldn’t trade your career for anything. I am so proud of you, when I see you on stage…” she shrugged. “It’s

clear you belong there, don't you think so, Ilya?"

"Mom, he's my bodyguard, he's not-"

"Yes." Ilya nodded. "I think he is fantastic on stage. I think that he made the right choice."

"Well, thank you." Shane cleared his throat.

"Pasta is fantastic, Mr. Hollander, thank you," Ilya said.

"Yeah, dad, it's really great." Shane smiled at his father. "Thank you, it's good to be home."

They put Ilya up in a guest room, and Shane curled up, exhausted, but happy, in his own bed for the first time in ages.

When he woke, Shane felt fresh and ready to start the day. There was no show that night, he always made sure that he had a full day in Ottawa before he had to get back on the road. He would spend the day in his hometown, sleep one more night in his own bed, and then wake up early the next morning to hit the road, heading for Montreal, his home away from home.

God, this was his favorite stretch.

"Alright, so, your day is all ready to go. Mr. Rozanov has gone through the proper security measures, so you will start out at the children's wing of the hospital," Yuna said over breakfast. "Then you are going to do a shift at the food bank, a quick break to get some food yourself, then you're going to go to the community center-"

"I wanna be there for the whole afternoon," Shane said.

"I know, sweetheart. I didn't book you anything else until dinner."

"Thank you." Shane loved the community center. He didn't get to volunteer much, and the days when he did were always packed, but he loved getting to see the kids of Ottawa, to play kick-ball with them, or tag - anything they wanted. Sure, he still had to be Shane Hollander, International Pop Star, but it wasn't the same. He was able to have fun, to play around, to sort of be a little kid again himself, and he enjoyed it. A lot.

"Then there is a dinner fundraiser at the Fairmont, I know how much you hate those things, but as the guest of honor-"

"I know." Shane smiled. "The money will go to the community center. It's worth it."

And it would be. Sure, maybe he hated standing there, shaking the hands of people with too much money - though he supposed he was now one of them - and having the same conversations over and over again with men in tuxedos that he could barely differentiate.

"What can I say?" Yuna reached out, giving Shane's shoulder a squeeze. "You're Ottawa's favorite son."

“Mr. Popularity,” Ilya said with a grin as he took a too-large bite of Cheerios.

“Shut up.” Shane kicked him under the table, though he smiled down at his own meal - the green smoothie, blended to perfection as his father had promised. “You’re gonna have your work cut out for you, those kids are beasts, and you have to keep me safe.”

“Oh, I am ready for the challenge.”

Ilya flexed a bicep, his tank top hiding nothing, and Shane nearly passed out, his stomach flipping as he took in the curves of Ilya’s toned arm.

If he wasn’t careful, he was going to give himself away…if he hadn’t already.

=====

The children’s hospital was always sad with a lining of hope. The kids were always so glad to see him and the parents were always thrilled that he took the time to actually talk to their children. He wasn’t just there for a photo op, and by the time they were on the way to the food bank, they were already running behind schedule. Rather cut the shift at the food bank short, however, Shane opted to forgo the lunch break, instead scarfing down a granola bar from Yuna’s purse on the way to the community center.

“Okay, okay, okay!” Shane laughed, raising his hands and trying to dull down the screaming of the children packed into the community center gymnasium. “I’m gonna be the captain of team one, we’re gonna be-”

“THE METROS!” A little girl screamed out.

“Yes, sure, The Metros.” Shane laughed. “This is my friend Ilya Rozanov.” Shane gestured to Ilya. “He’s gonna be the other team captain.”

“What?” Ilya looked surprised.

“Well I need another captain and if I choose one of the kids, it’ll be a chaotic mess of unfairness.”

“Okay.” Ilya nodded.

“He’s gonna be the other captain,” Shane repeated. “And they’re gonna be…” he looked to Ilya.

“The Raiders,” Ilya said with a smirk.

“Sure.” Shane rolled his eyes. “So we’re gonna count off, one, two, one, two - ones, you’re gonna be Metros with me, twos, you’re gonna be Raiders with Ilya.”

It took the patience of several gods to get all of the children divided into two kickball teams,

but soon enough, the match was set. If trying to separate the kids off into teams had been mayhem, that was nothing compared to the actual game. The rules went out the window fast, started, to Shane's surprise, by *Ilya*, who was picking kids up willy-nilly and tossing them around while they shrieked in delight, making sure they all landed softly on the mat "bases" as he threw them down.

No one was keeping score, and when the community center manager blew the final whistle, Ilya crouched down, whispering something to his team, something that Shane was *certain* would end poorly for him. Sure enough, before he had the chance to react, the entire Raiders team was charging him, tackling him onto the nearest mat.

"Help!" Shane laughed from beneath the sea of children. "Metros, help!"

His own team…did not help him. Instead, they piled on, further burying Shane. He pretended to fight them off, laughing as he did so, crying out for aid.

"Do not worry, Hollander, I will save you!" Ilya finally jumped in, pulling kids off of Shane right and left, finally freeing him from the mass of children.

"You are a terrible bodyguard," Shane said as Ilya helped him to his feet, a wide grin on his face. "Coordinating an attack on me? I should have you fired for that!"

"Ah, you would miss me," Ilya said with a wink before letting go of Shane's hand.

"Right." Shane gulped. "Who wants autographs?"

Shane signed everything. He took a photo or two with everyone who wanted one, children, parents, and community center employees alike. He took the time to ask names, shake hands, to chat, and if he thought he saw Ilya smiling at him from his post by the door of the gymnasium, well, he tried not to let the flutter in his heart get to his head.

"You were good with them," Ilya said in the car back to the Hollander home.

"Yeah, well, I used to *be* them. I grew up at that community center playing floor hockey and kick ball, and…I don't know. It's just fun to be back there. I started working when I was 16 and I haven't really taken a break since."

"Is nice, then?" Ilya asked. "To be a kid for a few hours again."

"Well, you would know," Shane said with a smile. "No one was being more childish back there than you."

"Ah, yes, well." Ilya gulped, looking away from Shane. "Maybe we both grew up too quickly."

And just like that, it was back, that *thing* inside of Ilya that Shane couldn't quite figure out, that hint to some deep, dark, pain. It should be expected, Shane supposed, given the line of work that Ilya had been in before switching to bodyguard. He was sure that Ilya had seen

some shit in his time with Russian special forces, but Ilya hadn't let him in, and he knew that he couldn't ask him to.

At the end of the day, Ilya was still his bodyguard.

At the end of the day, Ilya still called him by his last name.

"You are excited for Montreal?" Ilya rapidly changed the subject.

"Yeah." Shane nodded. "Not as much as Ottawa, I guess, but it'll be good to see Hayden and his family.

"Ah, yes, the cheeseball and his hoard of children."

"Yes." Shane rolled his eyes. "The cheeseball. It'll be nice for you, too? I mean, at least at my place in Montreal you sort of have a room that's yours."

"Sort of," Ilya agreed.

He had spent weeks living in the same room, but it wasn't his, and they both knew it. Shane wanted Ilya to be comfortable there, he wanted Ilya to be happy there, but that didn't make it home.

"Do you…where do you even live?" Shane asked.

"I could tell you," Ilya said. "But tragically, then I would have to kill you, and that would be messy for many, many reasons. I would get fired, probably never work again, and besides," Ilya shrugged. "You are too pretty to die."

"Stop it." Shane flushed at Ilya's words. His mom was one car row away from them.

"What? Is objective truth. Fans would be howling in the streets, lamenting the death of Pretty Boy Shane Hollander."

"Oh my god." Shane rolled his eyes. "You are ridiculous."

"Maybe, but I think you like it. You need a little ridiculous in your life, especially before stuffy charity dinner, yes?"

Shane knew that Ilya was right, he probably *did* need a little more ridiculous in his life, he just had not been expecting to get that from his bodyguard, of all people.

Then again, Ilya had proven himself to be nothing like Shane had expected, and every time Shane got a glimpse of him - the tragedy in his blue-green eyes, the way that they sparkled when he had played with the kids at the community center, the way that his hand felt on Shane's lower back, the slight curl of his lips when Shane caught him staring - he just wanted more.

No one had ever intrigued Shane the way that Ilya did, but he knew that he had to be careful. He had to be careful with his heart, he had to be careful with his body, he had to be careful with his career. Ilya was hired help. Once the threat was gone, Ilya would be, too - in the wind on another assignment.

Even if Shane was right and Ilya's teasing words and soft glances were flirtations, even *if* those flirtations turned into something more tangible, they could never work.

Ilya was high end private security. As far as Shane could tell, he belonged to the company that he worked for, and Shane? Shane was an international pop star. He belonged to the world.

Could either of them ever really belong to anyone else?

No, Shane thought as he looked out the window of the hired car. Probably not, so it would be best to get those thoughts from his head now before they did any real damage.

Chapter 8: Chapter Eight

“Ah, home, sweet home,” Ilya said as held open the door of Shane’s Montreal penthouse for the other man to walk through.

“Yeah, for about four minutes, then we have to get to the venue.”

There had been traffic, and the bus had only just gotten them to Shane’s place in time to drop off their stuff before they had to rush out for sound check at The Bell Centre. It was going to be a slightly more complicated show, the setlist lengthened to add one song from Shane’s days with The Metropolitan Men so that Hayden Pike could join him on stage. They still had to set the light cues and staging for the added song, so being there as early as possible was paramount.

Shane didn’t mind, though. As soon as he walked into the Bell Centre and saw Hayden Pike standing there, his face lit up.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t our international superstar. Finally had time to come down from your high horse to remember the little people, huh?”

“Shut up,” Shane said, grinning wide as he allowed Hayden to pull him into a tight hug.

“How the hell are you, man?”

“Good.” Shane nodded. “Sorry I’ve been so busy, this tour-”

“Dude, from what I’ve heard it’s been amazing. I’ve seen clips on socials and stuff, seems like you’re really lighting it up, and hey, who knew you had moves?” he asked, flicking Shane in the right hip.

“Yeah, well, we have many, many hours spent crying in front of a choreographer with more patience than God to thank for that,” Shane said dryly.

“And Shakira music videos,” Ilya added.

“Rozanov…”

“Oh, so *this* is Rozanov, huh?” Hayden turned his attention to Shane’s bodyguard. “Huh. The way you talked about him, I thought he’d be taller.”

“Yes, and the way the world talks about you, I figured you would be handsome,” Ilya fired back. “I suppose we both were mistaken.”

“Damn, okay.” Hayden nodded, snorting with laughter. “Is he allowed to say that to me?”

“I work for Mr. Hollander, not you. I can say whatever I want to you. And besides. You started it.”

“Okay then.” Hayden looked to Shane, one eyebrow raised, but Shane just shrugged.

He still hadn’t figured out exactly what Ilya’s beef with Hayden was, but he was sure that Hayden hadn’t won himself any points by coming in and immediately taking a dig at the other man’s height. Ilya wasn’t short, not by any stretch, but he was roughly the same height as Shane, which was unusual for a bodyguard.

The guards that they had had during their Metros days had all been huge, tall guys that had been imposing and intimidating in such a classic way that there was no mistaking them for exactly what they were. Ilya was intimidating, yes, but he was young, he was handsome, he blended in with Shane and the beautiful people that surrounded him, and frankly, that was, in some ways, an advantage.

“So, you really wanna do *Heart on Ice*?” Hayden asked, tilting his head to the side as he looked at the other man.

“I mean,” Shane chuckled. “It’s what the people are gonna want, and I don’t see a reason to overcomplicate it. Any of the later stuff, the stuff we like, wrote together that wasn’t sort of handed to us? I think it would be kind of insulting to Sorren, Gil, and JJ if we did it without them.”

“They could be here,” Hayden said.

“I know.” Shane gulped. “I offered, you were in the group chat, I said if anyone wanted to join me in any city, I would love to have them. You were the only one that said anything.”

“Well, lucky me then,” Hayden said with a grin. “I get to share the stage with my best friend, no complications or interruptions.”

“I just feel like they blame me,” Shane blurted out.

“Whoa.” Hayden’s eyes widened. “Why? If anything, I was the one that broke the dynamic with my stupid little EP.”

“It was a great EP.”

“I mean, yes, sure, objectively, but if I’d known what it was going to start, I don’t know if I’d have done it.”

“The breakup would have happened sooner or later. Everyone had things that they wanted - you wanted your family, some of us wanted to make different kinds of music, I mean…we couldn’t have stayed a boyband forever, the charm would definitely have worn off.”

“Speak for yourself,” Hayden said with a shrug. “I ooze endless charm.”

“Oh, gross, don’t say ooze.”

“Look, at the end of the day, you’re just the best of us.”

“That’s not-”

“Well, you released the best album. It’s good, you’re marketable, people love you, if there’s jealousy with the other guys, fuck ‘em. They should have been better song writers. We all know that you had it in you, I mean come on, Shane. The songs you wrote were always the best ones, and before you try to deny it, the sales speak for themselves. You may not have had J.J.’s swagger, my charm, Gil’s sex appeal, or Sorren’s charisma, but…you had something we all wanted, and that was sheer, unbridled talent.”

“We all had talent.”

“It was different with you. Always was, and you know it. Come on, Shane. You’ve always known you were good - great, even - and now here you are. You’re the one with a sold out arena tour, so…”

“I’m just glad you’re here,” Shane admitted. “It’s been weird, doing this without you.”

“I’ll admit, it’s been kinda weird *watching* you do it without me, but like, good weird? I don’t have the time for it, I have four kids and a wife I actually like to spend time with. You? You can still take over the world, so take over the world. Just give me, I don’t know, Quebec when you do?”

“Hayden Pike, King of Quebec.” Shane nodded. “Has a nice ring to it.”

“Damn right it does. Now, let’s go knock the socks off some sound guy.”

“I promise you, my sound guy does not give a *fuck* about our original hit single.”

There was a warmth to performing with his best friend again, and when the show was over, Shane had to hold himself back from inviting Hayden to join him for the rest of the tour.

Hayden had made it clear that he was where he wanted to be, and when Shane saw him kiss Jackie backstage, take his baby from her arms, and hug his children, he understood it. Well, at least he understood it peripherally.

Love had never come easy to Shane, he wasn’t sure that it ever would, but at least he had his best friend. It didn’t matter that the Shayden shippers would be all over the place the next day, posting edits and remixes of the stripped down, duet version of *Heart on Ice* that they had played on stage.

If they were looking at him and Hayden, well, then they weren’t going to see the way that Shane looked at his bodyguard, and that was very much for the best. He did his best not to make it overt or clear, but he did worry that if he wasn’t careful, at some point, he would get caught looking at Ilya in a way that he shouldn’t be caught looking at anyone.

The high of the show felt short lived, however. Perhaps it was the craze of the Montreal show, or the fact that not one, but two former members of The Metropolitan Men had been present, but the fans outside were rabid - rabid, and they showed no signs of going home.

Hayden went first, making a spectacle of drawing attention to himself so that his family could get safely into the waiting car, and honestly, Shane should have taken that chance, too. He should have let Hayden lure the crowd away from him instead of waiting, hoping that, after getting attention, the throngs of fans would subside and he would be able to make it to his own waiting vehicle without problem.

“I do not think you should go out there,” Ilya said, returning after inspecting the crowd. “I do not think you should go wave to fans tonight, I think we sneak you out.”

Shane gulped. He wanted to do that, he really did, but this wasn’t just some random city. He lived here. These weren’t his hometown Ottawa fans, maybe, but…they were still his. He couldn’t just slight them like that, could he?

He should have listened to Ilya.

Halfway to the car, the barricade busted, and while security was able to keep almost everyone back, one fan got through - a man, who instantly grabbed Shane around the waist and, as he raised his phone to snap a selfie, planted a massive kiss on Shane’s cheek.

“Get the *fuck* off of him!”

Before he was able to take the picture, however, Ilya grabbed the man. He tore him off of Shane and gripped the collar of his shirt as the man wriggled, preventing him from getting away and disappearing back into the crowd.

“Hey, let me go!” The fan yelled. “I just wanted a picture!”

“That is not how you get picture,” Ilya snarled. “Police will deal with you.”

Ilya *threw* the fan into the waiting arms of two far burlier security guards and turned to Shane. He put his arm around him curving around him as he rushed Shane through the rest of the fan line and into the waiting car.

“Are you alright?” Ilya didn’t take his arm off of Shane as the car began to drive, but Shane said nothing.

Shane’s breathing was shallow and fast - too fast for words to come out, so instead, he turned himself into Ilya’s arm, his face burying in the other man’s neck. Ilya put his other arm around Shane, pulling him in close.

“It is alright,” Ilya said, gently rubbing Shane’s back. “It is alright, you are safe. I will be sure those guards are fired. Is their job to hold the barricade,” he all but snarled. “But you are alright, you are safe.”

“Can you squeeze?” Shane whispered, his words barely audible as he kept his face pressed against Ilya’s shoulder.

“What?”

“Can you just squeeze me, please? Hard? It’ll…it’ll help.”

“Ah, yes, okay.” Ilya understood almost immediately, and he applied pressure, his arms constricting around Shane’s torso, and as they did so, he was rewarded with Shane finally beginning to relax in his arms.

They stayed like that for a couple of minutes, Ilya holding Shane tight while Shane regulated his breathing, his heart rate, and finally, pulled back and out of Ilya’s embrace.

“I’m sorry.” Shane reached up, swiping a tear from his eye.

“What?” Ilya frowned. “Shane, what do you have to be sorry for?”

“For…melting down, I guess.”

“No, no. You do not have to be sorry for that. *I* am sorry for allowing terrible fan to touch you.”

“I thought…for a second I thought it might be *him*,” Shane admitted. “The doll, the notes…I was worried, I mean…”

“But it wasn’t.” Ilya shook his head. “It was just some horrible, asshole fan who cannot respect personal space.”

“Yeah.” Shane gulped, raking a hand through his hair. “Thank you. For getting him off of me so quickly.”

“Is fine, is my job.” Ilya shrugged.

“Still. It all happened so fast, I was frozen, and you…you acted really quickly. I don’t…I didn’t…” Shane shuddered. He could still feel the unwanted hands on him, the unwanted lips on his cheek. It wasn’t the first time a fan had touched him in a way that he hadn’t wanted, but he never got used to it.

Throughout the rest of the ride, it played again and again in his head. The barricade had busted and within fractions of a second, the fan - larger than Shane, taller, had grabbed him. He remembered the strong grip on his waist pulling him against the fan’s side, then wet, freezing lips on his cheek, and then…Ilya.

And then Ilya, tearing the man off of Shane with such force that, had he not held on to the man’s shirt, Shane was sure that his assailant would have gone flying. The tone in Ilya’s voice as he admonished him was one that Shane had never heard before. It was cold, it was

harsh, there was a violence to it that would have made Shane uncomfortable if it had been aimed at him.

Instead, it made him feel safe. Ilya had finally had to prove what he could do, and maybe it was small, but he had done it. He had protected Shane from a threat, tossed the threat aside, and then instantly turned his focus back to his charge. He had put his arm around Shane, he had pulled him into the car, he had held him…he had said his name.

"Wait." Shane turned to Ilya. "You called me Shane."

"Yes, well, you were having panic attack."

Maybe it had been a slip of the tongue for Ilya, but it mattered to Shane. He had finally heard his name, *just* his first name on the other man's tongue. Gone had been the tone used against the fan. Instead, Ilya's words had been gentle, soft, caring, and his embrace? He had understood what Shane was asking for, what he *needed*, and he had given it to him without question.

The scenario, however brief, had been terrible, but Ilya had been there, and even now, just minutes after everything had gone down, Shane felt completely and utterly safe with Ilya Rozanov.

Those feelings of safety, however, did not lend themselves to sleep.

Once they were back at the penthouse, Shane tossed and turned in his bed for almost two hours before giving up, unsurprised to find that, when he went downstairs, Ilya was up and at the kitchen counter, hunched over his laptop.

"Hey." Shane moved to sit next to Ilya at the counter. "What are you doing?"

"Compiling dossier on your attacker," he said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"Oh. Is…do you think he's dangerous?"

"Honestly, probably not. He is an aspiring influencer, he probably wanted to use you for cool points, but still. I want to make sure if he is ever nearby again that he does not get close to you."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"He frightened you."

"Yeah." Shane nodded. "A lot, I guess. More than…I'm proud of. I just…I don't like being touched, not like that."

"To be fair, I do not think many like to be touched like that. It was very violating." Ilya paused, finally closing his laptop screen. "Is why you can't sleep?"

“Yeah. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Is better than headless doll, no?”

“No, actually.” Shane shook his head. “It’s like you said. It’s…it’s worse than the doll, because you’re right. The doll can’t happen, the doll can’t get me, but that? That was real.”

“Ah.” Ilya nodded. “A bad dream that has already happened.”

“A bad dream that has already happened,” Shane repeated.

“Look at me.” Ilya turned, making sure that he was facing Shane. He put his hand on Shane’s chin and drew Shane’s gaze upward to his own, though Shane’s brown eyes avoided Ilya’s. “Look at me.”

Ilya’s tone was firmer the second time, and Shane couldn’t help but follow the instruction. He looked into Ilya’s beautiful eyes, into that icy, penetrative stare…and knew that he would be unable to look away.

“I will *not* let that man touch you again. I will not let that bad dream happen a second time, do you hear me? No more fan lines. We will sneak you in and out of the venues, in and out of hotels, of events, of appearances. You will still have your meet and greets, but I will watch like a hawk. *No one* will *ever* touch you like that again, Shane. Not while I am there.”

Shane gulped as Ilya’s words ran through him like a sword, slicing him open, bare in front of this gorgeous man. His shoulders relaxed, his chest loosened, and he closed his eyes, resting his chin in Ilya’s hand as a soft huff of breath escaped him. He expected Ilya to let go, to turn away, but Ilya’s hand remained on his chin, and when Shane opened his eyes again, that ocean gaze was still on him.

“Fuck,” Shane breathed.

“You are safe with me,” Ilya repeated.

“I know.” Shane paused.

Perhaps it was the adrenaline of the situation, the fear that was still coursing through him. Perhaps it was the way that Ilya *tamed* that fear, the safety that he felt in the proximity of his bodyguard. Perhaps it was just months of pent up want coursing through his ever cell, but Shane couldn’t stop himself from *wanting*.

Ilya was so close, *right* there, and Shane was *exhausted.* He was exhausted of constantly being on the road, exhausted from waking up from bad dreams of headless dolls.

Exhausted from trying to pretend that he didn’t want Ilya Rozanov.

“Ilya…” Shane whispered.

“You did not eat,” Ilya said quickly, pulling back, removing his hand from Shane’s chin.

“What?” Shane blinked in surprise, aching instantly at the loss of Ilya’s touch.

“You came home, you went to your room, you did not eat.”

“No, I guess I didn’t, but-”

“You need to eat.”

Shane watched in confusion as Ilya hopped off of his stool and walked around the counter, opening the fridge, perusing the ingredients.

“Ilya.” Shane frowned. He was *sure* they had been about to kiss, and now Ilya was up and going through the refrigerator.

It was intentional, and Shane knew it. He was certain that what he had felt had not been one sided.

“You like tuna melt?” Ilya asked, pulling the requisite ingredients out of the fridge. “I will make for you.”

“No, I don’t-” Shane was betrayed by his stomach rumbling loudly. “Fuck. Ilya.”

“What kind of cheese?” Ilya asked, holding up a packet of Kraft singles in one hand and sliced cheddar in another.

“I don’t…why do I even have those?” Shane asked, gesturing to the Kraft slices.

“I bought them.” Ilya shrugged, setting them down. “Cheddar it is.”

“Ilya.”

“What, you don’t want tuna melt?” Ilya looked at him, head tilted to the side.

“No, I…” Shane paused, because, yeah, now he kind of *did* want the tuna melt. Ilya had reminded him that he hadn’t eaten since well before his show had started, and now it was very late, he had had a rough day, so yeah. He was hungry, and did he want a tuna melt? Sure.

There was just something else that he wanted *more*, and for a brief moment, he had let himself believe that he was going to be able to have it.

That was foolish, though. He couldn’t have Ilya, he knew that.

“Yeah, I want the tuna melt, cheddar is fine. Or…” he shrugged. “If you wanna use the Kraft, that’s fine, too.” It had been a long night, a rough night, and if he was going to deal with cheese and mayonnaise and carbs, he wasn’t going to be too precious about any of it. He probably wouldn’t feel better physically, but the sandwich might make him feel better

emotionally.

It was worth a shot.

“I’ll use the Kraft, it’s good. You will like it. Melts good.”

Shane said nothing, but he watched as Ilya slathered mayonnaise on…the outside of the bread for some reason before mixing up tuna salad using - yup, a decent amount of mayonnaise and maybe Shane shouldn’t watch this part. He had already made up his mind to *eat* the tuna melt, but it might be easier if he didn’t think about what went into it. Still, he was unable to take his eyes off of the other man as Ilya prepared the sandwiches, placing them in the hot pan to cook.

“Thank you,” Shane said, leaning against the counter, looking over it at Ilya. “For making me food. You’re right, I am hungry.”

“I know.” Ilya pressed the bread into the pan with a spatula, no doubt with the intention of making it crisp up.

“I just thought…” Shane sighed, trailing off.

This was probably something he should say out loud, right? Clearly it was penetrating every part of his life, and maybe he should just get it out there. Ilya had to know that Shane was attracted to him, and Shane didn’t *think* that he was imagining the reciprocation. It was just… tricky to navigate.

“What?” Ilya asked.

“I thought that when you were holding my chin like that, telling me that you would keep me safe, that you might…that you might kiss me.”

“Ah.” Ilya nodded. “And…if I had?”

Shane wasn’t sure what response he had been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t that. He had expected Ilya to rebuke him, to tell him that it was all in his head, that he was just tired and overwhelmed from being grabbed, that he was experiencing some sort of intimacy of crisis.

Ilya got under his skin like no one had in his entire life, flustered him like he had never been flustered, and now he was feeling hot under the collar just thinking about what might have happened if Ilya *had* kissed him just now. There were a million possibilities, a million turns that the night could have taken, but there was one thing that Shane absolutely knew for sure.

“If you had kissed me just now,” he said softly, forcing himself to look at Ilya. “I would have kissed you back.”

“I see.”

Ilya flipped the sandwiches, cool as a cucumber it seemed, which infuriated Shane.

Shane felt like he was going to die. He had just put something huge out there, and Ilya was flipping tuna melts on a fucking skillet? That didn't seem fair.

"And if you had kissed me back." Ilya set the spatula down and rested his hands on the counter, looking across it at Shane. "Would you have regretted it in the morning?"

Oh.

Slowly, but with a certainty that could not be denied, Shane shook his head. It could have been the worst idea on the planet, and it might well have been, but that didn't mean that he would regret it.

"I should probably regret it," Shane admitted. "I *want* to think I would regret it because I know it's stupid, but I've wanted you to kiss me for a while now, so no. I wouldn't regret it. I *couldn't* if I wanted to."

God, it felt good to get that out. Shane spent so much of his life not saying the things that he was feeling, or if he did, it was half-truths, pieces of a puzzle that no one had enough of to truly solve. It felt like a weight was being lifted off his chest just *admitting* what he wanted to Ilya, and the relief of it was great enough that, at least for a moment, he didn't feel the anxiety of awaiting Ilya's response.

The response didn't come - or rather it didn't come with words.

Ilya switched off the burner and walked around the counter to where Shane had been watching him. Instinctively, Shane turned, watching as Ilya moved closer to him, backing him against the counter.

Shane's heart hammered against his chest so loudly that he was all but certain the *neighbors* would be able to hear it, never mind the man standing right in front of him. His breathing was suspended, his head spinning, dizzy with want, as Ilya closed the gap between them, but instead of kissing him, he placed his hands on Shane's thighs, pulling upwards, lifting Shane onto the counter top. The granite was cool against his ass, just the thin layer of his flannel sleep pants between him and the cold stone, but he didn't care, how could he? Ilya was *touching* him.

Ilya moved himself between Shane's legs, looking up at the young man.

"I have been wanting to kiss you for awhile now, too," Ilya said, resting his hands on Shane's hips, toying with the hem of his plain white t-shirt.

"And…" Shane gulped, barely able to get the words out. "If you do, will…will *you* regret it in the morning."

"No." Ilya smiled up at Shane, giving his hips a gentle squeeze. "Is not possible."

"Then…" Shane released a shaky breath. "Then please…"

“Please what?” Ilya scrunched his nose, smiling up at Shane as he moved his hands up to Shane’s waist, squeezing slightly, the soft fabric of Shane’s shirt bunching in his hands.

“Oh, fuck you!” Shane let out a startled laugh.

“Wow, right to the point,” Ilya teased.

“Shut up. You know that’s not-” He cut himself off because it wasn’t *not* what he wanted, it just wasn’t what he wanted *yet*. “Just…please kiss me. *Please*.”

Shane spent so much time giving of himself to others and asking for so little of what he really, truly wanted, but he wanted this so badly he couldn’t deny himself. He shuddered, feeling rewarded for his bravery as one of Ilya’s hands left his waist, moving up his chest, then his collar bone, his neck, to rest on his cheek.

Ilya drew Shane down, leaning upwards himself, and guided Shane into a gentle kiss.

Shane’s eyes fluttered closed, his legs wrapped around Ilya, and all thoughts of the show, of being grabbed, of being *frightened*, left his mind as he kissed Ilya back, melting into the other man’s warm, soft lips.

Ilya was clearly capable of being rough, but he kissed with a softness and proficiency that Shane could only have ever dreamed of, leaving Shane whining when Ilya’s lips left his own to travel to his neck.

“You can’t - you can’t leave a mark,” Shane whispered, pulling Ilya closer to him with his legs at the same time so that the other man would know that this was *not* an invitation to stop.

Ilya said nothing, but kept the kisses light, miles short of bruising, as he slipped a hand up Shane’s shirt, letting his palm wander the warm, smooth skin. His other hand quickly joined it, and he broke away from Shane just long enough to push the shirt up and off over his head.

“God, this is such a bad idea,” Shane whispered as he grabbed at Ilya’s tank top, tugging it off and tossing it aside.

“Do you want me to stop?” Ilya looked up at him, eyes searching Shane’s for any sign that this was no longer what he wanted.

“I think,” Shane whispered. “If you stop, I might die.”

“Well.” Ilya’s concerned gaze turned into a soft smile. “I would be a terrible bodyguard if I allowed this to happen.”

He hooked his hands back under Shane’s thighs, kissing him as he lifted him from the counter top. Shane’s legs tightened around Ilya’s hips, returning the kiss with everything that he had while allowing Ilya to carry him out of the kitchen.

Ilya was strong, capable, and Shane knew that he was putty in the other man's hands as he was carried not only *to* the staircase, but up it.

If Shane Hollander had felt like he was going to die earlier, well, now he was *sure* of it, but he couldn't find the will to care. If he was going to die at the hands, or rather the lips, of Ilya Rozanov, he was more than willing.

Chapter 9: Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

> Please note the change in rating. I wasn't sure where I wanted to take this rating-wise, and...now I do. Sex has always been such an important part of Shane and Ilya's story, and it felt like a disservice to not play with that.

"Wow." Shane lay back in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He was all but certain that he would never be able to shake the feeling of Ilya's mouth around him.

Just moments ago, he had seen stars. He had been a wreck in his own sheets, one hand fisted around his bedcovers, the other in Ilya's hair, as he was swallowed up by the other man. He was certain that his own performance had not been as skilled - he was unpracticed, but eager, and while Ilya hadn't come anywhere near as quickly as Shane had, at least he *had* come.

"Yes, is good, no?" Ilya smiled, lying back next to him.

"Yeah. That's…" Shane gulped. "I've never done that before, not…I mean, I've…but not with a man, not like this."

"Well, it was not bad at all for first time, then," Ilya said, leaning over and kissing Shane's shoulder blade.

"Hey!" Shane chuckled, looking over at him, cheeks still rosy. "Would it have been bad…if it *hadn't* been my first time?"

"No, but is nice to know you will only get better from here."

"Fuck you."

"Later."

"So…so that wasn't your first time, I take it?"

"No." Ilya shook his head.

"But in Russia…"

"I know." Ilya moved to his side, propping his head up on one elbow as he looked over at Shane. He lowered his free hand, trailing his fingertips up and down Shane's arm.

“Was it…another guy in your, I don’t know, what do you call them? Platoon? Unit?”

“No.” Ilya shook his head. “Not exactly. It was…my commanding officer’s son.”

“Oh shit, that sounds-”

“Like trouble?”

“Uh, yeah. Like major trouble.”

“Well,” Ilya reached out, nudging Shane. “I like trouble. Clearly.”

“Clearly.”

“But…you were safe? You didn’t get caught?”

“Uh, no. We were caught.” Ilya’s gaze dropped, looking down at the rumpled bedspread rather than Shane’s brown eyes.

“Oh, shit.” Shane sat up, looking down at Ilya. “What…what happened?”

“Well,” Ilya sighed. “His father did not want shame brought upon his son or his family, it could have hurt his own status in the organization,” Ilya reasoned. “So I was discharged with an ‘injury’, and was told to leave.”

“So…there was no injury?”

“There were injuries here and there, but nothing big, nothing to be released over, no. I think…he just wanted to save his own pride, wanted me away from Sasha, and the easiest way was to say I had been injured in the line of duty, and have me shipped off to somewhere else, anywhere else. I chose to come here. Svetlana and I go back to our childhoods, she offered me position with Vetrov, so.” He shrugged. “Here I am.”

“Oh…Ilya…”

“Is fine.” Ilya shook his head. “I…my father was Spetsnaz, my brother is Spetsnaz, it was…exepcted of me, I suppose. Never something that I chose for myself. This, at least, I sort of chose for myself, yes? But let’s not talk about that, we just had a good time, I would not wish to ruin it.”

“Did…did you love him?” Shane asked, unable to help himself. “Sasha?”

“No.” Ilya shook his head. “It was complicated, he was…there, available, we were both, you know - same secret,” he shrugged. “It made sense. We did not think we would get caught, we were careful, but…I suppose careful means less when everyone around you is trained to sniff out everything.”

“Were you-”

“Shane.” Ilya sat up, settling in next to Shane against the headboard. He took Shane’s chin in his hand, kissing him softly. “Please, let’s not talk about this.”

“Okay.” The soft kiss stole Shane’s breath, and the word came out in a low, barely audible tone as he leaned in for another.

Ilya returned the kiss for a moment, pulling away and patting Shane on the cheek before sliding out of bed.

“Where are you going?”

“*We* are going back downstairs,” Ilya stated, tossing Shane his sleep pants. “Because you still have not eaten.”

“Oh. Wow. I…yeah, I guess we got kinda distracted.”

“Yes, we did.”

Shirtless and spent, both young men made their way back to the kitchen where Ilya fired up the pan the half-finished tuna melts had been sitting in. Shane got them both soda - ginger ale for himself and a Coke for Ilya, and several minutes later, they were both at the table with their very late night snack.

“So, um,” Shane wiped a crumb of bread from the corner of his mouth. “That was…that was a really bad idea.”

“Probably, yes,” Ilya agreed.

“Oh.” Shane wilted slightly.

“What, you were hoping I would lie to you?” Ilya asked. “We both know that was terrible idea. Doesn’t mean it was not worth it, and…does not mean I would not do it again.”

“Yeah?” Shane asked, perking up, his tone lined with hope.

“Yes. The uh…deed has been done, no? I am attracted to you, you are attracted to me, we are going to be practically on top of each other on this tour for the next several months, we might as well enjoy ourselves, if is what we both want. Does not have to be anything. It is what you want?”

“Yeah.” Shane nodded. “It’s what I want.”

“Good.” Ilya smiled, taking a swig of his Coke. “Because I have a lot that I think I can teach you.”

“Fuck.” Shane gulped. “I…would like that.”

“I know that you will,” Ilya said confidently.

“But it has to…” Shane shook his head. “No one can know.”

“Yes, Hollander.” Ilya rolled his eyes. “I can keep a secret.”

“Okay. I’m sorry, I just…” Shane toyed with the crust of his tuna melt. “I had to say it.”

“I understand.”

=====

The next leg of the tour felt…easier.

He did a show in New Brunswick, the next night in Halifax, followed by two nights at Madison Square Garden in New York City. Shane came down from the highs on stage in hotel rooms, Ilya Rozanov backing him against walls, kissing him until he felt like he couldn’t breathe.

It was *incredible*.

“How did you get this scar?” Ilya kissed the scar on Shane’s left shoulder, tangled up in the sheets of Shane’s Philadelphia hotel room.

“Oh god.” Shane laughed, rolling onto his back, hiding the scar from view, and looking up at Ilya as the other man crawled over him.

“No, hey, it is sexy!” Ilya argued.

“It’s embarrassing. It’s not even a cool story.”

“Well, are you going to tell me this embarrassing story, or no?” Ilya asked, tilting his head to the side.

“What? No!” Shane shook his head.

“No?” Ilya leaned down, kissing Shane’s jaw, just below his ear.

“No.”

“No?” Ilya kissed Shane’s throat.

“Fuck. No.”

“And…how about now?” Ilya pressed his lips to Shane’s collar bone.

“*No.*”

Ilya kissed his way down Shane's chest, his abdomen, his hip.

"What about now?" Ilya asked, looking up at Shane after dropping a kiss on Shane's inner thigh.

"No!" Shane laughed.

"You sure? I think *someone* wants you to tell me," Ilya argued, eyeing Shane's stiffening cock.

"Fuck." Shane gasped as Ilya took him into his mouth.

Ilya's tongue licked along the underside of Shane's cock before swirling around it, teasing, playful in a way that Ilya had learned drove Shane crazy. Ilya began to suck, slowly, almost lazily, as Shane hardened inside of his mouth, but abruptly pulled away after only a few seconds.

"What the fuck?" Shane whined.

"Tell me," Ilya teased, kissing Shane's hip. "Where you got that scar."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I want to know!" Ilya pressed a kiss at the base of Shane's cock. "I will make it worth it, I promise."

