

Thorns

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77450206) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77450206>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Rape/Non-Con
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Hayden Pike
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort , Angst , Protective Ilya Rozanov , Rape/Non-con Elements , Violence , Consensual Sex , Anal Sex , canon divergence after ep 4 , POV Shane Hollander , POV Ilya Rozanov , POV Hayden Pike , Some Humor , Autistic Shane Hollander , Bottom Shane Hollander , Top Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander Needs a Hug , Jealous Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander Whump , Angst with a Happy Ending , Masturbation
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-10 Completed: 2026-01-29 Words: 75,054 Chapters: 3/3

Thorns

by [TheLoveliestCrime](#)

Summary

“He’ll never forget anything about their first night. Or any night he shared with Ilya. Every detail has been etched into him. Without them, he wouldn’t recognize himself. Without them he was blank.

Stop thinking about Rozanov. Fuck.

He seeks new memories. New... etches.

So when future archeologists dig up his bones they won’t read them like a love letter to Ilya Rozanov.

Shane knows it’s risky.

But he doesn’t know that tonight he won’t be etched, he’ll be broken.”

When Shane hooks up with a stranger after a game, he thinks the worst that could happen is getting outed. He is wrong. What was meant to be a night to forget all about Ilya Rozanov, becomes a night when he needs him most.

Notes

Some things to note as you brave the story (thank you for giving it a chance)

- The rape itself is not explicitly described, but everything leading up to and right after is, including physical violence.
- The rape is NOT between Shane and Ilya.
- There is an explicit, consensual sex scene between Shane and Ilya, set before the rape.

Two less important notes:

- All I know about hockey is what's in the show (so not a lot).
- I have read the books but this is based on the show so I was free to take some liberties, not bound by the internal monologues from the book. However when I read the book and Ilya asked "Did he hurt you?" Shane said no, but my brain said yes and then this happened.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

Shane knows it's risky. It's objectively a bad idea. But he's followed through on a bad impulse before and was rewarded for it. Well, until recently.

He leaves the hotel with a nervousness in his underbelly that is distantly familiar to him. It's the same restless, primal unease with which he waited for Ilya to knock on the door of hotel room 1410.

It's been years, but he'll never forget the room number. He'll never forget anything about their first night. Or any night he shared with Ilya. Every detail has been etched into him. Without them, he wouldn't recognize himself. Without them he was blank.

Boring.

The word echoes in his head in a specific, rounded accent.

Not so boring now, he thinks to himself defiantly, as he's off to meet a nameless, faceless guy who slid into his dm's on Grindr. As if proving Ilya wrong would release him of the hold the Russian still had on him. Prove that he's moved on, that's he's grown into a Shane Ilya doesn't know anymore. Doesn't own anymore. A Shane who doesn't need nor want Ilya. A Shane who fucks guys on Grindr. He wants to be that Shane. In the vain hope *that* Shane doesn't miss Ilya the way he does.

Stop thinking about Rozanov. Fuck.

He seeks new memories. New... etches.

So when future archeologists dig up his bones they won't read them like a love letter to Ilya Rozanov.

Shane knows it's risky.

But he doesn't know he's risking a nightmare worse than being outed.

He doesn't know that tonight he won't be *etched*, he'll be *broken*.

+++

3 HOURS EARLIER

+++

The crowd is deafening as Shane and Ilya skate up to center ice for the face-off at the start of the third period.

They'd both been on the bench before then. Shane stole many glances in Ilya's direction and never caught him looking back. The Russian player was mechanically following the puck with his gaze, as it was passed from player to player and stolen by the other team. He wasn't really reacting to anything though, like none of the action was really registering, in spite of how singularly focused he seemed.

Not happy when the Raiders stole the puck.

Not angry when the Metros stole it back.

When the whole Raiders' bench erupted with rage when a Metro's defenseman slammed the Raiders' left wing into the boards, Ilya didn't move a muscle.

As they get into position for the face-off, Ilya is still uncharacteristically stoic and refusing to meet Shane's gaze. He doesn't even goad him the way he always would, the way players always do, in an attempt to unsettle him. But Ilya's silence was more unsettling than any crass chirp his devilishly creative mind could come up with.

"Rozanov," Shane simply said. Because what else could he say on center ice, while the ref readied to drop the puck? But he hoped Ilya would hear in his tone more than his name. It was both a plea and apology. He's grown accustomed to Ilya hearing inflections in his voice that others dismiss as monotone, but if anything resonates now, Ilya's face betrays none of it. His expression is harder and colder than the ice they stand on.

The puck drops.

Shane wins the face-off and skates off before the Russian gets any momentum, getting some distance between them. Ilya is the more powerful skater, faster on the long distance between goals, but Shane is the more explosive one. As soon as he takes off, he knows he doesn't have long. Ilya is hot on his heels and will soon catch up, force him into the boards. Shane sees a clear line to Hayden and he passes the puck along.

It's a full second after passing the puck that Ilya rams into him.

Shane grunts in pain as he makes contact with the boards. He's crushed between the solid wall and the solid body of the Russian player. Not until Ilya skates away can Shane suck in a breath again and once he has enough air in his lungs to shout, he calls after the Russian: "What the fuck?!"

He had already passed the puck. Either Ilya had not been paying attention at all, or he checked him on purpose. Either way, it was a foul.

The Raiders fans in the stadium are cheering though, drowning out any boos from the few Metros fans loyal enough to make the trek down from Montreal.

The ref doesn't halt the play. Marleu easily bodies Hayden off the puck, passes it to Ilya, and the Raiders' captain scores, causing the crowd to absolutely erupt.

While the team celebrates their newly won lead, after the two teams had been tied throughout the second period, Hayden skates up to Shane.

“You ok?”

Shane experimentally rolls his left shoulder. It hurts, but it didn’t dislocate. His ribs hurt too, bruised for sure but they don’t feel broken. He has enough experience to be able to tell the difference. “Yeah,” he feels confident making that call.

“What a fucking asshole,” Hayden spits, looking over to where the Raiders are still celebratorily patting Ilya on his shoulder pads. “The ref too. That was an obvious foul.”

The game starts anew.

The Raiders win.

As the two teams line up to go through the motion of shaking each other’s hands, Shane seeks out Ilya on the ice. The foul gives him an in. An excuse to talk to him, even under the watchful gaze of thousands of fans.

“I was off the puck,” Shane points out and he hates himself for how he doesn’t even sound remotely mad because all he can be in that moment is relieved that Ilya isn’t avoiding him and instead looks him dead in the eyes.

“Sorry,” Ilya says flatly and Shane is taken aback by the easily apology until he recognizes a beat later that it’s probably sarcasm.

Shane wants to apologize. Not for anything that happened on the ice tonight. But for the last time he saw Ilya. For leaving like he did. He had already apologized, on his way out the door, but he felt a deep-rooted need to say sorry again, now that he understood that in his panic he had broken something fragile and precious and Ilya won’t help him put it back together again, just keeps hiding pieces so nothing fits anymore.

But they don’t have much time. They’re supposed to shake each team member’s hand and then clear the ice.

Asking to meet at Ilya’s house seems wrong, given how things ended last time. Shane feels like he has no right to ask to be invited back. But he wants to talk. So before their private moment drags on too long and becomes suspicious, he says: “We’re at the Hilton. I’m 803.”

There’s a beat of silence. Then:

“Good for you,” Ilya spits and he skates off.

Shane’s not sure if that was a rejection, although the cold that flash freezes his bones suggests that it is. His movements are jerky as he goes through the motions of being a respectable captain, representing his team and then finally he can leave the ice and seek out some warmth.

The Metro's are quiet as they shower. They typically are after a loss. J.J. pipes up about the foul, says that the ref was biased and this somewhat livens up the team, steers them away from despondent shame and into a righteous outrage.

Shane ignores it all as he stands under the hot spray of water.

"You ok?" Hayden asks for the second time that evening.

Shane blinks, submerging from his thoughts. Wondering if the storm in his head raged so loud Hayden could hear. "Huh?"

His teammate pointedly looks at his torso.

Shane looks down at himself. There are bruise lines forming on his shoulders and ribs that follow the familiar contour of his gear. The padding protects them, absorbs the brunt of the force, but with a powerful impact the edges especially dig in and leave marks. He shrugs. "It's nothing." It really is. He'll be stiff and sore but that's a hurt he can stand.

Once he's halfway dressed, he can't resist any longer and he reaches for his phone. His last text exchange with Ilya is weeks old. He types: *Hilton. 803*. In case Ilya didn't hear, or forgot.

He remembers fondly one night when Shane was in room 1313, but Ilya heard 1330 and showed up to the wrong room. Thankfully, he didn't run into any other Metro player, just two random women who, if Ilya's story was to be believed, were very willing to welcome him into the room after they had gotten over their initial shock.

"I think maybe they think I am gigolo," Ilya had said, breathless from laughter.

"*Gigolo*?" Shane had smiled so wide it hurt. "How do you even know that word? Last week you couldn't think of the word 'headboard'!"

"I know only useful words!"

Shane had turned coy then. "'Headboard' isn't useful?"

Ilya swallowed his laughter, leaving nothing but a playful, proud glint in his eyes. "As word, no. To tie you up, yes."

He had crowded him then, pressing hot kisses under Shane's jaw, grabbing his wrists and pinning them to the wall above Shane's head...

Shane is pulled back to the present when a bubble appears in the app, indicating that Ilya is typing.

The reply makes him feel cold again.

No.

Just...

No.

Because “Hilton. 803.” is really a question: Will you come over? And Ilya understands that. Ilya understand things even when they are not literal. Ilya understands Shane.

Will you come over?

The answer is no.

He stands frozen but his mind races, remembering their schedules, calculating how long until they were both either in Boston or Montreal again. But he realizes their teams won’t play each other again before the All-Star game in Tampa and that was still five weeks away.

Five weeks.

They were used to not meeting in person for stretches of time that last months. The prospect of their next rendez vous being only five weeks away would have made him giddy in the past. *So soon*, he would happily think to himself and start counting the days. Now, after so long already apart and more than just physical distance between them, five weeks felt like an eternity.

In desperation, he starts to type.

Please can we talk? In person? I want to say-

He stops himself. Say what, exactly? Beyond an apology, he hasn’t figured it out yet, but he knows for sure he doesn’t want to say it in a text message. He hopes that if he can just be in the same room as Ilya, alone, the words will come. The truth will come. He deletes everything and starts over.

We won’t get another chance until All-Stars. That’s five weeks from now.

He deletes that too. Because Ilya knows this. Ilya *knows* this and still the answer is no, he doesn’t want to see Shane, doesn’t want to talk to him.

He types: *I’m sorry*. He nearly hits send on that but shakes his head and deletes it. Over text it would be at best meaningless, at worst seem manipulative.

“Planning to meet up with Lily?” Hayden teases him.

Shane puts his phone away and finishes pulling his shirt on. “No, she’s busy,” he says. He’s an awful liar but he’s pretty sure Hayden is one of the few people who never caught on to that.

“Oh.”

Shane realizes he’s been so rattled he’s entirely forgotten to do his regular spiel of pretending there is no Lily and even if there was he certainly wasn’t hooking up with her.