"This is extortion," Shane objected. "They teach you this technique in fucking Spetsnaz?"

"No." Ilya chuckled. "This one I came up with on my own."

"Oh, you're evil."

"And you are caving."

"Fuck you." Shane groaned. "I was eight, we were at my parents' cottage by the lake. I stepped on a LEGO my mom had asked me to clean up like, 500 times, and fell backwards… right through a glass door."

"That…is not as embarrassing as I had hoped."

"What would you have preferred? I lost a fight with a loon?"

"What the fuck is a loon?"

"It's a bird." Shane laughed. "Nevermind. I told you, so…"

"Okay, alright."

Ilya took Shane back into his mouth. Gone was the laziness, replaced with vigorous, skilled movement.

“Oh, fuck, Ilya…” Shane arched his back slightly, reaching down, tangling one hand in Ilya’s curls, pulling, but just slightly.

It was embarrassing how quickly Ilya was able to bring him to climax. He had hoped that, as they spent more time together like this, he would be able to last longer, but there was just something about Ilya - maybe it was his skill, maybe it was just…*him*. Shane was powerless, and moments later, he was gasping, flopping back on the mattress as Ilya wiped his mouth.

“You would never survive an interrogation.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a reason I’m a pop star and not a spy.” Shane rolled his eyes.

“Ah, yes, the only two career options.”

“Shut up.” Shane rolled his eyes, but there was absolutely no vitriol to be found in his tone.

“Make me.”

Shane smiled, the playful glint in Ilya’s eyes inviting him to lean in and kiss the other man. Despite the fact that this had become a daily occurrence - making out, even if they didn’t go any further - Shane was not sure that he would ever get used to kissing Ilya Rozanov. The second their lips touched, Shane felt as though he were on fire. It was addictive, pulling him in, and when Ilya moved to break the kiss, Shane followed his lips, whining as Ilya rolled away from him.

“We have long drive tomorrow, you have to be up early, and you need your beauty sleep,” Ilya reminded him.

“I know.” Shane sighed. “I know.”

Shane watched as Ilya found his underwear, pulling them on before adding his jeans, his shirt - everything.

“I will see you in the morning.” Ilya walked to Shane’s side of the bed, kissing him once more before disappearing through the door of their adjoining rooms.

Shane knew, though, that sleep wasn’t coming. He could sleep on the tour bus, he had gotten good at that during his time with The Metros. Instead, he reached for the notebook on his bedside table, melodies and lyrics rushing through his mind.

He had written every night since he had begun hooking up with Ilya - fragments of songs, nothing fully cohesive that had come together, but he had the beginnings of an album that he wasn’t sure he could ever release.

=====

“I think…” Shane bit his lip, looking up at Ilya as they entered a hotel room in Miami, Florida. “I think I’m ready.”

The show that night had been electric, they all were, and he and Ilya had been fooling around for almost three weeks now.

“You…you are sure?”

“Yes.” Shane nodded. “I’m not…I don’t know…but I’ve been doing research.”

“You have been doing research?” Ilya looked impressed and…delighted?

“Yes, shut up. I’m new to this.”

“I will teach you.”

“I know, I know.” Shane sat down on the sofa in the sitting room of the suite. “But I wanted to be…prepared.”

“It will hurt,” Ilya said softly, sitting down on the sofa next to Shane.

“I know.” Shane gulped. “I’m not…I’m gay, Ilya. I’ve known this for awhile, I’m not…I have…”

“What?”

“I have a uh…a toy.” Shane avoided eye contact. “Not here, but back at home.”

“A…toy?” Ilya raised an eyebrow.

“Fuck, Ilya, a dildo.”

“Oh.” Ilya grinned. “You know this is not bad word, right? It is just a dildo.” Ilya shrugged. “Everyone should have one.”

“Oh my god.” Shane flushed.

“So you have…”

“YES! Yes, I have…practiced. Or…that’s not the right word, I just…”

“Hey.” Ilya pulled Shane into his lap. “Breathe, yes?” He kissed Shane, anchoring him to the moment, trying to bring him down from where it was clear he was beginning to get lost in his own head.

“Yes,” Shane whispered as he pulled away.

“I will be gentle.”

“You…you have what you need?”

“Yes.” Ilya nodded. “I thought it was perhaps wishful thinking, but always better to be prepared than not.”

“Good.”

“You are sure is what you want?” Ilya asked.

“I’m sure.” Shane nodded.

“Okay. Come on. Let’s find the bed.” He patted Shane’s thigh twice before gently easing Shane off of him and getting to his feet.

Ilya took Shane’s hand, helping him up off of the couch and leading him back towards the bedroom. They took their time, kissing, undressing, Shane neatly folding his clothes and resting them on the dresser while Ilya merely kicked his own into a pile.

“You were very good tonight,” Ilya whispered, pushing Shane back onto the bed and climbing over him.

“You don’t have to butter me up, Ilya.” Shane’s hands moved up, fingertips brushing against Ilya’s biceps.

Ilya smiled down at Shane, the gold cross necklace that Shane hadn’t realized Ilya *always* wore until he had started seeing him naked hanging down, partially filling the empty space between them.

“If you want to stop at any moment,” Ilya said softly. “Just tell me, I will stop.”

Shane nodded, his heart beginning to race as Ilya leaned down, kissing him. The metal of Ilya’s necklace grazed Shane’s chest as he leaned up into Ilya’s kiss, finding himself growing hard quickly as Ilya’s hands explored his body.

He whined when Ilya broke the kiss, sitting up and going to the bedside table to reach for the lube and condoms he had placed there while Shane had been folding his clothes.

“I am not going anywhere,” Ilya chuckled. “Just getting ready, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Shane watched as Ilya uncapped the lube, all of the breath leaving his body as Ilya applied some of it to his own fingers. Realistically, Shane knew that was a part of this - or at least that it should be, the stretching, but that didn’t mean that he had at all been prepared for the sight of it, and he lay back, covering his eyes with his upper arm. Ilya gently moved Shane’s legs apart, placing one hand on Shane’s hip to move him, just enough to give himself the access he needed.

“You are okay?” Ilya asked, fingers poised to enter Shane.

“I’m okay.” Shane nodded.

“Good.” Ilya leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane’s shoulder as he inserted one finger, then a second, moving around, exploring Shane, stretching him out.

“Fuck,” Shane groaned.

“Good?” Ilya asked carefully.

“Good.” Shane’s breathing was shallow, and god, if Ilya could take him apart like this with just two fingers, he was almost nervous about what was going to happen when he experienced the rest of him. For once in his life, however, Shane just tried to be in the moment, to not think, to let this happen.

He had wanted Ilya’s hands all over him for so long and now that he had them he just wanted to relax, to let the other man in, to let his desire flow throw him and take over.

Ilya took his time, and Shane wasn’t sure that he was going to be able to handle that. Sure, he knew that they were in no rush, they had all night, and Shane had never done this before. It was probably a grace, a kindness, that Ilya was giving so much attention to stretching him out, preparing him to take the other man, but Shane felt half-crazed with want.

“Please,” Shane breathed. “Please, Ilya. Fuck me.”

Ilya slowly removed his fingers and leaned up, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane’s lips. “As you wish,” he whispered.

Shane gasped a ragged breath as Ilya rested him on his back, tearing open one of the condoms and slipping it on.

“Don’t worry,” Ilya said with a teasing grin. “I will fit.”

“Fuck you,” Shane huffed out a laugh. “I know that.” The smile, the laughter, however, left his face instantly as Ilya finished applying lube to the condom, his erection slick and ready to enter Shane. “Fuck.”

This was real. This was happening.

“You are still okay? You still want this?” Ilya moved between Shane’s legs, leaning down over him and taking Shane’s wrists, pressing them lightly into the mattress as he kissed him.

“Yes, I still want *you*,” Shane said, his words pointed.

He didn’t want just any man. He was Shane Hollander, international pop star, if he had wanted just *any* man, he was sure he could have found one by now, one willing to sign an NDA and keep things quiet at the chance for a night with him. Hell, he probably could have

found many men, but he didn't *want* those men.

He wanted Ilya.

"Okay."

Ilya gazed at Shane, watching the other man's head sink back into the pillow as Ilya released his wrists, hands grazing up Shane's arms to his shoulders, and down his chest. He grabbed Shane's thighs, pushing them up so that Shane's knees were practically in his face. Shane whimpered, pressing his chin to his own right knee as Ilya held him in place.

God, how was he already such a mess?

"Deep breaths," Ilya cautioned as he lined up, guiding himself carefully into Shane.

"Jesus Christ," Shane muttered. Tears pricked at his eyes, though he squeezed them shut, gasping at the mix of pleasure and slight pain as he took Ilya in.

"Still okay?" Ilya asked, holding his position, waiting for confirmation.

"Still okay." Shane was barely able to get the words out, but they were just loud enough for Ilya to hear, just loud enough for Ilya to understand he had the green light.

He started off slow, making careful, easy thrusts into Shane, watching as Shane came unglued beneath him. Shane's fingers tangled in the bedsheets, his entire being alight in a manner he had not actually known possible, and god, did Ilya *know* what he was doing to him?

Once he found a comfortable rhythm, Ilya moved upwards, capturing Shane's lips with his own, swallowing down Shane's wanton moans. Slowly, Ilya moved from Shane's lips, kissing the corner of his mouth, his jaw, and then his neck.

"Oh my god," Shane whined, lifting his hips on instinct, taking Ilya deeper. "Fuck, Ilya…"

"Is still good?" Ilya asked, beginning to push a little harder.

"Fuck." Shane sucked in a sharp breath. "Yeah, yes. Still good."

"You are sure?"

Shane couldn't get any more words out as Ilya thrust inside of him, but he locked eyes with Ilya and nodded. He wanted to make sure that Ilya knew how much he wanted this, that he didn't care about the parts of it that hurt, that they were *greatly* out weighed by the pleasure. Shane's breathing was ragged, his cock absolutely aching, as Ilya ran a hand down his chest, taking Shane in his hand, gently stroking.

With a whimper, Shane came, spilling over Ilya's hand, all over his own chest. It took a couple more thrusts for Ilya to come, his own orgasm ripping through him as he collapsed on top of Shane.

“Fuck, Hollander.” Ilya didn’t seem to care about the mess between them as he pressed his face into Shane’s sweat-slick neck, kissing any skin he could find with soft lips while he worked to regain his breath.

“That…” Shane gasped. “That was so hot.”

“Yes.” Ilya rolled off of Shane, landing on his own back, both of them resting on the hotel bed, looking up at the ceiling. “You are alright?”

“Yeah. Very alright.” Shane paused. “A little sore, I think, but…I like it. I like feeling you. I hope I still feel it tomorrow.”

“Oh, Shane…” Ilya turned his head so that he was looking at the other man. “You keep talking like that and you are going to kill me.”

“Yeah, well, you keep fucking me like that, and *you’re* gonna kill *me*.” Shane looked around at the mess on his chest, on the bedclothes, and sighed. “Thank god we have another bed.”

“Oh, so you think you are sleeping in my bed tonight?” Ilya asked with a gentle laugh.

“Well I’m certainly not sleeping in this one,” Shane pointed out.

Silence fell between them.

Would it be possible to sleep in this bed? Absolutely. All of the hotel staff had had to sign NDAs. Housekeeping could come up, change the bed spread, the sheets, while Ilya ducked off into the other room, and no one would even know it was him that Shane had been with. The Metros had had girls in hotel rooms all the time and it had never been a problem, but that wasn’t really the point.

Shane *wanted* to sleep in Ilya’s bed. *With* Ilya.

“Okay.” Ilya smiled, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane’s shoulder. “You go shower, I will clean up in here some, shower myself and I will meet you in my room.”

The tightness that had begun to build in Shane’s chest as he waited for Ilya to make a decision about their sleeping arrangements released, all worry that Ilya had been about to reject him dissipating.

Shane took his time in the shower. It wasn’t as nice as the shower in his own home, but these premium hotel suites usually had good water pressure at least, and for that, he was grateful. His body ached slightly from Ilya, but at the same time, he was almost hesitant to wash the other man off of him.

Shane had had sex before, but not like this. Where penetration had been concerned, it had just been him trying his best, disappointing the young women that he was trying so hard to please, because *they* hadn’t been wrong, per se, but the *situation* had been wrong. Women had just

never felt right to him, and he had learned the hard way that trying to force it wouldn't change that.

Ilya had felt right. Taking Ilya in, lying back and letting the gorgeous, strong man guide him through the single greatest orgasm of his life, had been transformative. His head was filled with lyrics as he washed himself clean, but they would have to wait. There was a gorgeous man waiting for him one room over, and Shane was just out of his head enough to not overthink it.

He got out of the shower and dried off, looking at himself in the mirror. He didn't look any different than he had the night before, or six months ago, but he *felt* different, and as he wrapped the towel around his waist, not bothering with clothes as he entered Ilya's room through the door that joined theirs, he wondered if anyone would be able to tell that he was changed.

Ilya, it seemed, had been more efficient than Shane. He was already showered, in a pair of sweatpants when Shane entered and looking over something on his laptop, his brow furrowed in concern, when Shane entered the room.

"Oh, should I…get clothes?" Shane asked, gesturing to the towel around his waist.

"Mmm, no." Ilya shook his head, closing his laptop and walking over to Shane, all concern immediately disappearing from his face. He put his hand on Shane's chin and guided him upwards and into a kiss. "Absolutely not."

"Okay." Shane let his shoulders relax, his hands moving to rest on Ilya's bare chest, fingers lightly tracing over the moles on Ilya's skin.

"Stop." Ilya gently took Shane's wrists, pulling his hands away.

"What? Why?"

"I…they are bad, I know."

"What? No." Shane shook his head. "They're beautiful. They're like stars, like constellations all over your body. I wanna kiss every single one of them."

That stopped Ilya short. He dropped Shane's wrists, looking at the other man, true surprise on his face, perhaps for the first time since Shane had met him.

"Really?"

"Really." Shane rested his hand on Ilya's waist and dropped a gentle kiss to one of the moles on Ilya's shoulder. "They're beautiful, Ilya."

"Well…" Ilya lifted a hand, brushing the pad of his thumb across the freckles on Shane's left cheek. "Maybe not as beautiful as your freckles."

“Shut up.” Shane flushed, ducking his head down.

This wasn’t the first time that someone had told him that his freckles were beautiful, not even close, but feeling Ilya’s thumb on them, hearing him say those words, hit harder than anyone had before. Those words coming from Ilya made him *feel* truly beautiful.

“Come on, it is late, we should go to bed.” Ilya stepped backwards, taking Shane’s hand and pulling him to the edge of the still-made bed. “This…I think you do not need.” Ilya smirked, pulling the towel away from Shane’s waist and tossing it to the floor.

“Well, now that’s just not fair,” Shane said.

“True. I suppose we will have to make it fair.”

Shane watched Ilya hook his fingers in the waistband of his own sweats, pushing them off and to the ground.

“Yeah.” Shane gulped. “You’re beautiful.”

“Shut up and come to bed.” Ilya turned the bed down and crawled in, scooting back so that there was plenty of room for Shane to follow.

Wordlessly, Shane obliged. He climbed into the cool sheets, letting Ilya guide him backwards towards the center of the bed. As Ilya’s chest pressed against Shane’s back, his arms going around Shane, the young man tensed. He had never done this, never been held like this - it was something he had barely even let himself *want*, let alone *have*.

“Relax,” Ilya whispered, pressing the ghost of a kiss to the back of Shane’s neck.

Shane released a soft breath, following Ilya’s instructions without even thinking as Ilya rested his chin on Shane’s shoulder.

Shane had done things before, had sex before, but as he fell asleep next to Ilya, he knew that *this* was what he would always remember as his *real* first. His life would take him many places still, he knew that, but he was certain that he would always remember this - being 26 in a hotel room in Miami with Ilya Rozanov.

Chapter 10: Chapter Ten

QueenHuntress *@huntress442*
Um…okay. Has anyone heard Scott Hunter's new single? #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

BlueMoonBaby *@hunterrrrrrz*
O. M. G. I'm obsessed #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

Scott Hunter Updates *@schunterupdates*
New surprise single from our boy Scott Hunter out now! EVERYONE stream Blue Moon Over Brooklyn RIGHT now it is so good holy shit. #ScottHunter #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #LeagueRecords

Music Dude *@musicguy3208*
@schunterupdates I thought he died. Oh, no, that was just his career.

I<3Scott *@anniekmusiclvr*
@schunterupdates ignore the haters holy shit this is so good???????

THE KING IS BACK *@scottcunter*
Scott fucking Hunter has fucking reinvented yearning holy shit he sounds like he is gonna DIE if he can't kiss that girl and I'm gonna die cause it's not me #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

Music Dude *@musicguy3208*
Oh fuck, guys, Blue Moon Over Brooklyn is actually really good. Is Scott Hunter actually talented? #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #ScottHunter #LeagueRecords #MusicDudeRec

I<3Scott *@anniekmusiclvr*
@musicguy3208 man shut the fuck up

I<3Scott *@anniekmusiclvr*
@musicguy3208 …but also yes, welcome to the party you are SO late but we go all night!

Scott Hunter Updates *@schunterupdates*
Okay, I have listened to this song like 20 times already this morning this is hands down the best thing he's ever released. I am so proud of him, if League Records doesn't promote this… we ride at dawn. Let's get our boy back on the charts where he belongs! #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #ScottHunter #ScottHunterIsBackParty

TheHunterSoldier *@th3huntrsoldier*
@schunterupdates Doing my part, let's lead him to the top! This song is SO good. #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #ScottHunterIsBackParty

UJustMetAGirlNamedMaria *@smoothiegirl*
Girl. GIRL. G I R L!!!!!!

THE KING IS BACK *@scottcunter*
Okay does anyone know who this song is about?! Did we even know he was seeing anyone? She dumped our KING she is dead. #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

I<3Scott *@anniekmusiclvr*
@scottcunter I KNOW HE SOUNDS SO SAD BUT ALSO THOSE LYRICS HOLY SHIT!!! (Also lol @ your username). #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #ScottHunterIsBackParty

TheHunterSoldier *@the3huntrsoldier*
Our boy is in love. Down bad. Eat your heart out Shane Hollander, we are coming for your number one spot. #ScottHunter

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
@th3huntrsoldier damn, chill Shaniac central is all over this song, most of us like Scott, but do NOT come for Shane.

ShaydenShipper *@shaaaayden*
@th3huntrsoldier get my boys name out of your mouth right the fuck now
But also holy shit BMOB is acutally fucking fire. #ShaydenIsReal #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

ScottHunterApologist *@ScottyDoesnttKnow*
Blue Moon Over Brooklyn listening party at Black Cat Cafe ALL day my boss gave me the aux babyyyyyy! #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #ScottHunter #ListeningParty #BlackCatCafe

STREAMBMOB!! *@scothunterrrrrrs*
Okay so like I know I'm biased but this is the greatest song EVER WRITTEN #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #ScottHunterIsBackParty

BMOBOUTNOW *@huntrixxx*
@scothunterrrrrs like yes but also it's the way he sings it? Like he can barely breathe without her? It's so sad and so romantic? Like all at once? I'm never getting out of bed again? #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

UJustMetAGirlNamedMaria *@smoothiegirl*
Why are u all assuming it's a 'her'? #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

ScottHunterApologist *@ScottyDoesnttKnow*
@smoothiegirl lololol Scott Hunter's not gay. I fucking wish. But no.

ScottScottScott *@mayday222*
@TheScottHunter who is this song about? #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

IDreamedThis *@hunterfan5*
@TheScottHunter Scott, who is this song about?? This is crazy?? #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

Shane Hollander (Hat Trick Out Now) *@ShaneHollanderOfficial*
Everyone go listen to Scott Hunter's new single, Blue Moon Over Brooklyn, out now! @TheScottHunter Man, this song is really good, I am honored to share a label with you. #ScottHunter #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn #LeagueRecords #ScottHunterIsBackParty

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
Alright Shaniacs, the king has spoken! Let's help the Hunters get Scott on the charts! #BlueMoonOverBrooklyn

---

"That tweet was a classy move, Shane, I'm proud of you." Yuna reached out, giving Shane's arm a gentle squeeze.

Shane had been on the tour bus between cities when he had gotten word of Scott's new single, but the second he had listened to it, he had known that it was something special. An album was coming, he was sure of it, but Shane had pushed all of that from his mind to focus on his own show.

Now, though, that show was over, and his mother, eternally in strategizing mode, had decided to have a meeting in Shane's suite.

"Yeah, well, if I'm going to lose the number one spot, I'm not gonna let the narrative be that I'm bitter about it," Shane said with a slight smile. "Besides, the song is good."

"It's *really* good," Yuna agreed. "Maybe we should get you in the studio with him. I didn't know he could write like that but I looked it up and he has the sole writing credit, you two together-"

"Mom." Shane cut her off. "It's okay, it doesn't always have to be a business deal, he can just have this. Besides, I like to write alone now."

"Yes, and your songs are good, Shane, but you're young. Getting you writing with someone like him who's been around the block a few times…"

"He is one million years old," Ilya interjected from where he sat, his legs over the arm of a chair in Shane's hotel suite, doing…something, as usual, on his laptop. "I am surprised he can still sing."

"He's like forty," Shane rolled his eyes.

"Same thing." Ilya shrugged.

"That's not even that old!" Shane snorted with laughter.

"Well, regardless, he's going to knock you off the charts, I think." Yuna's tone was calm, but there was the worry in her eyes, the "manager" side of her twitching to keep her client at the top.

"I know, mom. It's okay. *24* has been the number one for weeks now, I can handle being number 2."

"Yes, of course, but…are you writing?" Yuna asked.

“Always.” Shane nodded.

“Anything good?”

Shane’s gaze flitted, however briefly, to Ilya, then right back to his own hands, his cheeks turning the lightest tinge of pink. “Yeah, I think some of it might be.”

“Okay, good, because you probably should start at least thinking about your sophomore album.” Yuna nodded. “*Hat Trick* was a shot straight to the damn moon, and I am so proud of you, but we both know how hard it is for an artist to strike gold like that twice.”

“Yeah, mom. I know. I’m working on it, I promise.” Shane offered her a smile, thinking about his notebook, about the lyrics, the melodies that had taken him over these past few weeks.

He knew that what he had was good, but he also knew that he had to keep it to himself, at least for now. None of what he had written in these past few weeks would be suitable for release, even if it was polished and finished. He was going to have to get his head out of the Ilya Rozanov haze and write something he could actually show her.

“Okay, well, I trust you, I - oh, hmm.” Yuna’s brow furrowed as her phone rang. “It’s Crowell.”

“Form League?” Shane asked, though he already knew the answer.

“That’s the one. It’s late, I wonder what he could possibly want. I’ll just-” Yuna stood, going to the bedroom and closing the door as she answered the call, leaving Shane and Ilya alone in the sitting room.

“Fuck.” Shane buried his face in his hands, and instantly, Ilya closed his laptop, moving to the couch beside him.

“What is wrong?” Ilya put his hand on Shane’s back, rubbing slow, gentle circles, the fabric of Shane’s white shirt bunching under Ilya’s hand.

“Don’t…my mom is in the next room.” Shane snapped, pulling away from Ilya’s touch.

Ilya yanked his hand back, smarting as though he had been stung, the look on his face, momentarily, a portrait of shock.

“Shit, sorry. I just…his song is really good, Ilya.”

“So what?” Ilya frowned. “There are a lot of good songs, millions of good songs. Your songs are good, too. He has one good song, you have whole album, so what? You have notebook full of future good songs, no?”

“It’s just…pressure. I’m gonna…people are going to start asking what’s next, and I don’t… know what’s next.”

“But you told your mom you had songs. I have seen you writing in your little book, is it not songs?”

“No, no, it is songs, it’s lyrics, some melodies,” Shane said. “But they’re…different.” He flushed. “And some of them are close, maybe, but none of them are finished.”

“So finish them.”

“It’s not that simple, Ilya.”

“No?” Ilya tilted his head to the side. “Scott Hunter is 900 years old. If he can do it, you can do it.”

Shane snorted with laughter, some of the worry and anxiety disappearing from his face at both Ilya’s joke and his encouragement.

“You’re right. Well not about him being 900 years old, but the song stuff - I know, it’s just…” He sighed. “Sorry. Sometimes I start to panic a little bit, when I’m not the best at something, like when someone tops me.”

“Funny, I hadn’t noticed any panic when *I-”*

“Ilya!” Shane’s face reddened. “That’s not - my mom is *right* there!”

“She is on phone, door is closed, she did not hear me.”

“Even so, that’s not what I meant and you know it,” Shane reasoned.

“Well hey,” Ilya shrugged. “Maybe now your evil stalker will start sending his kidnapping threads to Scott Hunter and leave you alone.”

“You shouldn’t joke about that, it’s not - wait.” Shane frowned. “Kidnapping threats? No one said anything about…Ilya…” Shane’s face turned stony. “Have there been more threats?”

Shane hadn’t heard anything, not since the doll, and he had hoped that it had just…gone away, that whoever was upset with him had given up. Now, he felt goosebumps rise on his arms, a fear that he had let subside, lured into comfort by the presence of Ilya and the lack of headless dolls, returning to him.

“No, it was just an example, like you said, from your Metros days.”

“Who’s the bad liar now?” Shane shot back. “Have there been more threats?” This time, his tone was sharper, more pointed.

“It…is possible, yes.” Ilya bowed his head, eyes avoiding Shane’s.

“*Credible* threats?”

“A few.”

“From the same person?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Fuck. Why didn’t you tell me?” Shane asked.

“What would it have changed?” Ilya asked. “It would only have made you worry, and for nothing. I will still be here. You will still play your tour and I will still not let *anything* happen to you.”

This time, when Ilya rested his hand on Shane’s thigh, Shane didn’t pull away. He let the comfort of the other man’s touch calm him, grounding him back to this hotel room, this couch.

“No, you’re right.” Shane gulped, leaning back on the sofa, covering his eyes with his arms.

“I trust you to write good songs and you trust me to keep you safe, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane whispered. “It’s just a lot, and I’m not used to being alone with all of it.”

“Well, you may not have Cheesy Pike by your side every night, but I do not think is fair to say you are alone. Your mother is here, your father is mostly here, I am here…”

“Can you stop being right for like five minutes and just let me be upset?”

“Mmm, no, I do not think so.”

That returned the smile to Shane’s face and he lowered his arms, looking at Ilya, his expression softening.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “I really want to kiss you right now.”

“Yes, me too.” Ilya gave Shane’s thigh a squeeze before pulling his hand away. “Later.”

“Later.” Shane agreed.

“Okay, that was - whoa.” Yuna raised an eyebrow as her son started with her return to the room. “Shane, are you okay?”

“Yeah, just too much coffee.” He hesitated. “What did Crowell want?”

“A couple of things.” Yuna eyed the spot on the couch where Ilya now sat, suspicion in her gaze for a brief moment before she shrugged, going to sit in the chair that Ilya had previously occupied. “First off, the label is having an album announcement party for Scott Hunter. It sounds like they weren’t really expecting…all of this, but since it’s happening, they want to capitalize on it, and they want you to be there. It will be in a week, and it’s an off night, so you will fly to Los Angeles, attend the party, and then link back up with your tour for two nights in New Orleans.”

Shane nodded, but Ilya straightened.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, no.” Ilya shook his head. “Absolutely not. That is not enough time, it is too quick, it would not be safe. The party, the travel, that is not enough time to lock everything down.”

“Hey, don’t worry, I asked Crowell about that, Shane’s safety is my top priority,” Yuna said. “You will travel with him, and Crowell assured me there would be top notch additional security.”

“It’s okay, I-Rozanov,” Shane said, avoiding using Ilya’s name in front of his mother. Sure, it probably wouldn’t be the worst thing, considering how much time they were spending together, but it still felt like too much, like something he wasn’t ready to share with anyone *but* Ilya. Shane knew that Yuna would go off like a bomb if she found out that Shane was fucking his bodyguard, and the last thing that they needed right now was for her to sniff them out. “I’m sure it’ll be fine, I want to be there to support Scott. He was kind to me when League signed me solo. He came to my album release.”

“Great,” Yuna said. “Then hopefully you won’t mind the other request.” She shifted slightly.

“Mom, you’re making me nervous.” Shane looked over at her, discomfort evident on her face.

“No, it’s nothing big, he just…has asked if you would consider adding a song to your setlist, covering something of Scott’s. I know your setlist is your baby, but your tweet got a lot of attention,” she said. “Scott’s fans tend to trend a little older than yours, he thinks if you can help pull your fanbase in, it will be good for Scott’s single, and then his album, and the record label. On the other end, it might pull some of Scott’s fanbase to you. You’ve said multiple times that you want to mature as an artist, a slightly older fanbase might help usher you into that.”

“It’s fine.” Shane shrugged. Did he love the idea of Crowell telling him what to do with his setlist? Not really, but this did not seem like the hill to die on tonight. “I’ll cover *Angels & Demons*.”

“That was fast.” Yuna furrowed her brow.

“It’s my favorite Scott Hunter song, well.” He chuckled. “Second favorite now, I guess, but it would be tacky to cover his new single before he’s even had a chance to play it live, even if it is his best song.”

“*Blue Moon Over Brooklyn* is such a stupid name,” Yuna bemoaned. “But it’s a really, really good song.”

“I didn’t know he had it in him,” Shane admitted.

“I don’t think anyone did,” Yuna shrugged. “It must be hard, loving someone you simply can’t have.”

“Yeah…he must really be lovesick to write a song like that.” Shane felt his stomach twist, and he kept his gaze avoidant, away from Ilya.

Whoever Scott was singing about longing for, about missing, it wasn’t the same as what he and Ilya had going on.

What Shane and Ilya had was physical, it was fun, that was all. If Shane felt butterflies when Ilya caught his eye, well, that was a problem that he was just going to have to figure out how to solve.

“I do not like this,” Ilya said, pacing the room once Yuna had left. “The party, it is too many unknown variables, it is too quick, it does not feel safe.”

“Ilya.” Shane reached out, placing a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “It’s fine. You’re fine. I will be fine. If you’re thrown off with last minute planning, there’s no way my stalker or whatever they are is gonna have time to make those adjustments better than you. Security at League parties is always way over the top anyways because they want to protect their assets. I’tll be fine.””

“Oh, is this what you are?” Ilya asked. “An asset?”

“To them, yes.” Shane nodded. It didn’t sound good, or glamorous, he knew that, but he also wasn’t in denial about any of that, he never had been. The second his music flopped, well, he could be out as quickly as he had been in.

Until recently, Scott Hunter’s career had been in the dumps. Not everyone was able to claw their way back out in the manner he was apparently capable of.

“Hmm.” Ilya nodded, stopping his pacing, looking at Shane. “This industry is terrible.”

“Yeah,” Shane smiled gently. “Probably, but…I love being a musician. If this is how it’s gotta be, it’s how it’s gotta be. It’s worth it to me.”

“Okay.” Ilya nodded. “I will make sure party is safe for you.”

“Thank you.” Shane leaned in, kissing him softly.

It was spontaneous, and maybe he shouldn’t have done it - drop a kiss so gentle on Ilya’s lips when they weren’t pawing at each other - but at the same time, it had felt right in the moment, and Ilya hadn’t pulled away.

They hadn’t hooked up the last few nights. There had been too much going on, things had been too busy, and Shane, after getting a taste of sharing a bed with Ilya, wanted more. He didn’t know how to ask for it, though. This could never *be* something real. This would end the second the tour was over, the second Ilya was reassigned. This lifestyle was so fast, so

fleeting, people didn't stay long, and Shane knew that. He couldn't get attached to Ilya, which was becoming a real fucking problem, but one that he was struggling to avoid.

Ilya put his hands on Shane's hips, drawing him in. "Do you want to go to bed?" he asked. "Is getting late."

"No." Shane shook his head, not breaking eye contact as he gazed into Ilya's eyes.

"No?"

"No." Shane's voice was low, soft, mesmerized by Ilya's eyes.

"Then…what is it you want?" Ilya playfully tilted his head to the side.

"I think you know."

"Mmm, I think that you should say it," Ilya teased. "Just to be sure that we are on the same page. It would be a terrible tragedy if I were to be wrong about this. Very embarrassing for us both."

"Ilya…"

"Shane…"

Shane flushed, his cheeks burning as Ilya maintained eye contact. It was such a stark contrast, the Ilya that was toying with him now versus the Ilya that everyone else saw, the bodyguard who stood tall, severe, his eyes everywhere, never locking on just one thing.

Now, the gaze that took in absolutely everything, those eyes that missed *nothing,* were locked on Shane. He felt as though he were going to melt.

"I want you to take me to bed."

"You just said you did not want to go to bed," Ilya let out a heavy, exasperated, melodramatic sigh.

"Going to bed and you taking me to bed are not the same thing, and you know it."

Shane did his best to hide the way that his heart was pounding in his chest, though he was almost certain that Ilya could hear it, they were so close. Shane wanted this. He wanted Ilya's lips on his, wanted Ilya's hands all over his body, wanted Ilya *everywhere*.

Fortunately, it did not seem Shane was alone in that sentiment.

Ilya reached out, stroking his hand down Shane's throat before resting at the base of it. He didn't squeeze, but Shane sucked in a sharp breath as Ilya kept it in place, leaning in to kiss him.

This kiss was slower, deeper than the more frantic makeouts they often engaged in after hitting the hotel room following a show, and Shane reveled in it. His breath was shaky, shallow, as Ilya's hands trailed from his throat down his sides and to his thighs, lifting Shane effortlessly as they kissed and, just as Shane had requested, taking him to bed.

"You…are really good at that, you know," Shane said, lying back in the bed, freshly showered on cool, clean sheets.

"You are not so bad yourself. You are a quick learner, and very hot." Ilya climbed into the bed, lying down on his stomach, his head turned to look at Shane.

"Shut up." Shane's smile was soft, almost lazy, as he reached out a hand, running his fingers over the moles on Ilya's back, tracing invisible lines between them. "Can I ask you a question?" Shane asked, his fingers still moving lazily over Ilya's broad, muscled back.

"You can. I cannot promise to answer."

"Was…your nightmare that already happened," he said softly. "Was that the thing with your commanding officer's son? Getting caught?"

Shane felt Ilya tense under his hand, a split second reaction before the other man recalibrated and he let out a breath, relaxing again into the mattress.

"No." Ilya shook his head. "Okay, is my turn for question," he said quickly.

"Alright." Shane frowned. He wasn't the best at reading people, not by a long shot, but he also wasn't totally stupid. Ilya was avoiding talking about his past, and that was fine. He couldn't ask Ilya to tell him the worst things that had ever happened to him. His life had clearly been so different than Shane's had been.

They were both 26, maybe, but what a different 26 years they had lived.

"How did you get into all of this?" He asked. "Into the music? And I do not want the answer you give to the radio stations, to the interviews," he said. "I do not want to hear some sound bite about how you always felt it in you, blah blah blah, and then you met the other boys, and click. How did you really get into it?"

The frown disappeared from Shane's face. That was a personal question, the kind of thing that Ilya had stayed away from in the past, because it really did not matter in the grand scheme of keeping Shane safe. That meant he was asking because he was curious.

He was asking because he wanted to *know* Shane.

"My dad - well both my parents played music in the car, but my dad always liked to sing along, we would play this game sometimes on long trips, where someone would say a word, and the first person to sing a song with that word in it got to pick the next word, but like, it had to be a real song, so I always got destroyed because when I was a kid they knew more songs than I did, but…" he shrugged. "I was pretty good at the singing part, and my parents

sort of let me run with that. I joined a choir, I started going to music camps, I was *good* at it. I liked being good at it, and at some point, that love of being *good* at something turned into a love of *doing* that thing, and…yeah." Shane shrugged. "Then I met the boys, blah blah blah, and click." He snapped his fingers, teasing Ilya slightly.

"So you did not always love it."

"I always loved *parts* of it," Shane admitted. "And now I just…can't imagine doing anything else. Nothing feels better than performing my own songs to my fans on stage."

"Nothing?" Ilya waggled his eyebrows, reaching a hand lazy over to give Shane's bare ass a gentle squeeze.

"Nothing," Shane agreed. "But…*that* is a close second."

Ilya huffed, then shrugged. "I suppose I will take close second."

Shane leaned forward, pressing a kiss to one of the more pronounced moles on Ilya's back. "A very, *very* close second."

"Ah, is this challenge?" Ilya asked. "I will see what I have to do to become first?"

"No." Shane chuckled. "No. I don't think anything could ever beat being on stage, I'm just saying I like having fun with you. A lot."

"Yes." Ilya reached out, brushing some of Shane's dark hair from his eyes. "I like having *fun* with you, too."

A silence fell over the room. Shane was spent from the show that night, from discussing everything concerning Scott Hunter, League Records. All that he wanted was to close his eyes and fall asleep in Ilya Rozanov's bed…so he did.

When Shane woke, it was still dark, moonlight illuminating the room, casting a gorgeous glow over Ilya as he slept. Shane was careful as he sat up, not wanting to disturb the other man. Ilya was a very light sleeper, and rarely looked peaceful. He was alert or he was playful or he was being downright *sinful*, but peaceful? Never. Shane didn't know if he would ever see this moment again. He wanted to take it in.

This was a face, a body, that people would go to war over, he was certain of it, and Ilya was in *Shane's* bed…or rather, they were both in Ilya's hotel bed, the bed in Shane's suite mussed from their earlier activities.

Maybe it was fleeting - no - it was *definitely* fleeting, but at least for now, Shane could sit there, gaze down at the Adonis tangled up in sheets, and think about how nice it was to finally be able to show this part of himself, *all* of himself, to someone else.

Chapter 11: Chapter Eleven

“That sounds nice, what is that?” Ilya walked over to where Shane was sat on the sofa of the private jet, strumming on his guitar.

“It’s a guitar,” Shane said.

“Oh, very funny,” Ilya said, rolling his eyes.

“Just a new song I’m working on.”

“Does it have lyrics?”

“Some.” Shane nodded.

“Can I hear them?”

“No.” Shane could feel heat rising in his neck. “It’s not done. I don’t like playing my stuff for anyone before it’s done.”

“Can you tell me what it’s about?”

Shane was certain, now, that the heat had reached his cheeks, likely tinting them with a shade of pink that he was sure that Ilya with his infinite perception would not miss.

“Sex.”

“Ohhh.” Ilya’s eyes widened…and brightened. “Sex with who?”

“Shut up.” Shane ducked his head down.

“So Shane Hollander is writing songs about sex now, huh?” He tilted his head to the side. “That will not alienate your fanbase?”

“Well, some of the greatest, uh, sex songs of all time…it’s kinda hidden in the lyrics,” he said. “So that’s sort of the key, right? Writing a song about sex that’s not, maybe, obviously about sex.”

“Okay…”

“Here, so…” Shane picked his acoustic guitar back up, placing it in his lap.

He began to strum a melody, familiar, probably to most on the plane. Ilya leaned back in the seat, nodding his head, clearly recognizing the melody as Shane began to sing, coming in at the chorus to prove his point as easily as possible.

“Take me to church, I’ll worship like a dog at the shrine of your lies/I’ll tell you my sins so you can sharpen your knife/Offer me that deathless death/Oh, good god, let me give you my life.”

He strummed a short outro, looking to Ilya.

“Deathless death,” he said softly, his cheeks still pink. “That’s a poetic way of uh…you know…”

“I do not know,” Ilya said.

From Ilya’s expression, Shane honestly couldn’t tell if he did know or not. Maybe he was fucking with Shane, but there was also a good chance that he just…didn’t know about the little death, the “biblical” death.

“Um, le petit mort?” Shane tried. “The little death?”

Ilya’s face was blank.

“Orgasm.” Shane gulped. “It’s an orgasm. Deathless death.”

“Oh.” Ilya nodded. “That…is beautiful.”

“That’s what I’m saying. There are - I mean, there is nothing wrong with songs that are overtly about sex, there are billions of them and people love them, I love them, but…that’s not really what I’m going for.”

“You are trying to be *Take Me to Church* guy?”

“No, no, god no, I’m not trying to be Hozier, that’s impossible, just…that sort of lyrical style, burying the meaning underneath entendres and poetry. It’s not just Hozier. Here.”

Shane began to play again, this one a little faster, a bit more upbeat, once again, coming in at the chorus.

"When you call my name/It’s like a little prayer/I’m down on my knees/Let me take you there/In the midnight hour, I can feel your power/Just like a prayer/You know I’ll take you there.”

“Also about the deathless death?” Ilya asked.

“Sort of.” Shane nodded. “Um, head, moreso, maybe?”

“Fuck,” Ilya chuckled. “I had no idea.”

“I think a lot of people don’t, I mean, you have to really think about it. There are songs people sing along to every day that no one knows what they’re about like uh, there’s this

popular song from the 90s, *Semi-Charmed Life*, it's…literally about crystal meth, it *says* in the lyrics 'doing crystal meth will lift you up until you break' and a lot of people don't know that. They've heard the song a million times, and have no idea." He smiled slightly.

"So what is your favorite?"

"My favorite song?" Shane asked, his eyes wide.

"No, your favorite song about sex that no one really knows is about sex," Ilya said.

"Oh. Well…I mean, it's not that *no one* knows, it's just songs that people sort of don't…"

"You are stalling, you do not have an answer?"

"No, I do."

"Then play it." Ilya reached out, patting the guitar.

"Okay, fine." Shane re-situated himself with the guitar, beginning again to strum. This time, though, as he played and began to sing, he closed his eyes.

"There was a time you let me know/What's real and going on below/But now you never show it to me, do you?/And remember when I moved in you/The holy dark was moving to/And every breath we drew was hallelujah/Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah…"

Shane trailed off, opening his eyes, letting out a soft breath as he found himself looking into Ilya's blue-green eyes.

"Yes," Ilya said softly. "I think that might be my favorite one, too."

Shane didn't say anything, he just gazed at Ilya, his hands still on his guitar, because he was afraid that if he didn't keep them there, gripping the instrument tight, he would reach for Ilya, and he couldn't do that. They weren't alone on this plane, and even the way that he was *looking* at his bodyguard was probably a bad idea.

"That was beautiful, you know," Ilya said.

"Yeah, it's a beautiful song." Shane nodded. "That verse actually wasn't in the original version of the song, Jeff Buckley added it, I think, except his version says "holy dove" instead of "holy dark". Rufus Wainwright changed it to "holy dark", and that's my favorite version. Allison Crowe's version says "holy ghost", so it's really just-"

"No," Ilya shook his head. "What *you* played was beautiful. The way that *you* sang it."

"Oh." Shane gulped hard. "Thank you. I think…" he paused. "That might be the first time I've played that song where I really understood it. In reality, and not…not the abstract."

He shouldn't have said that, and he knew it. He should have said 'thank you' and left it at

that, but at the same time, they both knew that he had never really enjoyed sex much before Ilya. Before Ilya, it had been a perfunctory thing, something that he did in an attempt to be "normal", in an attempt to please women that he was never going to please.

Now, though? He understood it. When Ilya had him on his back tangled in the bedsheets, every breath *did* feel like hallelujah. Ilya was able to draw things out of him that no one else ever had, so yeah. The lyrics to the song that he was writing were about sex, about sex with *Ilya*, and there was no way the other man wouldn't know it. Was there really any point in trying to deny it?

Shane had felt alive many times in his life, every night on stage, for starters, but being in bed with Ilya was a different kind of 'alive' entirely. It was a kind of 'alive' that would seep into his music, he was sure, whether he meant for it to happen or not.

"You should cover it."

"No." Shane shook his head. "It's been done to death, everyone-"

"Who cares about everyone?" Ilya asked. "You love the song?"

"Yes." Shane gulped.

"You connect to it? You *understand* it now?" He nudged his knee against Shane's fleetingly.

"Yes."

"Whatever you just did there, it was just one verse, but it was different from the other two you played. You closed your eyes, your entire body changed, your voice, you were *in* the song. It isn't your song, maybe, but just then, it felt like it was."

"Well, I mean, maybe, but there's licensing, and royalties…"

"This is what you have League Records for, no?" Ilya tilted his head to the side.

"Are you my bodyguard or my manager? If you try and come for my mom's job, she'll have you killed. Hell, she'll kill you herself."

"I do believe that she could," Ilya admitted. "But no, I just think you have this thing that you love, this thing that you have made your own, and so, so beautiful. It deserves to be heard by more than just me."

Shane sat with that, any response he could possibly have had dying on his tongue as he thought about it. Ilya was right. *Hallelujah* had been one of his favorite songs from a young age - too young an age, maybe, when he had first heard it in a movie. He had found every version he could, listened to how each artist had made the song their own, and it was true, what he had told Ilya, so many of them had done it, but they were all different, no two alike.

Music was Shane's passion. He loved the subtleties, the nuances, the way that two hundred

people could play the same song and rarely would it sound the same twice. It was beautiful.

“I’ll think about it,” he said finally.

“You do that. I,” Ilya said. “Will think about how to get you in and out of this party without too much distress.”

This wasn’t like his shows. He had to walk the carpet, he had to be seen entering the party, waving to the crowd, to the paparazzi, it was what League Records wanted.

“If you’re there,” Shane said. “I won’t feel distressed.”

“Sorry about your number one.” Scott approached the open bar, looking over at Shane, the ghost of a smirk on his lips.

Scott Hunter was nearly 40, though he didn’t look it. He had grown into a tall, polished man, his youthful good looks morphing into striking features, and he was better looking now, maybe, then he had been at the height of his career. The charming, boyish, pop songs that had made him famous, however, no longer aligned with the visual image that he exuded and it was that, rather than his songs, that Shane felt was to blame for the dip in his career.

League Records had attempted to pump catchy pop albums out of a man who had clearly matured past that point, and then they had punished him when the albums had failed.

Shane wanted to make sure that same thing did *not* happen to him.

“No you’re not,” Shane replied, returning the slight smile.

“Okay, I’m not,” he admitted. “But *24* is a good song.”

“And *Blue Moon Over Brooklyn* is a great one,” Shane admitted.

“Well, thank you.” Scott took a deep breath, downing a gulp of his beer.

“No, I mean it,” Shane said. “It’s a good sound for you, it’s different. It’s grown up.”

“About time, right?” Scott said with a soft chuckle. “We can’t all be 26, surrounded by screaming girls. Some of us have to grow up, and I guess I’m just glad that I’m finally making music that sounds like me again.”

“I can’t wait to hear the album.”

“Well, hey,” Scott playfully gestured to one of the mockup album cover boards displayed around the high-end ballroom. “*The Admiral,* out June 1st, tell your friends. Hell, you’re

Shane Hollander," he teased. "Tell your *fans*."

"Oh, I will." Shane nodded.

"Good."

"You're worried it'll flop?"

"Well, look at my last two."

"Yeah, but those weren't *you*, you didn't have a single solo credit on any song on either album. I mean you said it yourself, you've grown up, those last two albums were the same stuff you'd been putting out. Unless every single other track on *The Admiral* is different from your single, I'd say that's changed."

"I'd like to think they're not. It's not an album trying to hit as many number ones as possible, it's a whole album. Cohesive."

"Well, if you feel like letting a friend listen early…" Shane smiled.

"Oh, so we're friends?"

"I'd like to be. You've always been good to me, I've always looked up to you. I know our paths haven't crossed a *ton*, and I know…some people think I stole your spot at League, but…"

"Yeah, well, you and I both know that's not how it works. I got older. They decide who to promote, not you, not me."

"Well, doesn't look like it mattered with *Blue Moon Over Brooklyn*, huh? Zero promotion at all at the start, and you vaulted right to number one. That's how you know you've got it, right?"

"You know, you're pretty wise for a kid," Scott admitted.

"I know one thing," Shane said, holding up a single finger. "And that's music, the industry. After that, well, I might be the biggest idiot you've ever met."

"Fair enough." Scott took another slug of his beer. "I always hated parties like this."

"Yeah, me too."

"The label, parading us around like they've done something good," he gulped. "Giving themselves a massive pat on the back because someone they had put out to pasture turned out to still be alive and kicking. They don't tell you about that part," Scott admitted. "They tell you about the big houses, the fancy clothes, the expensive cars. They don't tell you how it feels to become a commodity."

“No.” Shane took a sip of his ginger-ale. “They sure don’t.”

“A little unsolicited advice from a vet who’s been around the block a couple of times?” Scott set his beer bottle down on the counter, gesturing to the bar tender for another. “Don’t let ‘em tell you who to be.”

Scott lifted his fresh beer, tilted it once towards Shane, and then pushed off of the bar top, disappearing into the sea of glitzy, glamorous admirers, leaving Shane alone with those last words.

His labels had *always* told him who to be, at least in the public eye, but as he scanned the room for Ilya, his entire being relaxing when he made eye contact with the bodyguard, he couldn’t help but wonder if maybe Scott was right. Maybe he didn’t want to stay in that neat, tidy box forever.

It had protected him from a lot of things for a long time, but he was outgrowing it. He just had to figure out what that meant for him before he tried to present it to League.

“You look tired,” Ilya said as they entered the hotel suite in LA.

“Parties like that just…take it out of me.” Shane turned, dropping his jacket onto a chair back, his eyes taking Ilya in.

Ilya was wearing that pressed black suit, the starched white shirt and black tie, the shiny black shoes that he had been wearing the first time that Shane had seen him, and Shane was filled with want.

“I can see why. Lots of people wanting a piece of you, yes?”

“Yes.” Shane nodded.

“And the neckties, you hate them.” Ilya took a step forward, reaching out and untying the bow-tie of Shane’s classic, black tuxedo.

“Yes.” Shane’s eyes watched as Ilya tossed the bowtie aside, wincing slightly as it hit the ground.

“And the buttons?” Ilya tilted his head to the side, gently sliding his fingers between the buttons of Shane’s tuxedo shirt, beginning to slide them free. “Buttoned up too high? Too tight?”

“Yes.” Shane gulped.

“Let me take care of that for you, Mr. Hollander.” Ilya finished unbuttoning the shirt, pushing

it off of Shane's shoulders and letting it, too, fall to the floor.

Shane winced, watching the shirt hit the ground out of the corner of his eye. The urge to grab it, to fold it, and stow it safely was eclipsed only by the desire for Ilya…so he went for it. Shane reached out, grabbed Ilya's neck tie and pulled him in, kissing him hard as he wound the tie around his fist.

Ilya's hands went to Shane's waist, slipping up under the white undershirt he still wore as he kissed the other man back.

"Okay, maybe neckties are good for *one* thing," Shane said with a gentle smile, half-breathless as he pulled back from the kiss, tie still wrapped around his hand, gazing at Ilya.

"I think maybe even two or three things," Ilya said, a twinkle in his eye.

"Oh…oh yeah?" Shane asked.

"Mhmm." Ilya smirked. "Perhaps I can show you."

"Perhaps you can."

"You might have to let me go, though," Ilya said, reaching up and placing his hand over the one that Shane had fisted in his tie.

"And if I don't want to let you go?"

Shane hadn't meant to say those words.

Those thoughts were meant to remain firmly in his head, unspoken, even if he had been feeling them for a long time, because he wasn't talking about releasing Ilya's tie from his hand…and he was sure that Ilya knew that.

If he was lucky, though, Ilya would pretend that he didn't. He would let Shane get away with it, behave as though his heavy words had fallen on deaf ears, and they could still have their fun.

Ilya said nothing. He stepped back as Shane's hand released his tie, and reached down, picking up the bowtie. He pocketed it and placed his hand on Shane's chest, pushing the other man back towards the bed - an ostentatious four-poster that would not have been out of place in a palace.

Shane kept his eyes locked on Ilya's, stopping only as the backs of his thighs hit the edge of the bed. Ilya reached down, pulling Shane's t-shirt off over his head and kissed him before gently placing a hand on each of Shane's shoulders, pushing him back onto the mattress.

Shane pushed himself up further, his whole body now on the bed, propping himself up on his elbows as he watched Ilya reach down. The bodyguard removed Shane's shoes, his socks, trousers, setting them aside more carefully than he had the other pieces of the tuxedo.

Perhaps, Shane thought, Ilya had caught the way that Shane had winced when his shirt had hit the floor.

Finally, Ilya hooked a finger through Shane's black trunks, pulling them down and away, leaving Shane naked and half hard on the bed, while Ilya stood over him, fully clothed.

"You want me to show you what to do with this?" Ilya asked, making direct eye contact with Shane as he loosened his tie.

"Yes." Shane's words barely escaped, so low, so quiet, they were nearly caught in his throat.

"Tell me if you want me to stop."

"I don't want you to stop."

"You don't even know what I am doing yet," Ilya said, a wicked grin curling onto his lips.

"I…I can imagine."

"Well, maybe you can stop imagining. Just lie back, Hollander," Ilya instructed. "I will take care of you."

Shane didn't have to be told twice. He lay back on the bed fully, looking up at the ceiling, at the ornate light fixture above his head, and god, his life was strange. He tried not to think about that - about his life, about what he had just said to Ilya, about not wanting to let him go as Ilya moved closer to him. The other man leaned down, kissing Shane softly, running his hand down Shane's chest, then back up, squeezing his left pec with a smirk before releasing him entirely.

"Do you trust me?" Ilya asked.

"With my life."

"Okay."

Ilya lifted Shane's right wrist and wrapped the bowtie around it, tying it off and securing the other end to the bedpost.

"Fuck," Shane gasped.

"Too tight?"

"No, no. Just…keep going. Please."

"As you wish." Ilya smirked, pressing a kiss to Shane's bound wrist before moving to his left arm, using his own tie to secure Shane's left wrist to the bedpost. The necktie was longer than the bowtie, but Ilya did not allow that to deter him. Instead, he simply wrapped the longer tie

around the bedpost more times before, once again, kissing Shane's wrist.

"Feels good," Shane admitted, his eyes fluttering closed as his arms rested comfortably on the pillows.

God bless hotel rooms and their 900 pillows.

"There is not too much strain?" Ilya asked.

"Not at all. You're good at this."

"Yes, well," Ilya smirked. "Former Spetsnaz. Good at tying people up."

Shane didn't have words as Ilya kicked off his shoes and, still fully clothed, climbed on top of Shane. He sat on Shane's hips, looking down at the other man as he unbuttoned his own shirt, tossing it aside.

A gasp escaped Shane's throat as Ilya removed his undershirt, and his cheeks flushed at the realization of what he had just done.

"You have seen me shirtless a million times, Hollander," Ilya teased, playfully whacking Shane in the face with the undershirt before tossing it aside.

"Not like this, not from this angle." Shane bit his lip, looking up, taking in every inch of exposed skin as Ilya sat on top of him.

He knew there was no definition of a perfect body, and he was sure that *someone* would be able to find fault with the Adonis currently atop him, but Shane certainly couldn't. From each muscle, to the smattering of moles, to the trail of hair leading down, disappearing below Ilya's belted slacks, Shane saw nothing but perfection.

"I like the way that you look at me," Ilya admitted.

"People must look at you like this all the time," Shane said with a scoff.

"You would be surprised how easy it is to be invisible when you exist in my profession." Ilya slid off of Shane, undressing the rest of the way and standing beside the bed, completely naked. "No one has ever looked at me the way that you do, I do not think."

Shane felt like he was going to black out as Ilya reached down, stroking his own cock while looking back at Shane, tied to the bed, and unable to touch his own.

"Fuck, Ilya…" Shane squirmed against his bonds, but didn't make any actual moves to break free of them or to ask *Ilya* to untie him.

"Lie back," Ilya said, shaking his head. "You are exhausted. Tonight, I will take care of everything."

Still stroking himself, Ilya moved to the foot of the bed, finally releasing himself to lean forward. He pulled himself part way onto the bed, his legs hanging off, perhaps awkwardly, as he kissed up Shane's inner thigh before taking Shane into his mouth.

There was absolutely no urgency as Ilya licked his way up Shane's length, swirling his tongue around it, his warm mouth moving up and down, releasing Shane only to take him right back in again.

"Fuck…" Shane whined, eyes squeezed shut, hands curling around the ties as he did his best to lie still for Ilya. As another moan escaped Shane's lips, Ilya removed his mouth entirely, and this time, slid off the bed.

Shane opened his eyes, watching Ilya, half confused, half achingly hard and frustrated that Ilya had stopped.

"Do not worry," Ilya said, walking back around and climbing up on the bed. "I will not leave you wanting for long."

Ilya moved around Shane, lying against his side, resting his head on Shane's shoulder and upper arm. He put his hand on Shane's cheek and guided the other man's mouth to his, kissing him as he took himself in one hand and Shane in the other.

Ilya swallowed down Shane's gasp as the other man realized what was happening. He stroked them both in time, giving himself every bit as much attention as he gave to Shane, and god, he hadn't been lying, he really did intend for Shane to lie back while he did all the work.

Shane was in a state of euphoria. He had given up all power to Ilya the second he had been tied to the bed, and he was being rewarded now for his trust.

"Hold for me," Ilya whispered. "Just a little bit longer, alright?"

"I don't think I can," Shane admitted.

"You can," Ilya kissed Shane's jaw. "You can."

Shane was pretty sure that he *couldn't*, but Ilya claimed his mouth again, and he put all of his focus into holding on as he kissed the other man back. He trusted Ilya with his life, he could trust him not to keep him waiting too long.

"Okay." Ilya breathed the word into Shane's mouth. "You can come for me now. Together."

Ilya barely finished getting the words out before Shane spilled all over Ilya's hand and his own stomach, a groan tearing through him as Ilya's own climax joined Shane's, both of them a mess, covered in themselves, in each other.

Once again, Ilya kissed Shane, this time long and deep, and by the time Ilya pulled away, Shane wasn't sure that he would be able to breathe *without* Ilya's lips on his own.

“We should clean up,” Shane managed.

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” Ilya promised. He got up, wiping his hands with the tissues from the bedside before reaching up to free Shane from his bonds. “Just lie back, alright? Rest. I will take care of everything.”

“Mmm.” Shane nodded. He wanted to get up, to help, to take a shower, but he was pretty sure that he couldn’t move.

He had been wound up so tightly when he had walked through the hotel room door, and now? Now he was just blissed out, tired, but happy, as Ilya brought a warm, wet towel, cleaning Shane off with care before climbing back into the bed with him.

“That was so hot,” Shane breathed, turning to face Ilya.

“See?” Ilya smirked. “Neckties can serve *some* good purposes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time I feel like mine’s strangling me,” Shane admitted.

He was pretty sure that he would never be able to tie a tie again without thinking of this, of the way that Ilya had bound him with such care and then proceeded to take him apart stitch by stitch.

Shane stayed quiet for a long while, resting his head on Ilya’s chest, letting himself be utterly calmed by the feeling of Ilya’s fingers carding through his hair, the feeling of Ilya’s chest rising and falling beneath him. Eventually, Ilya’s fingers dropped, his arm curling around Shane instead, and Shane snuggled in, closing his eyes.

“Did you mean what you said?” Ilya asked, his voice low, something in his tone unlike any Shane had heard from him yet. “About not wanting to let me go?”

The question took Shane aback, and he froze. He had thought that they were ignoring that, that they were going to pretend that it had never happened, or that it was just in reference to that specific moment, to that specific kiss. He could pretend to be asleep, he could stay silent, refuse to answer the question. He could lie, say that it was just the heat of the moment, that he was wrapped up in more than just Ilya’s necktie, but that wouldn’t be quite right. Something about Ilya’s tone seemed questioning, yes, but almost needy as well, and Shane was certain he deserved more than silence.

He thought back to earlier that night, to Scott Hunter’s words: *Don’t let them tell you who to be*.

“Yes,” he said finally. “I meant it.”

“Good.” Ilya kissed the top of Shane’s head. “I don’t want to let you go, either.”

Chapter 12: Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

> I want to take a quick moment to thank EVERYONE who has left comments, they mean a lot, and I really appreciate them!!! This chapter is a little hodge-podgy, a few things that need to happen that didn't stand alone as their own chapters, so I hope it's not too choppy. The storyline should start to ramp up soon, I promise - and yes, Shane's Chart Awards outfit is just Hudson's Golden Globes look described badly by someone (me) who doesn't know fashion.

After LA, Shane felt like a seal had been broken, and everything intensified.

He added two songs to his setlist - the Scott Hunter cover *Angels & Demons* that he had promised his label, and the cover of Hallelujah that Ilya had all but insisted upon. He did both on a stool, acoustic and stripped down in what was meant to feel like a private little moment between him and his fans. No dancers, no backing band, just them.

He felt *Hallelujah* pull at his chest every night and he followed that pull back to hotel room after hotel room, bed after bed. His feelings for Ilya intensified, the sex intensified, and with it, the song writing. Shane filled his notebook and had to purchase another, fragments of songs, couplets about pale eyes he couldn't get out of his head, mole-dotted skin he wanted to touch. Most of it was utterly unusable, but not all of it. He knew that some of what he had, some of what *Ilya* had inspired was good, but even then could he really ever show it to anyone? Could he play it live? Could he record it?

He barely had time to think about such things. Between interviews, appearances, his shows, and finding his way into Ilya's bed each night, Shane's mind was fully occupied, and he felt so incredibly and viscerally alive. He wanted to savor every single moment of this that he could.

"Okay man, you gonna tell me what's gotten into you?" Hayden asked over the phone.

"What? Nothing, I just hit my stride is all."

"Okay, so the fact that your stage smile is real now more often than not, and you look like you're gonna pass out every night singing *Hallelujah* are just you…hitting a stride."

"Hayden, what are you getting at?" Shane groaned, flopping back on the bed in his tour bus bedroom as they drove down some freeway or another in middle-America.

"I think you met someone. Someone you *actually* like. I think that after all this time, someone broke through your freakishly tough exterior and got more than a half-assed one

night stand out of you, and all of a sudden, you actually *understand* the love songs you've been singing for years."

Jesus Christ, having a friend that knew him so well was a double edged sword.

"Look, I know you like to keep things private, but come on, dude. It's me. I told you *everything* about Jackie."

"If I recall, that was despite me begging you constantly to stop," Shane teased, hoping to change the subject.

"Shut up. Not the point. You loved it, you secretly *love* love or you would stop writing love songs. You're an idiot, and your poker face is good, but I know you. You're *happy*, Hollander."

"Yeah, well, my career is going well, the tour is going well, I just…" Shane shrugged helplessly. Even if he *could* tell Hayden about being gay, about Ilya, he certainly couldn't do it in the back of his tour bus.

"Okay, fine, don't tell me." Hayden chuckled. "But I'm gonna see you at the Chart Awards next week, and you're gonna tell me *everything*."

"No, I'll be too busy collecting as many awards as possible," Shane teased. "Nice try, though."

"Your ego needs to be taken down a few pegs, man. Maybe it's a good thing Ol' Scotty knocked you out of the number one spot."

"Shut up, man. I gotta go, I have a security briefing with my bodyguard, but I'll see you next week."

Shane hung up, tossing his phone aside and letting out a deep sigh. He hadn't even *seen* Hayden since they had played Montreal together, and his best friend could still see right through him. Shane knew that he had two choices - tell Hayden everything, or figure out how to become less obvious.

Neither one seemed like an option.

"Hayden knows something's up," Shane admitted as he lay in Ilya's arms that night.

"Hayden Pike? He knows something about *us*?" Ilya sounded surprised.

"Yes, well, no, not *us* exactly, but…he knows something about *me*." Shane shrugged. "He's correctly guessed that I met someone and that that someone is making me happy." He paused. "Very happy."

"He knows you are gay?"

"No." Shane shook his head.

“Okay, so no problem then.”

“Probably not,” Shane admitted. “He’s sweet, but I don’t think he’ll make any further connections. He’s going to *try* in Vegas next week. At the Chart Awards?”

“He would do that to you? Badger you for private information in a public place?”

“Well…probably not?” Shane sighed. “It just feels sort of strange. This thing has been just us, no one…has seen through it at all and I guess I hadn’t really thought about what would happen when someone did.”

“Right, but is just Hayden Pike, so stop worrying.” Ilya kissed Shane’s shoulder. “He is your best friend, yes? Even if he *were* smart enough to figure us out, which I highly doubt, he would keep your secret.”

“Yeah.” Shane let out a soft breath. “He definitely would.”

“Well then there is nothing to worry about, I do not think. So long as he would not tell your mother.” Ilya nuzzled Shane’s neck. “She scares me.”

“Good,” Shane smiled. “She should. She’s maybe the most caring, loving person I’ve ever met, and if she thinks you’re distracted from keeping me safe, she’ll lose her mind. Even if what you’re distracted by is me.”

“Ah, but maybe this is my secret weapon. I care about you. It makes me even more vigilant, more careful. I do not want anything to happen to you, Shane.” Ilya kissed him softly.

“Nothing’s gonna happen to me. Not with you there.”

“You seem pretty sure of that.”

“Should I not be?”

“No, you should. I will not let you get hurt.”

“I know.” Shane cuddled into Ilya’s arms, feeling safer than he had maybe anywhere else. Ilya was good at his job, and Shane knew that he was safe with him, that Ilya would do everything he could to protect him, he just hoped that he would keep *himself* safe in the process. “Will you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Ilya asked.

“What happened,” he said softly. “What…what nightmare already happened to you.”

Ilya sighed, looking up at the ceiling as he pulled Shane’s head onto his chest, running his fingers casually through Shane’s hair.

“It was my mother.” Ilya’s voice was soft, barely a whisper. “She died. When I was 12.”

“Oh, Ilya…” Shane wrapped an arm around Ilya’s waist, pulling him in a little tighter.

“Yes.” He gulped. “She was the one who really saw me, I think. Once she was gone, it was my dad and my brother and following in their footsteps and that was that.”

“How…how did she die?” Shane asked.

“She was very, very sad,” Ilya whispered. “My father was not good to her, and I was so young, I didn’t understand it. She…took a whole bottle of pills.” He paused. “I found her.”

“No.” Shane gulped, trying not to cry as he held on to Ilya, pressing his face into the other man’s chest, not sure how else to provide him comfort. “No one…no one should have to go through that.”

“She was strong,” Ilya said. “I don’t…want you to think that she was weak, she just…it doesn’t always matter how strong you are when the whole world is pushing you down.”

“I don’t think she was weak,” Shane softly. “I just wish that you still had her, that you hadn’t had to go through that.”

“I…am just glad that my life is my own now,” Ilya admitted. “My father is a difficult man, getting out of Russia, away from him…it was good for me, I think. It is what she would have wanted for me.” He paused. “Being here with *you* is good for me.”

“It’s good for me, too.” Shane pressed a gentle kiss to Ilya’s chest. “Thank you for telling me, for trusting me with that.”

“Thank you for trusting me with your life.”

“I think my life is safer in your hands than any others.”

“Yes.” Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane’s head, a single tear falling into the other man’s dark hair. “I think that is probably right.”

“What was her name?”

“Irina.”

“That’s beautiful.” Shane gave Ilya another gentle squeeze, his fingers reaching up to the Russian Orthodox cross that hang around Ilya’s neck. “And this?”

“It was hers, yes.” Ilya nodded.

Shane gently brushed his fingers over it, tracing them down across Ilya’s heart before replacing his fingers with his lips, leaving the gentlest of kisses over Ilya’s beating heart. He said nothing more, but remained in Ilya’s arms, holding tight to the other man.

He couldn’t bring Irina back to Ilya, but he could be there for him, and he intended to do so.

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
Okay but has anyone else noticed that Shane looks like he’s *dying* when he sings #Hallelujah ?

HatTrick#1 *@shanesgrrrrrl3*
@shaniaclilah YES GIRL! I THINK HE MET SOMEONE

ShanicalLaughter *@hollanderluvr24*

@shaniaclilah @shanesgrrrrl3 OKAY but have you noticed that he always looks off stage when he sings the sexy part?

HatTrick#1 *@shanesgrrrrrl3*
@hollandrluvr24 The sexy part?

ShanicalLaughter *@hollanderluvr24*
@shanesgrrrrl3 “remember when I moved in you the holy dark was moving to?” SEXY PART.

HatTrick#1 *@shanesgrrrrrl3*
@hollandrluvr24 HOLY SHIT I NEVER KNEW THAT WAS ABOUT SEX!

HeartOnIceeeee *@metromax*

@hollandrluvr24 I bet it’s one of his backup dancers

ShanicalLaughter *@hollanderluvr24*
@metromax OMG I BET YOU ARE RIGHT! They’re off-stage when he sings that song!

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
Ugh. Lucky bitch. He looks so, like, *moved* when he sings it. He should record it. Then we can take back our number one spot!

HeartOnIceeeee *@metromax*
Do you think he’ll hard launch her on the Chart Awards carpet?

ShanicalLaughter *@hollanderluvr24*
@metromax LOL That man will hard launch 6 months after *death*, he’s so private.

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
Ugh I am so excited for the Chart Awards. His stylist has been EATING lately, and also we’ll probably get another glimpse of that Y U M M Y bodyguard.

ShanicalLaughter *@hollanderluvr24*
@shaniaclilah Right? That video of him RIPPING that guy off of Shane is like, so hot.

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
@hollandrluvr24 @shaniaclilah I hear you're talking about my man????

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
@shaniacmcgee LOL He's pretty damn dreamy. He looks like he could kill a man with his bare hands.

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
@shaniaclilah He can kill me with his bare hands

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
@shaniacmcgee Lolz do you even know his name?

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
@shaniaclilah I don't need to know his name to get my back blown out ;)

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
@shaniacmcgee girl. Have a little dignity!

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
@shaniaclilah Nah, it's more fun to be shameless, you should try it sometime! Besides is it so wrong to want a man who could take someone the fuck DOWN for me?

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
@shaniacmcgee As long as he's willing to take someone down for SHANE, he's good in my book. Get your back blown out all you want, girl.

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
@shaniaclilah Great. You can be maid of honor at our wedding.

HeartOnIceeeee *@metromax*
Guess it's Thirsty Thursday on Twitter…

ShaydenShipper *@shaaaayden*
SHAYDEN ARMY RISE! THEY ARE BOTH GONNA BE AT THE CHART AWARDS!

Awards shows were always something else. The Chart Awards, especially, were a bit wild, as they were always held in Vegas. They also held less weight to them than the Grammys, VMAs, and things like that. They were still a red carpet event, but a little more lax, a little more fun, and the after parties were often the most wild of the year.

Shane knew that he was pretty much a lock for *Album of the Year* with *Hat Trick*, and probably *Song of the Year* with *24*, but he was also up for *Best Solo Act*, where he had perhaps the most competition.

He didn't care.

When he had first started out with the Metros, he had cared about every award, but as his penthouse stacked with virtually meaningless hardware, he cared less and less. Now, as a solo act, he would have to accept the awards himself. Bless Farah, she had written short speeches for him for every category, and he would just have to go up on stage and say what she had prepared, but it was still a bit nerve-wracking.

Mostly, he was excited to see Hayden, to sit in a crowd, to cheer for other musicians as they won awards they cared about more than he did, and while the food at those things was usually pretty mediocre, Hayden *always* snuck in snacks, and Shane was adamant that they be seated next to each other.

If he was going to sit through five hours of awards, he was at least going to have a Jackie Pike home-baked snack to munch on.

"SHANE! OVER HERE!"

"SHANE HOLLANDER, LOOK HERE!"

"SHANE! HERE! COME ON, SMILE! GIVE US A SMILE!"

Shane blinked as the lights flashed, paparazzi calling his name from every direction as he attempted to pose, to smile, to look at everyone calling his name. This was a part of the job, and his stylist had made sure that he looked immaculate, so he should show off her hard work, he knew that.

Still, all that he wanted to do was look behind him, to make sure that Ilya, forever in his perfect black suit, was right there. He knew that he was, though. He didn't need to see Ilya to know that the other man wouldn't have left him alone in a situation like this. He was sure that Ilya's eyes were scanning the crowd, looking for anyone who might be more interested in shooting him with a gun than a camera, and that knowledge, that peace, helped him get through the red carpet.

"Thank god that's over," Shane said once he was inside, giving Hayden a big hug.

"You're a superstar, honey, comes with the territory," Jackie said, giving Shane a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah, dude, looking good, by the way, damn!" Hayden stood back, taking in Shane's outfit.

He was wearing black tuxedo pants and shiny black shoes, a white cummerbund over a half-buttoned satin white shirt, and an white blazer that matched the cummerbund perfectly. It had

been paired with a gold necklace, ring, watch, and earrings. His stylist really had gone all out, and he was sure that he would make at least some of the best dressed lists, if not all.

“Whatever you are paying your stylist, it’s not enough, you look like it’s your damn wedding day!” Hayden laughed. “I feel underdressed!”

“You look great, babe,” Jackie encouraged. “I love you in a classic tux.” She reached out, straightening his bowtie.

“Aw, thanks hon, I think you look amazing, too.” Hayden looked at Jackie, perfectly coiffed and accessorized in a forest green dress that most would be unable to pull off.

Shane smiled, watching the two of them. They really did make a beautiful couple, and he couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy as he watched them canoodle. Ilya was here. He was just feet away, watching everything go down, but Shane couldn’t straighten Ilya’s tie - not that it needed it. He couldn’t tell Ilya how nice he looked, couldn’t kiss him on the cheek, on the lips, couldn’t dip him on the red carpet the way that Hayden had Jackie, and it hurt.

More than he would have guessed.

The ceremony went about as Shane had predicted. He picked up *Song of the Year*, lost *Best Solo Act*, understandably, to Taylor Swift, and was reading over his speech just in case he managed to secure *Album of the Year* when Scott Hunter was announced *Comeback of the Year* winner.

Shane tucked his speech into his pocket, clapping along with the crowd as Scott took the stage, accepting the trophy and holding it high above his head.

“As you may know, the last few years for me and music have been…less than ideal. I grew up, and finding a way to make my music grow with me was a challenge. I can’t thank enough the fans who stayed by my side, who kept streaming my songs and coming to shows while I was figuring things out. It’s been wild, to see *Blue Moon Over Brooklyn* do so well, to see my album get this much attention before it’s even come out, and I hope you love it as much as you love the first two singles…and as much as I do. It’s been a rollercoaster to say the least. I’ve been all over the world, I’ve seen a million things, done a million things that most have never had the chance to do, and that is all thanks to my amazing fans, but - to quote one of my favorite artists, ‘these stories don’t mean anything without someone to tell them to,’ so this award is great, it means the world, but this comeback would not have been possible without someone very special.” Scott’s jaw tensed. “I’ve spent a lot of time hiding behind my music, hiding from the world, but I met someone who changed all of that, or should have. I was scared. I guess I still am, but knowing how much these songs resonate with people, I can’t keep hiding. I ran, and I’m sorry. I was scared, and I’m sorry, but Kip Grady of Brooklyn, New York, this award is for you. This album is for you. I love you. Thank you all.”

“Who the *hell* is Kip Grady?” Hayden asked, turning to Shane. “Can Kip be a girl’s name?”

“I…I don’t know,” Shane said, watching as Scott exited the stage, the entire crowd buzzing. “Maybe?”

The commotion was so much that the show went to commercial, giving everyone a little bit of time to simmer down as Scott Hunter walked back down the aisle and out of the auditorium entirely.

“Where the hell is he going?” Hayden asked.

“Where would you be going if you had just made a speech like that?” Jackie rolled her eyes. “He’s going to Kip, I bet! That’s so romantic!”

“Who the hell is Kip?!” Hayden asked again.

“Oh my god.” Jackie rolled her eyes as Shane stood there, slackjawed, because no. Kip probably was *not* a girl’s name.

“Did…did he just come out?”

Shane turned as someone behind them spoke.

“What do you mean?” Shane asked.