Hayden regards him with an expression that Shane thinks might be pity and it makes the team captain look away.

“Hey wanna hang out and watch a movie or something?” The other suggests.

Yeah, it's definitely pity, Shane notes. “Nah. I’m gonna pop a painkiller,” he gestures down at himself, referring to his bruised torso, “and then straight to bed.” His face and neck go warm at the word “straight”. Because nowadays, every time he uses this innocent word, his brain reminds him, without even a *shred* of innocence, that he’s not straight. The context of the word doesn’t matter. Since his epiphany, it’s just a thing his brain does.

Rose picked up on it in one of their many face times since they broke up and now likes to tease him about it. That doesn’t help.

“Sure.” Hayden claps him on the shoulder.

Shane winces as the slap lands right on a sore spot.

“Oh, shit, fuck. I’m an idiot. I’m sorry.”

Shane chuckles. “It’s fine, I can take it.” After a thought he half-jokes: “But maybe I’ll take two painkillers.”

“Shane Hollander living it up.”

“Fuck you.”

Hayden playfully punches him, but on the elbow, where there’s no bruising.

The team piles into the bus and are shuttled the short distance to the Hilton hotel. A group agrees to go to the hotel bar and the rest splinters off to their own rooms.

They don’t always have the privacy of having a room to themselves. Shane will admit, but only to himself, that in any other city but Boston, he prefers to share a room with Hayden. Sitting in quiet company as they both swipe through social media on their phone or put on a movie that has Hayden falling asleep in the first ten minutes.

Shane always catches himself wishing he could have that with Ilya; quiet nights watching a movie.

Life on the road feels lonely and unlike his teammates Shane doesn’t find refuge or distraction in clubs with random women. Hayden is a bit of a security blanket. He also doesn’t go out, for obvious reasons. Hayden always talks about how he likes being on the road because he actually gets to sleep through the nights, instead of getting woken up by crying babies and toddlers scared of the monster under the bed. But in reality Hayden spends his evenings texting Jackie, asking about the kids, and smiling at all the pictures she sends at the end of every day.

Shane always catches himself wishing he could have that with Ilya: a family.

He shakes his head.

Don't think about that.

The answer is no.

Ilya doesn't want to see him. Not tonight. Not five weeks from now.

As he stands in his hotel room, he remembers standing in Ilya's living room. Short-circuiting with the same fearful realization that it's so easy for Ilya to just end things and move on. It's happened before. After their first time; *Shane's first time*.

Ilya had been relentless, without being pushy, to get them to that point. Kept reminding Shane how much he wanted it. How he wanted *him*. Kept making himself available to him.

Unlike Shane, Ilya actually has a social life. It is all over the tabloids that Jackie likes to read; and Hayden pretends he doesn't. Ilya is always in some exclusive club. There isn't a VIP section in Boston, Montreal, or any other city in Northern America where he hasn't literally charmed the pants and skirts off patrons. Of course only Shane knows about the pants, the public only knows about the skirts.

Shane is also the only one to know that Ilya willingly sat out on all that excitement whenever Shane was in Boston, or Ilya was in Montreal. He'd text him his address, or hotel and room number as an open invitation and not once did Shane doubt that if he'd shown up on any of those given nights, at any moment, Ilya would have been there, waiting for him.

When it finally happened, when Shane finally took Ilya inside his body like that, it was the most vulnerable, most intense experience of his life and as much as he should have been, he hadn't been scared before, or regretful after, about who he was sharing with it. Ilya was the only one he wanted to share that intensity with.

While Ilya was in the shower – *Ilya Rozanov in Shane's shower* – Shane had laid in bed waiting for his heart to settle. He could still... feel Ilya inside of him. Feel him in his pleasantly overstimulated nerves. He wondered if that feeling would still be there in the morning and if it wasn't, he would ask Ilya to give him that feeling again.

But that was silly. He soon realized.

Ilya wouldn't be there in the morning.

The Russian player had plopped back down into bed with him, fresh out of the shower.

In his absence Shane had wiped himself down with a tissue and had kicked the soiled sheets of the bed.

As Rozanov got settled, Shane closed his eyes. He should shower, he was filthy, but more than that he was sleepy and oddly content with the state of... everything. Even the drying sweat on his skin.

His shampoo smelled so good in Ilya's curly hair...

His eyes had been closed for barely a second when Ilya announced he had to go.

And Shane wasn't brave enough to ask him to stay.

But it was ok, he consoled himself, already looking forward to the next time.

Then six months passed with Ilya having no interest in "next time". He didn't want to see him, didn't even want to text him back.

It humiliated Shane to know how little that night meant to Ilya. How easy it was for Ilya to cut him out of his life: just ignore his "boring" texts and go back to the clubs; go back to the women and all the other men who could satisfy him just as well, or probably better, than Shane could.

For Shane, there is only Ilya.

For Ilya, Shane is replaceable.

So when Ilya first invited him to his house, first asked him to stay, first made him food, first and finally engaged in conversation with him, first... first said his name...

Well, it just reminded Shane of that other *first* they'd had shared and how easy it was Ilya to discard him afterwards.

Ilya was finally giving Shane everything he had wanted after that *first time*. But all Ilya had really given Shane after that *first time*, was a painful lesson. One he had taken to heart.

He had accepted the limitations of what they could be and, frankly, had eventually found some security in understanding exactly where those limitations were. Not even a kiss was guaranteed. After Las Vegas, he knew exactly what to expect moving forward and he was ok with that. Or... maybe had just very successfully convinced himself he was. Whatever. There were rules.

We have sex. We don't talk. Not before or after. It is ok to shower. If we're in his room, I leave. If we're in my room, he leaves.

That was simple.

But then Ilya went and made it all complicated. He changed the rules and changed something within Shane too. Changed how "ok" he felt, or thought he felt, with the whole arrangement.

Because complicated... was nice.

He doesn't doubt Ilya thought it was nice too. Ilya doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do. He *wanted* Shane to stay, he *wanted* to make him tuna melt, he *wanted* to watch TV with him.

And maybe if Shane hadn't left, Ilya could have wanted even more. Could have wanted everything. Could have wanted the same things Shane had once dared to want.

He knows he hurt Ilya when he left. But Shane was too afraid of getting hurt himself.

If he had let himself enjoy it, if he had let himself get attached, if he had himself become accustomed to the new rules... how long until Ilya would shake things up again?

How long until Ilya would have grown *bored* with Shane and realized how much more exciting it was to pick any one of the number of *hot women* lined up in every city? How long until he realized just how *perfect* Svetlana was for him? How long until he remembered how easy it was to cut Shane out of his life?

Just a simple text. A single word.

No.

Shane stares at it now. Forces himself to face the finality of this.

Maybe he's with Svetlana right now...

He shakes his head.

He needs to not think about Ilya tonight. Or ever again.

There is only *Rozanov*, captain of the Boston Raiders, a team that stands between the Metros and their third consecutive cup.

He wishes he could erase all the memories of their nights together. He knows he can't do that, but, pragmatically, he thinks maybe he can overwrite them and become a new Shane. A Shane who doesn't give a shit about Rozanov.

He thinks the best place to start is for Il-Rozanov to not be his only sexual experience with a man.

Fuck, maybe that's why he's been so singularly focused on him. He's never known anything different.

Yeah, he needs different.

He lowers himself onto the edge of the bed and starts googling bars and clubs in Boston. That's how normal people meet others for sex, right?

He flinches – actually flinches – at the visceral memory of standing on the dance floor in a club in Montreal, watching Rozanov put his hands, God, those hands, all over some girl.

However slim the odds are of repeating themselves, he knows that wherever he goes, he'll worry. He'll just spend his time searching the faces of the crowd, pretending not to hope one of them is familiar.

Ok. No clubs.

He feels absolutely insane when his next thought, and one he follows through on, is to download Grindr.

He only knows of the app because it had become part of locker room banter. Whenever one of the guys was on his phone for too long, he'd risk getting whipped with a wet towel and accused of perusing through the catalogue of local gay men. Shane had personally fallen victim to that joke quite a few times while he was just smiling at whatever text Ilya – fuck – Rozanov had sent.

After downloading, the first step is to make a profile and he spends way too long on that.

Name? Obviously he can't put Shane Hollander. He's not exactly famous in Boston the way he is in Montreal, but he's self-absorbed enough to think his name might ring a bell even here.

Just Shane then? Even that feels too close to home.

He leaves it blank for now.

Pictures are the next hurdle. He doesn't want his face on here.

With a blush he remembers a folder on his phone, titled "Cottage Reno 2012". He never renovated the cottage, he had built to be perfect and it was. The top pictures in the folder are from the bathroom renovation of his parents' cottage, after that it's dozens of photo's of himself. He'd taken them to send to Rozanov. The Russian had started this, of course. After he first sent that dick pic, he'd regularly sent him photo's of himself. Never with his face though. Always low enough that even his cross pendant was out of frame. It was so stupid, if anybody caught their phones unlocked and scrolled through their chat, the ruse of the names Lily and Jane would be rendered pointless as it was obvious they were both talking to another man. But after some coaxing – ok, several months of coaxing – Shane had begun to reciprocate.

Pictures of his chest with his nipples hard. Pictures of his abs sweaty and flexed after a workout. Pictures of his cock in his hand, white on his knuckles. Pictures of his ass, including one where the end of his dildo was visibly poking out between his cheeks.

Suddenly, he feels guilty for showing any of these to anyone other than Rozanov. Because they were for him.

Another silly thought he has to shake out of his head.

He selects one picture that he thinks isn't too overtly sexual. It's one of the first pictures he had ever sent. It's just his reflection in the bathroom mirror, from upper thigh to under his chin. He's wearing sweatpants and that's it. He's not hard. He's not glistening with sweat. He's not even flexing. He remembers the moment, he remembers thinking how he's trying so hard to be sexy only to take the picture and realize none of that translated. It was a skill that took him a while to learn.

He wonders if picking a faceless profile picture would only draw attention to the fact that he's trying to hide his identity, but he can't take a new picture, his torso all bruised from the game. Besides, it's one thing to risk one person recognizing him, but who knows how many users might swipe past his profile, only increasing the odds of a hockey fan finding it.

Without showing his face, he feels self-conscious about interested parties not realizing he's... *not white*. He doesn't want whoever he ends up meeting up with to be disappointed that he doesn't look a certain way. But while he mulls over that he sees there's a field for ethnicity as well as age, height, body type, and sexual position. He fills in all the details and he likes how formal it all feels, like he's filling out a form at the doctor's office. Although he never told his doctor what he's putting into his Grindr profile now; that he's a bottom.

He spends way too long trying to write a sexy text for his profile only to come to accept that that too is a skill that would take him a while to learn. So for now he just emphasizes what he's looking for in a direct, no-nonsense way: a no-strings-attached, one-night-stand. Condoms non-negotiable.

When he hits "Create account" he gets an error and is reminded that he hasn't filled in a name for his profile yet.

He can't put in Shane. He can't drop any clues, anything that might jog a memory with someone. Moreover, he's not quite ready to hear anybody else say his name in the throws of sex yet.

He puts in Jin. A Japanese name. It sounds a little like Jane, his previous alter ego.