“The internet sleuths are fast. Kip Grady, 28, works at a Brooklyn New York Smoothie shop that Scott Hunter has been spotted at multiple times.” She turned her phone around, showing Shane a picture of an ungodly attractive young man handing over a smoothie to the one, the only, Scott Hunter.

“Oh my god.” Hayden grabbed Shane’s shoulders. “HE TOTALLY JUST CAME OUT!”

“Y-yeah. Wow.” Shane felt frozen, a deer in headlights. Where was Ilya? Did it matter? Did anything else matter?

Tomorrow morning, Scott Hunter and his smoothie boy would be the top news story, and Shane just hoped that Kip was ready for the firestorm that was coming for the both of them.

“Hey, man…are you okay?” Hayden asked.

“I think I just need…bathroom.” Shane took off down the aisle towards the bathroom. There were still three categories before the final award of the night, *Album of the Year*, and he just needed a minute.

Ilya, of course, was on his tail.

Shane entered the bathroom, checking under the stalls to make sure that he was alone before turning on the sink, splashing cold water in his face.

Ilya slipped inside.

“Hey,” he said. “You are alright?”

“Yeah.” Shane nodded. “I just…I didn’t…Scott Hunter just came out, I think.”

“Yes, I was there.” Ilya nodded. “Very lame. Didn’t even kiss his man on stage.”

“Shut up,” Shane said, though Ilya’s joke, as always, won a smile from him. “I just…I don’t think I could ever be that brave. To get up on a stage like that and say to the world that this is who I am, who I love, who I want. He’s going to be under so much pressure tomorrow, they both are. His life is never gonna be the same again, it-”

“Will be better, no?” Ilya tilted his head to the side. “Because he will not be under that pressure alone. He will be with the man he loves.”

“Love isn’t the only thing that matters,” Shane pointed out.

“Maybe not, but it is a pretty important thing, I think. It seems to be very important for Scott Hunter, anyway.” Ilya paused. “Is it important for you?”

“I…I don’t know,” Shane admitted, reaching up, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ve been moving so fast since I was like 16, I haven’t…really ever stopped to think about it. It was never a reality, I kept everyone so far from me, at arm’s length, but now…”

“But now…”

Shane looked at Ilya, standing there in his perfect suit, with his starched collar, and his straight black tie, and *fuck*. He closed the distance between them, kissing Ilya up against the wall of the hotel bathroom, his hands on the other man’s cheeks.

“*You* are important to me,” Shane said softly, his eyes searching Ilya’s as he pulled away. “I…all of this, finding someone, romance, it was such a low priority to me, and then…*you*. I don’t know how we work, I don’t know *if* we work, but I…I…”

“Hey.” Ilya reached up, brushing some of Shane’s perfectly loose hair from his eyes. “You are important to me, too, okay?” He leaned in, kissing Shane softly. “We don’t have to figure it all out right now, in fact, awards show bathroom is probably not the best place to do that, but…yes, finding something like this was never a priority for me, either, and then, as you put it…*you*.”

“Really?” Shane asked.

“Really.”

“Not even Sasha?”

“No.” Ilya snorted. “No, definitely not even Sasha. That was just fun. This…I don’t know. But it’s more than just fun.”

“Shit.” Shane gulped, leaning forward, pressing his forehead against Ilya’s shoulder. “What

are we gonna do?"

"We are going to go back out to the ceremony. We are going to sit. We are going to clap politely for winners, even if we hate them. You are going to go on stage, give your speech and thank everyone for your *Album of the Year* award, and then we will leave. We will go to boring after party, you will have a couple of drinks, tell bad jokes with Hayden, take pictures with your famous friends. I will make sure no one harms you. When you have put in all of the appearances that you need to, we will go back to the hotel. I will take every single piece of this designer outfit off of you bit by bit until it is just the jewelry left, and then you will get on your knees," Ilya said with a smirk. "And show me just how important I am to you."

"*Fuck*." Shane shuddered.

"Yes." Ilya smirked. "And then I will push you back on the bed and show *you* how important you are to me. Does that sound like a good plan to you?"

"Yeah, yes." Shane nodded. "That sounds…sounds like the best plan." Well, aside from the part that he could feel himself growing hard just thinking about it…

"You are okay?" Ilya tilted his head to the side.

"Yeah, I'm okay. That just caught me off guard. I didn't…I don't know."

"It was surprising, and it relates directly to you. You will get to see with him how the label handles it."

"Oh god, I didn't even think about the label!" Shane's dark eyes went wide. "What if they-"

Ilya cut him off with a kiss, rewarded for his action by Shane's near-instant calming down.

"It will be okay," Ilya said. "Whatever it is, it will be okay, yes?"

"Yes." Shane hesitated. "I finished a song. About you. About us."

"You did?" Ilya smiled gently.

"Yeah." Shane nodded.

"Can I hear it?"

"Soon." Shane gulped. "I think…I think I'm going to put it on the setlist. I'll take off *Hometown Boy*, we've already played Ottawa, and…I want to see."

"To see what?"

"To see how it feels to go on stage and sing about someone who means this much to me."

"Okay." Ilya smiled. "I look forward to hearing it."

Shane took another deep breath, then exited the bathroom, going back to his seat.

“You okay, man?” Hayden asked.

“Yeah, just had to pee,” Shane said with a shrug.

“Right.” Hayden eyed Shane, suspicion clear in his gaze. Hayden reached for his phone, firing off a text message.

Shane’s pocket buzzed and he pulled his phone from it.

Hayden Pike: If you’re gay, you can tell me.

Shane closed the message and shoved his phone back into his pocket, looking to his best friend, his eyes wide.

Hayden just gave Shane a small smile and a nod.

For a moment, Shane was frozen, staring at Hayden, wondering when he had figured it out, *how* he had figured it out, and *why* he was choosing this exact moment to let Shane know that he knew. But Hayden wasn’t looking at him with any judgment, any disgust, anything negative at all. Hayden was giving him the same, loyal, friendly, encouraging smile that he had always given Shane he was up against something challenging, and Shane relaxed, returning the smile, and giving a small nod.

“Yeah?” Hayden said softly.

“Yeah.”

“I love you, man.” Hayden slung his arm around Shane, kissing the side of his head.

Shane settled back in, wondering how one speech by one musician could have changed things so much for him. There was bravery there, bravery in what Scott Hunter had chosen to do, and turn, what Hayden had asked and Shane had confessed, what Shane had decided in the bathroom.

He was going to add *Constellations* to his set list.

He was going to go on stage and sing a song about the man that he was falling in love with - maybe the man that he was already in love with. He was going to tell his best friend everything, and maybe those two steps seemed insignificant, seemed small, but for Shane, they were enormous.

Shane turned back, Hayden’s arm still around him, and found Ilya, catching his eye, giving him one subtle wink before shifting his body and his focus back to the stage.

Scott Hunter had taken a giant leap tonight, and while Shane wasn’t ready for something

quite that big, baby steps, at least, he could do.

Chapter 13: Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

A few notes:

1. I am not a poet or a songwriter, so if you could pretty, pretty please do that cool suspension of disbelief thing and pretend Shane's song is great, that would be amazing.
2. I got the Russian from a reddit post, so please let me know if it is wrong and I will correct it ASAP!
3. I am absolutely overwhelmed with the kind things that folks have been saying to me in the comments, it means a ton - I AM going to go through and reply to them at some point, but I have been pretty busy of late. I'm not ignoring you, I DO want to engage back because I appreciate your engagement so much!
4. That being said, if anyone does want to engage a little (or teach me better Russian) my tumblr is suburbanrhythms.

“Mr. Rozanov, if you don’t give me what I want, I will have to resort to means that I think you will find…irresistable, so you can tell me what I want to know now, or we can see how well trained you really are.”

Ilya’s wrists tensed against his bonds, twisting, as his arms pressed against the back of the chair he was tied to.

“What, cat got your tongue, Rozanov?”

“Torture me all you want, I will tell you nothing,” Ilya snarled.

“Oh, we’ll see about that. I know you have what I want…it will be easier for both of us if you just give it to me.”

“Just give it to you, huh?” Ilya looked up, smirking. “You think I am so weak as to just give it up like that? So easy? I was fucking Spetsnaz, you are going to have to do a lot better than that.”

“I think I’m giving you a choice. You give me what I want or I drive you absolutely crazy until you can’t help it.” Shane eased himself down onto Ilya’s lap, running his hands over Ilya’s bare chest.

They had reached Santa Fe early and had had the whole day to explore and rest, giving Shane and Ilya plenty of energy to have fun in the hotel suite on their night off. Both well rested and giddy at the thought of having so many hours free, just the two of them, they had decided on

a game, and now Ilya was bound to a chair with his own black neck tie, shirtless, in casual dark wash jeans, with a fully-dressed Shane straddling his lap.

“I think you underestimate my training, Hollander,” Ilya retorted.

“Perhaps *you* underestimate my persuasiveness.” Shane placed his hand under Ilya’s chin and tipped it upwards, kissing him deeply.

This was new to him - role play, tying someone up. Having even a modicum of power over the other man was thrilling, though given Ilya’s training and Shane’s inexperience with knots, he was certain that Ilya was *choosing* to remain restrained. There was almost a 100% guarantee that Ilya would be able to get himself free at any moment if he desired.

Shane sat back in Ilya’s lap and pulled his own t-shirt over his head, tossing it on to the bed. Ilya leaned forward for a kiss, but Shane shook his head.

“No, no…I don’t think so,” he teased. “You can look, but no touching, no kisses…not until I get what I want. *Then* you can have what *you* want.”

“Not going to happen.” Ilya smirked.

They both knew what it was Shane *really* wanted, and they both knew, they could both *feel* through Ilya’s jeans that he wanted to give it to him, but that wasn’t the game. Ilya had a piece of information, a secret from Shane, and it was on Shane to try and get it out of him.

“No?” Shane tilted his head. He rubbed the back of his neck, then ran a hand down his own chest, stopping at the waistband of his blue jeans and pulling the hand back, resting it under Ilya’s chin. “Come on. One little answer, and I’ll stop torturing you. What’s your favorite Shane Hollander song?”

“I’ll never tell.”

“Shame, really,” Shane let out a melodramatic sigh. He wasn’t much of an actor, maybe, and the slight smile at the corner of his lips, paired with the hardness beginning to press against denim was likely giving him away, but he didn’t care. This was fun. He and Ilya were having *fun*, and as bad as he might be at it, he more than planned to see it through.

Shane placed each of his hands on Ilya’s pecs, squeezing, before running his hands down Ilya’s chest, fingertips digging into the warm skin, leaving brief, quickly disappearing marks as they trailed down. Shane had absolutely no desire to hurt Ilya, but he couldn’t deny that having him like this, tied to a chair, pretending to resist, was really fucking hot.

Ilya squirmed slightly under Shane’s touch, and Shane chose that moment to slide off of Ilya’s lap. He stepped back, taking in the view. He had made sure to choose a padded chair. Ilya had insisted that he didn’t care, but Shane had been adamant that it be as comfortable as possible as he had pulled Ilya’s t-shirt off over his head, kissing him fiercely before crossing his wrists behind his back and binding them to the chair.

Now, Ilya's hair was slightly mussed, his cheeks slightly flushed, and honestly, the sight of him topless, looking up at Shane from the chair, was almost too much to resist.

"What?" Shane tilted his head to the side. "See something you like? You can have it…" Shane hooked a finger through one of the belt loops on his jeans, tugging it down so that the waistband of his boxer-briefs was clearly visible to Ilya. "All you have to do is answer one little question."

"Fuck you," Ilya growled.

"Only if you tell me what I want to hear," Shane teased. He walked over to the chair and reached down, flicking the button of Ilya's jeans open and tugging down the zipper. "Hmm, would you look at that?" Shane tilted his head to the side. "Looks like I'm having *some* effect after all."

Slowly, Shane pulled Ilya's jeans down and off. It was a little awkward, with Ilya sat in the chair, but Ilya lifted his hips, allowing Shane to get them off with relative ease, keeping them both in their little game. Shane sank to his knees, nuzzling Ilya through his underwear for a moment before looking up at him.

"What's your favorite Shane Hollander song?" Shane asked, brown eyes gazing up at Ilya's with an innocence they both knew he was faking.

"Nice try," Ilya winked.

"Fine. Suit yourself."

Shane pushed Ilya's legs apart and moved between them. He kissed Ilya's hip and then grabbed the waistband of Ilya's boxer-briefs with his teeth, pulling them down, using his hand on the other side to yank them off completely.

"Oh, you're *definitely* gonna crack," Shane taunted as Ilya's erection sprang free. "If you don't get a little attention soon, it's gonna start to hurt, and we wouldn't want that, now would we? Come on…" Shane ran his hand down Ilya's thigh. "Tell me."

"No." Ilya shook his head. "Never."

"We'll see about that."

Shane pushed Ilya's legs still further apart, kissing his inner thigh, his hip, his pelvic bone - anywhere *except* Ilya's balls and swollen cock.

"Fuck," Ilya twisted his wrists against the neck tie, tipping his head back. "You're better at this than I expected," he admitted.

"Oh yeah?" Shane's head popped up from between Ilya's legs. "You gonna answer my question?"

Shane gave a teasing lick up Ilya's shaft - just a little taste of what the other man would receive if he just gave in.

"Jesus Christ, Hollander."

A huff of breath escaped Ilya's mouth, and Shane got to his feet, taking a pause to enjoy the sight before him - Ilya flustered, naked, and hard as a rock.

"You know what I think?" Shane asked, undoing his own jeans and very slowly peeling them down, stepping out of them, removing his boxer-briefs a moment later to free his own growing erection. "I think you're about to crack."

"What, so you're just getting ready in case I do?" Ilya snarled.

"I want to show you what you can have," Shane said, moving forward. He straddled Ilya's lap and leaned in close, his lips centimeters away from Ilya's year. "If you just answer my question," Shane whispered. "I will ride you into the next century."

"Fuck…" Ilya shuddered as Shane bit down gently on his earlobe.

Shane relished in it. He had never been wild like this before, not with anyone else - he hadn't even really dreamed of it, but Ilya brought things out in him that he hadn't known existed, and he was having the time of his life. He had always been so good, so polished, so poised, so *restrained*, but here, in this hotel room with Ilya, all that he felt was *free*.

"Come on, just one little answer…" Shane scooted backwards, trailing his fingertips along Ilya's cock. "One answer, and you can have me."

"I hate you," Ilya groaned.

"No you don't." Shane beamed. He pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of Ilya's mouth. "Come on. What's your favorite Shane Hollander song, Rozanov?"

"Fuck you," Ilya rolled his eyes, but his lips quirked into a smile. "Fine. You are killing me. It's *Collapse*, I like *Collapse*. Now can I fuck you?"

"*Collapse*, huh? Damn, you romantic," Shane teased as Ilya named one of his sappier love songs.

"Yes, *Collapse*." Ilya watched as Shane slid back down to his knees. "Are you going to untie me?"

"No." Shane shook his head. "I don't think I am." He leaned down, taking Ilya into his mouth, head bobbing slowly as he worked to pull a groan from Ilya so sinful that Shane could feel his own cock twitch from the mere sound of it.

"Shane…" Ilya's tone was warning, and Shane didn't need to be told twice. He pulled back, grinning.

“You are so hard,” Shane teased, going to Ilya’s bag and taking a few supplies.

He lay back on the bed in clear sight of Ilya, and lubed up his own fingers.

“Holy shit…”

“You like watching me?” Shane asked, doing his best to give Ilya a good angle as he stretched himself out.

“You are so beautiful,” Ilya said, clenching his hands into fists. Could he get free from the tie? Absolutely, but that wasn’t the game, and he was certainly not going to be the one to break.

Shane worked two fingers inside himself, stretching until he was confident that he could take Ilya. He wiped his fingers on a tissue and approached the chair, condom and lube in hand. Ilya’s mouth hung open slightly as he watched Shane roll the condom on to Ilya’s erection, lubing it up for him.

“I didn’t know you had this in you,” Ilya admitted.

“What can I say?” Shane placed a hand on Ilya’s cheek. “You bring it out in me. Hold still, okay?”

Ilya obliged, his blue-green eyes fixed on Shane as the other man carefully lowered himself on to Ilya. Was it a bit of an awkward angle? Sure, but how fucking hot this was absolutely cancelled out all awkwardness as Shane began to move on top of him.

“Fuck.” Ilya gasped.

“See what you can get if you play ball?” Shane continued to move on Ilya’s dick, leaning in, kissing him as he did so.

Shane kept one hand on the chair back to brace himself, the other curled around the back of Ilya’s neck as he kissed him fiercely, speeding up his own movements.

“Oh my god.” Shane gasped, throwing his head back, the hand *not* bracing on the chair trailing down Ilya’s chest before grabbing his own dick, beginning to pump in time to his own riding.

“Shane, Jesus Christ,” Ilya breathed. “I’m gonna-”

“Just give me a second, I’m almost there,” Shane ordered, pumping himself harder to try and get as close to a mutual orgasm as possible.

“Fuck!”

Ilya beat Shane by a couple of seconds, panting, falling back against the chair as he came

inside of Shane. Moments later, Shane spilled all over Ilya's chest and stomach, falling against Ilya's chest, his forehead pressed to Ilya's shoulder as he gasped for breath with Ilya still inside of him.

"Oh my god," Shane gasped. "Ilya, that…was so fucking hot."

"You don't have to tell me this, I was there," Ilya breathed.

"Shut up." Shane laughed, reaching a hand behind the chair to release Ilya's wrists from the necktie. "I think ties are growing on me."

"See?" Ilya brought his hands around to rest on Shane's hips. "You just needed to learn how to use them properly."

"I'm lucky to have such a great teacher," Shane said with a smile. He leaned in, kissing Ilya once more before climbing off of him.

"So, *Collapse*, huh?" he teased.

"I would say anything to get you to touch my dick," Ilya replied.

"Mhmmm." Shane rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say, Rozanov. Come on. You're a mess, let's go shower."

"Hey, wait." Ilya stood from the chair and grabbed Shane's wrist, pulling the other man back to him.

"Yeah?" Shane gazed into Ilya's eyes, studying them, curious to know what the other man was going to say.

"That was fun." Ilya leaned down, capturing Shane's lips in a searing kiss.

Two nights later, on stage in front of a sold out crowd in Phoenix, Arizona, Shane performed *Constellations* for the first time.

It had taken a bit for his team to be ready to add the song, he had had to teach it to the band, get light cues, and it was difficult to get any practice in without Ilya there, but he hadn't wanted Ilya to hear the song until it was ready, until it was perfect.

Now, in front of the crowd, feeling Ilya's eyes on him from backstage, Shane gripped the microphone stand.

"Hey, so…I'm sure you've all seen videos, or previews of the setlist, but I'm hoping you'll bear with me…if you don't mind, I'd like to play something new for you?"

Shane smiled as his words were met with screams and whoops.

“Alright, thank you - this one’s called *Constellations*, and you’re the first people to hear it.”

He stepped back, getting into position. He had written the song on an acoustic guitar, but now he would just be singing while his band did the bulk of the heavy lifting with the music. He knew the song, and every word of the first verse came out perfectly, a poetic love-letter to the man watching from the eaves, as he got to the chorus:

“Sleepless nights have always gripped me/A yearning, twisting, turning of a key/Forced into a lock it didn’t fit/Who I was and who I will be/Once packed away, now start to break free/I’m tracing constellations in your sky/A shooting star runs through me/Your North Star like a beacon, guides me home/And I’m not alone/And I feel known…”

Shane closed his eyes, knowing that if he didn’t, he would look off to the side, search for Ilya’s eyes, for a reaction that he wasn’t sure that he was ready for. He had to get through the song first; he had to finish it. *Then* he could seek the reaction of its inspiration.

His chest tightened as he reached the bridge. Was it too much? Was he exposing too much of Ilya? Should he have run these words by the other man before singing it in front of a sold out crowd?

It didn’t matter. It was too late now, so he continued.

“Look at me just one more time/A death that couldn’t take my life/I crave you like the oxygen I breathe/Don’t leave me here to die alone/Back in that place where I’m unknown/A nightmare come to life is hard to fight/But I am by your side.”

He ended the song on a double refrain of *“And I’m not alone/And I feel known*,” before finally looking to where Ilya stood off stage.

For a moment, he froze as Ilya reached up, wiping what Shane was certain was a tear from his eye. He followed it up, though, with a nod and a gentle smile, and Shane smiled back, unable to hear the applause and screams.

All that he could think about right now was Ilya.

You could have put a gun to Shane’s head and asked for a recounting of the night, and he still would not have been able to recall even a second of the rest of the show. Once he finished his final encore, blowing kisses and waving to his fans, he practically tore to his dressing room, Ilya on his heels.

As soon as the door was shut, Ilya had him against the wall, still sweaty, still in his stage clothes, but he didn’t care.

“So…the song? It was okay?”

“I fucking loved it. Shut up.” Ilya pressed his lips against Shane’s, deftly flipping the dressing room lock with his free hand, just in case Yuna, or someone else, opted to attempt a congratulatory entrance.

Shane groaned as Ilya’s lips moved to his neck and he tipped his head to the side to grant Ilya more space as Ilya kissed him, careful, as always, not to leave anything even close to a mark.

“Stop, stop, stop.” Shane reached out, placing his hands on Ilya’s chest and gently pushing him backwards. “Not here, okay?” He smiled at Ilya. “Back at the hotel, but not here.”

“Yes.” Ilya nodded. “Back at the hotel,” he said softly. “I will lay you down on some overly pillowed bed, and I will show you just how much your song means to me.”

“Fuck.” Shane’s eyes locked on Ilya’s, and there was something in there that hadn’t been there before, something that, perhaps, Ilya hadn’t been willing to let out.

“Ya tak sil'no tebya lyublyu i ne znayu, chto s ehtim delat,” Ilya whispered, cradling Shane’s face in his hands. *I love you so much and I don’t know what to do with it.*

“What?” Shane’s brow twisted in confusion at the Russian.

“Go take a shower,” Ilya teased, slapping Shane’s hip gently. “Then we can go back to hotel.”

“Okay.” Shane, blissfully unaware of the confession Ilya had just made, headed off to shower and change.

Things were going so well.

Ilya had liked his song, Ilya had looked at him as though he *more* than liked Shane, and as the hot water beat down on him, Shane couldn’t stop his mind from wandering. Was there a future for them? Ilya wouldn’t be Shane’s bodyguard forever, and when his contract was up, he would have to leave.

Or maybe not. Shane had more than enough money for the both of them, Ilya wouldn’t *have* to work, or maybe he could leave Vetrov and come on full-time as Shane’s head of security, but…then Shane would be his boss and that would be a potentially uncomfortable dynamic. He would have to figure something else out. Shane Hollander was in love with Ilya Rozanov, and his mind was already hard at work trying to figure out ways for them to have a future together.

“Hey.” Shane smiled as he emerged back into the main area of the dressing room, changed into casual clothes, toweling his hair dry. “I was thinking…”

“Dangerous,” Ilya said with a teasing smile.

“Shut up, hear me out.” He rolled his eyes. “After the North American leg of the tour, before we go to Europe, there’s a break, a couple of weeks off. I have this…this cottage that I had built. It’s on a private lake in Quebec-”

“Yes, Shane, I know about your private lake, your precious cottage,” Ilya rolled his eyes. “I would be terrible at my job if I did not know about all of the places where I might have to protect you.”

“Well, even better,” Shane said. “Because after the North American leg of the tour, I want… to go there. Just you and me. We can have a couple of weeks together, just the two of us. You can teach me self-defense, I can teach you how to play guitar, we wouldn’t have to put clothes on for days at a time…” Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya’s waist, kissing him softly. “And I’d be totally safe because you would be there with me.”

“Hmmm.” Ilya nodded as though he were thinking about it. “Well, I *would* have to be there to protect you…”

“It’s your job.” Shane nodded.

“And while I was there, I suppose it would make sense to teach you how to protect *yourself* a little bit.”

“Oh, definitely.” Shane grinned. “We can grill burgers, swim in the lake, watch movies, sit in front of the fire…you can tell me about Russia, about your mother, we can just…*be*.”

“Sounds nice,” Ilya said, something almost wistful in his tone.

“So…you’ll come?”

Ilya’s hands traveled downwards, resting on Shane’s ass, squeezing gently.

“I don’t have a choice,” he said with a teasing smile. “It is my job.”

“Ilya…” Shane rolled his eyes. “Come on.”

“Okay, yes. I’ll come to your boring cottage.” Ilya laughed.

“It’s not boring!” Shane batted his shoulder.

“Oh, I’m sure.” Ilya leaned down, kissing Shane softly. “I will love to come to your cottage,” he said, this time his words genuine, gentle. “Now come on. Let’s sneak you out of here so we can go back to the hotel room and I can cover your mouth to keep whole world from hearing you scream my name.”

“Oh my god.” Shane’s cheeks flushed under his freckles instantly, and he had to force himself to pull away from Ilya.

It wasn’t safe, not particularly, canoodling like this in the dressing room, even with the door locked. They would be much better off once they got back to the hotel, but Shane wasn’t sure that he could stand the wait.

His heart was pounding in his chest.

Without saying those three words, he had practically told Ilya that he loved him on stage tonight. Hell, he had practically told the *world* that he was in love with Ilya, though he supposed no one knew who the song was about.

Ilya wanted to come to his cottage. Ilya wanted to spend two weeks just the two of them together. Ilya had had a look in his eyes that told Shane just about as much as Shane's song had told Ilya, and maybe Shane needed to be brave.

Maybe when they got back to the hotel, he needed to just rip the band-aid off. He could take Ilya's face in his hands, kiss him deeply, and then look into those gorgeous, ocean eyes, and tell Ilya Rozanov that he was in love with him.

It was scary, it was nerve-wracking, but it was the truth - a truth that Shane did not want to keep to himself any longer.

As Ilya ushered Shane out a side door of the venue towards the waiting car, Shane felt a slight squeeze as Ilya's hand rested on his lower back. He smiled, leaning back into the touch just slightly.

Was that how he had first fallen in love with Ilya? The feeling of that hand on his lower back? Maybe. Probably. He craved it now, every night Ilya's large hand resting gently on his shirt, his jacket, whatever was covering him. It was a security blanket, something that he knew he could count on. With Ilya's hand on his back guiding him, Shane knew that he was safe.

And then a crack so loud Shane knew that it had to be close by rang out, pulling Shane from his happy thoughts. He flinched, wincing as screams began to fill the air, but he was barely given a second to register what was happening.

"GO! GO!" Ilya pushed Shane hard.

Shane stumbled forwards a few feet as two more cracks pierced through the screams and shouts. Were any of those screams his own? Shane wasn't even sure as Ilya *tackled* him into the open door of the waiting car.

"FUCKING DRIVE!" Ilya screamed as the door slammed shut behind them.

The driver wasted no time following the instructions given, tearing off and out of the parking lot, away from the commotion outside the venue.

Ilya's body covered Shane's on the floor of the car as Shane panicked. He felt dizzy, ill, he didn't know what was happening, and he wasn't sure why, but he couldn't feel his own body. It was as though everything had gone numb. If Ilya's weight hadn't been on top of him, Shane might have been certain that he was dead…

And then he felt something warm, something wet on his back, seeping through his t-shirt.

Blood. He was sure of it.

Shane tried to breathe, tried to locate the source of the blood, searching for pain, but there was none. He had been shot, so there should be pain, a lot of it, from what he had heard, but he couldn't feel *any*, just blood, hot, sticky, unwelcome on his skin as he slowly began to realize that there was no pain because *he* hadn't been shot.

There was no pain because the blood soaking through his clothing right now wasn't his.

"Ilya!" Shane barely got the word out, turning under the man, pulling himself up into a sitting position as best he could.

Sure enough, blood soaked the back of Ilya's white button-up, two clear holes marring the normally pristine fabric.

"No, no…" Shane pulled Ilya into his arms. "Ilya!" For a brief moment, he turned his focus to the driver. "Nearest hospital. *Now*. Fuck. Ilya, can you hear me?"

"You were not hit?" Ilya looked up at Shane, blinking slowly.

"No, no, I'm fine." Shane gulped, tears welling in his eyes. "Hey, you're okay. You're gonna be okay."

"Yes." Ilya nodded, his voice soft. "It will be okay. I did my job. You are safe, yes?"

"Yes." Shane sniffled. "But now you have to be okay, too. Promise?"

"Ya tebya lyublyu." Ilya struggled to get the words out. "Ya tebya lyublyu."

"That…I don't know what that means. Ilya, promise me you're going to be okay."

"Ya…tebya lyublyu," Ilya said again, his eyes fluttering closed.

"No," Shane shook his head. "No, no, no, Ilya…ILYA!"

Chapter 14: Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

> I am absolutely blown away by the response to the last chapter, and it motivated me to really put "pen to paper" so to speak, so this was supposed to be the weekend update, but since I left it on such a cliffhanger, well, I didn't wanna be the guy that left my readers in that position for long because I don't want you to hate me, and I am so glad that you are here!

They reached the hospital quickly. It was late at night, and fortunately there was one just a few minutes away from the concert venue.

By the time they got there, the place was swarming with cops who surrounded Shane as Ilya was rushed off to be triaged.

It was all a blur to Shane.

Once the police had realized that they were not going to get anything real out of him until he had had some time to process and calm down, the meds checked him over. They were thorough, ultimately declaring him to be in a mild state of shock, but uninjured physically. Shane processed none of it, not until he was led to a private room where his parents were waiting, police officers posted up outside the door.

“Oh my god, Shane!” Yuna cried out as Shane entered the room, still in his blood-soaked t-shirt and jeans, completely rattled.

“It’s not mine,” Shane said quickly following her gaze. “It’s not mine. Oh god. It’s not mine.” He gulped. “Ilya. It’s Ilya’s. They shot him! They shot Ilya. It’s…it’s…” Shane pressed both hands to his shirt, feeling the now-dried blood.

Ilya’s blood.

“No, sweetheart, don’t…” Yuna tried to pull Shane’s hands away, but he flinched, pulling backwards.

“Where’s Ilya?” Shane looked at his parents, tears pricking at his eyes.

“I don’t know, sweetheart, we haven’t heard anything, granted…” Yuna looked sheepish. “I suppose we were mostly worried about you, we-”

“I’m fine,” Shane snapped. “Someone tell me where the fuck Ilya is. Hey!” Shane turned,

reaching for the doorknob, but both of his parents pulled him back.

“Shane, you can’t.” Yuna shook her head. “We don’t…they didn’t catch him.”

“What?” Shane turned.

“They didn’t catch him. Or her. The shooter. They got away. It’s not safe for you to go out there, we don’t-”

“I don’t fucking care! I need to know - Ilya!” Shane wasn’t thinking clearly, how could he? Ilya was in Schrödinger’s box right now and Shane needed that lid opened immediately.

How could he think clearly without it? He needed to know that Ilya was okay.

“I’ll go ask, I’ll go ask.” David reached out, putting a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Find him some clothes, please,” Yuna begged. “I can’t…”

“I will.”

David slipped out the door and Shane slumped down to the floor of the room.

“He was saying something in Russian, over and over again, I don’t know what it was, there was so much fucking blood, oh god.” Shane pulled his knees to his chest, leaning into his mother as she put her arm around him.

“Sweetheart, it’s going to be okay,” she said softly. “You’re going to be okay.”

“I need *him* to be okay.”

“I know, sweetheart. I know, but he was doing his job, okay?”

“Fuck his job, he might…he might…” Shane’s chest seized. He couldn’t get the words out.

“Oh sweetheart…”

Shane let his mother gather him in her arms, holding him tight as he shook in her arms, not even trying to ground himself.

Time crawled, every second radiating an eternity so agonizing Shane wasn’t sure he could survive the next, but he did…and the next one after that, and the next one after that, until finally, the door opened again.

“Ilya?” Shane looked up instantly, his eyes red and puffy, his face tear-streaked as his father walked back into the room.

“He’s in surgery,” David said, ignoring the chairs around them and moving to sit on the floor with his wife and son. “They won’t know more until they’re further along. I’m sorry I don’t

have better news, but I did get these," he held out a plain t-shirt and hoodie.

"I'm fine." Shane shook his head.

"Shane, sweetheart," his mother shook his head. "You're soaked in…" she trailed off, unable to say it. "Please, for me? I can't look at you like this, it's a mother's worst nightmare."

Shane said nothing - what else could he say? Ilya was on a surgery table somewhere, possibly dying this very moment, and he didn't have it in him to fight his mother over a t-shirt. He took off the blood-soaked top and allowed his parents to get him into the clean, fresh shirt and hoodie.

To their credit, his parents didn't try to get him to stand up, to go to the chairs. David and Yuna stayed on the floor, holding Shane between them, waiting.

The police checked in frequently, a doctor came in at some point, checking Shane over again and offering him something to help him calm down - something he tried to refuse, but it was no use. There was nothing at all that he could do, and if it would help ease his parents' mind for him to take the sedative being offered, then so be it.

It didn't take long for the drug to take effect, and Shane slumped down, his heart rate calming as he closed his eyes, falling asleep crying with his head in his mother's lap as she stroked his hair.

When Shane woke, he was no longer in the hospital, but in a bed in his Phoenix hotel suite. His eyelids felt heavy as he opened them, but there was no pain. He blinked twice, pulling himself into a sitting position as he rubbed his eyes, trying to understand why he felt like someone had swapped out his brain for cotton balls. He reached for the lamp on the bedside table and switched it, startling instantly as it illuminated a figure in a chair by his bed.

"Mom?" he asked.

"Oh, you're awake."

"Yeah, I-" Shane stopped abruptly as everything came rushing back to him. He had been leaving his concert, there had been gunshots, blood - so much blood. *Ilya's* blood. "Ilya?" he asked desperately. "We have to go back to the hospital!"

Shane moved to get out of bed, but Yuna put her hand on his arm.

"He is out of surgery, he's stable, but he's still not awake. He's in the ICU and can't have visitors right now. Once he's up and lucid, we can discuss going to visit him."

"But…but he will be up and lucid?" Shane gulped.

"They think so, yes. He lost a lot of blood but the bullets missed all major arteries and organs, he's a very lucky young man."

“Lucky?” Shane shook his head. He gathered the bedclothes around him. “He’s not lucky, he got shot. Twice. Protecting *me*. He saved my life.”

“He did.” Yuna nodded. “And for that, your father and I are eternally grateful, I just meant that he was lucky it wasn’t worse.”

“Right.” Shane looked down at the comforter, finding the name somewhat ironic, as it was doing nothing to aid in his distress. “So what, we just…wait here until the hospital calls and says we can see him?”

“Yes.” Yuna nodded. “Vetrov Security is sending a replacement guard and Farah is drafting a statement to release to the public. Your tour is going to be postponed until your security can be guaranteed, and besides, you need time to recover, honey.”

Shane nodded, his throat and chest too tight to form words.

Ilya had been shot. *His* Ilya was fighting for his life in a hospital room and there was not a damn thing that Shane could do. He pulled his knees back to his chest, hugging them close. He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt this *young*, this scared, this upset.

Maybe never.

“Mom, I…” Shane tried to speak, but the words got lost in his throat.

“It’s okay, honey. We’re going to find who’s trying to do this to you. We’re going to keep you safe.” Yuna climbed onto the bed, putting her arm around Shane.

Shane rested his head on his mother’s shoulder, squeezing his eyes shut as more tears welled in his eyes, bracing to fall. He wanted to keep them back, wanted to stay strong but he just couldn’t.

The man that he loved had almost died protecting him. The man that he loved wasn’t out of the woods yet, and all that Shane could do was sit here and cry.

It took some time, but his mom was finally able to convince him to shower. He sat in the expansive hotel shower until the water ran cold, trying to wash not just the physical blood but the *feeling* of Ilya’s blood off of him.

Even as he pulled on sweats and a clean shirt, he knew that it was unsuccessful.

While he had been in the bathroom, the bedsheets had been changed and breakfast had been sent up, though Shane could only pick at his as both parents watched him, anxiety in their eyes.

“The next time you talk to the hospital please make it clear that I want his bills to come to me. Make sure he has a private room, the best of everything - everything he needs and anything he wants. I’ll pay for it all.”

“Of course, honey.” Yuna knew better than to argue. “Your father has been handling the hospital.”

“I’ll make sure they know that no expense is to be spared,” David said with a nod, exchanging a glance with his wife that Shane caught, but couldn’t parse.

“And the fans,” Shane said. “Make sure that every fan who has tickets to an upcoming show knows that…that their tickets will be honored at the rescheduled date, and that full refunds will be offered to anyone who wants to go that route and I…I don’t know, set up some sort of…something. A gift that we can send to the address of purchase, just *something* to make up for the postponement. I don’t care if it’s expensive.”

Between his contract, money from his time with the Metros, royalties, and brand deals, Shane could certainly afford it.

“Maybe…maybe a portal, so they can use proof of a ticket ownership to choose something, a t-shirt, or a hat, or a CD or something, just…so they know.” He gulped. “That I’m thinking about them, too.”

Yuna knew her son. He was thinking about this so that he wouldn’t have to think about the other thing, the scariest thing. She nodded, squeezing his hand.

“That’s my sweet boy.” She smiled gently, giving Shane’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Always thinking about your fans, it’s why they love you so much.”

“And League.” Shane bulldozed through his mother’s praise, unable to hear it under the circumstances flooding his brain. “Are…are they mad about the tour?”

“No. God no. I know this is disgusting, but this kind of publicity…” she grimaced. “Your record sales are probably going to be close to where they were week one.”

“Okay, well,” Shane cleared his throat. “Any profit *I* make from those sales goes to Ilya. For loss of work, for recovery, for anything. I don’t…I don’t want to profit from him getting shot.”

“Okay.” Yuna nodded.

“Can I ask something?” David asked. “How’d this fucker know? Shane is being snuck out of the venues, that’s…”

“We are trying to figure that out,” Yuna said. “It’s a big part of why the tour has to go on hold - until we know how this guy keeps getting away…”

“They think it’s someone on the inside?” Shane asked. “Someone who knows what I’m doing?”

“Maybe, but sweetheart, we’re going to keep you safe. Vetrov has more than proven their worth, and we know it wasn’t Rozanov. The mole, I mean. If there is one. But that means we know that we can trust Vetrov. I’m sure whoever they’re sending to replace Rozanov will be just as good.”

“I don’t want anyone else getting shot for me.” Shane looked between his parents, eyes glassy and tired.

“I really hope it doesn’t come to that,” Yuna admitted.

“I…” Shane’s hand shook. “There’s nothing else I can do? For Il- for Rozanov?”

“The doctors are doing everything they can,” she assured him. “And they gave me more of that sedative. I think you should take it, get more rest, you’re…” she gazed at Shane with sad, tired eyes. “I mean, look at you, honey.”

Shane didn’t want to take the sedative. He wanted to be awake, alert, he wanted to be able to go see Ilya the second he was allowed visitors, but the look of desperation in his mother’s eye told him it wasn’t about him. She loved him, and he was suffering. He knew that she just wanted to take away some of the hurt, the way that he wanted to take away Ilya’s.

He knew that she cared about him.

His parents were terrified. Someone had taken shots at their only son, and Shane was a wreck. There wasn’t anything he could do to help Ilya right now, so if it would help them calm down, help the time pass, then so be it.

“Okay, mom. But wake me if the hospital says I can go see him.

“We will,” David promised.

Yuna handed him the pills and he swallowed them down with orange juice, continuing to push his breakfast around his plate until they kicked in.

This time, when Shane woke up, he was curled up on the couch with the lights still on.

“Any word?” Shane asked, yawning as he moved to sit against the couch.

“He’s awake, he’s lucid,” Yuna smiled gently. “He’s expected to make a full recovery.”

“Great! I…that’s…that’s great.” Shane felt *some* mild relief flood through him. Ilya was going to be okay. He had still been shot, whoever had done it was still out there, but he was going to be okay. “So I can go see him?”

“Sweetheart.” Yuna reached for her son’s hand. “He isn’t receiving visitors.”

“But you said-”

“I know, honey, but that was *his* choice.”

“He…he doesn’t want to see me?” Shane asked softly.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. He doesn’t want to see anyone, and we have to respect that.”

“But I…he…” Shane shook his head. “*No*.” He whimpered.

“Look, I’m sure he’ll come around, it’s all just a lot right now. I spoke to League, they’re arranging for a chartered jet to take you home - I think you should come back to Ottawa. We have been promised security at the house and I just…”

“You want me to just leave him here?” Shane asked.

“Sweetheart, you can’t heal like this. If - *when* he changes his mind and he’s ready for company, if you still want to, you can fly right back here, okay? I’ll come with you. Hell, I’ll pay for the flight myself. For now, let’s just go home. You’ve been through a lot and this isn’t the place to process any of it.”

Shane wanted to fight, to argue. He wanted to demand they rent a house in Arizona and stay here until Ilya was recovered, but that wasn’t rational.

To the rest of the world, Ilya was Shane’s bodyguard. To the rest of the world, Ilya had done his job, he had kept Shane safe, he would be paid handsomely, lavished with praise, and that would be that, but for Shane it was so much more.

There were too many thoughts, too many feelings, and it was easier to just switch them all off, to get on the stupid plane with the stupid new guard that Vetrov had sent. When Ilya came to his senses and was ready to see him, Shane would turn right back around and make a beeline for that Phoenix hospital.

Until then, he simply felt numb. It was easier that way.

“Okay, the tour postponement has been announced. Everyone with a ticket purchase has received a personalized link to select one of a few items from your store as an apology for the inconvenience along with the offer of a refund or rescheduled show. Mr. Rozanov’s hospital bills are being taken care of by your accountant…I think that’s everything.” Yuna looked over at Shane on the private jet.

“Flowers,” Shane said, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “Fresh flowers in his room every day until he’s discharged.”

“Well actually,” Yuna smiled gently. “Your fans have been flooding the hospital with flowers and gifts. It’s more than one room could hope to house, he’s been diverting them to the children’s ward.”

“Good. That doesn’t change my request. He got shot protecting *me*, mom. Fresh flowers in his room every day. From *me*.”

Ilya needed to know that Shane cared. He didn’t understand why Ilya wouldn’t see him, but he needed Ilya to know that Shane was thinking of him. All that he wanted was to be by Ilya’s side, and before the plane had taken off, he had asked just one more time if he could see Ilya.

He had been told no, that Ilya wanted no visitors.

It was agony.

“Okay.” Yuna nodded. “I understand.” She paused, setting her phone down. “He’s going to be okay, Shane,” she said with a gentle smile.

“It’s not…it’s more complicated than that.” Shane sighed.

“You’re afraid? Of course you’re afraid. But it’s okay, they’ll catch who did this.”

“Yeah.” Shane sighed. It wasn’t that, either, but he didn’t know what to do. Ilya was in the hospital recovering from two gunshot wounds he had sustained getting *Shane* to safety.

Could his family handle knowing about him and Ilya on top of that? Was it fair to *Ilya*? Did it even matter, since the other man wouldn’t even see him?

Shane didn’t want to think about the fact that things might be over with Ilya. Maybe getting shot had caused the other man to realize that Shane would always be “first” in that dynamic, that Ilya was always going to be the one taking the bullets. Shane didn’t want it that way. He wanted Ilya to be on equal footing with him, he didn’t want anyone taking bullets for him, he didn’t want *Ilya* making sacrifices for him, and yet here they were. Ilya had damn near made the ultimate sacrifice, and maybe that was sinking in for him.

Maybe Ilya finally understood that Shane really was just some spoiled pop star whose life didn’t *actually* matter more than Ilya’s, and yet everyone was going to act like it did anyways. He would have liked to think that Ilya would be able to say it to his face, but maybe he just needed more time to heal.

This *could* have been worse, and Shane knew that, but as he curled up into the big, squashy, luxurious seat on the enormous, opulent, ostentatious private jet, it still felt like his entire world was coming down around him and he didn’t know how to stop it.

“Hey buddy.”

“Go away.” Shane groaned, pulling the covers over his head as Hayden walked into his bedroom.

“Nope.” Hayden sat down on the edge of the bed and yanked the covers down so that he could see Shane’s face.

“What are you doing here?”

“I asked your parents if I could come see you, said that you weren’t responding to my texts, and wouldn’t you know it, they told me you haven’t gotten out of bed in three fucking days.”

“Yeah, well, someone shot my fucking bodyguard. I’m allowed.”

“Well now that’s interesting,” Hayden said. “Because, you see, most people would probably be more upset that someone had tried to kill *them*.”

“Well, both things are true, so I’m double allowed.”

“You can’t hide in here forever, Shane.” Hayden let out a long, melodramatic sigh as he tugged the covers back further. “Now come on. You smell, quite frankly, *the* fucking worst. Get up, take a fucking shower before this bed becomes a damn biohazard, and I’ll order us a pizza.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Tough nuts.” Hayden stood up and used every ounce of strength he had to physically pull Shane, dead weight and all, out of the bed. “Shower. Before the PHAC has to quarantine this place.”

Shane grumbled, but once he was out of bed, it was easier to get the momentum to stumble to his bathroom, take a shower, and pull on a fresh pair of sweats.

It had been four days since Ilya had been shot, and the news was everywhere. The hospital had been flooded with gifts, Shane’s fan mail had more than quadrupled, as predicted, his sales were through the roof, and not a lick of that mattered.

Ilya still wouldn’t see him. Ilya still wouldn’t talk to him.

Shane had gotten reports that Ilya was on track to recover just fine, that he would be discharged from the hospital relatively soon, but what would happen then? Shane didn’t know. He would have to go somewhere for PT, and Shane had sent several text messages inviting Ilya to come to Ottawa or Montreal, to stay with him while they let the best doctors in Canada help Ilya recover, but his text messages went unanswered.

The new guard that Vetrov had sent over, Cliff Marlow, was just fine. He was fairly no-nonsense, and they didn’t really have a bond. He was nice enough, but he didn’t have the same easy charm that Ilya had, and Shane certainly hadn’t been brought to his knees by the mere thought of Marlow’s hand around his throat.

They still hadn’t caught whoever had shot Ilya, though, and until they did, Shane wasn’t sure that he would actually feel safe.

Then again, he wasn’t sure that he would be able to feel safe without *Ilya.*

“Oh my god.” Hayden put his hand over his heart as Shane exited his bedroom. “You look human!”

“Shut up.” Shane’s eyes gazed down at the floor.

“Nope.” Hayden shook his head. “Your parents have kindly given us the living room, pizza on the way, and we’ve got MLH Anthem on the TV ready for me to kick your ass. Don’t

think I'm gonna go easy on you just because someone tried to shoot you."

"Hayden, I don't really feel like playing video games."

"Okay." Hayden shrugged. "Well, what *do* you feel like doing? And before you say it, crawling back under the covers is not a choice."

"I just…" Shane sighed, flopping down hard on the couch, feeling tears begin to well in his eyes. *Again*.

"Hey, I get it. I mean, I don't *get it* get it, but…someone tried to kill you, they got your bodyguard instead, it's a lot."

"He won't see me," Shane said, his voice small. "Ilya. He won't see me."

"Okay…well he did get shot, maybe he just needs a little time."

"Maybe, but it's more complicated than that." Shane gulped. "He's…I…"

"Oh fuck me." Hayden paused. "*He's* the guy?"

"What guy?"

"*The* guy. *Hallelujah* guy. *Constellations* guy!"

"What?" Shane's face paled. "How did you - *what?*"

"You know I'm not actually an idiot, right? I just play one on TV or however the saying goes? He's totally the guy!" Hayden's joy at discovering Shane's mystery man faded quickly, his expression dropping as it sunk in. "Oh my god, he's the guy and he got shot protecting you."

"Yeah…" Shane sank lower into the couch. "So can I please get back in bed and hide under the covers some more? Because I kind of feel like *I'm* going to die."

"Oh, buddy, no." Hayden shook his head. "Sorry, but no. Does the situation suck? Absolutely. Can I relate to it? Absolutely not, but that doesn't change the fact that you're my best friend and I am not gonna let you wallow like this. Talk to me."

"I don't…"

"Shane," Hayden nudged him gently. "You can't keep it all inside. Does anyone else know?"

"No."

"Okay, so tell me. You can't just bottle this all up. It's Coke and Mentos, and we both know how that goes."

“He’s…the guy.” Shane nodded, reaching up and wiping a tear from his eyes. “Or he was, I don’t…know what to do, he won’t talk to me, won’t see me. I got him shot.”

“It’s not your fault,” Hayden assured, gently patting Shane’s arm. “You didn’t get him shot. It’s not your fault.”

“I love him,” Shane said softly.

“Yeah, I kinda figured. That song was pretty damn romantic.”

“He’s special. He’s so complex, and interesting, and sweet, and fun, and…” Shane trailed off.

“Great in the sack.” Hayden wiggled his eyebrows.

“Shut up. But I mean. Yes. Very.” Shane felt his cheeks growing hot. “It’s everything. It’s cliche and I feel stupid saying it, but he’s the total package, and I hate how I met him because it’s been weird the whole time, sneaking around in hotel rooms and stuff. We’ve spent practically all of our time together for months, and…” Shane looked to Hayden, his eyes glistening with the threat of tears to come. “And I love him.”

“Does he know that?”

“I don’t…I don’t know,” Shane admitted. “I hadn’t said it, not to his face, not in as many words, just the song, but I was going to. I had invited him to the cottage, for the break in the tour and I was going to tell him there, I shouldn’t have waited. I should have just said it the moment I knew it was the truth. God he could he died, he *almost* died, and I-”

“He didn’t die,” Hayden cut him off. “He didn’t die, and you’re gonna get the chance to tell him how you feel, okay? He probably just needs some time or something.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. I just…do. Same way I just *knew* with Jackie. I have a sixth sense about these things.”

“And that sixth sense never taught you about birth control?”

“Oh thank god.” Hayden leaned back on the sofa. “You’re still in there!”

“Shut up.” Shane ducked his head.

“Man, I love you.” Hayden slapped Shane on the back. “I know this is ass right now, but we’re gonna get through this. They’re gonna catch the psycho that’s trying to off you, you’ll get to go to your cottage with Ilya and say what you really feel, dead to rights, instead of hiding it under some flowery poetics, and then,” Hayden grinned. “This is the best part. And *then* you’re gonna write the greatest love album of our generation because it’s about damn time someone dicked you down so well you finally wrote good music.”

“The greatest, huh?” Shane huffed softly, choosing to ignore Hayden’s latter comment.

“Absolutely. If you wrote that one song after being with him just a few months, just wait and see what’s coming next.” Hayden nudged him. “Although, when you eventually go public with him, oof, there are gonna be a lot of broken hearts. The Shayden Army is gonna be devastated."

“I don’t know why I’m friends with you.”

“Shut up, you love me.” Hayden shot Shane a wink. “And besides, the Shayden Army didn’t give up when I got married to Jackie, so they probably won’t give up if you go public with Ilya. Hell, it might even fuel their fire, knowing that they had it half right.”

“Half right would imply that I am or at some point was in love with you.”

“Okay, so they had it a quarter right.” Hayden shrugged, narrowing his eyes. “But wait, really? You’re gay and you…never?” He gestured to himself.

“Not once.” Shane shook his head.

“Damn. I feel kind of insulted.”

“You’re just not my type.”

“Dude, I’m the boy next door. I’m *everyone’s* type.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Shane said with a gentle smile.

He leaned back on the couch, letting out a soft sigh as he picked up the video game controller. In spite of himself, he *did* feel a little better. Hayden was right, things *were* ass right now, but Ilya was alive, Hayden was here, and even though Ilya wasn’t talking to him right now, wouldn’t see him, it wasn’t over. He would still have a chance to tell Ilya how he felt. If the other man needed a little time, Shane could give him that.

He had waited 26 years to feel a love like this. He could wait a little longer.

Chapter 15: Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is kind of weird, an attempt to get some Ilya perspective into the story, idk if it works. Shoutout to my buddy for helping me with some of the social media usernames!
> Oh, and all communication between Ilya and Svetlana just...assume it's in Russian, please! Thanks!

Shane Hollander Updates *@shanehollanderupdates*
Okay, I have been trying to be respectful and also I have not been sure how to post about this, but yes. Someone tried to kill Shane. Yes, his bodyguard, Ilya Rozanov, we now know, took the bullets for him, two to the back. Yes, Shane is safe. Yes, Mr. Rozanov is going to be alright. No, the shooter has not been caught. This account is sending best wishes to the Hollander and Rozanov families, and we urge everyone to be respectful of them during this difficult time.

We understand that the tour dates being postponed is probably very disappointing and possibly financially difficult for many in our community, but the attempt on Shane's life is a very serious issue. He may be a public figure, but Shane is still a person and right now he probably needs space. Let's show him that he truly does have the best fans ever.
#PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov

ShanicalLaughter *@hollanderluvr24*
@shanehollanderupdates Yes. THIS exactly. #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov

SHAAAAAAAANE *@Shnhllndrfrvr*
I can't believe someone would try and hurt Shane like that, what the fuck?! Thank GOD for his bodyguard, damn. A fucking hero. He should get a fucking medal or something. How do you even nominate someone for a medal? #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
Oh. My. God.

Shaniaaaaac *@shaniaclilah*
@shaniacmcgee your man is a hero. #ThankYouIlyaRozanov

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
@shaniaclilah OH I FUCKING KNOW!!! #ThankYouIlyaRozanov

Shane Hollander Updates *@shanehollanderupdates*

We now know that Mr. Rozanov is at the Banner - University Medical Center. You can send flowers or gifts. If you do so, please go through the hospital gift shop or one of the recommend florists, you can call them to find out who, that way they will know how to get the items to Mr. Rozanov without much trouble. We want to show our appreciation. We don't want to add stress to a stressful situation, but let's fill that hospital room with flowers. #RosesForRozanov #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov

Hayden Pike Place Market *@haydenpikeplace*
Y'all. I had tickets to Shane's Seattle date and I just got an email with a special store link for my troubles? With ALL of this going on, Shane is STILL thinking about us? MY UNPROBLEMATIC FAVE. Well, second fave…I can't be disloyal to my Hayden. #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov #ThankYouIlyaRozanov

Prayers 4 Shane *@MrsHollander24*
I can't fucking believe this is happening. They didn't even catch the guy?! Come on, internet sleuths, can't you do your thing? This fucker almost K*LLED SOMEONE?! HE ALMOST K*LLED SHANE?! HE MIGHT TRY AGAIN?! #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov #ThankYouIlyaRozanov

Hayden Pike *@HaydenPikeMusicOfficial*
Okay. I saw Shane, he wanted me to thank everyone for all the flowers, the cards, everything. He appreciates you all so much, he's with his family healing right now, but he'll make a statement when he is ready. All you Metros fans and Shaniacs out there, please keep my boy in your thoughts, and he has asked me to ask you all to not spend money on him. If you want to make a contribution, please consider a donation to one of the charities below focused on helping those who can't afford their medical bills get through tough times. Also, looks like cat's out of the bag so thank you to Mr. Ilya Rozanov for saving my best friend's life. #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov #ThankYouIlyaRozanov

Hayden Pike Place Market *@haydenpikeplace*
@HaydenPikeMusicOfficial THANK YOU! Tell Shane we love him and we hope he gets better. Donation MADE. #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov

Shayden4Ever *@shaydenshusband*
@HaydenPikeMusicOfficial Done and done. Give Shane my love. #PrayersUp4Shane #PrayersUp4Rozanov

ShaydenShipper *@shaaaayden*
SHAYDEN ARMY YOU HEARD (one of) OUR KING(s)! MAKE THOSE DONATIONS COUNT! Also how do we get a statue of Ilya Rozanov? He's practically already sculpted from marble, but for real. Like he saved Shane's life. For real.

ShaneHollandersHotBodyguard *@shaniacmcgee*
@shaaaayden Now that is what I'm talking about. But also I'm gonna need to take about 10% off my man, there.

Shane: Thanks for posting those links, I just don't think I can handle social media right now and it means more coming from you than a publicist or something.

Hayden: Anytime, man. Seriously. Whatever you need. Your fans are rabid to help, and so am I. And Jackie. And the Pikelets.
Hayden: Well, the kids have no idea what's going on, but you know what I mean. They love their Uncle Shane.

Shane: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Hayden: Any word on the shooter?

Shane: Fucking nothing. Whoever it is knows what they're doing and it's terrifying.

Hayden: I can't imagine how scary that is. Do you want me to come back to Ottawa?

Shane: No, you've got Jackie and the kids, I've got my folks, if I need you I'll let you know.

Hayden: I'm almost afraid to ask, but any word from Rozanov?

Shane: Nothing. I tried the hospital again, they said he still won't see visitors. I feel like I'm gonna die.

Hayden: I can't even imagine. Keep trying?
Hayden: Actually, Shane, you're good with words. Write him a fucking letter.
Hayden: At least then you can say everything you want to say and if he chooses not to read it he's a fucking idiot.
Hayden: Well I'm inclined to say that he's an idiot anyways for not seeing you, but he went through something traumatic so I'm trying to give him the benefit of the doubt.
Hayden: But also damn.

Shane: I'm not going to lie, I thought about just flying back there, showing up, and refusing to leave until he agrees to see me, but that's…that's crazy, right?

Hayden: I mean, I don't know if I'm the right person to dictate crazy, I just…don't want you to do anything rash that might get you outed before you're ready.
Hayden: I don't think you should have to stay in the closet, that's not what I'm saying, I'm just not sure that you want to be adding that particular log to the fire right now and throwing a fit at your bodyguard's hospital just to see him isn't like, suuuuuper discreet.
Hayden: Sorry if that's not the answer you wanted.

Shane: No, you're right, and it's not…not fair to Ilya, either.
Shane: He's Russian, so if we got outed, it could have real world consequences for him, like worse than mine. He might not ever be able to go home again.

Hayden: Oh fuck, I didn't even think about that.

Shane: Yeah. Fuck.

Hayden: Fuck.

Shane: We already said that.

Hayden: Is there anything I can do?

Shane: Nothing you aren't already doing. If you can just try and keep the fans…sated and pointed in the right direction. I don't need teddy bears and gifts and stuff, but there are real people who need help and if we're in a position to guide some assistance their way, I want to do it.

Hayden: I don't understand how your brain is working like this right now, but I am in awe.
Hayden: But also write that letter. You can decide whether or not to send it later, but just… write it, okay?

Shane: Okay. I'll think about it.

Hayden: Shane.

Shane: Okay, fine, I'll do it.

Hayden: Thank you.

Hayden: I love you, bro.

Shane: I love you, too.

Hayden: And don't you forget it. ;)

Dear Ilya,

I don't know what I'm supposed to say here, or how to start this out, so it probably won't be my best work, but please know that every word comes from the heart.

You saved my life. Yes, you took two bullets for me, and there is no way on this Earth or any other that I will ever be able to repay you for that, but it's more than that.

I have felt more alive these last few months with you than the last 25 years of my life combined, so I guess you sort of saved me in that way, too.

I was fine before I met you, I guess. I had a great career, good friends, a loving family, but I

was exhausted, and even with all of that, I was lonely. You took that loneliness away and replaced it with a vibrance that I didn't know I was capable of feeling and I miss you. I miss the way that you look at me, I miss the way that you tease me, I miss the way that you touch me, hold me, kiss me. I would give anything right now to hear you call me an angry kitten, and this is killing me, Ilya.

I am so sorry. I'm sorry that you got shot, I'm sorry that you almost died. I'm sorry that the media posted your identity and that there have been camera crews trying to bust into your hospital room. I'm sorry that you aren't being able to recover in peace the way that you deserve, I'm sorry that this all happened to you because of me, and I understand if you're mad at me, I do. I don't know how to come back from this. I don't know how to apologize for getting you shot, I'm not sure that there is any way to.

If you have to end things, end us, I understand. If you can't be with someone who put you in a position like that, who almost got you killed, I understand. I just hope that you'll tell me so that I can figure out how to deal with all of this. I can't force you to be with me, though right now, I can't lie, I sort of wish that I could. It's a bad thought, but it's the truth, and you deserve the truth from me, so here's a little more truth.

This is destroying me. Everything that I wrote in that song was real. Everything that I said to you was real. It's all still real. I have feelings for you that I don't have the words for, I'm not sure words even exist for what I feel, so I don't care how long it takes you, if there is any chance for us, please just let me know. If you need time, if you need space, I get that, but please don't keep icing me out like this, I don't think I can take it.

I know I don't have the right to ask anything of you right now, but I'm going to anyway because I think I'm falling in love with you, and you saved my life and almost lost yours in the process. It's driving me crazy not to be able to see you, to talk to you, to comfort you.

Most importantly, heal.

I'll be here when you're ready. As long as it takes.

Yours,
Shane Hollander

To: Svetlana Vetrova <svetrova@vetrovsecurity.com>
From: Shane Hollander <s.hollander@shollander.com>
Subject: Rozanov

Ms. Vetrova,

I hope this email finds you well.

First, I know that League Records is covering the contract, but I want to thank you and your company personally for your excellent, above and beyond security. I do not think that I would be alive without Mr. Rozanov, and there is no way to thank you enough.

Second, I have learned that Mr. Rozanov has checked out of the hospital, and was hoping that you might pass along details to me of where he intends to do physical therapy/recovery so that I can cover the bills, along with any loss of wages incurred due to being injured and the recovery time.

Third, before he checked out of Banner, I sent Mr. Rozanov a letter. I was hoping that you could provide me confirmation that he received it.

Thank you,
Shane Hollander

To: Shane Hollander <s.hollander@shollander.com>
From: Svetlana Vetrova <svetrova@vetrovsecurity.com>
Subject: Re: Rozanov

Mr. Hollander,

I appreciate your email. We do our best to provide top notch security, and I am glad that you are pleased with your experience, though I am sorry that such measures became necessary. I hope that you are finding Mr. Marlow a satisfactory replacement. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you have any concerns.

Your generosity in covering Mr. Rozanov's hospital bills has been greatly appreciated, but covering his physical therapy and wage loss will not be necessary. Vetrov Security understands the great risk our employees are taking in their line of work, and we take potential for wage loss, injury, and recovery into the rates that we charge and as a result, what we pay our guards. Rest assured, financially, Mr. Rozanov will be well taken care of.

As far as your letter goes, yes. I can confirm that it was received and read.

Sincerely,
Svetlana Vetrova
VP, Vetrov Security

To: Svetlana Vetrova <svetrova@vetrovsecurity.com>
From: Shane Hollander <s.hollander@shollander.com>
Subject: Re: Rozanov

Ms. Vetrova,

I appreciate your prompt response, however, I would like to insist that you allow me to cover Mr. Rozanov's physical therapy, at the very least. He took two bullets meant for me, either of which could have ended his life, and I do not take that lightly. A few thousand dollars of physical therapy does not even come close to repaying the debt that I owe him.

Mr. Marlow is just fine, I have felt nothing but safe in his presence, so nothing to worry about there. He's no Ilya Rozanov, but I don't think anyone is.

That being said, thank you so much for confirming that he read my letter. I have been trying to get a hold of him, and he seems to have blocked my number, which I guess I understand to a degree, but it's nice to know that my letter got through.

I spent a lot of time with Mr. Rozanov these past few months and developed something of a friendship with him. I would appreciate it greatly if, perhaps, you could put a bug in his ear to give me a call or something. Please.

Thank you,
Shane Hollander

To: Shane Hollander <s.hollander@shollander.com>
From: Svetlana Vetrova <svetrova@vetrovsecurity.com>
Subject: Re: Rozanov

Mr. Hollander,

I understand that you feel you owe Mr. Rozanov your life, however, he was merely doing his job. He was hired to protect you, he knew the risks, and I can assure that he does not regret taking the job with you, and he does not regret the outcome.

As far as the physical therapy bills go, it's out of my hands. Mr. Rozanov has asked me not to disclose where he will be doing his recovery, and I am afraid that I have to protect that information as he has asked me to.

As for the communication…I'll see what I can do. No promises.

Sincerely,
Svetlana Vetrova
VP, Vetrov Security

Svetlana: He wants to pay your physical therapy bills. He asked again.

Ilya: No.

Svetlana: What did his letter say?

Ilya: Nothing.

Svetlana: Ilya, I'm worried about you.

Ilya: I'm fine.

Svetlana: I know you well enough to know when you're lying. I've got Shane fucking Hollander begging me to get you to talk to him, and I am a lot smarter than you think, so I really suggest you stop lying to me right fucking now and tell me what's going on. I can't help you if you shut me out.

Ilya: I don't need your help.

Svetlana: Bullshit.
Svetlana: You'd be absolutely lost without me and we both know it.
Svetlana: Are you in love with him?

Ilya: No.

Svetlana: Ilya, stop fucking lying to me.

Ilya: If you already know the answer then why did you ask the fucking question?

Svetlana: Because I wanted you to tell me. Damnit, Ilya, you're my best friend. It scares the shit out of me that you got shot, but it almost scares me more that you're pushing me away right now.
Svetlana: You got shot. You almost died. Now is NOT the time to be pushing away the only person who really knows you.
Svetlana: Well, both of the people who really know you, I think. I've seen the way you look at him, I've seen the way that he looks at you. I am so much more perceptive than you give me credit for. If you love him, why are you shutting him out?

Ilya: Because I fucked up.
Ilya: I should have spent my nights going through security footage, looking for his stalker. Instead, I spent my nights in his bed, distracted.

Svetlana: Ilya, this wasn't your fault.

Ilya: Maybe not, but we don't know that for sure.

Svetlana: Ilya, you're being ridiculous. Just talk to him.

Ilya: I can't.
Ilya: I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have been and he was nearly killed. That fucker should never have gotten so close to him, and I just…I can't.
Ilya: Not until I find him.

Svetlana: Find him?

Ilya: Yes. I am not giving up. I was hired to keep Shane Hollander safe and I am going to do that. I am going to find out who is trying to hurt him, and I am going to see to it that they

never succeed.
Ilya: Then I will talk to him.

Svetlana: You should be recovering.

Ilya: I am.

Svetlana: I can't condone this. As your boss, I can't condone it.

Ilya: And as my friend?

Svetlana: ...Just tell me what you need.

Ilya: If I write back to him, you can see that he gets it? Just once.

Svetlana: Yes, and I think that's a good idea, Ilya, I really do. His emails are professional, but something about them seems just…like maybe he's unraveling a little bit. I think he needs to hear from you, just like you needed to hear from him.
Svetlana: Whatever was in that letter must have been something else, your face when you read it…I don't think I've ever seen you cry before.

Ilya: I'm not talking to you about this, not over text. Not right now. Maybe not ever.

Svetlana: It's okay, Ilya. It's okay to love him.

Ilya: Not if it puts him in danger.

Shane,

Words are maybe not my strength, and English can be hard but I am trying my best.

I let you down. You maybe don't see it that way, but I did. I should have been focused on your safety and finding this stalker but instead I was focused on other things and what happened that night should never have happened. I am not mad at you that I got shot, I am only mad at myself. We were stupid. I was stupid. I should not have been doing what we were doing, it was careless, reckless, unprofessional, and unsafe.

I do not want you paying any more of my bills, I do not want you sending me any more text messages or trying to call, I do not want you sending me any more letters. I do not want you bothering Svetlana.

I am going to find the person responsible for this, and I cannot have you distracting me again.

Once you are safe, once I can be certain that you are safe, we can maybe talk about the rest.

Until then, please leave me alone to do my work.

Oh, and thank you for the lilies. You did not have to send new ones every day, but they were beautiful and appreciated.

-Ilya

P.S. Everything that I said was true, too. Please believe that.

Shane sat down hard on the bed, his eyes scanning the letter again and again. The envelope had been heavy, he had expected more words, but…this was it. Ilya, telling Shane to leave him alone.

Ilya, telling Shane that he thought getting shot was his own fault.

This wasn't Ilya's fault, and Shane had asked for clear communication, but now that he was looking at it, spelled out in a messy scrawl on a wrinkled piece of paper in front of him, he was almost wishing that he hadn't.

All that he wanted was to find Ilya, to grab him, to *shake* him so that the other man would understand that Shane hadn't been let down, that *Ilya* certainly hadn't let him down.

He read the letter again, his heart aching as he did so. The words wouldn't change. No matter how many times he read them, he couldn't rearrange them to say what he wanted them to say. Ilya was being clear with him, and Shane had to respect that even though he felt a cruel twisting in his chest at the mere thought of letting Ilya disappear from his life.

At least it wasn't a fully closed door. Ilya had left open the chance to talk about the rest of this when everything was sorted out, and god, Shane hoped that was soon. Maybe if the shooter was caught, they could sit down together, talk things out.

Maybe if the shooter was caught, Ilya would still come to the cottage and Shane could take his hand, look him in the eyes, and tell him not just that he loved him, but how *much*. He knew, though, that this letter was no guarantee. Maybe they would catch the shooter, and nothing would change, Ilya would be in the wind and Shane would never see him again. The mere thought of that made him feel like he was going to die.

He couldn't go there.

Shane couldn't let himself think like that, let himself shut down. He couldn't hide in his parent's house in Ottawa forever. At some point, he had to get back on his feet, get back on his tour, and keep going. He belonged to himself, to his parents, to Ilya, but also to his fans, to League Records.

He couldn’t lose himself, it wouldn’t be fair to everyone else.

With a gulp, Shane carefully folded the letter, lifting the envelope to tuck it safely back inside. As he did so, however, he was surprised to find that the envelope still carried weight.

Frowning, Shane tipped the envelope, watching as something gold and shiny fell out onto his bedspread.

Shane sucked in a deep breath, certain that his heart stopped beating as he brushed fingers across the gold chain, spreading it out on the quilt to fully take in the Russian Orthodox cross that rested there.

Ilya’s cross.

Shane lay back on the bed, clutching the cross to his chest as tears burned hot in his eyes.

It wasn’t over. It couldn’t be, and this was Ilya’s way of telling him that. He was sure of it.

Chapter 16: Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

> So, this chapter wasn't in my outline, and I waffled on keeping it, restructuring it, but at the end of the day, this one's for *my* mom, so. Yeah. I hope you enjoy, I think it matters for Shane to have this chapter.

Shane didn’t hear from Ilya again.

He was patient, or he was trying to be, knowing that he couldn’t pressure Ilya into talking to him, to seeing him. The other man had asked for space, but he had also given Shane his necklace, a necklace that Shane was *certain* he would want back one day, so at the very least, they hadn’t had their last goodbye. Shane held on to that knowledge as hard as he could, letting it carry him from day to day as he milled around his parents’ house in Ottawa trying to keep from losing his sanity.

“I can’t do this anymore.” Shane set his fork down at the breakfast table, looking up, between both of his parents. “I need to - I can’t just stay here. I know they haven’t figured out who’s trying to kill me or whatever-”

“It’s not whatever, Shane,” Yuna said, ever the household voice of reason. “It’s your *life*.”

“I know.” Shane sighed. “I know it is, but this isn’t living, Mom. Cooped up in the house all day, hiding from *one* guy with a gun isn’t living. I’m losing my mind and I’m blocked. I can’t write, I’m having trouble sleeping, I’m restless, I’m *bored*. I just can’t *do* this anymore. I haven’t stopped moving since I was 16, so being this…this sedentary state is killing me. I want to get back out on tour. I want to at least start talking about it.”

Shane needed to get on the road. He needed to have something to occupy his time, something that would be able to pull his thoughts away from Ilya, from his broken heart. He was certain that he had only been able to hide his heartbreak from his parents this long because the traumatic events surrounding it gave him cause to be withdrawn, moody, upset, even if he had never been those things before.

Only Hayden knew about Ilya, and he intended to keep it that way, at least for now. If Ilya were to come back into his life, well, he might reconsider. He wanted more, so much more, and he hoped that the other man did, too, but right now, he didn’t know where they stood or where they were going.

As he stared down his parents, he felt the cool metal of Ilya’s cross, tucked under his shirt collar, hidden away, but comforting against his skin, reminding him that he could still carry

hope.

“Okay, well,” Yuna nodded. “I suppose that’s something we can start to talk about. I’ll set up a meeting with League Records. A conference call, perhaps. Baby steps.”

“Thank you.” Shane relaxed, the tension in his shoulders releasing at the knowledge that he could at least *start* doing things that would make him feel human again. “I want to get back in the studio.”

“You do?” Yuna looked surprised by the statement, but not displeased.

“Yes. Nothing much, but I want to record a single - *Constellations*. I only got to play it the one time on tour and I want to release it. Preferably with a B-Side of *Hallelujah*, so please see what you can do about looking into getting me the correct licensing to release an official cover.”

Those songs belonged to Ilya. In Shane’s heart, they belonged to the man that he loved, and maybe he couldn’t reach out to Ilya in person, but he could reach out to him like this, through the airwaves. He could hurl his songs, *their* songs, out into the universe and hope that Ilya would hear them, that he would know, as he worked towards finding Shane’s stalker, that Shane was still thinking about him.

That Shane loved him.

One day, he wanted to be able to say it for real, but for now, he would settle for saying it any way he could, and he just had to hope that Ilya would hear it…and that if he did, he would understand.

“I will add that to the list of things to talk to League about,” Yuna said with a slight smile.

“Speaking of…” David looked at his son, head tilted to the side.

“What?” Shane asked.

“*Constellations*. It’s a pretty romantic song, is it about someone special?”

“No.” Shane shook his head.

“You sure? It’s one hell of a love song.”

“I’ve written love songs before, they’re never about anyone.” Shane pushed his eggs around his plate, stuffing a bite into his mouth to prolong the amount of time until he had to speak again.

“Okay, if you’re sure, but…just know that if you ever want to talk about anything like that-”

“Dad, no. That’s gross. I’m a fully grown adult, I don’t need *the* talk.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just mean that we love you, me and your mother,” David said, finding his wife’s hand and squeezing it. “And we want you to know that you can come to us, to talk to us, about anything. I’ve seen the rumors online, you and one of your backup dancers?”

“Just rumors,” Shane said, feeling his cheeks heating up. “My dancers are nice, they’re great, but…no.”

“I think what your father is trying to say is that if there ever *is* someone special in your life, we hope that you’d tell us, and that we’d get to meet them. You’re still very young, but you haven’t brought a girl home since high school, and even then, Jessica always seemed more like a friend. A good friend, but a friend nonetheless.”

“Oh my god. Mom. Please stop.”

“Alright, alright.” Yuna lifted her hands, placating her son…at least this once. “We just want our only child to be happy.”

“I am. Or. I will be. Things are a lot right now, with, you know…” he gestured vaguely, trusting his parents to track his line of thought to the shooter, not to Ilya. “I’ll be happier if you get me back in the studio, back on the road.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Yuna promised.

To Shane, that was as good as gold. Yuna Hollander had never failed at something that she had set out to do, at least not in Shane’s experience.

“You’re ready to get the tour back up and running? That is fantastic news! We will get everything set up, reach out to the venues, find make-up dates that work, double security-”

“Triple.” Yuna stared down the webcam, wanting to be nothing but clear about her stance on the issue. “Triple security. Someone tried to shoot my son, and they almost succeeded - they would have, if not for that excellent bodyguard.”

Shane shuddered at the mention of Ilya, reaching up, touching his shirt over where the cross lay against his chest.

“Fine.” Roger Crowell sighed. “*Triple* security. No expense will be spared.”

Of course it wouldn’t be. Shane couldn’t ignore the way that his sales had skyrocketed. Every single track on *Hat Trick* had blazed to the top of the charts alongside several Shane Hollander-heavy tracks by The Metropolitan Men. His entire merch catalogue had sold out, been restocked, and sold out again.

In the time since the shooting, Shane’s fans had made their loyalty to him abundantly clear.