He creates the account and starts swiping through the app, quickly discovering that faceless pictures are the norm, so he feels less awkward about that. What he feels more self-conscious about is his chosen name, since at least half of the men he encounters just have sexual innuendo's as their name.

Looking through the profiles feels impersonal and clinical but he can't deny there is an appeal to that. And this is normal, right? This is what gay men do. He yearns to be normal within these new parameters that he has for himself. He's always felt so abnormal, so out of place, a fish out of water. That's only gotten worse since he was able to accept that he is gay. But he can achieve normality *within that*, right?

Soon, messages are popping up so he goes to check them out.

The first handful are bots, he's pretty sure at least. The guys have joked about this too. Apparently it's also a problem on the straight equivalent of this app.

"Give up, J.J., the only DM's you're gonna get are from the bots. No human wants to fuck your ugly ass."

The next one reminds Shane of Rozanov and he can't deny the warmth that starts at the tips of his ears, spreads to his cheeks, and then sinks down inside of him, to between his legs. The musculature of his torso. The light hairs around his nipples. The darker hairs between his navel and the edge of the image. The pale skin dotted with moles. Shane has mapped Rozanov's moles like constellations, and the moles on "8oston 8ody 8uilder" don't line up. It's not him. Also, the profile text confirms that the 8 instead of a B in his name is a reference to his 8 inch cock and Rozanov aims higher with his brags – since he can back it up.

He ignores his “I got what you want” message because what he wants is to *not* be thinking about Rozanov, so he can’t pick a guy that reminds him of the Russian player.

The next guy has “Thorne” as his name. No innuendo. No bragging. His picture does the bragging for him. No face, just a broad chest and ripped abs on display, one arm out to flex his bicep, show off his muscles and the faded tattoo there.

The name sounds so overly masculine that Shane assumes it’s as fake as Mr. “8oston”. Although it’s not outside of the realm of possibility that Thorne is his real name, it sounds more like the character in a cheap romance novel.

But the idea of being with a guy named Thorne after being with a girl named Rose draws a chuckle out of Shane.

Thorne’s message just reads “Hi Jin :)”. It’s simple and a little awkward in a way that feels earnest. It’s disarming. It’s something Shane himself might have sent after many discarded drafts. In fact, he sends back: “Hi Thorne”

The other man immediately starts typing.

It’s pretty straight forward from there. Transactional even. But Shane supposes that’s only normal.

Thorne assumes Jin is a Boston local, and why wouldn’t he? He casually suggests meeting up at a certain park. The way he brings it up, with little extra information, implies it might be a regular spot for random men to meet up. Some concern seeps into Shane’s underbelly but when he googles the name of the park he is put at ease. It’s just a small square of grass in a downtown area surrounded by buildings that all have names that sound like hip bars and restaurants. Shane hasn’t been invited out to the middle of nowhere, it’s a pretty public environment. Whoever decided to name the patch of greenery a “park” was really taking liberty with the definition of the word.

He’s not entirely sure how that works then for their purpose, but he doesn’t have a counter offer, so he accepts.

Thorne hits him back instantly, like he had the message typed out already.

I can be there in 30.

Shane doesn’t like when people do that. Thirty what? Thirty days? Thirty years? He knows people mean minutes when they say this, but it annoys him. He recognizes he’s being petty though, possibly subconsciously looking for an excuse to back out.

He goes back into google, goes to maps and figures out how long it would take him to get there. It’s nearby, close enough to walk. About twenty minutes. At his pace, less than that.

Same, he replies.

Again, an immediate reply: *See you soon :)*

He has a couple of “date outfits” that his stylist put together for him, but those are all at home. Probably for the best. He shouldn’t be treating this as a date.

All he has packed for this trip to Boston are a pair of casual black pants, some sweats, T-shirts, and hoodies. So he puts on the pants, a white tee, nearly makes the mistake of putting on his Metros hoodie but switches it out for an Adidas one and realizing his jacket has Metros branding as well, he layers another hoodie, with a zipper, over top. He puts on a cap that he’s pretty sure he’s stolen from Hayden at one point, because all of Shane’s caps are Metros caps and this one isn’t.

It is not a sexy outfit but he supposes that won’t really matter. He doesn’t suspect Thorne will be particularly picky and he reminds himself that he shouldn’t be either.

This is casual.

He can be casual.

Still though, when he picks his phone off the bed on his way out, his muscle memory has him checking his chat with Rozanov. The “No.” still just sits there at the bottom of the chat, the way a brick sits at the bottom of Shane’s gut looking at it. He switches to google maps, studies the directions and heads out. He’s good at navigating off the memory of a map, so he pockets his phone.

Shane has underestimated the bitter cold of Boston that night. As an Ottawa-born Canadian living in Montreal, he has a high tolerance for cold but was clearly too cocky thinking a shirt and two hoodies would be warm enough.

He sets a walking pace that keeps the worst of the cold at bay but that means he’s at the little park sooner than expected. He stands by the fountain at the center. The spouts are turned off, the water is frozen solid. He stuffs his hands in his pockets and keeps his body moving in place to ward off the icy cold. The little park is indeed surrounded by bars and restaurants, a couple of which are especially loud. The howling wind carries the booming bass. Because of the cold, nobody loiters outside. Everyone approaches the area from one corner, so there must be a parking lot or public transport that way, then they filter into the different establishments.

It's just public enough to not feel unsafe, while simultaneously also just quiet enough to not feel *perceived*; like he risks getting recognized. He definitely sees the calculated appeal of the rendez vous point.

He’s nervous, but not scared. Awareness tugs at the back of his mind that maybe he should be. Alone and meeting a stranger off the internet. His mother would be so mad. But Shane feels confident in his strength. He’s a pro athlete; a hockey player for God’s sake. He knows how to fight. Even if he only usually does so on the ice. And within the rules and regulations of the sport. If it comes down to it, he’s a fast runner too.

He stills when a lone figure cuts across the grass, making a beeline towards him. The man slows, squinting at him as he approaches and the one fear Shane did have wells up and expresses itself with an unbearable heat in his face and neck. Did he just get recognized?

The man closes the distance with a lopsided smile. “Hi. You’re Jin, right?”

The heat lets up. So this is Thorne then. “Yeah.” He takes a hand out of his pocket to offer a handshake.

Thorne chuckles before he accepts and notes: “This is more formal than how I usually do it.”

The heat returns, as shame this time. Shame at doing this wrong. “Oh, sorry.” He puts his hand back into the pocket of his hoodie.

“No, no worries.”

Thorne is... not what Shane expected. While the coat he wears hides a lot, Shane is certain that the picture he used on his profile is either old or not him at all. The height and weight info certainly doesn’t check out. He’s supposed to be taller than Shane but in reality he is just a tad shorter. He’s definitely less broad. Less broad than Shane and less broad than the picture suggested.

Shane thinks he should be miffed about this but he finds it disarms him. It suggests Thorne is maybe a little insecure and that feels unthreatening. Especially combined with the arrogant but objectively accurate observation that Shane could *definitely* take Thorne in a fight.

With Thorne seemingly not recognizing him, the encounter feels riskless now and Shane can muster a smile.

There’s an awkward silence where they look at each other with nothing to say. It lasts long enough for Shane to blurt: “I don’t really... do this. Often.”

Thorne takes it as his cue to take the lead. He gestures in a vague direction and says: “There’s an alley behind that bar where I always... You know?”

“Ok.”

Another beat of Thorne looking at him and saying nothing and Shane having nothing to say either.

But then Thorne starts to walk and Shane follows, allowing the other man to lead him to this alley.

As they near the row of buildings on the northern edge of the little park, he can see a narrow, dark alley in between two of the buildings. A noisy, booming club on the left and a little, quieter bar to the right.

Shane slows his gait as they near the entry of the alley. It’s only just wide enough for a garbage truck to back up into it and empty the dumpster that’s positioned about halfway.

While it’s narrow and dark, it doesn’t feel very secluded. Anyone walking by and bothering to throw a look down the alley could still catch a glimpse of them. Unless they hide themselves behind the dumpster, which doesn’t appeal to Shane at all and the twist in his gut

alerts him that this isn't going to work for him. He should have expected this and he feels embarrassed at not anticipating what a turn-off this is for him.

Thorne takes notices and pauses. He explains: "At the end you can round a corner, get behind the bar, it's completely private there."

"I'm sorry," Shane says before Thorne has even finished. His gaze darts from the alley to the man's face and back again.

For a moment Thorne doesn't say anything, maybe hoping that if he waits a bit Shane will change his mind again. But that's not going to happen.

"I'm sorry, to have made you come all the way out here," Shane says diplomatically once he sorts through his thoughts, slipping into his press-voice to make it easier to speak.

Thorne purses his lips but he says: "Hey, no, don't worry about it." Although it looks like he is still processing the rejection. At least he doesn't jump to anger or guilt-tripping.

Shane makes an apologetic face and takes a step back. His hands are still in his pocket because it's really too cold for any skin to be exposed and he wonders, half bemused, how this would have worked if he had followed through. Just pull down his pants over his ass and let Thorne sidle up behind him, pulling his dick out through his fly? Huddle together in Thorne's big coat?

He starts to say goodnight, but Thorne interrupts him: "How about we grab a drink instead?"

The man nods at the bar to the right of the alley.

Shane hesitates.

Thorne smiles. "Hey, it's ok, seriously. Look, it's not the first time a guy has backed out on me, especially on a cold night like this." He laughs as if he had the same thought Shane just had. "I always just end up grabbing a drink with them instead."

That gives Shane pause. So that is normal then? If that's the normal, expected thing to do, he feels like he should. It would be impolite otherwise. He glances at the neon sign over the entrance and through the windows inside. It's looking pretty empty but he prefers that. "Ok."

His answer seems to surprise Thorne at first, but after a slow blink he jolts into action. With a barely-there touch to his elbow that Shane allows, he guides him up the front steps and through the door, into the bar.

Walking into the warmth is an instant relief.

The bartender greets Thorne by name, so the man wasn't lying when he said he was a regular here.

Shane loiters by one of the booths near the door, if it was up to him it'd be where he'd prefer to sit. But Thorne crosses the space and seats himself at the bar, so Shane follows and slides onto the bar stool next to the other man.

“Sup man,” Thorne says to the barkeep. “Can I have the usual?”

The other nods and turns his back to them.

To Shane, Thorne says: “It’s certainly much warmer in here, huh?”

“Yeah. Definitely.” When his gaze starts to drift away from Thorne’s face, finding eye contact exposing, he forces himself to keep looking at him as Thorne speaks up again.

“It might snow later.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Did you drive here?”

Shane shakes his head.

“Uber?”

“I walked.”

“Oh, you live close by?” Thorne smirks and leans in to bump his shoulder against Shane’s. “We could have just gone back to your place.”

Shane shoots an alarmed look at the bartender, who puts two bottles of beer in front of them.

Beer. Of course. *The usual* is apparently a Corona. Shane hopes he doesn’t visibly grimace.

“I’m just kidding,” Thorne is quick to follow up. He picks up his beer and gives thanks to the bartender with a nod. He takes a swig.