He had gotten good press for the way that he had handled the rescheduling of his tour dates, for thinking of his fans even in the wake of such horrific events. A vast majority of ticketholders had opted to hold on to their tickets for the rescheduled shows and the tickets that *had* been refunded were sure to sell out in seconds once the new dates were announced.

The reality of the situation was that demand for Shane Hollander was blazing hot right now. League Records had already made a killing off of everything that had happened, and truthfully, so had Shane, though he didn't like to think about it. Capitalizing off of Ilya's pain when the other man wouldn't let him share a dime of those earnings with him felt wrong in ways that Shane couldn't yet name.

He would find a way, though, to make sure it got back to Ilya somehow. Maybe it would be lavish meals and expensive gifts, once they were back together - *if* they got back together - a car, maybe. He didn't know, but he was having his accountant keep track of what was coming in and from where so that he knew how much was to be earmarked.

"You're going to need a new opening act," Crowell added.

"Of course." Shane nodded. The one that he had previously had on his tour was *also* capitalizing on the situation, and her management had quickly cobbled together a headlining tour of club venues, rendering her unavailable for Shane's rescheduled dates.

"I'll send you some options, other League acts that I think might be good - Luca Haas is promising," he said. "Young, a little more singer/songwriter than pop, but he's sweet, very eager - I think he'll appeal to your fans. He designs all of his own merch, too - posters, album art, everything."

"I've heard his EP. He has a great voice."

"Like butter," Crowell agreed.

"If he wants to do it, no need to send other options. I'd love to have him," Shane said.

Did he care who his opening act was? Only tangentially. He wanted to cater to his fans. He had taken time away to deal with all of this, and he was still looking at a bit more before he was able to get everything rescheduled. Luca Haas was charming, adorable. They would absolutely love him.

They might also eat him alive, but that was Luca's problem, not his.

"We also want studio time," Yuna said. "My client has a single he wants to record, and he wants to release an official cover of *Hallelujah*. It was doing well on tour, lots of re-posts on TikTok, Instagram, everywhere, really."

"I think that's a great idea!" Roger looked practically delighted. "Releasing a new single and B-Side cover alongside your rescheduled tour dates is, hands down, the best way to say that you're back with a vengeance, that no one can keep Shane Hollander down. Is that new single by any chance that song you played on stage the night…" Crowell trailed off.

“*Constellations*, yes.” Shane nodded.

“And you don’t think it’s a bit…*mature* for your audience?” He asked.

“I’ve been on the scene for 10 years,” Shane reasoned, keeping his tone as calm as possible. “With all due respect, I’m not a kid anymore. I’m growing up, and my fans are growing up with me, so no. I don’t think it’s too mature. Sure, the song has some sexual undertones alongside some darker themes, but at the crux of it, it’s a love song. My fans go crazy for love songs, and we both know it.”

“You…have a good point. They’ll stream it over and over again just trying to figure out who it might be about.”

“They always do,” Yuna said with a smile. “And as always, it’s not about anyone.”

“Even better,” Crowell admitted. “It makes you seem available, allows them to slot *themselves* on the other side of the song. Between the three of us, I think that’s a major part of why you marketed better than the other four.”

“Right.” Shane shifted. He had liked to think that it was about his music and his talent, not about his perpetually single status allowing him to seem *available* to fans, but he didn’t expect Roger Crowell to see him that way.

He knew that he was a marketing tool, and the second he became invaluable they would promote someone else in his place, maybe even Luca Haas.

Shane wasn’t ready for that, not yet.

Maybe once he got Ilya back it would be easier to quietly disappear from the scene, a proverbial ride into the sunset, but he didn’t know when, or if, that would happen, so no. He wasn’t quite ready to disappear just yet.

“Okay, so we get you studio time, get the songs cut and ready for release in tandem with the rescheduling announcement, I’ll enter negotiations with Haas and his agent…and you’re still happy with Marlow?”

“Yes.” Shane nodded. “I trust him. I trust Vetrov in general.”

“Yeah, they’ve more than proven their worth, haven’t they?” Crowell said with a sly smile. “That Rozanov boy could easily have died protecting you. It’s good to know they stand by their word.”

Shane’s stomach turned, and he had to look away. *That Rozanov boy?* The way that Roger Crowell said it was sickening, as though Ilya were simply disposable, as though had he died, it would have been worth it because he had protected Crowell’s fucking golden goose.

“Ilya Rozanov saved my life,” Shane said, turning his gaze - the one that he was sure Ilya

would call an angry kitten gaze - back to the screen projecting Roger Crowell's face. His smile was too large, too…giddy for the situation at hand.

"He's a hero," Yuna chimed in. "My client means that Mr. Rozanov is a hero."

"That he is." Crowell agreed. "Best return on investment this label has ever spent, maybe."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Shane asked, brow furrowing.

He knew what it meant, though. He knew that Ilya getting shot had been great for Shane's brand, for his sales, and great for League in general. The fact that Roger Crowell didn't even have the tact to *pretend* to be morose about it made Shane want to leap through the screen and punch his stupid, smug face.

Roger Crowell was going to make millions off of Ilya's sacrifice, and Shane couldn't think of *anyone* who deserved it less.

"He kept you safe, that's all," Crowell said, wisely sensing that Shane was not pleased with the way that he was speaking on the issue. "Here at League Records, we are all just…very, *very* glad that you're alright. We are going to get your tour back up and running and we can have you booked at a studio in Ottawa probably as early as this week, if your songs are ready."

"They're ready," Shane confirmed. "My band knows them both, so if you get them here, we can probably take care of both in an afternoon."

"That's one of my favorite things about you, Mr. Hollander. You're young, but you don't waste my time. You don't waste *anyone's* time. You're good at what you do, and you're a damn professional."

What Crowell meant, Shane was sure, was that he didn't waste Crowell's *money*, but that was fine.

"Just make sure that security at the studio is perfect," Yuna said. "We still don't know who's trying to hurt my son, and until we catch them…"

"We understand, Mrs. Hollander. Like I said before, no expense will be spared in keeping your son out of harm's way."

"You'd better hope that's true," Yuna said.

"Mom." Shane shook his head.

"No, I understand." Roger Crowell nodded. "I'll have my team get working on the tour and the studio time. We'll get you back up and running, Shane. Don't you worry. You're in good hands."

"I'm sure I am."

Shane was sure of that, but only because he knew how much he was worth right now. Roger Crowell wouldn't let anything truly bad happen to him…not as long as he was providing value to League Records, and right now, he was the biggest act they had.

Maybe the biggest act they had *ever* had.

"Well, that went well," Yuna said as she disconnected from the call.

"I hate him," Shane said, unable to stop himself.

"I know, he's the worst, but-"

"Can you get me out of my contract with League?" he asked. "After…after this tour?"

"Shane…"

"Mom. Did…you *heard* the way he talked about Rozanov. That Rozanov boy? It was like he was *glad* Ilya got shot because it lined his own damn pocketbook. I don't want to be in bed with people like that, and I don't think that you do, either."

"No, I don't," Yuna admitted. "They've been good for your career, they've really pushed your stuff, and your contract is fairly ironclad, but I'll see what I can do. I might be able to entice another label to buy *out* your contract, but I'm not sure I can get you fully severed from them. It will be a process, and it may well be impossible until you've fulfilled your five-record deal."

"It's not urgent, but…" Shane shrugged. "Please just try, he makes me sick."

"Honey." Yuna turned to face her son. "I can't help but feel like there's something you're not telling me."

"Mom, it's nothing. It's fine."

"No, I don't think that it is - fine, *or* nothing. I understand that you're a grown up, that you are your own man, and maybe sometimes I don't…behave like that, because yeah, sometimes I still just see you as my little boy, but if something is on your mind, if it's weighing you down, I don't want you to be alone with it."

"I'm not…not alone with it," Shane said. And he wasn't - he had Hayden.

"I love you so, so much, Shane. You are the most important person in the world to me. Nothing ever has or will matter to me more than you, and I know how hard all of this must be, but even so, there's - you don't have to hide from me. Whatever it is, I'm here for you. Anything." She reached out, finding Shane's hand. "Please don't shut me out, sweetheart. It's killing me to see you struggle like this."

"Mom, I just…" Shane looked down at the carpet of his mother's office, gulping, feeling

ashamed as, for what felt like the millionth time since he had last seen Ilya, tears pricked at his eyes.

“Look at me. Honey,” Yuna reached out, putting her hand on her son’s chin as he attempted to avoid her gaze, moving it to face her. “Look at me. There is *nothing* you could say to me that would make me love you any less than I do right now. Nothing.”

“Fuck.” Shane gulped, gazing into his mother’s eyes. She looked so tired, so worried - older than he had ever seen her. “I’m in love with him.”

“What?” Yuna looked mildly taken aback. “Who are you in love with, honey?”

“Ilya. Ilya Rozanov.”

“Oh.” Yuna’s eyes widened. “Oh…oh my. I thought - never mind.”

“No, what?” Shane asked.

“I mean, we thought - your father and I, we’ve thought that you might be gay for a while now,” she admitted. “But we thought, *I* thought…God, I feel so stupid.”

“*What*, mom?”

“We thought it was Hayden.”

“Oh my god, why does everybody think I’m in love with Hayden? He’s my best friend, he’s not, I’ve never - wait.” Shane paused. “You…knew I was gay?”

“Not for certain,” she shook her head. “But honey, sweetheart, your father and I both know you so well, and you just never seemed to click with girls.”

“You never saw me click with boys, either. Not like that.”

“No, I suppose not, but…there’s just always been something about you, and it’s just really not surprising, but…Ilya Rozanov? Your bodyguard?”

“Yes.” Shane’s eyes were cast downward, avoidant.

“Oh sweetheart.” Yuna stood, pulling Shane up and into her arms. “I am so, so sorry that you’ve just been holding this in, dealing with it all by yourself. I am so sorry that I made you feel like you couldn’t tell me. Sweetheart, I love you, no matter what, and if you’re going to be in love with someone, well, I can’t say I’m disappointed that it’s someone who would take a bullet for you.”

“So you don’t - you’re not mad?”

“Mad? Honey, no. Why would I be mad?”

“Because, I don’t know, because I lied to you? For like, ever, basically. And then a lot recently.”

“You are your own man, Shane, you always have been, even when you were still a little boy.” She stood back, keeping her hands on her son’s shoulders as she gazed at him. “You have always been so independent, so mature, so grown up for your age, but you have been carrying too much alone lately. I just want to help you shoulder some of this burden.”

“Mom, I’m so scared.” Shane melted into his mother’s arms, burying his face in her neck.

Yuna’s scent was so familiar, so calming, and it had been a long time since Shane had sought out her comfort like this, but he hadn’t realized how much he had needed this until he was in the middle of it.

“He’s not talking to me, he’s…he thinks this is all his fault, he sent me a letter, he said that he can’t talk to me, can’t see me until he sees this through, until he finds out, or *someone* finds out who’s trying to kill me. I miss him so much, and I’m so scared. I thought - in the car on the way to the hospital, I thought he’d fucking *died* in my lap, and I…I can’t sleep because every time I close my eyes I see him bleeding out in my arms.”

“Oh, sweetheart…” Yuna held Shane tighter, working to maneuver them over to the sofa. “I can’t even imagine how hard this all must be for you. God, it all makes so much more sense now. I wish…I wish I’d known then. I wish I had taken better care of you.”

“You took the best care of me you could, it wouldn’t have mattered. I love him and he almost died, and it’s my fault - or it’s not my fault but it only *happened* because he was hired to keep me safe and I don’t care that it was his job, I really don’t, I…just…” Shane’s words were separated by sobs - sobs that he had been holding in, *fears* that he had been holding in. “I don’t want him to push away from me, but I don’t know how to make him stay.”

“Look, I’m going to tell you something that - well, if you tell anyone that I said this, they won’t believe you anyways, so I don’t have to threaten you.”

That won a quick, stilted snort of laughter from Shane.

“We can’t *make* people stay in our lives, that’s true,” she said. “But I do truly believe that if it’s right, you two will find your way back to each other. The right people always do. Love is a powerful thing, Shane, maybe the most powerful thing in the world, and there are a lot of different ways to love someone. The way that I love your father, the way that you love Rozanov-”

“Ilya,” Shane hiccuped.

“The way that you love Ilya,” she corrected with a gentle smile. “It’s *rare*, it’s special, it is to be cherished, but it is not to be taken for granted, and it’s not easy. There were so many times that I worried your father and I might not make it-”

“What? You always seemed so solid.”

“Oh honey, we are, this was largely at the beginning, but my point is love, *real* love, like you wrote about in that song?” She reached up, running her hand along Shane’s head, patting down his hair. “Not everybody gets to have that. If you love him, if he loves you - and he would be stupid not to - give him the time, give him the space, and if after that, he still doesn’t come back to you, I will help you kick down his door and make him tell you to your face that he’s done with you. So help me god, if that man breaks your heart-”

“Mom,” Shane sniffled. “I get it, okay? Thank you. I get it. Thank you.” He rested his head on her shoulder, exhausted, emotionally and physically.

“Of course. I love you so much, Shane.” She kissed the top of his head. “I would do anything to keep you safe, and I like knowing that the man you’ve chosen seems to feel the same way.”

“Yeah.” Shane took a shaky breath. “He told me…he told me he didn’t think I could be safer with anyone else, because he cared about me, and that meant…that meant…” he whimpered as tears began to slowly roll down his cheeks again. “That meant he would do more to protect me than someone who didn’t feel the same. I just wish it hadn’t been the way it is.”

“Me, too,” Yuna whispered. “Me, too. Wow.” She gently rubbed Shane’s back. “Ilya Rozanov. Interesting choice.”

“Wasn’t a choice,” Shane admitted. “It just…happened.”

“I understand. How…how long?”

“Oh god, I don’t know. Um. I mean, right away in some senses, for me at least. The first time he walked in at the League office I’m pretty sure my soul left my body for a minute, but…I didn’t kiss him until…um, the Montreal show? When that fan grabbed me?”

“Oh, *I* could have kissed Rozanov for the way that he ripped that asshole off of you.”

“Yeah.” Shane flushed a deep crimson. “Me, too. So…I did.”

“I understand now, I think, why you want to release those two songs so badly.”

“You do?”

“Well they’re for him, of course,” Yuna said as though it were the most obvious thing in the world - and now that she *knew* how Shane felt about Ilya, it probably *was* the most obvious thing in the world. “You want him to hear them, to know how much he matters to you while you’re apart.”

“Yeah, that’s…yeah that’s about it,” Shane admitted. “But…I want the world to hear them, too. I want them to know, even if they don’t get it, not really, how much I love Ilya.”

“Oh sweetheart.” Yuna gave Shane a gentle squeeze. “They will. Thank you for telling me all

of this, for trusting me. I just…I hope you can forgive me, for not making it an easier thing to do."

"I forgive you, Mom." Shane nodded. "Of course I forgive you."

"Thank you." Yuna wiped away a tear of her own. "And when you're ready to tell your father, I can promise you, he's ready to hear it."

"You aren't going to tell him?" Shane asked, surprise evident on his face.

"This is your thing to tell. I hope that you choose to tell him soon because I know that he will support you, and you could use that right now, but you do it when you're ready."

"I'll tell him," Shane assured her. "Tonight. But for now, can we just…stay here for a little bit."

"Oh sweetheart, of course."

Yuna leaned back into the couch and Shane curled up, resting his head on her shoulder. He hadn't done this since he was a little boy, let his mother really fawn over him, take care of him. He had been a grown up, bringing in grown up money and then some, since he had been 16 years old. He was an adult now, 26, successful, known. International, maybe. But right now, he merely felt like a little boy who needed his mother - a boy who was lucky that she was right there.

Shane had held all of this in for far too long, but here, in his mother's arms, for the first time since Ilya had been shot, Shane finally felt like maybe it would all be alright.

Chapter 17: Chapter Seventeen

Roger Crowell made good on his promise, and by mid-week, Shane was in the studio with his producer and his band, laying down the two desired tracks. As *Shane* had promised, he was a proper professional, and they were finished before the end of the day.

The songs were with Shane's producer now, and he would get versions of them sent to him for approval as soon as mixes were done, but he couldn't deny that it felt good to have been back at work. It felt good, being in the recording booth, singing from the heart about Ilya both with his own words and the ones that he had borrowed from famous artists before him.

On the car ride back to his parents' house, though, he couldn't help but feel a pull at his chest. He wanted to share this day with *Ilya*. He had wanted to look out to the soundboard and see Ilya standing there, watching the whole process like a hawk. Instead, he had seen Cliff Marlow - tall, alert, more than ready to defend him, he knew, but it wasn't the same.

"Did you know him?" Shane asked finally, turning in the hired car to look at Cliff.

"Know who?"

"Rozanov."

"Ah." Cliff nodded. "A little. We did some trainings together, but he showed up after I had already been with Vetrov for a couple of years. I was often on assignment by the time that he was in house and then once he was trained up, he was assigned to you very quickly. I won't lie," Cliff said with, perhaps the first smile that Shane had seen out of him. "Some of the more seasoned guards were a little jealous of him."

"Jealous? Why?" Shane frowned.

"You were a big score, a big pop star? It would be a lavish job, very high profile, very high paying," Cliff said with a shrug. "And they gave it to a newbie. Then again, not everyone knew about Rozanov's background and how uniquely qualified he was for something like this."

"So you're not all…"

"Secret service, special ops, and whatnot? No. I was with the Marines, but it's not really the same. They put me on you because I have a lot of experience and I've never, well…" Cliff shrugged. "Nothing like what happened to Rozanov has ever happened on my watch. It wasn't his fault," Cliff said quickly, before Shane even got the chance to argue that. "But I'm trusted to keep you safe, and I will do my best to make good on that. I have never lost a client."

"Well, thank you." Shane bit his lip. There was a first time for everything, but he wasn't

about to say that. He didn't want Cliff to think that he didn't have faith in him, he just really missed Ilya and wanted him back.

"I'm sure it's hard," Cliff said softly, perhaps reading some of the reticence inside Shane. "You liked him, you got used to him, and now it's this other person with you 24/7, but I'm good at my job. You have nothing to worry about."

"I know." Shane nodded. "I know."

"It was cool, being in the studio with you today," Cliff added. "I've never gotten to see something like that before, you're very talented. Whoever those songs were for, she is a very lucky woman."

"Yeah, well..." Shane shifted uncomfortably, suddenly wishing the car were much, much closer to his home than it was. "I'm not sure she feels that way."

"Well, you never know." Cliff shrugged. "Maybe she will when she hears the songs. Sometimes all you need is the right gesture, and those songs are one hell of a gesture."

"Yeah." Shane let out a heavy sigh, turning his gaze to look out the tinted window as pieces of Ottawa streaked past. "Maybe."

"Bro, I want to hate you, but I simply cannot, this is just too good!" Hayden grinned as Shane closed the laptop.

The latest mixes from his producer had come in, and Hayden was over for the day, so Shane had been eager to play them for him and get a professional, but also amiable, opinion.

"I think it's done, I think…those are the ones."

Shane had been back and forth with his producer a couple of times with the songs over the past several days, but they felt finished now, polished, ready to go.

Ready for *Ilya* to hear them.

The timing was perfect. The League Records team had been working hard to make sure that Shane got his tour back on schedule and all of the dates were in the final stages of being confirmed. The announcement would be ready very soon, with the first rescheduled date being San Diego, kicking the recommencement of the tour off in less than a month.

Shane was itching to get back on the road and a month still seemed far away, but honestly, they were lucky they had been able to get going again as rapidly as they had. Some of the dates were a bit more scattered around North America rather than the clear trajectory of the original set, but that was based on venue availability, and if it got him back on the road faster,

Shane didn't mind. If he had to spend a little extra time on plans or on the tour bus, that was a small price to pay to get out of this house and back to his life.

It was a small price to pay to distract him from constant thoughts of Ilya Rozanov.

"They sound really good." Hayden sat back on the sofa, taking a swig of his beer. "I wish I didn't like you so damn much so I could hate you a little for being more talented than I am."

"Not more talented," Shane said with a smile. "Just…differently talented."

"I wrote a whole album for Jackie and I think it took every track on it to convey the longing, the love, the intensity that you packed into *Constellations* alone," Hayden pointed out.

"Well yeah but it's a different vibe. Doesn't matter."

"Is it true that Luca Haas is taking your opening spot?"

"Yup. Contracts got signed yesterday, I think."

"That'll be fun to watch, he seems like a sweet kid. Your fans are going to eat him up."

"I just hope he's ready," Shane said with a chuckle.

"Well, he'll have a good mentor. I mean you remember what it was like," Hayden said with a gentle smile. "Being that young, touring the world, screaming fans in every city? One day, we were normal kids and the next day we couldn't go get the paper from the porch without someone trying to pap us. What a fucking life, man, huh?"

"Seems like a lifetime ago," Shane admitted. "I feel so much older now."

"Well, maybe you can get a nice shot of remembrance at the dinner next week. It'll be good to see the other guys, their families…"

"Yeah." Shane smiled. "I don't like that it's black tie, but…it'll be nice to see everyone," he agreed.

One of the parents, Gil's, Shane was pretty sure, had orchestrated a whole thing with *Teen Vogue*, a reunion dinner for The Metropolitan Men, to show support for Shane during this time of need. Of course, it was also a cash grab for…everyone, but Shane was still looking forward to it.

There wouldn't be a performance but there would be a photographer, and a few speeches, and the press would fly off the handle with the pictures from that night of all five boys together again, making nice with each other. Streams would increase, royalties would line everyone's pockets, and hopefully, it would start to breathe life back into the careers that had been stagnating.

Shane had agreed to it in a heartbeat. Those boys had been his best friends for some of the

most important years of his life, and right now, he *really* needed his friends.

Since the shooting, all of them had reached out more than once. The Metropolitan Men group chat had come back to life, and it had been a saving grace to Shane as he had been stuck inside this house.

They had all agreed that a full reunion was out of the question - they had their freedoms, and they all wanted that - but a dinner in their honor? Putting to bed the rumors that they hated each other? That would be nice.

Really nice.

“Man, what is it with you and formal wear?” Hayden laughed. “You’ve never been a fan.”

“I just feel like…” Shane reached out, playfully putting his hands around Hayden’s neck and pretending to squeeze. “Just feels like that.”

“So dramatic. No wonder you’re a good songwriter. Get off of me.” Hayden pushed Shane away, though he was smiling. “Small price to pay to see Jackie in what is no doubt gonna be a totally killer dress. She won’t let me see it in advance, and that’s how I *know* it’s good.”

“Are the kids coming?”

“They are not. They’re staying back with Jackie’s parents,which - it’s gonna be great. Me, Jackie, a New York Hotel Suite…”

“Oh my god, grow up.” Shane rolled his eyes.

“Excuse me, if memory serves, you have recently begun to understand the delights a proper hotel suite can bring?”

Well, Hayden had him there.

“Yeah, I guess…that’s true.” Shane reached up, rubbing the back of his neck, feeling beneath his fingers the chain of Ilya’s necklace. He hadn’t taken it off since it had been given to him, and if anyone had noticed, they had had the good sense not to ask.

Then again, if his parents had noticed, they probably didn’t *have* to ask. They weren’t stupid. They had probably seen the necklace on Ilya, and now that they both knew how much he and Shane meant to each other, well, they had likely put the pieces together instantly.

“Still nothing from him?” Hayden asked.

“Nothing at all. Radio silence. I mean,” he paused. “Not since the letter.”

“The letter, where he both told you to leave him alone and basically told you to wait for him?”

“That’s the one.”

“Man, and here I was thinking that *women* were confusing.” Hayden let out a low whistle.

“He’s not…I understand it,” Shane admitted. “He feels like we got in the way of him doing his job. He wants to get the job done, and I get it. I mean, he doesn’t want to get shot again, I’m sure.” Shane’s hand moved up, rubbing at his chest where he could feel the pendant beneath his thin t-shirt. “I just hope this all ends soon. I’m tired of being scared, and I’m tired of being away from him.”

“I can’t even imagine.” Hayden sighed, giving his best friend a sympathetic look. “Loving someone as much as I can tell you love him and having no contact is bad enough, adding in someone trying to kill you…yikes, but hey,” Hayden’s expression switched incredibly quickly to his charming, Hayden Pike smile. “All the more reason to get amped for this dinner. It’s gonna be so good. Good food, good music, good friends, it’s pretty small, so it won’t be a *total* zoo…”

“Yeah.” Shane nodded. “I know.”

“You know what you’re gonna wear yet?”

“That’s up to my stylist,” Shane said with a laugh. “You know I have no say.”

“You could at least try to get involved, you know. If you wanted.”

“She’s good at her job, and I would not be helpful. No reason to fix what isn’t broken.”

“Just tell her no tight neckties, am I right?”

“Yeah.” Shane felt his stomach turn. It wasn’t crazy, he didn’t think, the way that so many things reminded him of Ilya now, even the neckties on his suits called back to the other man…to the way that Shane had been bound to the bed, Ilya had been bound to the chair, the feeling of Ilya’s tie fisted in Shane’s hand as he used it to pull Ilya in for a kiss…

“Hey,” Hayden nudged Shane. “Where’d you go?”

“Oh, uh, nowhere.” Shane shook his head. “Just thinking about the mixes.” He gestured awkwardly to the laptop.

“Right.” Hayden narrowed his eyes, suspicion lacing his tone. “Thinking about Ilya?”

“I mean,” Shane leaned back into the couch, closing his eyes for a moment. “Always.”

“Mmm, you know what that sounds like…” Hayden grinned, looking around Shane’s “office” at his parent’s house. It had the comfy sofa they were sitting on, the laptop, and a smattering of musical instruments.

“Oh no. No.” Shane shook his head. “Hayden…”

“You love it.” Hayden got up, grabbing one of the acoustic guitars and resting it in his lap, checking it, expertly tuning it, before beginning to strum.

*"I have died every day waiting for you/Darling don’t be afraid/I have loved you for a thousand years/I’ll love you for a thousand moooo-*hey!”

“The *Twilight* song? Really?” Shane asked, ripping the guitar from Hayden’s hands, though he couldn’t stop himself from laughing.

“What? Jackie loves *Twilight*!” Hayden defended. “And *Twilight* or not, it’s a good song, man. Also…kind of applicable to your situation, don’t you think?”

Shane knew what Hayden was doing, though, and it was working. He was playing with Shane, doing little things to annoy him that would get him to laugh, get him out of his own head, and Shane knew that he couldn’t have asked for a better friend in this moment…or any other.

“I don’t know what I would do without you,” Shane admitted.

It wasn’t often that he said things like this aloud. He usually saved his best words, his flowery ones, his sappier ones, for his songs, but he had felt something shifting in him lately, a *need* to tell the people in his life how much they meant to him, because he understood now just how easily that chance could be ripped away from him.

“Aw, buddy…” Hayden pulled Shane in, giving him a tight squeeze. “You’re never, ever gonna have to find out, so don’t even worry about it, okay? You’re stuck with me. You’re my kids’ God Father, for crying out loud! If anything were to happen to me and Jackie, well, they’d go to Jackie’s parents…and then my parents, but hey, you’re third!”

“You do *not* want me raising your kids,” Shane said with a laugh.

“Eh, you’re not gonna have to. It’s more of a vanity title anyways, like our producer credits on *Overtime*,” he said, naming the final studio album of The Metropolitan Men.

“Fair enough.” Shane conceded. “Just feels like all of this would be very, very impossible without you.”

“Well I’m right here, so none of it has to be impossible at all,” Hayden affirmed. “It’s not gonna be forever, okay? That Russian hunk is gonna find out the psycho who’s stalking you, and he’ll probably take him down in some very sexy way-”

“Yeah, by calling the police and having him arrested,” Shane snorted.

“Hey, having him arrested is sexy, right? Cause then he can run back into your arms and you can make love until the break of dawn, and then some.” Hayden waggled his eyebrows. “It all sucks balls right now, but I have a feeling it’s gonna be okay, and I know about these things, okay? I know all about love.”

“Gross. Like fifty percent of what you just said was gross.”

“Maybe. You love it.” Hayden winked.

“Nope.” Shane shook his head, though the smile on his face, he was sure, betrayed his lie.

The tour announcement and Shane’s two-track release came out the very next Friday, exactly one day before the Metros dinner, and Shane was grateful for the distraction of flying to New York, getting settled in the hotel, and preparing for the dinner.

He stayed off of social media, avoiding looking at how the songs were doing, avoiding thinking about whether or not *Ilya* had heard them yet…or at least trying his very best to avoid that.

His stylist had surprised him, opting to go with a plain, classic black tuxedo and bowtie.

“Your career has skyrocketed, you’re the flashy one in every respect, and I think it would be tacky for you to show up in something eye-catching and attention grabbing,” she had reasoned as she had helped him into the garment, styling him very understated, casually.

She was right, of course, and aside from the bowtie that he felt might throttle him by the end of the night, he was grateful for it.

Let J.J, Gil, Sorren, and Hayden grab the attention with edgy outfits and eye-popping jewelry. He did not need anymore attention right now, that was for sure.

Shane had been put up in a hotel only a few blocks away from the hotel where the dinner was being hosted, but a car had still been sent to ferry him there, and he had been assured by both Cliff Marlow and League Records that security that the event was both heavy *and* had been thoroughly vetted. The event had not been made public and the guest list was tight. On top of that, Gil’s father, Nigel, who had had a strong hand in planning the event, had been high up at a technical security company before quitting to help manage Gil’s now-failing career.

Really, there was nothing to worry about. Shane relaxed on the short drive, eager to see his friends again, even if they would be in a room surrounded by not only their families, but a bunch of stuffy rich people who would probably claim the boys’ successes as their own.

“It’ll be nice to see everyone again, don’t you think?” Yuna mused as they drove. “It’s been awhile since we were all together in one room.”

“Yeah,” David agreed. “It’ll be nice to catch up with the dads, especially Nils!”

“You two did have quite the bromance,” Yuna said with a smile at the mention of Sorren’s

father.

“It’s gonna be good.” Shane looked out the window, though, and not at his parents.

This *was* going to be good, *was* going to be exciting, but he still couldn’t help but feel that something was missing.

That *Ilya* should be here.

Hayden would arrive with Jackie, J.J. would surely arrive with some model on his arm, Sorren had a long-term girlfriend who would certainly be there, and Gil? Even with his slumping career, Shane was certain that he had never had an ounce of trouble digging up a date in his life.

Ilya should be here with him, on his arm, for his friends and family to see.

At the very least, Ilya should be in *Cliff’s* spot, watching over him, making sure that everything was secure.

The first time that Shane had met Ilya had been in New York, and as Shane looked out the window, all that he could think about was how close by Ilya might be. Sure, he didn’t *know* where Ilya had gone after leaving Phoenix, but Vetrov was based out of New York, so there was a definite chance that Ilya was close by.

So close, and yet he might as well be a million miles away.

Those thoughts were pushed from his mind, however, as Shane entered the ballroom. The party was elegant, but buzzing. The bar was open, and some people had clearly already had a drink or two. He found his seat at the very first table, seated with the other boys and their dates.

“Hollander!”

Shane had barely had a second to take a sip of water before J.J. was practically on top of him, slapping him on the shoulder.

“It is fucking great to see you, man!”

“Oh, yes! You, too, J.J. Thank you so much for everything, for reaching out…”

“Of course man, I can’t even imagine! This whole thing has been just absolutely wild I’m sure. Oh, come meet Brigitte! Babe!” J.J. called over a gorgeous, willowy woman who was definitely a model, or at the very least both could and should be.

Mentally, Shane congratulated himself for calling that one.

“Brigitte, this is Shane, Shane, Brigitte.”

“It is lovely to meet you, Shane,” Brigitte said, a thick French accent lacing her words.

“It’s lovely to meet you too - oh my god, Miitka!”

“Shane!” Sorren launched himself into Shane’s arms for a hug.

Moments later, they were joined by Hayden and Gil.

“Look at us!” Hayden beamed. “The dynamic quintuple back together!”

“Terrible nickname,” Gil said with a laugh. “Absolutely terrible.”

“Whatever, it’s just good to see you all again! Fuck the world who think we hate each other. Someone comes for one of us, we will all be right here,” J.J. announced, slapping Shane on the back far harder than necessary.

Still, it felt good. This testosterone fueled bro-hug felt warm, inviting, a calm sea in the wake of everything that he had been dealing with.

If there was any resentment from any of these men about the success of his own career, they weren’t showing it, and Shane was nothing but grateful for this night away. Maybe Ilya was close by, but he wasn’t here. Shane’s friends? They *were* here, and at least for one night, he could focus on that, and how good it felt to be in the company of these four men again.

They had been through so much together, and while Shane had felt that he had been shouldering a lot of the difficulties of his circumstance alone lately, knowing that they were there? That they were rallying around him? It helped make everything feel more manageable.

Sure, the dinner was full of a lot of small talk and shaking hands with people he knew would not care a lick about him if he weren’t Shane Hollander International Popstar, but it was still nice to be out, hell, even to be dressed up.

By the time he needed some space, he had had a couple of glasses of champagne, his cheeks rosy from the drink, from the party, from the sheer joy of being around his friends again. He went to the bathroom, took a few deep breaths, splashed some cold water on his face, and was about to re-join the party when he felt his phone buzzing in his pocket.

Unknown: Your mother looks very striking in that gold dress.
Unknown: Follow my instructions or I start shooting people…just like I shot that bodyguard of yours.

Shane felt his blood run cold, sobering instantly as he stared at the pair of text messages, his hands shaking.

This couldn’t be happening, not now, not here. They had mentioned his mother, knew what she was wearing. Of course there were several ways that they could have known that, but… this party was full of the people that he loved the most - his mother, his father, his friends.

He couldn't risk harm coming to anyone else that he loved.

Shane: What do you want?

Unknown: Leave the bathroom and go to the elevator bay to the left.
Unknown: And don't even think about alerting anyone to your situation. Anyone that seems to know something is amiss will go first.
Unknown: Would it be Pike? Or his lovely wife? They have four children at home, it would be a shame for something to happen to them…
Unknown: Or what about your parents? There is your beautiful mother, of course, and your father looks so happy talking shop with his buddies, it would be a shame for that smile to be wiped off his face…

Shane: Don't hurt them.
Shane: I'll do as you say.

Unknown: Good. I'm sure you wouldn't want another of your bodyguards getting shot…this one's eagle-eyed, but he hasn't spotted me yet. No one has.

Shane: What about cameras?

Unknown: Oh, don't you worry about that, I've taken care of everything.
Unknown: Just do as I say and no one has to get hurt.
Unknown: Well, almost no one.

Shane felt rooted to the spot. Whoever this was knew everything. They knew who was at this party, what people were wearing. They were right there, under the eye, and no one had figured it out.

Shane knew that they had discussed the possibility of whoever was doing this being in the know, on the inside, but no one from League Records was at this party, no one who had been around Shane's tour was here except for himself, his parents, Cliff Marlow, and Cliff? Cliff was still so new to the situation that Shane was sure it wasn't him.

So who?

Then again, did it even matter who? The anonymous person on the other side of these text messages was threatening his parents, his best friend. They had already shot the man that he loved, so there was absolutely no reason whatsoever to believe that they wouldn't go through with another shooting.

This time, they might not fail to kill.

Shane took a deep breath, trying to put on the most normal face he could. He didn't want to alert anyone to the fact that something might be wrong, because if anyone picked up on his anxiety, his fear, *they* would be in danger, and that simply couldn't happen.

Carefully, his phone still gripped in his hand, Shane exited his bathroom and turned to the

left, going to the elevator bay.

Unknown: Good boy.
Unknown: Press the down button and wait for the elevator farthest to the left. If one of the others comes first, pretend you're distracted by your phone and skip them.

Trying to keep his hand from trembling, Shane reached out, pressing the elevator button.

Unknown: Good job, you always were good at following directions.
Unknown: Now get in the elevator when it stops, keep your head down, don't look up until the doors are closed, do you understand? Nod if you understand.

Shane nodded.

His heart hammered in his chest as he moved towards the left-most elevator, watching as the digital floor counter showed the elevator growing closer. It felt like it was coming both too quickly and agonizingly slow. There was no way out of this. He was being watched, if he hadn't been certain before, the man instructing him to nod made it more than clear.

Finally, the elevator stopped along with Shane's breathing, and the door slid open.

As instructed, Shane kept his head down. There was someone standing in the corner of the elevator, but Shane didn't dare to look up, to see who, until the doors closed and the elevator began to move again.

P4, a parking level, was selected, and the elevator was showing no sign of slowing as Shane finally forced himself to look up.

"Shane Hollander." Gil's father, Nigel Comeau, pushed back the jacket of his suit, revealing a shiny pistol tucked into his belt. "I hate that it had to come to this, but you're going to die tonight."

Chapter 18: Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

> Some folks have noticed that I recently added this story to a "series"! That is because after finishing this, I decided I wasn't ready to be done with this universe, so I have a few more things planned in this pop star universe, so if you are interested in those things, please consider subscribing to that!
>
> Also sorry for the posting delay, like everyone else, AO3 was down every time I tried to come on to post, but it seems to be up now, so let's go!

Shane's jaw dropped.

Of all of the people that could have been tormenting him, he would never have guessed that it would be Gil's *father*.

"You?" Shane asked, his brown eyes going wide.

"Yes, Hollander. *Me*," Nigel sneered, holding his hand out. "Give me your phone."

With shaking hands, Shane did so, watching as Nigel removed the SIM card, snapped it in two, and slipped both card and phone into the pocket of his suit jacket.

"But…*why*? I've known you since I was a kid. You were always so nice to me, you were always nice to all of us!" The shock, Shane was sure, was evident on his face, but he had no idea how he was supposed to react.

Even if he did know, he doubted it would matter. He was certain that there would be no controlling his reaction.

He had known this man since he was 16 years old. Nigel had quit his job to travel with them, he had managed Gil's career the way that Yuna had managed his own, though ultimately with less success. He knew Shane as well as anyone else, it seemed…and he knew security.