Knowing he’s expected to drink as well, Shane takes a small sip and immediately rubs his finger against his lips to wipe the taste off them as inconspicuously as he can.

Thorne smiles at him, but then looks down at his phone. Shane can’t see the screen, but he sees the man is typing and he figures he’s probably on Grindr again, slipping into someone else’s DM’s, hoping to arrange a successful hook-up for the night. He supposes it’s still early enough in the evening and Thorne is already at this preferred location anyway.

Shane looks around. There’s not much to the bar. Nothing special. The people of Boston seem to agree. There’s three guys playing darts and a couple in the booth in the corner, but that’s it. There’s an emergency exit in the back, off to the side of the bar, that probably leads right into the alley where Thorne fucks his Grindr conquests. Crates of beer half block the exit, which is surely a violation. Music is playing at a volume just slightly above comfortable. He knows himself well enough to know he doesn’t have long until it will irk to a point of not being to speak through his irritation anymore.

He shifts on the stool, wondering if he should just excuse himself and leave, as impolite as that would be after Thorne just bought him a drink.

“You don’t like Corona?” The man asks in that moment.

Shane twists back around to face him. Thorne still has his phone in his hand but is at least looking at him. And smiling at him. Not wanting to explain to this stranger that Shane hates all beer and would actually much prefer a ginger ale, he grabs the bottle and takes another sip. Not until Thorne looks down at his phone again does Shane give into the urge to wipe his lips.

Thorne chuckles at his phone, so his DM endeavors must be going well.

“Maybe I should just...” Shane’s too polite to finish the sentence but not too polite to leave. He’s sliding off the stool already.

“No! Please. Fuck, I’m sorry.” He pointedly puts his phone down on the bar, screen facing down. “Sorry.”

“It’s ok. You probably want...” *to fuck*. Another sentence he’s too polite to finish.

“There’s still time,” Thorne says. “It’s early. I’m in no rush. Please.” He raises his bottle of beer in an unrequited toast and takes a drink.

Shane shuffles back onto the stool and takes another sip.

“So, you live in the area?”

“Hm?”

“You said you walked.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, I live in the area.” He hopes this lie doesn’t lead to Thorne fishing for an invitation to come with him after all.

It doesn’t. “Some place nice?”

Shane shrugs. “Nice enough.” He’s not familiar with the area at all and if living here would be “nice”.

“You’re not from Boston though, are you?”

The question makes Shane go rigid but he relaxes when Thorne points out the obvious: he doesn’t have the accent. “No,” he admits.

“Canada?”

He stiffens again. What a goddamn roller coaster of alternating stress and relief this conversation is becoming. “The accent?” He surmises.

Thorne grins. “You’ve said ‘sorry’ enough for it to be noticeable.”

He dreads that Thorne might be familiar enough with ice hockey for it to click *why* there is a Canadian in Boston right now. Even if he assumes Shane, or Jin rather, is just a fan traveling to support the Montreal team, it would get dangerously close to putting two and two together.

The phone on the bar buzzes with a new message. Thorne ignores it, giving Shane his undivided attention.

“What about you?” Shane deflects. “Are you from here?” Thorne doesn’t have the Boston accent that Shane only knows from TV either.

“Nah,” the man says with a drawl but then doesn’t elaborate. He takes a swig of his beer instead. His eyes glitter with mirth as he watches Shane.

In the silence, Shane takes another sip.

I’m terrible at this, he berates himself. If he can’t talk about hockey, he’s stumped for conversation.

For the first time since stepping out of his hotel room, he think about Rozanov. Rather than give himself grief for his thoughts circling back to the Russian man, he focuses on it being a good sign that it’s the *first time* he’s thought of him for, well, at least half an hour now. Some sort of record, he’s sure. Maybe that was as successful as he could reasonably expect this out-of-character outing to be.

So as a reward he allows himself to dwell on the memory of sitting on Il-Rozanov’s couch and Rozanov letting him talk about hockey and answering his questions about hockey. He remembers them talking about Rozanov’s signature fake-out goal-scoring puck trick that he pulled in a previous game against the Metros. For the first time in the play-offs, his trick didn’t work, because Shane had caught his tell studying replays and had warned their goalie about what to look out for.

Rozanov’s indignant expression had scared him for a second. Had he ruined the mood by ruining his trick? But then Rozanov had erupted in laughter and teased him about how many hours of footage Shane must have watched of him to figure this out and then Rozanov had warmed Shane’s heart when he had said:

“You really were not lying when you said I am an *awesome player* to watch.”

“You remember I said that?” Shane had blurted.

Rozanov had shrugged. “It was memorable.”

“Was it?”

“Yes.” Another shrug. “Really embarrassing. I thought you were fan girl.”

“You didn’t think that! You knew who I was.”

Rozanov had ignored him and droned on with a bemused tone: “I wanted to say: I don’t have pen. I can’t give autograph.”

“Fuck you.”

Rozanov had finally been talking to him and he made it so easy, it felt so effortless. How was Shane supposed to have that with anybody else if hockey was off-limits for fear of getting recognized and outed?

Thorne does his best to keep the conversation going with questions that feel like he might read them in a “How To Date For Dummies” type of self-help book. Shane gives clipped answers, always conscious that he can’t reveal too much. In the meantime he occasionally takes a small sip of beer, something Thorne teases him for it and that’s the second time Shane thinks of Ilya. Fuck. *Rozanov*. Rozanov knows Shane likes to drink ginger ale. If Rozanov had ordered a drink for them both, he would have ordered a vodka on the rocks for himself, or a coke if he was playing the next day, and a ginger ale for Shane.

A forlorn truth catches up to Shane that he might never be able to let another man get to know him well enough to even just know his drink order. Or at least not until he retired. Unless he wants to get outed, which he very much doesn’t. It’s his worst nightmare.

Thorne’s phone starts to buzz again, not with a received message but an incoming call. The man rejects the call without even looking and Shane is flattered until Thorne declares: “We should head out.”

Thorne has finished his beer in the meantime but Shane hasn’t even downed half of his.

Shane nods and when he clocks Thorne looking at his half-full bottle of beer, he feels self-conscious. It’s rude not to finish. So he puts the bottle to his lips and gulps it down, hoping he isn’t making a face while doing so. When he puts the empty bottle on the bar, the man claps his shoulder and says “Heck yeah!” Shane’s mouth curves into a smile, then wipes both the smile and the beer off his lips.

He slips off the stool and turns to face the front door but Thorne coaxes him to follow him out the back, explaining: “Shortcut through here. To my car.” At Shane’s panicked expression the man chuckles. “Don’t worry, I’m not inviting you home. I’m off to meet a friend. But I can drop you off along the way?”

His talking and the thoughtful question distracts Shane to a point that he thoughtlessly trails after Thorne to the back of the bar and then out the door. The protest that they shouldn’t be using the emergency exit dies in the back of his throat because clearly Thorne is a regular, he knows the bartender, so surely this was... normal.

There’s a tiny, dark hallway, lit only by the emergency exit sign over the outer door. When Thorne cracks it open, the cold air bites at them and Shane draws up his shoulders.

“Mind your step,” Thorne says as he leads Shane down the three, uneven concrete steps.

The near familial concern for his safety, tone not unlike Shane’s mom’s when she tells him to drive safe, delays Shane from fully processing the environment he’s stepping into.

The outdoor space behind the bar is completely enclosed by the brick walls of the surrounding buildings. There are some windows, but they're all blacked out. There's another emergency exit across. Around the corner to the left is the narrow alley with the dumpster blocking half of it. To the right, there's nothing. The bar or restaurant next door is much deeper and connects to the building at the back.

There is no short-cut. It's a dead-end.

Before this realization sinks in, pain explodes across his face. He staggers backwards, nearly tripping over the bottom step he came down from but the steel railing catches him, albeit painfully, prodding into the small of his back. He tastes blood as his teeth cut his inner lip.

Around the corner, a man had been lying in wait and punched Shane as soon as he stepped out.

Once the burst of stars in his vision clears, Shane sizes up the guy. He's big. A head taller than him and the kind of *wide* a man becomes from both working out and eating a lot. Heavy with muscle and fat. He'd put that weight behind his punch.

The absolutely ludicrous thought pops into Shane's mind that with the help of Thorne he'd be able to take the big brute but immediately on the heels of that is the grim realization that this isn't going to be a 2-v-1 in his favor. It's a 1-v-2.

While Shane is still somewhat dazed, the cap gets snatched off his head and the big man whistles.

"Holy shit. It really is Shane fucking Hollander."

Shane's stomach drops. He backs up to create some distance, get himself out of arm's length from the guy. He's aware though that he's backing up into the dead-end.

"I told you I wasn't messing with you," Thorne snipes.

The big man shrugs. "You know what they say about the Asians."

They all look alike, hangs in the air. Neither of them speak it out, they just laugh.

"To be honest, I really wasn't entirely sure until I got him into the bar and looked up a picture of him."

More laughter.

"I'm glad you texted. This is going to be fun."

Thorne's reply has Shane's blood run cold. "Even with the roofie I don't think I'd be able to overpower this guy alone. Not yet at least."

Roofie. The beer.

The usual that Thorne ordered included the bartender slipping a pill into Shane's open bottle of Corona before serving it to him.

He just drank the whole bottle.

Shane knows that he's running out of time. He shouts at them: "I can still take you both!" He makes sure to be as loud as possible, in the vain hope someone will hear him. But they are completely boxed in by other buildings. He hears the droning bass coming from the club next door. The wind howls across the rooftops overhead. The street out front, around the corner, all the way down the long alley he had peered through before, sees only sparse foot traffic in the bitter cold.

Nobody is going to hear him.

The condescending laugh that makes the big guy's shoulders shake in his coat makes Shane's stomach churn.

Hyper aware of the ticking clock as his body absorbs the drug he's been given, Shane makes his move. He catches them both off guard by focusing on Thorne first. A single right hook has the man crumbling to the ground, not out-cold, but momentarily incapacitated. Then Shane tries to push past the big man, one hand flat on his chest, the other curled into a fist to land a targeted punch to his gut. The man grunts and does take a step back and Shane tries to run, more confident in his ability to outrun the brute than to overpower him in a fist fight. But before he gets some distance between them, big hands grab his hoodie and yank him back.

Shane is thrown into a wall and it knocks the air out of him. Before he can even take a breath, the big one crowds him. He holds him in place against the wall with one hand on his throat and then starts punching him in his ribs, which were already sore and bruised from the game tonight. The punches land so hard and so fast Shane is afraid is going to black out. The pain is so overwhelming his body doesn't function; he can't even punch back, he hasn't even been able to draw in a breath.

When the guy finally relents and steps back, Shane doubles over, clutching his side, sucking in air in spite of how much that burns.

The man is panting as he helps Thorne up from the ground.

Shane straightens up and *woa...* he stumbles. A wave of dizziness crashes into him. He puts a hand on the wall behind him to steady himself.

Time is running out.

He lunges forward again and lands a couple of good punches, the first of which on the man's big square jaw. Two big hands close around his throat and he is pushed back against the wall again. He fights the instinct to wrap his hands around the man's thick wrists. He knows he won't be able to pry those paws off his neck. He keeps punching him, as hard as he can. He punches so hard he thinks he might break his hand but he doesn't let himself stop.