As much as it hurt, it all *did* make sense. Gil had been around for Shane's meteoric rise to fame alongside the other boys. He knew the ins and outs of venues, he knew how appearances worked. He knew how the talk shows worked. He knew how to tap into security cameras, to turn them on, turn them off, angle them, maybe more, because that had been his *job* prior to managing Gil.

He would be able to come and go relatively unseen. He had planned this party, he could have

set absolutely everything up to his own specifications. It would have been easy for him to mess with the damn security, and absolutely no one would have questioned him.

No one *had* questioned him.

Fuck. He was going to get away with this.

"Why?" Nigel asked. "*Why*? It's simple, really, and it should be obvious, Shane, but you never were as smart as everyone gave you credit for, always mistaking your quiet nature for brains that you and I both know you never had. Still don't." Nigel ran his finger along the handle of the pistol, threatening Shane without even removing the weapon from his belt.

"I don't…I *don't* know, actually," Shane said, his voice shaking as much as his hands and body as he looked up at a man that he had thought he could trust.

"You stole my son's career," Nigel sniped.

"What?" Shane's eyes widened. "No I didn't!"

"You did! *He* should have been the one topping the charts. *He* should have been the one on the sold out world arena tour. *He* should be the one winning awards, getting the best endorsements, showing up on every 'best dressed' list, and we both know it. Gil was the heartthrob, he was the one that should have taken off when you boys split up. It should never have been you. My family put all of our eggs in his basket, and he failed because of *you*, which means my family failed. His career failed, but it should have been yours."

"I…" Shane gulped. "I didn't mean for any of that, I just…wrote my songs. We all did. I didn't intend to have this career over Gil or any of them."

Shane's chest constricted, squeezing so hard he wasn't sure that his heart wouldn't simply stop beating before Nigel even had the chance to pull the trigger on him.

Maybe it would even be better that way.

"It doesn't matter if you meant it to or not," Nigel snapped. "You're a spoiled fucking brat and you always have been. You played shy, innocent, quiet, but we all know you were behind the scenes all the time, manipulating your own career with that conniving mother of yours."

"Don't…please," Shane begged. "Leave her out of this, okay?"

"If you do exactly as I say, there is no reason why she has to be involved," Nigel said, his tone *too* casual. "It'll hurt her plenty to lose you."

This man was all over the place, a level of unhinged that Shane had never seen out of him… or anyone, for that matter.

"Okay." Shane gulped. He was trying to stall for time. It wouldn't be long, he was sure, before someone realized he was missing, he just wasn't sure if anyone would be able to find

him in time. “So what…what are you going to do to me?”

“You’re going to come with me. We’re going to drive far enough away from here that no one will be able to tie me to this, and by the time they find your body, well,” Nigel shrugged. “No one will ever know it was me. If you step even a single toe out of line, I will not hesitate to hurt the people that you love…and maybe some of your fans as punishment for their terrible taste.”

“Alright.” Shane whimpered, because he knew better than to fight. It wasn’t just his life on the line, and he wouldn’t do anything to put those that he loved in danger. “I won’t…I’ll do as you say.”

Ilya being shot was bad enough, he couldn’t go through it a second time. He also didn’t think that Nigel would fail a killshot twice, not with the determination that he was clearly holding onto. All that Shane could do was comply as terror sank in, Nigel’s words ringing in his head.

Shane Hollander…you’re going to die tonight.

“What…what are you going to gain from this?” Shane asked. If there was any way to talk Nigel out of this, he was going to try. Shane didn’t want anyone else getting hurt, but he didn’t want to die, either. He may have been scared, nearly paralyzed with that fear, but he wasn’t ready to fully give up, not yet.

If he died, his parents would be devastated. They would break down completely, and he couldn’t bear to think of that. And then there was Ilya. If Shane let Nigel take him out away from here, let this man shoot him, *kill* him, he would never see his parents again, never see Hayden again…never see *Ilya* again.

Shane would never be able to tell Ilya that he loved him, and that thought broke his heart. It should never have come to this, he should have seen this coming.

Now that Nigel was standing in front of him, maybe the motive didn’t make sense to a rational human being, but the means certainly did. Of course this man had every tool that he needed to do this to Shane, to get away with it, and tears burned at Shane’s eyes against his will.

He wanted to stand tall, to be brave in this moment that may be one of his last, but instead, he was shaking, moments from tears, as a man he had known for the last ten years, the father of someone he had known for so long, made it clear in no uncertain terms that he would be ending Shane’s life very shortly.

“Do you know how *good* it will be for Gil’s career?” Nigel’s expression changed, his tone practically giddy. “A tribute album to his fallen friend, a memorial tour - everything that’s yours now? It will be his. It should have been all along, you see. I’m just resetting the balance. People will feel sorry for him. Gil will be shaken by this loss, let it fuel him to write new music, to keep your legacy alive-”

“Wait.” Shane felt his stomach drop. “He’s not…he doesn’t know about this, does he? He’s

not…he's not *in* on this? What you're doing to me?"

Shane wasn't sure that he could take it if Gil was, not that he would have a choice. He and Gil hadn't been as close as he and Hayden, but they had been through so much together, they were friends, and they would be forever…or at least Shane had thought so. The way that Gil had reached out after Ilya had been shot had been sweet, convincing enough that Shane had believed they were on a path towards healing.

"What, Gil? Oh god no." Nigel laughed. "No. I mean, I doubt he'll mind, he's spent the last couple of years moping around the house complaining about you, but he's too soft, too weak to do something like this. I had to take matters into my own hands, but I'm sure, in the end, he won't miss you for longer than he has to. He's been upset for *years* because you took what was his. I'm just helping him get it back."

That…wasn't really how Shane thought of Gil. He had never really seemed soft. Though he had been well aware that Gil had been pretty upset when Shane's career had taken off and they hadn't talked for a while, he had felt that there had been a rift repairing between them of late.

Learning that Gil had been harboring these growing feelings of jealousy, of rage towards Shane hurt.

Still, knowing that Gil had had no part in this did cause some sort of release in Shane. At least someone he had considered a friend, a brother at times, wasn't orchestrating his literal demise.

"I really do hate that it has to be like this," Nigel said as the elevator rested at Parking Level 4. "It really is a shame that you have to die for this, but it really is the best way to get Gil back on top, and that's all that matters to me - you get it, right? You're a family man. You understand, though I am sorry."

Except he didn't *sound* sorry, and Shane was certain that he wasn't.

"Come on." Nigel put his hand on the small of Shane's back, guiding him out of the elevator.

Shane flinched, his entire body running cold at the touch. That was *not* a place for Nigel's hand to be. That was where *Ilya* got to touch him, where *Ilya* would rest his hand and in a single gesture, make Shane feel safer than he had ever felt in his life. This? This was harm. There was no safety here, no comfort, and on instinct, he jerked away from the touch.

"Now Shane," Nigel said, his tone lowering into something frightening, dangerous. "You do as I say. The cameras down here are on a loop. No one will see us, but I can't guarantee that no one will be down here and if they see anything amiss…"

"I'm sorry, it was a reflex," Shane whispered, his words all but getting lost in his throat, in his own fear.

"Maybe it will be easier to keep yourself in control with this reminder of what happens if you

don't." Nigel finally removed the weapon from his belt. He moved his hand from Shane's back, instead pressing the gun against Shane's side.

Through his suit jacket, Shane could feel the nose of the weapon, and as the terror consumed him, beginning to shut him down. It took every ounce of strength and willpower that he had to put one foot in front of the other, moving in the direction that Nigel was guiding him.

"Will you take care of my family?" Shane asked, his voice trembling. "Just…I know you can't tell them it was you, but you can be there for them, support them through…through their loss. Think of how much it would hurt if it were Gil."

Shane knew those words were risky, knew that this man was not stable, not rational. Still, even within all of that, he had managed to be so careful that Shane was convinced that he would get away with this, or at least that there was a good chance that he would]. Hopefully, it would stop at Shane. Hopefully, he wouldn't feel the need to try and kill anyone else he perceived as getting in the way of his son's career.

"Of course. What kind of friend would I be if I didn't support them in the tragic loss of their son?"

God, this man was twisted.

"Okay." Shane sniffled. "Thank you."

"Oh, you really are pathetic," Nigel said, rolling his eyes. "You really did not deserve this fame, you really should have just stayed in your lane and then none of this would have had to happen, would it? But here we are, and it really is all your fault. Your family will suffer your death because you were selfish. And ugh, that bodyguard. I really thought I'd killed him," Nigel admitted. "He was very fast. I thought I was going to get you that night, I thought it would be easy. I underestimated him. It's a good thing, though, that he had to go to rehabilitation, because he was too good. If he weren't already out of the way, well, I would have had to make sure that he wasn't going to ruin my plans a second time."

Shane's jaw tensed at the talk of Ilya, of how close he had come to death, and god, he didn't want that. He didn't want to think about that, about what this man might have done to Ilya if Ilya were anywhere near here, and all of a sudden, Shane was no longer wishing that Ilya had been with him that night.

Wherever he was, Ilya was safe, far away from this man and his evil machinations. If nothing else, Shane could at least take some comfort in that.

"Where is your car?" Shane asked, not wanting to hear Nigel say another word about Ilya.

"Just a few rows further," he said with a smirk. "And you're going to be a good passenger, right?"

"Yes." Shane nodded.

“Good. I can’t have you ruining this by getting gutsy in the car.”

“I won’t do anything, I promise.” Shane bowed his head as Nigel finally slowed to a stop beside a very nondescript black car with tinted windows.

Nigel pressed Shane against the car, stomach first, and pulled Shane’s hands behind him, securing them with a hard, cold, plastic cable tie.

The plastic was painful, it dug into his skin. Shane willed the tears to keep from falling as his mind wandered, thinking of how gentle Ilya had been when he had bound Shane to the bed.

He shifted his arms, testing the bonds on instinct. They were too tight, much more so than necessary, and if Shane hadn’t felt defeated before, he certainly did now.

“I just can’t have you trying to play some sort of hero. I’m sure you understand,” Nigel said.

Shane’s captor moved to open the back door of the car, but before he got the chance, they both turned. The sound of screeching tires drew their attention as a black sedan came careening around the ramp from Parking Level 3…and directly towards them.

“What the…” Nigel’s eyes widened as the car came directly towards them, showing no signs of slowing.

With Nigel distracted, Shane took his chance. He jumped out of the way of the sedan, watching, eyes wide, as the car slammed *directly* into Nigel.

The car came to an immediate halt on impact as Nigel fell, his gun clattering to the ground.

Shane’s heart was racing. He was frozen, frightened, unsure of what to do, as he watched the door of the sedan open.

Ilya, clad in jeans and a black hoodie, weapon drawn, emerged from it.

In one swift motion, Ilya slid across the hood of his car, planting himself firmly between Shane and where Nigel lay on the ground.

“Don’t you *ever* fucking touch him again!” The venom in Ilya’s tone was lethal, and while relief had yet to set in, at least Shane could cling to that, to how *personal* Ilya’s anger sounded.

“What the fuck…*you?*” Nigel groaned, rolling over, his hand reaching out for his gun. “I knew I should have killed you when I had the chance.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Ilya snarled, cocking his own weapon. “If you’re smart, you’ll stay down. You’re fucking done for, and I would welcome an excuse to shoot you. Give me a reason, I’ll do it.”

Nigel let out a whimper of pain. Shane couldn’t tell from where he stood what the damage

was, but the force of being hit by a car couldn't have been good for him.

Shane tried to speak, but no words came out as he opened his mouth, the fear, the adrenaline, the shock of it all overwhelming. All he could do was watch as Ilya, with one hand, expertly kept his gun trained on Nigel, the other reaching into his pocket for his phone.

"Yes. Parking garage. Level 4. He is not going anywhere. Yes, I think so." Ilya turned his head to look at Shane for the first time. "Shane, you are alright?"

All Shane could do was nod.

"Yes, Shane is fine." Ilya turned his focus back to his phone, to where Nigel lay on the ground.

The next several minutes went by somehow both in a blur and slow motion. The parking lot was flooded with security and police. Someone cut the ties binding Shane's wrists as Nigel was hauled off the ground and cuffed. Finally, *finally,* Ilya lowered his weapon and turned towards Shane.

Shane pulled away from whoever had freed him and launched himself into Ilya's arms, holding him tight.

"You're *here*." Shane buried his face in Ilya's neck, breathing in that familiar scent, the one that he had been missing.

"I am here, yes." Ilya returned the embrace, holding Shane tight in his arms. "I could not let him hurt you."

Shane didn't have any words. He held tight to Ilya, listening as Ilya spoke to him in Russian, words that Shane didn't understand, and frankly, barely heard. There were lights flashing all around him, words, shouts, and it was all too much.

Safe in Ilya's embrace, Shane slipped from consciousness, overwhelmed from everything that had come to pass.

When Shane came to, he was no longer in the parking lot. He was resting on a lavish sofa in the hotel where the event had taken place, his parents at either side.

"Mom?" Shane sat up, looking to his mother.

"Oh, Shane." She pulled him into her arms, his father instantly joining the hug from the other side. "It's over," Yuna whispered. "It's finally over."

"Ilya?" Shane asked.

“He’s debriefing with the police,” she said softly. “But you’ll be able to see him later.”

“He saved me.” Shane whispered.

“We know, sweetheart. Now that you’re awake, we’re going to get you back to your hotel room, the police have agreed to get a statement from you there where we can get you into your own clothes, get you comfortable.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Shane allowed himself to be maneuvered back to the hotel where he was being put up, Cliff Marlow very apologetically at his side the entire time.

Quickly, Shane showered, changing into sweats and a comfortable hoodie before moving into the living room of the suite.

His mother and father had not bothered to go back to their room, to change, and his mother remained in her shimmery gold dress, his father in his crisp tuxedo, as Shane sat down with the police detective.

“I-I was in the bathroom,” Shane began, recounting everything that had happened since he had received that first text message. “He texted me - my phone -”

“Your phone is in evidence,” the detective assured him. “It was in the perpetrator’s pocket.”

“Yeah.” Shane nodded. “Okay, so he texted me, gave me instructions, told me he…he would start shooting people if I didn’t follow his directions. He said that if I drew any attention to the situation, he would kill whoever…whoever saw.”

It was difficult to go back over this, to think about the way that it had felt to *know* that he was going to die, especially with his parents in the room. He had been so terrified, so sure that he was doing what he had to to keep the people that he loved safe, despite knowing that it would result in his own death.

And yet, it had been alright. No one had died. Nigel Comeau had been arrested, and no one else had been hurt.

“Oh god, Gil.” Shane gulped. “He must be…he must be…”

“We have officers with him and his mother,” the detective assured.

“He didn’t know, he wasn’t in on it,” Shane said quickly. “Nigel acted alone, he was very clear about how disgusted he was with Gil for being…I don’t know, weak. He may not like me much, but this must be really hard for him, please-”

“We’ll make sure that he has what he needs,” the detective assured him. “Right now…this seems pretty open and shut, there is no reason in hell for Nigel Comeau to plead anything but

guilty. You may not even have to go to trial, but we'll be in touch, alright?"

Shane nodded, wordless.

"And Rozanov?"

"He's a damn hero," the detective said. "He figured it all out."

"What?" Shane's eyes widened.

"He figured it out. Just in time, too, it seems. He reached out to us, but by the time he got a hold of us, you had already slipped away. We couldn't find you on the cameras, you weren't answering your phone…"

"How?" Shane asked.

"You should probably ask him yourself," the detective said with a gentle smile. He got to his feet, shaking Shane's hand, then Yuna's, then David's. "We'll be in touch as the case progresses, but it seems like you're in the clear. This nightmare is over."

"Thank god." Yuna smiled politely at the officer, though Shane could tell that both she and his father were at the end of their rope.

This had been hard on everyone and Shane had yet to wrap his head around all of it, to process, well, anything. All that he knew was that he was safe, and so was everyone that he loved. He could relax now.

He could relax, and soon, he would be able to see Ilya. Maybe they would be able to talk things through, to get back on track, or at least gain some sort of closure if there *was* no back on track.

Shane could still feel, inside his chest, the way that he had felt when Ilya had come flying out of that car and to his rescue. No sight had ever been so beautiful.

The officer left, and Shane was alone with his parents again.

"I can't believe it's over," Shane said softly, sitting back on the couch, gazing ahead of him, truly dazed.

"Thank god." Yuna wiped a tear from her eye. "I can't believe how close we almost came to losing you. *Again*. Thank god for Rozanov. Just…thank god."

"Yeah." Shane looked down, tracing his fingers over his wrist, where it was red from the biting of the zip ties. "He almost…he was *just* in time. He almost had me."

"But he didn't," David said. "You're safe, and nothing like this is ever going to happen again. I can't believe it was Nigel this whole time."

“I feel so bad for Gil,” Shane said softly. “His own father…doing something like this.”

“We’ll do what we can for him,” Yuna promised. “I know that you feel for him, but you also need to focus on yourself right now.”

“I know, but I just…I can’t imagine.” His heart hurt for his friend, knowing that, despite the fact that he had had little to do with this, this would mar Gil forever, follow him forever.

He would always be the failed pop star whose father had tried to murder Shane Hollander.

“How are you feeling?” Yuna asked.

“I don’t…I don’t know,” Shane admitted Maybe it was easier to think about how Gil was feeling than himself right now. His own feelings felt overwhelming. “I don’t think it’s all really set in yet, I don’t…think that I really…I don’t…” Shane shook his head. Words were simply too hard right now.

“That’s okay,” David assured Shane, patting him on the back. “You don’t have to. You did great, and it’s all over. Just relax. We’ll stay with you as long as you want, and Marlow will be here all night. He feels terrible-”

“He shouldn’t.” Shane hesitated. “The party was supposed to be secure, I didn’t need an escort to the bathroom, I shouldn’t have. He was doing his job, it just…got out of hand. I don’t want him to get punished or fired or anything like that.”

“I understand,” Yuna nodded. “But nothing else is getting resolved tonight. We’ll figure out the rest in the morning.”

“Yeah.” Shane nodded. His heart was still racing, and if he hadn’t known that he needed to stay awake, to hold it together because Ilya might be here soon, he might have asked if his mother had any of that sedative left from the hospital in Phoenix, but no.

He needed to take in everything that had happened. He needed to process the fact that he had almost lost his life tonight, again.

That Ilya Rozanov had *saved* his life.

Again.

It was over, and there should have been a million things running through his mind in that moment, but all that he could think of was Ilya, of how he thought he had been hallucinating when Ilya had come out of that car, the way that he had slid across the hood like he was in some god damned action movie to plant himself between Shane and danger.

God, he loved that man so much, but he was also still so angry with him for disappearing, for shutting Shane out when everything felt like it was falling apart. These last several weeks had been hell for Shane. He had been frightened, hiding from the world, trying to regain some semblance of normalcy all while the man he loved stayed away, out of reach.

He had forced himself to push it aside, to focus on the music, the tour, on giving Ilya the space that he needed to deal with everything, but he had been so lonely. Even surrounded by his parents, by Hayden, by people who were doing nothing but their level best to keep him happy, safe, and comfortable, he had been lonely.

So many feelings were swirling inside of him, and he started, nearly jumping off of the sofa when there was a knock at the door of the hotel suite.

"I think," David said with a gentle smile, getting off of the sofa. "That your mother and I are going to get cleaned up. I suspect that's for you."

Shane nodded. He got to his feet slowly as his parents opened the door. Yuna and David quietly and quickly greeted Ilya before taking their leave, Cliff following them to stand watch outside the door.

Finally, for the first time since the dressing room back in Phoenix, Shane and Ilya were together. Alone.

"You *left* me."

Shane hadn't meant for those to be the first words out of his mouth as he moved towards Ilya, backing the man against the wall of the hotel room, but here they were.

"You *left* me! I was going out of my mind, and you weren't there. I thought you were gonna die, and you wouldn't let me see you, I…I…" Shane gripped at the fabric of Ilya's black sweatshirt, knuckles white around the material as he admonished Ilya.

"Moya lyubov," Ilya whispered, reaching out, taking Shane's wrists in his hands, pulling them back.

It was only as his grip was pulled away from Ilya that Shane realized he was shaking.

"I am sorry," Ilya said softly, releasing Shane's wrists and moving his hand up to cradle Shane's face. "I am so sorry, moya lyubov." He leaned down, kissing Shane's forehead. "Do you want me to go?"

"No!" Shane shook his head. "No. God, Ilya. No. I don't want you to go, I…I am so mad at you for leaving me, don't do it again."

"Okay." Ilya smiled sadly down at him.

"I *missed* you."

"I know."

"I was *worried* about you!"

“I know.”

“I *love* you.” Shane gazed up at Ilya, his brown eyes red-rimmed, glistening with a sheen of tears that he stubbornly refused to let fall.

“I know, moya lyubov.” Ilya gently stroked the pad of his thumb across Shane’s freckled cheek. “Ya tebya lyublyu. I love you, too.”

Shane closed his eyes, the only way he could confidently keep back his tears, as he leaned into Ilya’s touch, as he let Ilya’s words, both Russian and English, wash over him.

He knew those words.

Ya tebya lyublyu.

Shane had heard those words in his nightmares every night since Phoenix. Those were the words that Ilya had repeated as he bled out in Shane’s arms.

Ilya had been dying, and he had used what could have been his last words to tell Shane that he loved him.

“Fuck, I love you so much,” Shane whispered, his breath shuddering as he leaned forward, capturing Ilya’s lips, at long last, in a fierce kiss, relaxing in Ilya’s arms as the other man held him up.

As Ilya kissed him back, all of the anger inside of Shane dissipated, falling away into exhaustion, shock, but most of all, love.

Chapter 19: Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

> Thanks as always to anyone who has been enjoying this story and especially those of you leaving comments! I really never expected anything even remotely close to the level of engagement I've received with this - honestly I truly thought no one would read this and I would just be screaming into the ether, so I know I've probably said it a lot but I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the reception you all have given me.
>
> I was hoping to get some feedback on something. One of the things I'm considering doing for this "universe" after this story is complete is a re-write from Ilya's perspective. This would mean a lot of new scenes and stuff, but it would also mean some repetitive scenes/dialogue, with simply different prose perspective. With that in mind, I would love to know if any of you would be interested in reading that even though a chunk of it would be a re-hash, and of course, all of the big moments/twists you would already know.
>
> Sorry to ramble, I am trying to gauge interest because it would be fun to do but also fairly meticulous and if folks would rather read something complete new, that would be good to know, so I can focus on stuff y'all want and not just "vanity" projects. :) With only two chapters left, I want to get right on to the next thing since I'm having so much fun writing.

Shane didn’t remember falling asleep.

He remembered his legs giving out in Ilya’s arms. He remembered Ilya carrying him to the bed, lying down beside him. He remembered Ilya stroking his hair, kissing him, repeating over and over again in both Russian and English that he loved him as Shane said the same words back to him, unable to bring any others to the surface. He remembered the feeling of being back in Ilya’s arms, but he didn’t remember falling asleep.

When he woke up, he and Ilya were both on top of the bedcovers, still fully dressed, Shane in sweats and a hoodie, Ilya in jeans and his black zip-up sweatshirt, tangled up in each other.

“Good morning,” Ilya whispered as Shane woke, reaching down, casually running his hands through Shane’s hair. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Shane tipped his head up just enough to kiss Ilya softly before he rested his head back on the other man’s chest. “Can you explain it to me?” Shane asked, his voice still thick with sleep. “Why…why you pulled back from me, but also how you found me?”

“Yes.” Ilya kissed the top of Shane’s head. “I am sorry that I hurt you, pulling away, but I am

not sorry that I did it," Ilya admitted. "Only that it caused you pain. I…it caused me pain, too. I missed you every moment, but it was not okay. I let myself get so distracted by you, so wrapped up in you, that I stopped spending my time trying to find the person threatening you, and I knew…" Ilya gulped. "I knew if I let you into my hospital room, into my recovery, that I would fall right back into you. I knew that I would not be focused, and Shane," Ilya said softly. "He was so dangerous. He wanted you dead, and I couldn't let that happen. Shane, I couldn't lose another person that I love, I couldn't lose *you*. I had to find him."

"The police-"

"The police were not doing enough." Ilya shook his head. "They always think that they are, but it is not like on TV. They do not have unlimited resources and a million geniuses consulting to find this guy. We know now just how much access Nigel Comeau had to you and just how much experience he had in dodging everything. I do not think the police would ever have caught him, even if…" Ilya gulped. "Even if he had succeeded."

"Okay," Shane breathed. "Then how did *you* find him?"

"While I was recovering I combed through everything. Every security tape from every city we were in when you received a threat, from the first appearance where the BB Gun was fired, around the hotel where the doll was dropped off at the courier, the venue in Phoenix. I looked at every face, every ticketholder, and I missed him at first. There was reason for him to be at some of those places. He was in your world, but not so much that we looked at him for an inside job, and not outside enough that we figured him to be a random stalker."

"Right." Shane snuggled closer into Ilya, letting the other man's arm around him comfort him.

"I caught him. An ATM camera by the outside merchandise truck at the Phoenix venue. The one thing he missed, I think. That ATMs have security cameras. He took care of the venue cameras, he knew how to avoid being seen by any of them, but he missed that one…and then I learned that he had had a hand in planning the event last night. I called the police, called Svetlana, got in my car to head that way. It was difficult to get through to people, and by the time I did, they had lost eyes on you. Shane, I was so scared. I thought…" Ilya gulped. "I thought that I was too late."

"You weren't," Shane assured him. "Ilya, you were right on time. How…how did you find me in that parking lot?"

"Ah, yes." Ilya smiled faintly.

He reached down, pulling the collar of Shane's hoodie down, then the neck of his t-shirt, gently freeing the chain around Shane's neck - Ilya's cross.

"May I?" he asked.

Shane nodded.

Ilya removed the necklace and lifted it, showing Shane just below the clasp, so incredibly tiny that Shane had missed, a small gold bump, blended in so perfectly with the necklace that no one had seen it.

“A tracker.”

“It’s…so small. I didn’t know they could be that small.”

“Well,” Ilya shrugged. “The perks of…some of the connections that I have. It is not only incredibly small, but incredibly specific. The tracker on your phone could only have told us you were in the building, but the one in this necklace? That one showed me exactly where you were. She led me right to you.”

“She?” Shane asked. “You mean…your mother?”

“Yes.” Ilya smiled gently, though his eyes were sad. “I had hoped that she would be able to watch over you when I couldn’t, and it worked. Barely, but it did.”

“And you…you knew I would wear it?”

“I hoped. I suspected.” Ilya nodded. “I know…that you knew how much that necklace meant to me. I hoped that you would understand what I was trying to say in sending it to you, that I wanted you to keep it close, to let it protect you the way that I believe it - that *she* - has been protecting me. I don’t know if I believe in all of that - heaven, angels, but…” he shrugged. “I have to think that she is still there, at least in some way.”

“Ilya…” Shane reached up, wiping away a tear as it rolled down Ilya’s cheek. He paused. “I think I know what to do with the money.”

“With…the money?” Ilya asked, clearly confused.

“I…” Shane sighed, burying his face in Ilya’s chest. “I made a killing - I…okay, poor choice of words,” Shane winced. “After you got shot, my merch sold out, my songs shot up the charts, I made a lot of money, and I wanted you to have it, for recovery, for loss of wages-”

“I won’t take it.”

“Yeah, I know that now,” Shane said with a dry laugh. “But it’s…a lot. And I can give it - *we* can give it in her name, to one charity or to many, that focus on mental health, depression, suicide prevention. She’s your guardian angel, maybe mine, too, but…it doesn’t have to stop there.”

“Oh Shane…” Another tear spilled quietly down Ilya’s cheek.

“Maybe it’s a stupid idea.”

“It’s not a stupid idea. It is maybe the best idea I have ever heard in my life.” Ilya paused, his words thick with emotion. “She would have loved you. Like *I* love you.”

Shane let those words wash over him, let himself really take in what Ilya was saying to him and just how much that all must mean to the other man. He pushed himself up just slightly, kissing Ilya on the lips, the chin, the jaw.

“God, you’ve saved my life so many times,” Shane whispered. “Please tell me we can just… figure this out. I know it’s complicated, and I know it’s hard, and I know…I know who I am, and I know who you are, but please. I don’t think I’ve wanted anything in my life as much as I want to be with you. I want it so bad it scares me.”

“Yes,” Ilya nodded. “Is what I want, too, so yes. If you want to figure it out, we will figure it out.”

“Good.” Shane relaxed against Ilya, cuddling into him, feeling safe and comfortable in his sweats…and the arms of the man that he loved. “So you told me you loved me,” Shane smiled slightly. “After you got shot?”

“Yes.” Ilya nodded. “And you told me that you loved me in your song.”

“Yes.” A sense of relief washed over Shane, knowing that Ilya had gotten his message.

“I heard it,” Ilya admitted. “On the radio yesterday, when I was driving to get food.”

“You did?” Shane flushed.

“Yes, the radio jockey said new song by Shane Hollander. I almost crashed my car.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Well, no, me too. I needed to crash it later, apparently, into Nigel Comeau. But I did pull over. I listened to it. Then I found it online and I listened to it many more times while I worked, so next time you have me tied to a chair asking what is my favorite Shane Hollander song,” Ilya said with a wolfish smile. “I think the answer will not be *Collapse*.”

“It better not be,” Shane teased. “It better- damnit.” Shane sighed as his phone began to ring. He leaned over Ilya to retrieve it from the bedside table. “Hey, mom. Yeah. Yes. No, we slept. No, you didn’t wake us up. Yeah, we’re both - sure. Sure. Let me check, hold on.” Shane muted the call and turned to Ilya. “My parents want to have breakfast. I guess they worked out a private room in the hotel restaurant or something.”

“Okay. I will stay here and go over your security plans with Marlow.”

“No, you idiot,” Shane rolled his eyes. “You, too. They want to have breakfast with both of us.”

“Oh.”

“That…surprises you?”

“I guess I just did not really think about it.”

“You’re their hero, Ilya,” Shane smiled. “And…shit. They know. I told them. I didn’t mean to, it just…I was going through a lot and it just sort of came out.”

“Hey, Shane, is okay.” Ilya kissed him softly. “I am glad that they know, that you were not alone with all of it.”

“Then I should tell you…Hayden knows, too.”

“Fucking Hayden.” Ilya rolled his eyes. “But whatever, is fine, he is your best friend, I understand.” He paused. “And for what it’s worth, Sveta knows, too. Svetlana, I mean.”

“I sort of figured,” Shane admitted. “I got pretty…intense emailing her, I think.”

“She knew from before that, she knew from me. Maybe she knew before I told her. Maybe she even knew before me. I cannot hide things from her, she just…knows it all.”

“Ah, I see.” Shane nodded. “Well, breakfast?”

“Yes, I will have breakfast with you and your parents.”

“Okay. Awesome.” Shane smiled, un-muting the call. “Yeah, we’ll be down in a few minutes. Yes, Ilya, too. Bye - I…yes, mom. I love you, too.”

“So sweet,” Ilya teased as Shane hung up the call.

Ilya moved to get up, but Shane rolled on top of him again, grabbing Ilya’s wrists and pinning them down on the bed as he straddled the other man’s hips.

“What is this?” Ilya asked.

“Don’t you ever, *ever* ghost me again,” Shane ordered.

“Okay.” Ilya smiled up at him, pale eyes bright. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Good.” Shane leaned down, claiming Ilya’s lips in a slow, deep kiss before releasing his wrists and climbing off of him and out of the bed.

Ilya propped himself up on the bed, watching as Shane went to the dresser, pulling fresh clothes out and setting them on the bed.

“Do you want to borrow something?” Shane asked, aware, for the first time now, that Ilya didn’t have other clothes here.

“No, that’s okay. I just want to watch you.”

“Perv,” Shane teased, pulling off his hoodie and t-shirt in one slick motion, separating them and folding them individually.

“I don’t think I have ever seen anyone fold a sweatshirt like that before,” Ilya mused.

“Shut up. It’ll make it easier to pack later.” Shane flushed, turning away from Ilya as he removed and folded his sweatpants and underwear, pulling on fresh boxer briefs before turning.

“You…are so beautiful,” Ilya whispered, watching Shane slip into a pair of jeans followed by a polo.

“Yeah?” Shane raked his fingers through his mussed hair, not bothering with any product.

“Yeah, Shane. You know you are beautiful.”

“I like hearing it from you.”

“Well, then…” Ilya got up, approaching Shane, wrapping his arms around him from behind, kissing his neck. “I will tell it to you every day.”

“Mmm, you better.” Shane closed his eyes, leaning back into Ilya’s embrace. “And I will tell you how much I love you. I’ll tell you with words, I’ll tell you with songs, I’ll tell you with my lips, with my body…”

“Careful.” Ilya ducked his head, leaving a quick peck on Shane’s cheek before letting him go. “You keep talking like that and we will not make it down to breakfast.”

“Later,” Shane promised, pulling on socks, then shoes. You can have whatever you want. Later.”

“Oh, whatever I want?”

“Yes.” Shane rolled his eyes. “You saved my life, you can have…*whatever* you want.”

“And if I just want you?” Ilya asked.

“Fuck.” Shane gulped, looking into the other man’s eyes. “You already have that.”

“Just a few minutes, huh?” Yuna looked at Shane and Ilya skeptically as they entered the private dining room…half an hour later.

“Uh, yeah.” Shane flushed. “Got a slow start getting ready.”

“Yes, I am sorry, Mrs. and Mr. Hollander,” Ilya said.

“Oh, you, Mr. Rozanov, have *nothing* to be sorry for.” Yuna stood up, pulling Ilya into her arms.

“Ilya, please,” Ilya said as Yuna secured him in a truly bone-crushing hug.

“Ilya, then.” She was beaming as she pulled back, looking right at Ilya. “Oh…how can we possibly ever thank you?”

“You owe me nothing, no thanks…nothing,” Ilya said, taking a step back, his gaze, for the first time that Shane could remember, on the ground.

“Nonsense.” Yuna shook her head. “You put your life on the line not once, but twice, for my son. You’re a hero, you’re-”

“Was just doing my job, ma’am.”

“Yuna,” she corrected.

“I was just doing my job, *Yuna*.” Ilya looked over to Shane. “And protecting most precious thing, yes?”

“Yes.” Yuna looked to her son as she nodded.

“Oh my god, please stop,” Shane begged, cheeks rapidly growing hot as his mother’s eyes filled with tears.

“Well,” David got to his feet. “Perhaps then, Shane, you should introduce us to your young man here.”

“Jesus Christ.” Shane sighed. “Mom, dad, this is Ilya…Rozanov. But you know that.”

Shane understood, though, that while they both knew Ilya, they knew him as Shane’s bodyguard, as a watchful eye hired to keep their son safe. They *didn’t* know Ilya as the man that Shane had fallen so deeply in love with that it had changed his entire life.

“Um, he’s my, uh…” Shane looked to Ilya.

“Lover?”

“No, Ilya, that’s gross.” Shane blanched, shaking his head. “He’s my boyfriend? I think?”

“Yes.” Ilya smiled, reaching out, placing his hand on Shane’s shoulder, squeezing it. “I think so, probably. Yes.”

“Okay. He’s my boyfriend.”

“Well, Ilya,” David said, holding out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to properly meet you. Please, come join us.”

Ilya shook David’s hand and the four of them took their seats at the table.

“So, Ilya, you’re from Moscow?” Yuna asked.

“Yes ma- Yuna,” Ilya corrected himself. “But…I think I will be perhaps making Canada my home.” Under the table, Ilya’s hand found Shane’s thigh, squeezing it gently.

“I will say, this is quite unconventional,” David said, gesturing between Shane and Ilya. “But I also can’t be mad about my son falling for someone who would go to such extremes to make sure he’s safe.”

“I would do anything to keep Shane safe.”

“But it’s not…this isn’t gonna happen again. He’s not my security anymore, he’s my boyfriend,” Shane said clearly. “So while I am very, very glad that you showed up when you did last night, no more getting shot, okay?”

“Okay.” Ilya nodded. “I have spoken with Svetlana Vetrova, they have offered me new position. If I do not have my job with them, my work visa…anyways,” Ilya waved his hand. “They will keep me on as security consultant, not in the field. Remote.”

“Wait, I didn’t know that.” Shane turned to look at Ilya.

“Yes. I will go over security plans, find potential weaknesses, like I did with the venues for you, but…no field work, so I can be wherever I want to be. So I can be with you.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news,” Yuna fawned.

“Yeah, Ilya, that’s…that’s great, I didn’t - I had no idea.” Shane worked to keep his jaw off the floor, pleased with how much easier things could be for them.

“Yes, well, turns out it was very good uh…” Ilya paused. “Publicity? Advertising? For Vetrov Security, that I was able to protect Shane. Twice. They will want to keep me happy, and the way to keep me happy is to keep me with Shane.”

“I think…I mean, I know that we had always hoped when Shane finally brought someone home, someone that he loved, that we would be able to feel it, to know that he found the right person. I will admit I was a little bit - well, a lot surprised, when he told me that it was you, but no. Seeing you together now, just…” Yuna shrugged. “Seems like he found the right person.”

“I did, mom. Or, well, he found me. But I can’t do this sappy stuff with you guys, so please, can we talk about something else?” Shane begged. “Please?”

“Sorry, honey,” Yuna shook her head. “You bring us a boyfriend for the first time and you

think we aren't going to have questions?"

"I was hoping you would take pity on me and not traumatize me further," Shane admitted.

"Nice try, sweetheart, but no." Yuna laughed. "You're not getting away with this so easily. So, security consulting, and how does your family back in Russia - how do they feel about that?"

"Mom, Jesus Christ." Shane sighed.

"No, is okay." Ilya gave Shane's thigh another squeeze. "I don't really speak to my family back in Russia, they would not approve of this, of Shane and I. They would not approve of any of how I have chosen to live my life."

"Well, that is their loss," Yuna said firmly. "You are welcome at our table any time."