He's pulled forward, into the man's chest and then slammed back again. The back of his head connects with the brick wall. There's a crack and it feels like his head might explode. His vision goes black for a few seconds.

By the time he is let go of, he doesn't have the strength left to stand upright. He drops down to his hands and knees and that's when Thorne kicks him in the stomach hard enough that he collapses flat on the ground and Shane knows that it's over.

The big man bears his weight down onto his back, his knee digging painfully between Shane's shoulder blades. He grabs Shane's right wrist and pulls his hand behind his back. When Shane struggles, the man forces his arm further and Shane lets out a loud wail when his shoulder dislocates. The guy lets go of his wrist and his arm drops down, he can barely move it now. So all the guy has to do is hold onto Shane's left wrist and he really has no way to fight back.

With his free hand the man pulls a rag out of the pocket of his coat and hands it to Thorne, who pries Shane's jaw open and stuffs the cloth into his mouth; as much of as will fit, as deep as it will go. So deep it causes Shane to gag and he has to control his breathing to stop himself from throwing up for fear of choking on his own vomit.

He screams around the rag as his pants get pulled down but the cloth absorbs all the noise and any sound he makes is barely louder than the drumming of his own heartbeat in his ears. He thrashes as much as he can but the man on top of him shifts to fully pin him down, adding his other knee to the small of Shane's back. He's so heavy on top of him even Shane, as strong as he is, is immobilized. Thorne controls his legs by kneeling on the back of his thighs while he violates Shane with his fingers first.

Shane sobs uncontrollably. He cries so much his nose gets stuffy and with his mouth blocked he's afraid he might suffocate. It's a constant, conscious battle to take shallow breaths through his nose.

Thorne's left hand gropes his ass and slips under his double hoodie and shirt to drag his short fingernails down his side and Shane flinches as much as he physically can, being restrained as he is, when the rough touch passes over his sore ribs.

There's a conversation about condoms. Thorne doesn't want to use one but his friend urges him to, so there's no DNA.

"As if this guy's gonna narc," is Thorne's reply, but then he grumbles: "Fine."

He is right though. Shane won't report this. How could he? This story starts with him seeking out anonymous gay sex on Grindr. As if he's going to out himself only to get told he got exactly what he was looking for.

He's heard enough stories like this. There's several guys in the league who've been accused of assaulting women and the few women that have come forwards have been dismissed as sluts and gold diggers. Accused of wanting "it" but getting greedy afterwards when they learned how much money can be made from settlements.

Shane won't get accused of lying for the money, of course. He has his own money. But he knows the truth will get twisted somehow. The headline will be that he's gay and a slut who likes to let other men fuck him...

Even though his body grows weaker and weaker the longer everything drags on, he continues to fight, using what little energy he has left to try and buck the big brute off of him, without success. But when Thorne presses into him, all the fight bleeds out of Shane.

It's done now. There's no undoing this.

Shane's only hope is that the drugs will soon make him pass out, so he doesn't have to feel this anymore, so he doesn't have to hear the slapping of skin against skin, a sound that used to add to his arousal.

"Good?" The big guy asks.

Thorne groans and laughs breathlessly. "So good, man. *Tight*," he hisses.

"Well hurry the fuck up, it's cold."

"Come on, I'm fucking *Shane Hollander*, don't rush me."

From then on, Shane thankfully slips in and out of consciousness, only catching snippets of exchanged words and grunts, and feeling the occasional press of Thorne's fingers into his ass cheeks but he's out cold again before registering the touches are hard enough to leave bruises. At some point he feels a blinding pain in his right shoulder.

For the third time that night, he thinks about Ilya and he latches onto the mental image of him.

Ilya.

Ilya.

Ilya.

Shane sucks in a deep breath through his mouth and only several heartbeats later it dawns on him that there's no longer a rag stuffed into his mouth and no crushing weight bearing down on his back.

His eyes flutter open to see a thin layer of snow on the ground. He blinks when a snowflake lands on his lashes. Experimentally he moves his body. He feels heavy and sluggish but unrestrained. After a few more breaths he rolls over, groaning as he does. His throat feels raw and sore, he must have screamed longer than he knew, with that cloth in his mouth. He flexes the fingers of his right hand. Pain radiates down his arm but he can move it. At some point, in the struggle, while he was barely awake, it must have popped back into the joint.

The ground is ice cold against his exposed buttocks. He barely has the strength to raise his hips up so he can pull up his pants.

He sits upright. That dizziness is still there. A new foggiess too. He remembers what happened, the broad strokes at least and some disconnected details, but not all of it. He should be grateful but he doesn't like not knowing exactly what happened. Did the other guy fuck him too or was it just Thorne?

Shane scoots back until he can lean against the wall. That's about as much strength as he can muster. His body feels weak and not entirely within his control. It's a challenge to force it to move.

He sits for a while, hoping that if he just waits long enough, the pain and drowsiness will ease away enough for him to be able to stand up and walk back to the hotel. But he just drifts off again, against his will.

It's the shivering that wakes up. More snow has fallen in the meantime. It's melting on his clothes, making him wet and that much colder.

He can't stay out here, it could kill him. But even with that awareness it's hard to motivate himself to move.

But as sleep threatens again, he forces another attempt to get up from the ground.

He can't manage. He's too heavy. Too weak. Of all the things he should be feeling right now, it's frustration that bubbles to the surface. Frustration that his body can't do something as simple as get up from the ground.

He needs help and that realization has a sob rip out of him, followed by silent, hot tears. The thought of being seen like this, the thought of the truth being known to anybody but himself, is mortifying.

For the fourth time that night, he thinks about Ilya and a calm settles in his chest.

He wants Ilya.

He wants Ilya to come and lift him up in his arms and carry him home and wash his body in the shower and then hold him in bed.

Shane shifts so he can fish his phone out of his pocket. He searches Lily in his contact list and hits the green phone icon.

It rings once. Twice. Three times...

Shane is holding his breath the entire time.

After the sixth ring it stops and Shane hears: *"Hi, this is Ilya. I will never listen to your voicemail."*

He swallows the lump in his throat. That outgoing message is way too targeted right now. He knows the voice mail after six rings means Ilya rejected his call. He hangs up before the beep. Ilya probably thinks he's still trying to invite him to room 803 at the Hilton. Or that Shane

wants to whine some more about Ilya's foul on the ice. All of that is distant and unimportant now to Shane, but to Ilya, that's probably still the biggest thing of his night.

Unless he went out, Shane's mind supplies. Maybe he's at a club right now. Fuck, maybe he's even nearby. He lets out a wry laugh at the thought that Ilya could literally be at the club next door, the music of which bleeds into the night sky. He doesn't laugh much, laughing hurts, like everything else.

It takes him a minute to gather the courage or maybe the selfishness to try again. He hits the call button.

The call goes straight to voicemail.

"Hi, this is Ilya. I will never listen to your voicemail."

Shane writhes in pain at the rejection and wonders dumbly if maybe it the most hurtful thing he had experienced tonight. In spite of the message, Shane waits out the beep but then is at a loss for words. As humiliating as it is to have it recorded onto Ilya Rozanov's voicemail, he merely sobs and it gets louder and louder as he loses control over himself. He hangs up just before his pathetic "please" gets recorded. He really needn't have bothered to hang up, his voice barely has any volume, he can hardly hear himself.

He puts the phone down in his lap, tears falling onto the screen as he uses his left hand to open their app and start typing a message.

I need help, he types. *I've been-* he stops, panic claws at him as the word comes to mind. His breaths come quicker and quicker. Then he types it out, barely able to see the screen through his tears.

I need help. I've been raped.

He can't bring himself to send it. He doesn't want that message to be out there, to exist in the world as this real and permanent thing. He deletes the last word and replaces it with *assaulted*. He can't hit send on that either. Another attempt: *attacked*. Even that he doesn't want to put in a *goddamn text message*.

Everything but "I need help" gets deleted and before he can second-guess it, he sends it.

It pops up in the chat.

I need help.

Delivered.

Shane waits and waits and waits but that little text under his message doesn't update to "read".

He adds the word he didn't want to have on the voicemail.

Please.

Delivered.

He's in a club somewhere, isn't he? He's probably dancing with a beautiful woman right now. Sliding his hands over her curves, pressing his chest against her back. As much as that hurts, it's less painful than the other possibility. That Ilya is home alone right now. On his couch. Just watching TV but really not paying attention. Not doing anything other than purposefully ignoring Shane's calls and messages.

Shane is hyperventilating now. The alley seems to shrink. The brick walls close in on him. He needs to get out of here! He can't stay here any longer! He doesn't want to be here! What if they come back? What if the bartender wants a piece of him too?

He picks up the phone again and puts it to his ear.

It rings.

Once.

Twice.

"Heyyy buddy," Hayden drawls sleepily. "Changed your mind about that movie?"

Shane can't speak. He sucks in panicked breaths.

"Shane?" Hayden immediately sounds alarmed. He no longer sounds tired. There's rustling as he must be getting out of bed. "Are you in your room?"

He can't talk! He can't talk!

"It's ok, buddy, I'm right here. Just stay on the line with me. Breathe with me." Hayden does a performative, deep breath, audible over the line. He does it again. Even though Shane can't yet follow along, Hayden says: "You're doing good. You're breathing. That's all you need to do. It'll slow down."

He's right, Shane's breathing is starting to normalize.

Hayden does another deep, loud breath and then jokes: "I have a fourth kid on the way, buddy, I'm a breathing coach pro."

It's not funny. Will anything ever be funny again? But it's so Hayden that it's reassuring.

Shane hears knocking from Hayden's end.

"You in there? Can you open up?"

Hayden is outside of his hotel room.

"Are you here?"

Finally, Shane manages: “No.” He grits it out but for as much effort he puts in, he’s still barely audible. His voice is gone from screaming around the rag.

Thankfully though, Hayden heard it. “...Are you with Lily?”

New hot tears roll down his cheek. “No,” he wheezes.

“Are you alone?”

“Yes...” He clears his throat as he definitely didn’t make a sound there and fuck clearing his throat hurts. He tries again, louder this time: “Yes.”

“No, you’re not, I’m right here, ok? You hear me?”

“Mhm.”

“Where are you? I’ll come get you.”

Shane squeezes his eyes shut in concentration as he searches his memory for the name of the bar. He knows he looked up at the neon sign before they headed inside, but it’s blurry, like so many other details. He remembers the name of the park though, so he whispers that and added: “Behind a bar.”

That wouldn’t help Hayden much, there are several bars surrounding the little park, but Hayden just says he’s on his way.

“Stay on the line with me,” Hayden says, sounding out of breath. He must have looked up the location and noted it’s close enough to walk. He sounds like he’s jogging but still talking to Shane all the while and this isn’t unusual to how their shared workouts go. Hayden always talking talking talking. The normalcy of it holds further panic attacks at bay.

The drugs also take effect again. When he opens his eyes and sees his hand, with his phone, in his lap he realizes he has passed out again for a bit. Putting the phone back to his ear, he hears Hayden is still talking, without expecting any response. His friend is just keeping him constantly aware that he’s there, that he’s coming, that everything will be ok.

“You don’t remember the name of the bar, buddy?” Hayden asks and it clues Shane in that he must have reached the park and is overwhelmed by the number of bars there to choose from.

“Uhm...” He scrunches up his face. He can’t recall. “The neon sign was orange.” His voice is still nothing more than a whisper.

“Orange. Orange. Orange.” There’s a pause. “I think I see the one, buddy. Hold on... Yeah, there’s an alley to the left of it.”

Shane starts to cry again, but with relief now. Hayden is close.

+++

20 MINUTES EARLIER

+++

Hayden lounges in bed. He has the TV on, too loud to be polite, but whoever is in the room left of his is just going to have to forgive him. Because to the right is J.J. and he is not alone.

And she is not quiet.

He's watching the replay of the night's game. Well, not really watching. The constant roar of the crowd is just the most effective white noise to drown out J.J.'s consolation prize.

Hayden's eyes are glued to his phone, slowly scrolling through the pictures Jackie sent throughout the day, of all the kids, herself, and her parents who came over to watch the game with her. There's even a picture of the charcuterie board. When Hayden's not around, Jackie does fancy stuff like "charcuterie boards" when she watches the games. When Hayden is home, it's sliders and pigs-in-a-blanket.

They'd just been on a long phone call together. Jackie had put him on speaker while she went through the nightly routine of bath time and then bed time. Over the phone he read the kids a story he knows by heart – or, so he thought, Jackie jumped in with some corrections. Then they went to sleep and Jackie let him rant about the game and then she told him about her day and it calmed him.

He sighs contently.

He's a lucky guy.

His thoughts circle to his friend. He wants this for Shane.

He casts a glance up at the screen when the words of the announcers register and looks up just in time to see the replay of Ilya bodying Shane into the boards even though Hayden had the puck at that point.

"What a fucking *asshole*," he grumbles, getting worked up all anew.

He flicks his gaze up at the ceiling when J.J.'s girl starts to get even louder.

What the hell is he doing with her and is it something Hayden needs to ask him to teach him?

He closes the app and lays the phone down on his chest. He can't be looking at his in-laws while listening to *that*.

He considers jacking off but that seems gross.

He wonders if Shane is still up, if he could join him in his room and watch a movie there. He's kinda too sleepy for a movie though.

Hayden's room has two beds, he thinks they might have all been assigned big rooms with two beds. It happens sometimes, no rhyme or reason to it. Just the benefit of early bookings. So he could just crash at Shane's to escape J.J.'s valiant effort to make a single Boston girl louder than an entire stadium full of Boston fans.

He considers it, but ultimately decides against it. Shane is either already gonna be asleep or maybe Lily wasn't too busy after all. Either way, Hayden doesn't want to be a bother.

He looks down the length of his body at the TV screen. Coach is going to give them a stern talking-to tomorrow about their performance. They really need to step-up their game or else the play-offs will end early for them. Although it does cross his mind that it would be nice to be home in Montreal and not traveling through the end of the season. Jackie hides it well, for his benefit, so he can focus, but he knows the toll pregnancy takes on her and the more he's around to help out, the better.

The game ends and the conversation of the commentators is not enough to drown out the activities next door.

Holy fucking shit, J.J., how are you still going?

In that moment, Hayden's phone vibrates and he plucks it off his chest.

The screen displays "*Captain Ginger Ale*".

Hayden smirks. He's quick to answer the call and put the phone to his ear.

"Heyyy buddy. Changed your mind about that movie?" he hasn't even finished speaking before his heart drops into his stomach as all he hears on the other side is Shane hyperventilating.

He shoots upright in bed and clambers out. "Shane? Are you in your room?" There is no answer. Hayden is already stepping into his shoes and grabs his keycard and coat on his way out the door. With rushed steps he makes his way down the hall to the stairwell, knowing Shane's room is down one floor on the far end. He talks to him all the while and tries to coach him with some calm breathing.

He reaches the door marked 803 and knocks. "You in there? Can you open up?" Hayden waits and listens. He presses himself against the door and momentarily holds the phone away from him. Shane is hyperventilating so loud, he should be able to hear him through the door if he was in his room, unless maybe if he was in the bathroom.

"Are you here?" He speaks into the phone.

When he first hears Shane's voice, finally, it sends a cold shiver down his back. His voice is raw and barely audible. He says only one word, but it's all he needs: "No."

Hayden hesitates for only a second and then asks, choosing his words carefully: "...Are you with Lily?"

Another weak "no".

Concern for his friend builds. "Are you alone?"

The affirmative answer breaks his heart. As quiet as Shane's voice is, there is such deep loneliness in that single word, that small "yes". Hayden steels himself. "No, you're not, I'm

right here, ok? You hear me?"

"Mhm."

"Where are you? I'll come get you."

It takes a while to get a general location. In the meantime, Hayden is racing down the staircase, too afraid he might lose connection in the elevator. By the time he is in the lobby he has the name of a park and google maps shows that it's not far, so he doesn't bother arranging a car and he runs.

Fuck, it's cold. But he'll warm up soon enough.

The cold air bites at his cheeks as he sprints down the streets without any concern about losing his footing. He does slip once on a patch of ice under the fresh snow, but manages to stay upright.

His mind is calm because he has a mission. It's a mindset he remembers having whenever Jackie goes into labor. When someone is relying on him, he needs to not disappoint them. He needs to keep his mind from racing. He can't follow them into a panic, then they'd only spiral further down together.

Soon he reaches the park, basically a soccer field in the middle of a bar district. A fountain at the center and a dotted line of trees along the perimeter. All around are bars and clubs. Overwhelmingly many. He'll search each and every one of them if he has to, but he prefers to do this quickly, for Shane's sake.

His friend remembers the color of the sign out front and Hayden's gaze lands on a neon orange sign on a bar at the Northern side. Running up to it, he recognizes the black space beside it as a narrow alley and he lets Shane know he is close. Shane did say earlier he was behind a bar, so he probably doesn't need to head in.

Hayden has no idea why Shane was at a random bar in Boston. At a glance it looks like a shitty place too.

The alley is a black void and if he had any wherewithal at all right now, any capability to be concerned for his own safety over Shane's, he might think twice about stepping into it. But he jogs past the dumpster midway without hesitation. His eyes adjust to the darkness. Light from the streetlamps doesn't reach this far and the clouds that shed snow block the moon. But the general light pollution of the big city reflects off the grey blanket that hangs overhead.

He rounds the corner and for the first time his pace falters as his gaze lands on his friend. It falters, but he doesn't pause, he doesn't stop. He pushes through and closes the distance. "I'm here, buddy." He pockets his phone in the final steps.

The closer he get, the better he sees how bad it is.

He's familiar with Shane's panic attacks and his meltdowns where the captain goes quiet and reverts into himself. He was expecting... something like that. That he'd gone out, with *Lily*

perhaps and that he'd just gotten... overwhelmed.

But it's worse.

It's so much worse.

He's badly beaten up. He sits slumped against the wall, his legs stretched out in front of him. There's a streak of blood down his chin. A bruise blooms on his cheek. There are unmistakable, red *handprints* on his throat. Every breath he takes makes a wheezing sound. Frankly, with how bad he looks, Hayden is just grateful he's still breathing at all.

Did he run into Raiders fans? Why would they give them any crap? Their team won tonight!

When Hayden kneels down at his friend's side, he notices:

The fly of his pants is undone.

He instantly knows. He just knows. The devastated look in Shane's wet eyes is all the confirmation he needs.

Hayden tries not to let anything show on his face and he's conscious not to touch him no matter how much he wants to for his own sake. "I'm here, buddy. I got you," he whispers and his voice cracks. He shrugs off his coat and drapes it over Shane, tucking the collar under his chin. It doesn't help much with his violent shivering. His clothes are wet from the snow and who knows how long he's been out here in the cold.

Dangerously long, Hayden suspects, judging by the blue color of Shane's lips.

"I can't get up," Shane whispers.

"Buddy," Hayden swallows thickly. "I think we need to call 9-1-1."

Shane's bottom lip and chin quiver at that. "No... No, I don't want-..." Fresh tears pour down his cheeks.

"I know, but Shane... I'm sorry, I think we really have to."

The black hair at the back of Shane's head is matted with what looks to be dried blood. He's suffered a head injury, he could have a concussion. He's clearly hypothermic. And who knows what more damage has been done to subdue a guy like *Shane*.

Shane is *strong*. Hayden knows this better than most. He has the stamina of a work horse and the brute force of one too. He noted his bruised and bloodied knuckles before he covered him with his coat and he knows how hard Shane must have fought. For that to have not been enough... it scares him to think about.

"Please, no..." Shane begs, squeezing his eyes shut. "I just want to go home."

Hayden doesn't point out that they are far away from home. It adds to his concern that he could be concussed. He's not thinking clearly.

But after what's happened to him, Hayden feels conflicted about calling an ambulance without Shane's permission. He doesn't want anything to be done to Shane without his consent. So he himself begs: "Shane, I really think you need a doctor. Please? Please let me call?"

There is a long pause but finally, thankfully, Shane nods his head.

Hayden wastes no time and dials 9-1-1 and gives instruction for where they are. When asked what kind of emergency it is he says: "My friend has been-" He stops himself. "Beat up. At least. But... maybe worse."

Shane shrinks on himself at the realization that Hayden has figured it out.

The dispatcher asks for clarification: "*Assaulted? Raped?*"

Hayden just hopes the volume on his phone is low enough that Shane didn't have to hear her ask that so casually. He understands it's her job, she's been desensitized to this, probably needs to be to get through her shift. He knows she's not being insensitive but it's so wrong to hear someone describe the nightmare his best friend has gone through so matter-of-factly. "Yes," Hayden replies, voice cracking again.

"*Male or female?*"

"Male."

She asks him more questions, about what kind of injuries he can see and every so often she assures him the ambulance has been dispatched and she keeps him updated on the ETA.

About ten minutes later he hears footsteps and the rolling wheels of a gurney.

Hayden steps back to let the EMT's do their job, but he stays close and talks to Shane as much as he can without interrupting the paramedics.

Fuck, seeing Shane get lifted onto gurney nearly has Hayden's knees buckling under him. He's used to guys getting rolled off the ice on gurneys, but thankfully that's never been Shane. He never thought he would have to be witness to this *off the ice*.

Thankfully, Hayden is allowed to join them in the back of the ambulance and ride along to the hospital. Shane keeps drifting in and out even though the EMT riding in the back asks him to stay awake, urging him to keep his eyes open.

"What's wrong?" Hayden asks.

"He might have been drugged."

It just keeps getting worse and worse...

Shane is awake again by the time they arrive at the hospital and they wheel him through the double doors of the emergency room. Hayden stays as close by as he can.

They deposit him on a bed in a private exam room, probably given the nature of his... *attack*. The added benefit is that he doesn't have to remain in the crowded open space of the emergency room where someone might recognize him.

It's clear the doctor does recognize him though. A silver haired woman in a white lab coat over black scrubs backs into the room, her gaze glued to the chart she's holding and she reads out his name: "*Shane Hollander*." There's a pause as she looks up at him.