Champagne and orange juice was brought to the table, their orders were taken, and Shane leaned back, sipping slowly at his mimosa as he simply observed the three people that he loved the most get to know each other.

Yuna and David had a thousand questions for Ilya, both personal and professional, and as much as Shane wanted to interject, to save Ilya from their interrogation, he didn't. Ilya answered every question with honesty and clarity, asking several of his own, and as Shane watched Ilya work to get to know his parents, he was pretty sure he fell even more in love with him.

By the time the meal was done, David was calling Ilya "son", and Shane was pretty sure that Ilya was now Yuna's favorite.

He was fine with that. If they loved Ilya half as much as he did, he would be happy. He could settle for second place.

"Damn," Shane laughed as they entered his hotel suite. "I think they like you more than they like me!"

"They are just relieved that no one is trying to take their precious son away from them." Ilya hooked a finger through the belt loop of Shane's jeans, pulling Shane close to him. "Cannot say that I blame them."

Ilya leaned down, kissing Shane, his tongue exploring Shane's lips before pushing into Shane's mouth, taking his time, going slow, as though he was re-familiarizing himself with Shane's taste.

Shane, in turn, melted into the kiss, his eyes fluttering closed as he wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck, returning every moment of the intense, passionate kiss, the two of them breaking apart only as Shane stumbled backwards.

"Shit, sorry." Shane let out a soft huff of laughter. "I think…I understand the whole knees

going weak thing now."

"Oh yeah?" Ilya tilted his head to the side. "I make you weak in the knees?"

"You make me weak everywhere."

"Mmm, good." Ilya nuzzled Shane's neck. "You will write a song about it?"

"Maybe." Shane laughed.

"Probably?"

"Probably."

"Good." Ilya reached down, scooping Shane into his arms, carrying him bridal style back towards the bedroom.

"Is this a good idea?" Shane asked. "With your injuries?"

"Is fine, I am plenty recovered. I can carry my boyfriend to bed. After all, I believe you said I could have whatever I wanted, yes?"

"Yes," Shane breathed.

"What I want starts like this." Ilya dropped Shane down on the bed, easing himself over Shane's body and down to kiss his lips, and then his neck.

"Fuck," Shane breathed as Ilya dropped kisses along his jaw and neck, tugging down the collar of Shane's shirt to press a few to his collarbone. "I missed this."

"Me, too." Ilya pushed his hand under Shane's t-shirt, running his palm along Shane's warm, smooth skin.

"Fuck." Shane arched upwards, pulling off his own shirt and tossing it to the side. "How did we let this happen?"

"We were very, very stupid." Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's chest, swirling his tongue around Shane's nipple.

"Too many clothes," Shane whined, tugging at Ilya's sweatshirt. "Off."

"So demanding." Ilya laughed as he sat upright, resting in place on Shane's hips.

"I just wanna see you," Shane breathed.

"Yes. I want to see you, too." Ilya unzipped his sweatshirt, tossing it aside before removing the t-shirt underneath it.

Socks, pants, and underwear were shed until both men were side by side on the bed, completely naked. Ilya rolled over onto Shane, kissing him, running a hand down Shane's side.

"Wait, something's missing." Shane pulled back and reached over to the bedside table, taking the necklace. He reached up, fixing the clasp around Ilya's neck so that the gold cross hung in the space between them. "There. That's better."

Ilya gazed down at Shane for a moment, emotion, adoration clear in his ocean eyes as he leaned in, kissing Shane.

"Fuck. I don't have anything," Shane groaned as the kiss broke apart. "I didn't expect you to be here, I didn't bring anything to, you know…"

"So what? There is plenty we can do." Ilya shrugged. "And plenty of time for everything else later."

"Okay…"

"What?" Ilya teased. "You are so desperate to have me inside of you?"

"I mean, it's been awhile," Shane sighed. "So kind of, yeah."

"Well, you know…fancy hotel like this, we could call down to the lobby…"

"Shut up. No. You're right, we'll have time for everything else later, right now I just…" Shane leaned over Ilya, kissing down his chest, his stomach, following that sinful trail of air from his belly button downwards. He kissed Ilya's hip, his inner thigh, before taking Ilya into his mouth.

"Fuck, Shane…" Ilya reached down, his fingers twisting into Shane's dark hair as Shane's head bobbed between his legs with the desperate efficiency of a starving man. "Oh god, Shane!" Ilya gasped. "I'm going to…fuck."

Shane didn't pull back. He swallowed Ilya down with ease, emerging only once the other man had finished, wiping his mouth as he moved up to kiss Ilya.

"I almost forgot how good it was to have you in my mouth," Shane admitted, reaching down, lazily stroking himself with one hand as he rested his head on Ilya's shoulder.

"I can take care of that for you," Ilya said, eyeing Shane's cock.

"Nah." Shane shook his head. "It's alright, I've got it. Just kiss me. This was all about you."

Ilya didn't have to be told twice, kissing Shane hard as the other man pleasured himself. With all of their time spent apart, it didn't take long, and Ilya swallowed down the moan that escaped Shane as he spilled all over his own hand and stomach.

“And *I* almost forgot how beautiful you sound when you come,” Ilya whispered.

“Only almost?”

“Only almost.” Ilya nodded. “I think it would be impossible to truly forget.”

“Well I’m never gonna give you the chance to again.” Shane kissed Ilya. “Come on, let’s get cleaned up.”

With a smile, Shane led Ilya to the bathroom, turning on the luxurious water and guiding Ilya directly underneath the warm stream.

“What are you doing?”

“Just hold still, okay?”

Shane kissed him before taking the shower gel, squeezing it into his palms and rubbing his hands together until the soap bubbled up. He ran his hands over Ilya’s body, gently working the soap against his skin, his touch nothing short of reverent as he knelt down, washing Ilya’s legs, his feet.

“Shane…”

“Let me do this,” Shane breathed, pressing a soft kiss to Ilya’s knee.

Ilya closed his eyes, letting out a steady stream of soft, Russian words as Shane rose, massaging shampoo into Ilya’s curls.

“Fuck, I’m gonna have to learn Russian,” Shane said softly.

“Mm, I will teach you the words that matter.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Harder, please…yes, sir,” Ilya teased. “Fuck me, please.”

“Oh my god.” Shane laughed, leaning in, dropping a soft kiss on Ilya’s lips as he ran his hands through his hair, helping to wash the shampoo away.

“I think you like it.”

“You know that I do.”

Ilya opened his eyes, gazing at Shane as Shane trailed his hand down Ilya’s chest, the warm water running down both of their bodies.

“Come with me to my cottage,” Shane said softly. “There’s still like a month before my tour starts back up, and yeah, I’m gonna have to do rehearsals and stuff, but we can still have a

couple of weeks, just the two of us. Together, like we were supposed to."

"Yes." Ilya smiled. "I would like that very much."

"That was my plan, you know," Shane admitted. "I was going to take you to my cottage, to my favorite place in the whole world, and tell you that I loved you."

"I am sorry that your plan got ruined."

"Not ruined," Shane shook his head. "Just…rearranged. That's what I was thinking about, though. When Nigel had me." He gulped. "That he was going to take me away, kill me, and I was never going to get to tell you."

"Hey, no." Ilya reached up, brushing the wet hair from Shane's eyes. "I would never have let that happen."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes." Shane nodded.

"Tell me now."

"I love you," Shane whispered.

"Again."

"I love you."

"Again." Ilya reached down, gently squeezing Shane's hip.

"I love you."

"See?" Ilya smiled. "Plenty of chances to say it, yes?"

"Yes. Will you say it to me again?" Shane asked. "In Russian?"

"Ya," Ilya said slowly, pointing to himself. "Tebya lyublyu." He pressed his hand to Shane's heart.

"Ya tebya lyublyu," Shane repeated.

"Oh fuck." Ilya chuckled. "Now that is a thing of beauty, moya lyubov."

"Moya lyubov?" Shane asked.

"My love."

“Moya lyubov.” Shane leaned in, kissing Ilya softly as the water beat down on him.

Ilya pulled Shane in close, holding him there until the water began to run cold.

So many things had happened, so many horrible things, but they were both here together, now. The danger had passed, and the next chapter could begin - their life. Together.

Chapter 20: Chapter Twenty

“So *this* is the famous cottage, huh?” Ilya asked, looking around at the walls and walls of windows as he and Shane carried their things inside.

“Mhmm.” Shane nodded, feeling a tremendous amount of pressure release inside of him just walking inside.

The world had felt like it was on fire the last few days.

Shane and Ilya couldn’t stay holed up in that New York City hotel room together, and by the time they had gotten back to Montreal, the story had broken. The Metros had divided and conquered, with J.J. and Sorren staying by Gil’s side, making sure that he had everything he needed and doing what they could to protect him from the negative press, and Hayden had gone with Shane and Ilya.

Well, he had gone with Shane and Ilya for a day before Shane had very politely, and Ilya had *not* so politely, suggested that he go back to his own home with his wife and children, and give them their space.

Shane had complicated feelings about Gil, but he still wanted the others to treat him well. At the end of the day, Gil’s jealousy and dislike of Shane were nowhere near the same as trying to kill him. He was getting a lot more hate than he deserved, and even with the betrayal and confusion that Shane felt towards Gil, he wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Gil Comeau’s career was almost certainly irreparably ruined, and his father would likely be in prison for life. The last thing that Gil needed was to lose all of his friends, too.

While, with the threat neutralized, it was no longer necessary for Marlow to be on Shane 24/7, he had stayed on to try and keep back the media frenzy. Everyone wanted a piece of Shane, and many of them wanted a piece of Ilya as well.

The story of how Shane Hollander had been briefly abducted with the intent of being murdered by his former bandmate’s father was perhaps one of the most sensational news stories of the year. Farah was working around the clock to try and keep the media sated, but even an official statement saying that Shane couldn’t share his story yet, even if he wanted to, because the investigation was still under way, didn’t keep the requests for interviews steamrolling in.

Somehow, the details had leaked - not only that it was Nigel Comeau who had been taken into custody and was now being charged with assault with a deadly weapon, attempted murder, and kidnapping, but the fact that Ilya Rozanov had managed to show up just in the nick of time to save Shane’s life.

If the media was ablaze, the internet was a downright conflagration.

Under guidance from, well, *everyone*, alongside his own common sense, Shane was staying away from social media and the news, but he still got wind of a lot of what was being said. He had also received a way over the top gift basket from League Records containing, among other things, the single most expensive bottle of champagne that Shane had ever had in his life, though that, Shane was sure, had more to do with the success of the *Constellations/Hallelujah* release than the fact that he had survived attempted murder.

In the end, though, it all tied together. The streams, the record, and merchandise sales, were all bolstered by the situation at hand, and Shane's accountant assured him that profits from the latest rush of royalties were being diverted to mental health organizations in the name of Irina Rozanova.

In the wake of it all, being able to escape to the cottage, even if it was only for a couple of weeks, was a huge relief. Knowing that he and Ilya had two weeks virtually all to themselves, though his parents were at their cottage just a few minutes down the road, was a god send.

"It is so quiet," Ilya mused.

"Yeah, it's kind of great, isn't it?" Gone were the sounds of the city, the ringing of phones, the constant buzz of…everything. All that Shane could hear now was quiet, the sounds of the nature around them, and Ilya.

"So…I can get the VIP tour?" Ilya waggled his eyebrows.

"Yes, of course, sir," Shane said, setting down the bags he was holding.

"Perhaps you could start with the master bedroom?"

"Of course. Right this way."

Grinning, Shane fit his hand into Ilya's, leading him up a short flight of stairs and to the bedroom that he had designed for himself, with open windows, a large comfortable bed, and an en suite bathroom.

"So here you have a king-sized bed, a two wall view of the nature surrounding, though there are black out curtains that can be triggered with this remote here." Shane picked up the remote, showing Ilya. "The bathroom is right through those doors, and-oof!"

Shane laughed as he was tackled backwards onto the bed, held down as Ilya grinned at him.

"Do you want to know a secret?" Ilya tilted his head to the side. "I do not really care about the VIP tour at all."

"Oh my," Shane gasped, feigning shock. "Well, I guess I'll just have to find some other way to entertain you."

"I can think of a few things."

“Oh yeah?”

“Mmm. One or two, at least.” Ilya grinned, leaning down and nipping at Shane’s neck before pressing his lips to it and beginning to suck.

“Fuck, Ilya…” Shane gasped, hands reaching for purchase, grabbing at the bed clothes as Ilya continued to mark him, leaving behind a deep, purpling bruise when he finally lifted his head.

“*Mine*.” Ilya leaned down, kissing the hickey he had just created.

“*Yours,*” Shane agreed, already breathless.

“We should probably talk about how this is all gonna work,” Shane said softly, sitting down on the outside couch, gazing at the fire that he had just started.

“Yes, probably,” Ilya agreed, moving next to him, pressing his leg against Shane’s.

“Well, I’m going back on tour in a couple of weeks, so there’s that.” He took a deep breath. “I think I’m gonna be under more scrutiny than ever, with everything being as it was, but I don’t…” he shook his head. “I don’t want to leave you behind.”

“You want me to come with you on tour?”

“Svetlana said you could do your consulting from anywhere, right?”

“Well, yes, but Shane,” Ilya said. “If I come with you on tour, people will ask questions.”

“I mean, people know that you protect me, they don’t…have to know that you’re not still a part of my security team. I mean, Marlow is my bodyguard now, sure, but that’s a private contract. On the record, you still work for Vetrov, so it’s plausible deniability, at least while you get your citizenship figured out.”

After his heroics, Ilya’s application for Canadian citizenship was being fast-tracked, but Shane still didn’t want to do anything that might cause harm, not until Ilya was fully a Canadian citizen and didn’t have to worry about what might happen to him if he were to be sent back to Russia.

Shane wasn’t going to let that happen, though. Ilya had no desire to return to Russia ever again, and Shane was adamant that Ilya get what he wanted - in that respect, and many others. In a lot of ways, being a spoiled, rich pop star had its advantages, though as Shane had learned rapidly over the last several months, it had certain downfalls that he could never have anticipated.

“This is true,” Ilya agreed. “Okay, so I come with you on tour while my citizenship is being

processed and then, what, once I am full Canadian citizen, you go on stage like Scott Hunter and announce to the whole world that the best music you have ever written is actually about a very sexy Russian man?"

"I mean," Shane shrugged. "Maybe something like that, yeah."

"Really?"

"Yes. Ilya, I love you."

"I know, I love you, too, but your career-"

"Fuck my fucking career," Shane sighed. "Coming out isn't going to fully tank it. Sure, some of my fans will probably not be thrilled, but at this point, I can afford to lose the ones who would drop me for something like that. I - *we* went through the *worst* thing together, Ilya. I almost lost you. Twice. I'm not…I don't care about hiding anymore. If League Records can't handle that two of their best acts are gay, then they can find someone to buy out my contract and I'm sure everyone will be much better off anyways. The media is already saying the most insane stuff about me right now, so really, coming out with you couldn't possibly be weirder than all of that."

"Okay. Yes." Ilya smiled. "Once I am full Canadian citizen, you can call press conference, play Whitney Houston's *I Will Always Love You*, and tell whole world about how you fell in love with your handsome, sexy, bodyguard."

"I mean, probably…with slightly less theatrics, but…yeah. I mean, that's the basic idea. I love you so much, Ilya. There isn't anything in this world that I would trade you to keep, my career, my fans, none of it."

Ilya didn't speak, and Shane turned to look at him, finding Ilya staring at him, the flickering flames casting dancing lights across his beautiful face. A few months ago, Shane would have said that the expression on Ilya's face was unreadable, but he knew better now, he could read Ilya better now.

Love had not been promised to Ilya, not like this, not since his mother had passed, and Shane had grown to understand how transactional affection had been for Ilya for most of his life. Despite the fact that Ilya had already given him so much, Shane was determined to prove to Ilya that this, what existed between them, was *not* transactional, but unconditional. Maybe Ilya hadn't known that kind of love since he had been 12 years old, but Shane was certain that he was capable of showing it to him again.

"You really mean, that don't you," Ilya said finally, his voice barely audible above the sound of the light breeze, the rustling of leaves, and the calling of loons in the distance.

"Yes." Shane insisted. "I really do."

Ilya leaned down, resting his head in Shane's lap as he stared at the flames.

“I didn’t know it could be like this,” Ilya admitted. “Love.”

“Neither did I, honestly. I mean, I wrote songs about true love, unconditional love, but I didn’t understand any of it, it was all just stories until I met you.”

“And you would really put everything on the line to tell the world that you love me?”

“Yes. In a heartbeat. I don’t know what I will lose when that day comes, but I know what I *won’t* lose, and that’s what matters. I won’t lose my parents, I won’t lose my best friends, and I won’t lose you. In fact, I *refuse* to lose you.”

Shane moved his hand to rest on Ilya’s shoulder and Ilya brought his own up to rest atop Shane’s.

“This is perfect, Shane.”

“I know, I love this place.” Shane paused. “I always have, but it sort of felt like, even though it was perfect, it was missing something. Now that you’re here, I realize that all it was missing was someone to share it with. I guess I don’t just mean this cottage, it was my whole life. I’ve been missing someone to share my life with, and whatever comes next, I don’t really give a fuck how hard it is. Not if I have you.”

“You will have me.” Ilya tipped his head, gently kissing Shane’s knee.

They stayed outside long after the fire turned to coals, the moon casting vibrant light across the near-still lake, until it was too cold for them to bear it any longer.

This place had been a sanctuary for Shane since he had had it built a few years ago, but now, with Ilya here, it felt more like home.

When they made their way back to the bedroom, Shane sat up in bed, waiting for Ilya while he showered.

“I have something for you,” Shane said softly. “And I want you to promise me that you will accept it.”

“Shane…” Ilya climbed into the bed, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane’s cheek. “Why don’t you tell me what it is and we can go from there?”

“Fine.” Shane sighed. “But I didn’t buy it, so you can’t play that card.”

Shane got up and went to the dresser, pulling a fancy box from it and handing it over to Ilya.

“Rolex? Shane…”

“Just open it before you say anything, okay?”

“Okay.”

Shane watched as Ilya opened the box, revealing the gold watch with the ruby face and the diamond studding that Shane had worn to the GQ party so many months ago.

“Shane, I can’t, this is-”

“Stop it.” Shane shook his head. “First off, it’s not really my style. Second, every man should have a statement watch,” he said with a smile. “And third…this isn’t because I think I owe you anything. It may be expensive, sure, but…it’s sentimental. I want you to have it because that’s the night I started letting myself fall in love with you.

“Really?” Ilya looked away from the watch and up at Shane.

“Yeah. In the car on the way back from the party, it felt like the initial physical attraction started to turn into something more. I…you talked to me like I was a real person, and not some pop star to be revered or to walk on eggshells around. I showed you a piece of myself, and you didn’t laugh or make fun, you saw me, Ilya.” Shane gulped. “And that’s when I stopped being able to pretend I didn’t want you. I want you to have it so you remember that. That I love you, even when it seems like we shouldn’t make sense, even when things are hard or they’re complicated. I love you, and it’s unconditional, Ilya.”

Ilya leaned over the bed, kissing Shane softly.

“Thank you. It is a beautiful watch.”

“You can wear it when I win a grammy for *Constellations*,” Shane teased.

“Deal.” Ilya set the box aside and pulled Shane into his arms, easing him down on the bed as he kissed him long and hard.

It had been dangerous, Shane had known, opening up the floodgate that night, beginning to let his feelings for Ilya in, but as Ilya flipped them, curling his body around Shane’s to sleep, he was certain that it had been worth it.

=====

“Mmm, what is that?” Ilya yawned as he padded into the living room in nothing but his boxers to find Shane fiddling with his acoustic guitar on the couch.

“Oh, just a song my mom played a lot growing up, it’s kinda been stuck in my head for a few days now, I can’t quite get it out, so I’m trying to arrange it. Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“No. Maybe. Probably. Yes.” Ilya shrugged, a soft smile curled at his lips as he sat down on the sofa next to Shane. “Play it for me?”

“Okay. Um, it might be a little rough, I’m still trying to get the arrangement right, but uh… yeah. Sure. Okay.”

Shane situated the guitar into his lap, placing his fingers on the strings as he began to strum, looking at Ilya with a soft, easy smile on his face as he began to sing:

"*Once upon a time/Somewhere in your past/Someone said forever/But that promise didn't last/Now you don't believe/Love is ever true/You steel yourself against the day/When I stop lovin' you/When the day comes that I don't love you/Every star will fall out of the sky/Every mountain will crumble down/Every river run dry…"*

"If that is rough, I hate to hear it will sound like when it is polished." Ilya reached up, wiping a single tear from his cheek with the back of his hand as Shane finished. "You will add that to your covers on tour?"

"Nah." Shane shook his head, setting the guitar aside and crawling into Ilya's lap. "I give a lot of myself to the world, but this one's just for you."

Shane cradled Ilya's face in his hands, kissing him, softly at first, but as Ilya's arms moved around him, holding him closer against his body, Shane deepened the kiss.

"Just for me, huh?" Ilya pulled back, gently running his hands up Shane's shirt, pushing it off over his head. "I like the sound of that. What else is just for me?"

"Mmm, this." Shane kissed Ilya, slipping his tongue into Ilya's mouth as he pressed his body against Ilya's. "And…this." Shane scooted back a little, taking Ilya's hand and placing it on the crotch of his sleep pants so that Ilya could feel him growing hard. "And this." Shane then moved Ilya's hands behind to the waist band of the same sleep pants, guiding them downwards until Ilya was firmly grabbing Shane's ass.

"Acceptable." Ilya smirked, holding tight as he flipped them sideways, laying Shane back on the couch, though he remained between the other man's legs.

Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya, locking his ankles together just above Ilya's ass and using their strength to pull Ilya down closer to him, bare chest to bare chest, as he kissed his boyfriend. He ran his hands over Ilya's back, feeling the moles, the warm skin, stopping when he felt the scars from the bullet holes.

"I hate these," Shane whispered, gently brushing his fingers over the scars.

"I don't."

"You don't?" Shane looked up at Ilya in surprise.

"No. They remind me that I am a survivor." He paused. "They also tell me, maybe when things aren't so good in my brain, that I have something worth surviving *for*."

"Oh." Shane's expression softened. "Well, when you put it like *that*…"

Ilya's lips found Shane's, kissing him long, slow, deep, for several minutes before pulling back and extricating himself from Shane's limbs.

“Get naked, I’ll be right back,” Ilya said with a wink.

Shane groaned at the loss of Ilya’s weight atop him, but did as he was told, freeing himself of the sleep pants that he had been wearing and setting them, carefully folded, on the coffee table as he watched Ilya return from the bedroom, condom and lube in hand.

“Ilya…” Shane shook his head. “The couch-”

“Will be fine,” Ilya insisted. “I will come inside of you, and you,” he smirked. “Will have to be very, very careful and come…hmm…” he reached out, trailing his hand down Shane’s throat, his collar bone, stopping his hand squarely between Shane’s pecs. “Right here, I think. No mess. At least not on your precious couch, okay?”

“Okay.” Shane agreed, his cock twitching with arousal at the challenge Ilya posed.

He took a step towards Ilya, dropping to his knees in front of the other man, looking up at him as reached for the waistband of Ilya’s boxers, pulling them down. Shane admired Ilya’s erection as it sprung free.

“Good morning to you, too,” Shane said with a teasing smile as he moved in, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s hip before taking the other man into his mouth.

Shane was methodical, being careful not to go too hard, too fast, not wanting to bring Ilya to climax before they had the chance to fulfill Ilya’s challenge.

“Okay, wow, but stop, stop, stop.” Ilya chuckled as he lifted the other man’s head first, then the rest of him, bringing Shane back to his feet. “You are getting too good at that.”

“I had a good teacher.” Shane kissed Ilya, allowing himself to be pushed over to the couch and once again, onto his back.

Shane watched, one hand under his chin, body slightly twisted to the side as Ilya slid the condom over his impressive length. He reached down with one hand, toying with himself as Ilya uncapped the lube, applying liberal amounts over the condom.

“Toss it here?” Shane lifted his hand from his own cock just in time to catch the lube, slicking up his fingers before setting the bottle on the coffee table.

“I could do that for you, you know,” Ilya said, looking down at Shane as he inserted one, then two fingers into himself, stretching himself out.

“I know,” Shane smiled up at him. “But I also know you like watching me.”

“I *love* watching you.” Ilya dropped to his knees beside the couch and found Shane’s lips, kissing him deeply while Shane worked himself open.

So much of their time together had been rushed. There had been late nights, early mornings

with both of them functioning on little or no sleep, because they had sacrificed rest for a chance to be together. Now, at least for two weeks, they didn't have to choose between sleep and each other. They didn't have to hurry, they didn't have to worry. Ilya could kiss Shane, slow and lazy while Shane carefully, methodically worked himself wide for Ilya.

They could be here, on this couch in the middle of a living room, surrounded by open windows, bright sunshine, broad daylight, and not have to pay attention to who might walk by because *no one* was going to walk by.

Shane didn't have to focus any of his attention on being quiet, and Ilya didn't have to listen for footsteps outside the door, for a need to cover Shane's mouth lest someone might hear him because *no one* was going to hear them out here.

Yes, there were elements of the sneaking around that were hot, but this, Shane sprawled out on the sofa, wide open and free with Ilya on his knees, kissing him and kissing him and kissing him, was so much better.

"Okay." Shane finally, and half reluctantly, pulled away from Ilya's kiss, his cheeks already growing rosy, a red tint highlighting freckles that were already more pronounced for the time spent outside in the sun by the lake the day before.

"You are ready for me?"

"Always." Shane moved from his side, lying on his back as Ilya moved over him.

"You look even more perfect here than anywhere else," Ilya said softly, reaching for one of the throw pillows and very gently placing it under Shane's head, propping him up just enough to give him some elevated comfort.

"I feel more myself here than anywhere else," Shane breathed in reply.

Ilya said no more. He ran his hands up Shane's thighs, pushing them upwards to grant himself access to the other man. He was careful, slow, meticulous, even, as he lined himself up, and Shane gazed at him, enamored of how beautiful this man was, the sunlight playing off of his curls, his golden skin. Even his pale eyes seemed brighter here, in the warm, natural Quebec sun.

As Ilya pushed inside of him, sunlight reflected off of the cross around his neck, and a slight smile curled onto Shane's lips. He had watched a few days ago as Ilya had carefully, painstakingly, removed the tracker so as not to damage the chain, and he watched now as the necklace moved with Ilya, taking in everything that the necklace represented. It wasn't just love, it wasn't just protection, it was also a promise - a promise that even when they were apart, they would come back to each other.

Ilya leaned forward as he moved inside of Shane, still seeking the perfect spot. He captured the other man's lips with his own, the pendant of the cross drawing along Shane's throat as Ilya kissed him.

And then Ilya struck gold. Surprised, Shane thrust his head back with a wild moan, Ilya's teeth scraping across his chin as he did so.

"Fuck, Ilya…" Shane's hips bucked upwards against the other man, taking Ilya in deeper with the single action.

"Ah, you liked that, huh?" Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's jaw.

"Yes, God. *Yes*." Shane didn't bother trying to keep his voice down, he didn't have to, not here, and he wanted Ilya to hear, to *know* just how mad he was being driven.

"Good." Ilya braced himself, thrusting again, being sure to angle himself perfectly to, once again, hit Shane's prostate in hopes of unraveling him further.

"Oh my god, Ilya…" Shane's whine rang through the cottage, bouncing off the windows, the support beams, the floors, the granite counter tops. "*Please*."

"As you wish, moya lyubov." Ilya thrust again as Shane came undone beneath him, a mass of sweat, panting, shallow breath, and beautifully flushed skin.

"Ilya. Fuck, I love you so much." Shane's words ran together as he reached up, one hand twisting, maybe a bit too hard, in Ilya's curls, but he felt if he didn't grab onto Ilya, to *something*, he was going to shatter into a million blissful pieces, never to be heard from again.

That, he was sure, was why they called this the little death.

"Oh my god," Ilya whispered under his breath as he pushed again.

Now that Ilya had found his rhythm, Shane knew that it wouldn't be long for either of them, and while before, Shane had always had to use his hand - or Ilya's - to get to the end, this felt different.

"Fuck, Ilya - I'm going to-" with *barely* enough time left, Shane remembered Ilya's challenge. His free hand reached down, grabbing his own cock, aiming at the spot on his chest that Ilya had told him to target just in time.

Ilya hit his spot just one more time and Shane's orgasm ripped through him, his entire body shuddering as he spilled over his chest, just where Ilya had told him to, as Ilya, with a loud groan, finished inside of him.

"Oh my god." Shane felt tears pricking inexplicably at the corners of his eyes as he fell limp, boneless, against the couch, his arms and legs noodles against the cushions as he looked up at Ilya. "I think I'm dead."

"The deathless death, yes?" Ilya smirked, giving Shane's belly, just below the pool of sweat and come on his chest, a smack as he pulled out of him and got to his feet.

“Yes,” Shane breathed, his eyes closed, his chest heaving as he tried to come back to himself.

“Stay right here, moya lyubov.” Ilya leaned down, brushing Shane’s sweat-damp hair from his forehead before dropping a kiss there.

“Where are you going?” Shane whined.

“Relax.” A soft chuckle escaped Ilya’s parted lips. “I will be right back, I promise.”

“Okay, fine.” Shane didn’t have it in him to argue right now. He wasn’t sure that he had it in him to do anything at all, so he just lay there, breathing - or trying to - as he waited for Ilya to return.

The other man did so moments later, now free of the condom, carrying a warm, wet towel.

“Hands free, huh?” Ilya knelt beside Shane again, this time cleaning him with the towel, being careful not to let any of the mess spill over onto the upholstery. “Nice trick.”

“I don’t know how you did that,” Shane gasped. “But it was so fucking hot.”

“I think you know how I did it.” Ilya kissed Shane softly. “I think you are just so unbelievably attracted to me that you cannot help but to be driven wild by my undeniable sex appeal.”

“Oh my god, shut up.” With all of the strength he could muster, Shane reached up, lightly slapping his hand against Ilya’s shoulder.

“But also…yes?”

“Yes.” Shane looked up at Ilya with heavy-lidded eyes and a dazed smile on his face. “I am so incredibly in love with you, Ilya Rozanov.”

“Well, then is good thing that I am equally incredibly in love with you, Shane Hollander.” Ilya stood, slinging the towel over his shoulder and reaching down. One of his arms went beneath Shane’s back, the other behind his knees as he lifted him into his arms.

Shane hooked his arms around Ilya’s neck, gazing adoringly at him as the other man carried him to the bathroom, setting him down only when they reached the shower.

As Shane leaned against the windowsill in the shower, Ilya turned on the water, his hand under the stream to make sure the temperature was right before he reached for Shane, dragging the other man with him under it.

The warm water beat down on them as they kissed, sunlight pouring in from the windows as they ignored everything that wasn’t each other, fresh water from Shane’s well washing them both clean of the stickiness, of the sweat that they had created together as they held each other, making out long and slow and completely free.

It took the entire time for Shane to come back to himself, but he was in no rush. He knew that he couldn't stay here with Ilya forever, but he damn well wanted to, at least in this moment. There was a world out there that was either ready for them, or it wasn't, and until they pulled the lid off the box, they wouldn't know which.

Here, they were safe. Here, they were together. Here, they didn't have to answer to anyone else for anything at all, they could just spend the rest of their two weeks learning who the other was without four closed walls, with kisses that were given freely and open rather than stolen.

Here, at this cottage in Quebec, Shane could lie back, he could let Ilya pull every single stitch of him open one by one, and do the same to the other man.

Here, he didn't have to be Shane Hollander, International Pop Star. Here, Ilya didn't have to be Ilya Rozanov, Bodyguard, or Ilya Rozanov, Spetsnaz Operative.

Here, they could be Shane Hollander, hopelessly in love with Ilya Rozanov, and Ilya Rozanov, irrevocably in love with Shane Hollander.

Chapter 21: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> This has been a hell of a ride. Thank you so, so much - and I really do mean this from the bottom of my heart - for everyone who read, especially those who took the time to say something. I have had so much fun writing this, and I did not at ALL expect the amount of eyes on this work that I got.
>
> I'm definitely a little bummed that it's over, and want to thank you all for indulging me in this! I'm excited to post my epilogue exactly 2 months after I posted the introduction, hence the back to back updates.
>
> For those interested in more of this universe, Ilya POV
>
> They Fell For You, And I'm Falling Too can be found by clicking the hyperlink!
>
> Lastly, to any of you who shared this with friends, reblogged it, or posted it anywhere, I really, really appreciate it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

18 Months Later

"...And the Grammy for Album of the Year goes to Shane Hollander for *Constellations!*"

The hall burst into applause and a smile broke out on Shane's face as his mother hugged him, smoothing down the jacket of his midnight blue tuxedo as she released him. He leaned over, kissing Ilya before proceeding awkwardly to the aisle, shaking hands and accepting congratulatory pats on the back as he made his way to the stage, accepting the trophy from the presenter.

"Wow, I - oh god." Shane winced as the microphone screeched. "Sorry, um…let's just… you'd think I'd be better with microphones by now, being a professional and all." He laughed awkwardly and was blessedly joined by many in the crowd as he adjusted the microphone. "There we go. Okay, first off, wow. Thank you, this is…this is absolutely incredible, a dream come true. As some of you may know, I have had a wild couple of years."

Shane paused as there were some whoops and some laughter from the crowd.

"In no particular order I completed a world tour, I almost lost my life, let's see…oh, I came out, I left League Records, I signed with Centaur Records, I released my second album…or tenth, I guess, depending on how you're counting." Shane lifted the trophy, a gesture to the success of said second album. "My partner and I started The Irina Foundation - a 'pay what

you can' music school for kids and adults alike, with all profits going towards suicide prevention and mental health initiatives. Our first program in Montreal has been a rousing success and our Ottawa program is set to open next month, so please consider checking that out and maybe opening your pocket books - I know some of you out there have a little spare change lying around."

Shane paused again for laughs, but he took that time to find Ilya in the crowd, giving him a smile, a wink. This foundation had been their baby, and while they had largely handed off operations of it to hired help, they still both put whatever spare time they could into it.

"And uh…to backtrack a little on that partner thing, as…a lot of you probably know by now, I fell absolutely head over heels madly in love with Ilya Rozanov. I spent ten years of my life writing and singing love songs that I didn't understand, not really, but uh…all that changed, and I guess this is proof of that. This Grammy is for him, hell, it's *all* for him," Shane said, reaching up, wiping a tear from his eye. "Without Ilya, I wouldn't be standing here now - not just because this entire album is about him," he said with a slight laugh. "But because I wouldn't be *alive* if not for him, and I mean that both literally and spiritually. So thank you for this award. Thank you to my team who made this album possible. Thank you to my fans, who have stood by me as I've gone through a tumultuous time. Thank you to my parents, who have supported me since I was a kid and continue to do so to this day. Thank you to my friends, especially to my fellow Metropolitan Men, without whom my career would never have existed in the first place, and thank you, Ilya, moya lyubov. Without you…well, I don't even want to *think* about a 'without you.'"

Shane lifted the award once more and blew a kiss to the audience before exiting backstage.

The host took the podium to give the closing remarks, and Shane gave the prop Grammy to a PA before wading through a sea of well-wishers and fellow musicians to get back to where Ilya, to where his *partner* was waiting for him, leaning casually against the wall, looking like James fucking Bond in a custom, tailored tuxedo and, as promised, the shiny rolex watch Shane had given him.

"You will *never* have to face a 'without' me. I am so proud of you, kitten," Ilya teased, pulling Shane into a warm, crushing embrace. "Ya tebya lyublyu. I love you."

"I love you so, so much." Shane reached out, resting his hand on Ilya's cheek, gazing at him with nothing short of adoration before leaning in to kiss him.

The cameras had stopped rolling, so Shane let the embrace carry on a little longer than he would have if the show were still going on.

He had announced his love for Ilya to the world through a statement vetted by his publicist shortly before the release of his full album, and the world had gone crazy. The story was like cat nip - the international pop star falling madly in love with the bodyguard who had saved his life. Shane and Ilya had capitalized on that, using the momentum from their sensational love story to funnel attention towards The Irina Foundation.

Ilya's citizenship had been processed, and Shane had sold his penthouse. Together, he and

Ilya had moved to a gated five-bedroom house on 8 acres of land outside of the city and were in the process of turning it into a home.

Things weren't perfect, because nothing ever could be, but it all felt pretty damn close.

"God." Shane groaned, resting his forehead on Ilya's shoulder as Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane. "I do *not* want to go the after party."

"Ah, well, tough luck. You won Album of the Year, you are expected to show up to at *least* one of the after parties, probably more."

"I know, I know." Shane sighed, righting himself, looking at Ilya. "You'll come with me?"

"Of course." Ilya smiled. "I have to show off my fancy watch…and my fancy boyfriend."

"Good. Okay. You're ridiculous, I love you." Shane relaxed, a slight huff of laughter escaping his lips as he gazed up at Ilya. "The car's waiting to take us back to the hotel to change, and then…"

"We party all night, yes?"

"Sure." Shane chuckled. "We party all night."

Shane laced his fingers through Ilya's, squeezing his hand as he ignored the flashbulbs and calls of his name as they were ushered into the waiting car.

"I do not think I will ever get used to being on the other side of that," Ilya said with a laugh as the car door closed behind them.

"Probably not. I still haven't." Shane rested his head on Ilya's shoulder. "I can't believe how far we've come. I can't believe how far we still have to go."

"Forever, I think, yes?" Ilya dropped a gentle kiss to the top of Shane's head.

"Yeah." Shane squeezed Ilya's hand, his mind briefly wandering to the ring box hiding in his favorite guitar case back at their home in Quebec, waiting for the perfect moment. "Forever."

Chapter End Notes

I know I said it at the top, but seriously, just thank you thank you thank you for making my decision to write this silly little vision so incredibly worth it. I will stop being sappy now, have a wonderful day.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!