The doctor pulls out a stool and takes a minute to explain to Shane that she will be examining him and that two female nurses will come in to help. She reminds him that at any point if he tells them to stop, they will stop.

Hayden isn't sure Shane is processing anything. His eyes are glazed over as he stares down at his hands in his lap.

"Do you want your friend to stay?"

Shane doesn't respond but he reaches out for Hayden's hand and holds on tight, like he's afraid that no matter what he wants, Hayden will walk away.

As if. As if he would leave his friend alone like this.

Hayden squeezes his hand back and holds on with an equally tight grip.

The nurses come in and the examination begins.

They cut him out of his hoodie and T. shirt because of the groan he lets out when they try to move his right arm to help him out of his clothes.

Jesus, he is badly beat-up.

Hayden had seen him earlier than evening; had seen the familiar bruise pattern from his gear. That pattern has been fully obscured by new, huge bruises, the biggest and darkest of which on his left flank.

When they shimmy his pants down, Hayden respectfully turns around, without ever letting go of Shane's hand.

He's seen the captain naked like a million times. Ok, maybe not a *million* times, but definitely a lot. But he's never seen him like this. It feels wrong for anybody to see him like this.

With his back turned to Shane, his face hidden from view, Hayden allows himself to cry silently.

The doctor suggests doing a rape kit.

It's the first time Shane speaks up. "No."

Hayden gives his hand another squeeze. "Buddy-"

“I said *no*,” Shane says hoarsely.

That’s the end of it.

Hayden feels himself vibrate with rage. Not with Shane, of course. At whoever did this to him. He’s going to get away with it.

At the end of the lengthy examination, the nurses shuffle out of the room and the doctor rattles off a list of Shane’s injuries.

A skull fracture with concussion, broken cheekbone, three broken ribs, a broken hand, a resolved shoulder dislocation, and extensive bruising. They still have to wait for the results of the bloodwork, but she suspects he had been slipped a benzodiazepine like Rohypnol.

Two hours later Shane’s hand has been splinted, his arm is in a sling, and he’s been redressed in his pants and the zip-up hoodie they didn’t have to cut off of him. It’s dried in the meantime. With Hayden’s coat slung over his shoulders and Hayden’s cautious hand hovering near Shane’s left elbow, they walk out of the hospital and a taxi takes them back to the hotel.

Much to Hayden’s chagrin, the driver recognizes Shane. The man assumes Shane’s injuries are from the game and hockey players get hurt all the time so he doesn’t treat it too seriously. He ribs Shane a little for letting Boston’s “top brawler” Ilya Rozanov ram him into the boards. Under different circumstances, Hayden wouldn’t think much of it. It’s just good-natured chirping from a hockey fan. But now, it makes his blood boil.

As a petty revenge, he doesn’t tip the dude when they get out at the Hilton. Some shitty blog site might post about that if the driver bothers to complain on social media.

In the elevator, Hayden studies his friend’s face in the mirror. Shane has gone catatonic. Hayden doesn’t know whether to be relieved or all the more concerned.

He shuffles after Shane into his hotel room. The thought occurs that he needs to ask if Shane even wants him to stay. He’s terrified the answer might be no. He doesn’t want him to be alone. He opens his mouth to ask, but Shane says, in that weak, wrecked voice he has now:

“I need to shower.”

“Ok.”

“I need... help. I think.” He looks down at himself, at his arm in a sling and his splinted hand.

“Ok.”

In the bathroom, Hayden helps Shane undress. Once more he is reminded of Jackie. After she’d given birth the first time, she needed help showering too. He treats Shane with the same gentleness.

Shane steps into the shower stall naked and Hayden joins him still wearing his boxers and grey T. shirt. He softly suggests that Shane should put his left hand on his shoulder, to help him balance and he's warmed when Shane does exactly that.

Hayden takes the shower head out of the holder and aims it at the wall while he waits for the water to warm up. Once it's at a comfortable temperature, he rinses Shane's body, taking care not to get his splint wet. They didn't have anything to wrap it with to keep it dry. Then, after asking permission, he puts his hand under Shane's left armpit to hold him steady and free up Shane's left hand so he can use a soapy cloth to properly wash himself. When Shane shamefully admits that it's hurts too much to bend down, Hayden takes the cloth and kneels in front of him.

He doesn't think twice about it. Given the circumstances, it isn't even awkward. He simply reminds Shane to put his hand on Hayden's shoulder again and then he diligently and thoroughly cleans Shane's legs; every inch he wouldn't have been able to reach himself without bending forward.

To fill the silence, he mentions helping Jackie shower, after giving birth. That he was happy to be able to do *something* for her. He hopes Shane recognizes that he feels the same way about this moment. He's happy to help. Shane shouldn't feel any guilt or shame about that. He's not a burden, or a task. Being entrusted to take care of him like this is a privilege and Hayden treasures it. He treasures their friendship. More than he's usually emotionally mature enough to communicate.

Once the suds have been rinsed off Shane's skin Hayden guides him out of the shower and gently dries him with a towel which he then wraps around him and he helps him sit on the toilet where Shane waits as Hayden rifles through his suitcase for underwear and comfy clothes.

He returns with the clothes bundled in his arms and nearly drops them to the tiled floor when he sees his friend, hunched in on himself, looking at his knuckles again. He seems to be focusing on that injury in particular and Hayden suspects it's because it reminds how hard he fought back.

He puts the clothes in the sink and kneel down in front of him. Slowly, very slowly, he reaches up and takes a tender hold of Shane's left hand. He waits for Shane to return his eye contact before he says in hushed voice: "I have an idea. How about we take a picture of this?"

Shane's brow furrows in confusion.

"You probably don't remember everything. And as time goes on, the memory might get blurrier still. But... something that you should never forget, is how hard you fought. So you can never blame yourself for not fighting hard enough."

Shane's face contorts in agony and Hayden can tell he's already blaming himself. His own voice gets scratchy with emotions as he begs him to believe him when he says: "None of this is your fault. Look at this," he slightly raises his left hand. "And look at your broken hand. You gave him *a hell of a fight*."

Shane lets his head drop. His shoulders jerk as he's trying to contain his sobs. "*Them*," he whimpers.

Hayden's heart does a painful twist in his chest. "What?" He's pretty sure he heard him. Pretty sure he understood what he meant. But he wants to be wrong.

"Them," Shane repeats hoarsely. "There were two of them."

"Shane..."

The broken man is quick to say: "I don't know if they both-..." He swallows. "I don't remember- I don't- I passed out. I-...I don't remember." He shakes his head and grits out: "Just take the picture. Just take it."

Hayden takes his phone out of his back pocket and snaps a picture of Shane's two hands in his lap. Next, he backs up a little, so more of Shane's body fits into the frame and he asks if it's ok.

Shane nods curtly.

So Hayden takes one picture that shows Shane from the knees up.

These pictures will be hard to look at, but nobody, including Shane, will ever be able to deny that he gave it his all to fight off these monsters.

He pockets the phone again and then helps his friend get dressed and into bed.

He walks around to the other side and asks "Can I?" while holding the sheets.

With Shane's permission Hayden climbs into the same bed, even though there is a second bed available. Shane lies on his left side, towards the center of the bed, so Hayden turns onto his right shoulder to face him. He slowly inches a hand out towards Shane, which lies on the sheets palms up. Shane doesn't pull away so Hayden takes hold of it, gently.

Shane closes his eyes, squeezing out more tears.

"I'm here, buddy," Hayden whispers. "You sleep. I'm here."

The doctor had warned him not to be scared that Shane would probably sleep long and deeply tonight, as a result of the suspected drugs in his system.

Before he drifts off, Hayden asks: "Do you want me to call Lily?"

The corners of Shane's mouth curl down. His chin wobbles. "I already did... Il-Lily doesn't want me anymore."

Hayden's body goes stiff with rage and he hopes he doesn't squeeze Shane's hand because of it. After taking a few breaths through his nose to compose himself, he grits: "*Lily* really is an asshole then."

Shane has passed out. His face looks relaxed now.

Probably for the best, this isn't the right time for Hayden to let it slip that he knows Lily is Ilya Rozanov.

Like, *fuck*, of course he knows. He's Shane's best friend and also he's not *oblivious*.

Well, ok, maybe he was a *little bit*, for a little while.

And yeah maybe it was purely by accident how he first discovered Lily was a *dude*, but after that Hayden had put together the puzzle pieces pretty quickly.

Shane wasn't exactly a sly guy, not even when he had a secret to guard. The two of them spend so much time together and are so comfortable around each other, it was only a matter of time until Hayden caught glimpses of Lily's name on Shane's phone. He was happy for Shane, he'd never seen him chase a girl, invest time like that. He always figured Shane would be *married to the sport* until he'd retire, in spite of Hayden's and Jackie's well-intended interference.

Then one day, recently, the coach had knocked on the door of their shared hotel room and asked Shane to step out for a moment. "Captain stuff," he explained at seeing Hayden's raised eyebrow.

"*Captain stuff*," Hayden had pettily repeated.

Being the polite and eager-to-please man that he is, Shane had rushed out the door to give the coach his attention and in his haste he had left his phone on the bed, screen up, chat open, a string of new messages from Lily popping up. He knew it was Lily because it was the only contact in Shane's phone that had an emoji paired with it: the pink heart.

Hayden was not *reading* the messages. He couldn't read the text from where he stood at his own bed, stuffing his clothes into his suitcase because their flight was at the ass crack of dawn tomorrow. And he wasn't *trying* to read the text. He just kept glancing at the phone as more messages filled the chat and he chuckled at how down-bad Lily must be, begging for Shane to engage.

And as he happened to be looking over, an image filled the screen.

An image of a man's torso. A pale, muscly chest. Something wet on his abdomen that Hayden was pretty fucking sure was cum, but it was too far to see. And... a *big* – like *huge* - erect cock, held in a loose fist.

Hayden took longer to look away than he was proud of, but sheer shock had his gaze glued to the screen for a full second, long enough to be able to register all the details he could see standing about 6 feet away from Shane's bed.

"*Holy shit*," He blurted then. He pointedly looked ahead at the wall but there was no unseeing that.

Lily is a guy.

Lily is a guy with a fat fucking cock.

Shit, I really can't unsee that.

All this time, Shane had been texting and sexting a man. It's been years! Hayden had been seeing the name Lily pop up on Shane's phone for *years*!

The realization that Shane is gay, or at least bi, shocked him for only about ten seconds and then he thought: *yeah ok maybe that checks out*. It certainly explained a lot.

He heard Shane try and fail to unlock the door with his keycard. *Seriously, why is that a struggle in literally every hotel?* He didn't want to get caught standing there, holding, of all things, a ball of his own goddamn underwear, with a picture of "Lily" still face up on the bed, clearly visible.

So before the door unlocked and opened, Hayden soundlessly slipped into the bathroom, closed the door and turned on the shower. So he could pretend he'd been in there the whole time and didn't see anything he wasn't supposed to see.

He never told Shane about it. He figured Shane kept it a secret, even from him, for a reason. It hurt at first. It hurt enough that he had to talk about it to Jackie. It was hard, because even telling his wife felt like he was violating Shane. But this was Jackie, he told her everything. She helped him see how Shane keeping this secret *wasn't about him* and Hayden shouldn't *make it* about himself. This was a huge thing for Shane to struggle with and if he felt the best way to protect himself was to even not disclose it to his best friend, then Hayden had to trust that was the right choice for him.

"So... what does Lily look like?" Jackie had teased him.

"Ah, fuck, I don't want to think about that!"

She gleefully punched his arm. "Come on! Is he... *big*?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

"You are enjoying this way too much."

Jackie cackled. "Do you think he's a hockey player?" She gasped and jested: "Do you think it's another guy on the team?"

Hayden off-handedly replied: "No, I'd recognize the body if it was one of our own."

"Oh, you'd *recognize the body*, huh?"

"Shut up!" He playfully pushed her down onto the bed and successfully distracted her.

But later, like *days* later, her question rang in his head.

"Do you think he's a hockey player?"

Because, well, see, firstly: *obviously* "Lily" was a Boston bloke. Hayden had figured out Lily lived in Boston long before he had found out Lily was a dude – with a huge goddamn fucking

cock, couldn't ever forget about that part. That didn't help him narrow down who Lily was.

But they were about to play against Boston on home ice and Shane was smiling at his phone and typing text after text. And it hit Hayden in that moment that Shane always had places to be, things to do, when the Metros were in Boston – totally not to hook up with Lily – *or...* when the Raiders were in Montreal. It clicked for him that Lily was either a player for the Boston Raiders, or one of those hyper dedicated fans who somehow always have the spare time and the disposable income to travel wherever their favorite team goes.

It would sound crazy to anyone other than a massive hockey fan, but it was *infinitely more unlikely* that such a devoted Raiders fan would be willing to fuck the captain of the rival team, than someone on the actual Raiders team. Those types of fans are more gung-ho than any player. Hayden doesn't believe for a second they'd travel to Montreal to cheer for their team and then afterwards go over and fuck the rivaling Captain...

With their giant fucking- stop!

No, it was much more likely that a player didn't care enough about team rivalries off the ice to let it stand in the way of a good lay.

Hayden rifled through the Boston team list in his head. Maybe someone who got traded often, so they weren't too attached to the team? No, that didn't make sense, because Lily and Shane had been hooking up on Boston vs Montreal nights for years, almost a decade even. Besides, if he entertained the idea that Lily was a Raider, then even someone like Shane, who lived and breathed hockey and was loyal to the team to a fault, didn't let the team rivalry stop him.

Marleau came to mind. He was a big guy who might have a big dick. But when Hayden pictured Marleau naked, he pictured him hairy. Very hairy.

Fuck, now this whole thing had Hayden picturing men naked?

This is so messed up, his mind supplied. And then it conjured up the most messed-up thought of all:

What if it's Rozanov?

He was about to laugh it off but instead he froze on the bench, a lovesick Shane beside him, completely unaware of anything going on in the locker room as he continued to give his phone his undivided attention.

Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya.

Lily.

That fit way too fucking well.

He sat there gaping like a fish on land.

It would also explain why Shane never told Hayden about it. Because surely Shane knew Hayden would be ok with him being gay, right? He hoped so. He hoped his best friend knew he wasn't a piece of shit who wouldn't support him. But Hayden hated Rozanov's guts and Shane knew that for sure. Rozanov was Shane's ultimate rival. Their rivalry was a literal selling point for the MHL. Of course Shane had to be extra careful keeping that a secret, even with Hayden. Maybe *especially* with Hayden.

There was an easy way to check...

Hayden straightened his back. He reached out a hand and poked Shane's hip to get his attention. Once Shane peeled his gaze away from his phone screen, Hayden asked: "You gonna make Rozanov sweat tonight?"

Shane freezes and goes beet red, because he thought Hayden was talking about the plans he was clearly making later tonight, that's where his mind was at. He wasn't thinking about the game before then, about making Rozanov sweat on the ice, chasing after him to steal the puck.

Outwardly, Hayden remained calm and made sure to clarify he meant on the ice and it relaxed Shane.

But in his head he was screaming:

Oh my fucking God Lily is Ilya!

Shane has been hooking up with Ilya fucking Rozanov!

That took a while to process. And a lot of help from Jackie.

Now, Hayden lies in bed with Shane and watches him sleep, still holding his hand. He's relieved at how peaceful he looks, even though he knows it won't last. For now, Shane doesn't have to be afraid. Safe and sound asleep.

He's a beautiful man. Inside and out.

And now, after hooking up for almost a decade, Ilya *doesn't want him anymore*? The asshole can't be bothered to give a shit about Shane when he's hurt? What, just because this isn't the fun part, it's not worth his time?

Hayden stews in his own rage. He had always known Rozanov was a goddamn asshole and God fucking shit was he proven right about that tonight. Shane called him and he didn't show up for him!

He's going to kill him.

He's going to fucking kill him.

Everything is silent until out of nowhere, in the middle of the night...

Someone softly knocks on the door.

+++

5 HOURS EARLIER

+++

Ilya storms into the Raiders' locker room, face screwed into a grimace.

While his teammates celebrate and clap each other on the back, Ilya is angry. So angry.

He wishes he was angry with Shane, because that would be so much easier.

Instead, he's angry with himself.

That bodycheck was unforgiveable. The ref should have penalized him for it. Shane had passed the puck to Pike. Ilya just wasn't paying attention, he hadn't been looking at the puck. Shane was absolutely flying across the ice and Ilya put in all his strength to catch up. When Shane passed the puck, he slowed down and Ilya was going too fast when he...

It wasn't the hardest he had ever bodied another player, but it was the roughest he'd ever been with Shane.

It was an accident, but it was an accident that happened because he was bringing thoughts and emotions onto the ice that don't belong there. This sport is too dangerous to engage in it distracted. So it was still Ilya's fault.

He jerks off his gear.

Marleau comes up next to him and maybe he sees something is off and wants to cheer up his captain with a compliment, but he goes about it the wrong way when he celebratorily bumps Ilya's shoulder and says: "Good bodycheck. Hollander felt that one all game for sure."

"Gonna feel it for *days*," Connors chimes in from across the locker room.

Ilya snaps. He rears up from his seat and punches Marleau on his square jaw.

The laughter that had filled the locker room dies down instantly.

The players on either side of Ilya and Marleau step in and pull the two apart as they exchange blows.

"What the fuck, Roz?!" Marleau shouts, one hand cupping his hurt jaw, the other half-heartedly scrambling to pry off the arm that is looped around his chest to hold him back.

Ilya throws Russian curses his way as he struggles in the hold of their goalie.

Their coach comes in and with a powerful bellow he has everyone settling down.

Marleau heads off for the showers and Ilya is finally released so he can slump back down on the bench.

“We’ll talk about this later, Rozanov,” the coach warns before making his retreat.

The cheerful atmosphere from before is now nowhere to be found. The guys whisper to whoever is next to them and Ilya is aware of them throwing confused glances his way. Ilya catches one of his team members hiss: “What the fuck is wrong with him?” He isn’t trying to be quiet about it like the others and makes eye contact with the captain as he says it.

What’s wrong with him is that for the first time in his life he wanted something more than sex with someone and it blew up in his face!

Ilya pointedly looks down as he yanks the last of his gear off. He hates this. He hates wearing his emotions on his sleeve. It’s too exposed. Too vulnerable.

As disgusting as he feels, inside and out, he decides he will skip on showering in the locker room. He doesn’t want to be here any longer than he needs to be. So he uses a small towel to dry off his sweat and then pulls on joggers and a shirt.

His phone buzzes on the shelf above his head and he grabs it only because it will serve as a prop for him to try and pretend that he doesn’t feel like he’s wearing his skin inside out while the entire team keeps staring at him.

It’s a message from “Jane”. The first since the one of Ilya inviting him to come over to his house, two months ago.

Hilton. 803.

He pauses for a moment to think wryly of how many texts just like this one have accumulated in this chat over the years. But for the first time, the invitation doesn’t excite him, nor warm him, nor endear him to how Hollander is always mimicking him, even in text messages. Following whatever example Ilya has set.

It doesn’t make him angry either.

It makes him sad.

Because all Shane wants from Ilya now is a chance to apologize, like the good Canadian boy he is and then probably suggest that they should be friends.

In a split second Ilya sees a future in which he, as one of Shane Hollander’s friends, gets invited to his wedding and has to watch Rose Landry get the thing Ilya wanted: a life with Shane, full of publicly celebrated love.

He recoils.

No. Nonononono.

And that’s exactly what he sends back: “No.” He closes the app and lays the phone face down on the bench. He knows how definitive it is. It feels like slamming a door in Shane’s face. But he has to. He has to slam shut doors and put up walls, lay down barbed wire coils and

land mines. Put back in place all the barriers that had been there before, that he taken down one by way to let Shane get closer and closer and closer...

A wave of nausea has him doubling over and he hides it by slipping on his shoes and spending too long tying the laces.

As soon as his stomach has calmed down, he grabs his backpack and storms out of the locker room. Nobody stops him from leaving. Nobody invites him to join them in a victory lap across several bars and clubs. When the door falls shut behind him, he can hear conversation pick up but he doesn't stick around to hear what his team has to say about him behind his back.

He'll patch things over at the next practice. Flimsy excuses have always worked well enough for him to cover his tracks, because the truth is too preposterous to occur to anyone. He'll pretend to be frustrated that Shane had nearly outskated him.

It was true, Shane was getting faster with every passing season. Or maybe the real truth was that Ilya was getting slower? Weighed down and held back by this growing realization that he cares about Shane Hollander than he does about hockey. It's almost self-sabotage. If he lets his career slide, their rivalry becomes uninteresting. Fans will forget all about it and pit Hollander against someone else, someone who puts up a more rewarding fight. And then maybe-

Ilya stops that thought process and quickens his step to the private parking garage. He doesn't need to bother himself with that line of thinking anymore.

His foot is heavy on the gas pedal as he drives home. He hasn't gotten a ticket since the cup win. Every time he's been pulled over, the cop recognizes him and all his speeding ever costs him is an autograph or a selfie. He's grown resentful of the attention over the years, even while actively reaping the benefits. More and more often he wishes he could just disappear.

Maybe to Montreal...

He grips the steering wheel tighter.

No.

Usually racing through the streets lets him outpace his racing mind and his thoughts have calmed by the time he pulls into his driveway. But not this time.

He paces in his kitchen, only stopping to rip open the fridge and pull out a beer.

It's the sight of the cans of ginger ale that stop him dead in his tracks.

It's been weeks since that afternoon and he hadn't been able to get rid of them. He'd tried one and decided he definitely did not enjoy it, because it kind of tasted like Shane's mouth but not quite; not close enough. He should have dumped the rest out in the sink, but instead he keeps them in the fridge. As if Shane is about to saunter around the corner any moment, still sweaty and thirsty from a quickie in Ilya's bed.

He's replayed that afternoon in his head a million times and each time feels like picking a scab off a wound and making it worse but he can't stop it. He can't stop obsessively picking at it.

He'd gone grocery shopping in the morning. Usually, he'd let someone do that for him, but buying ginger ale felt like smuggling contraband. As if Shane Hollander was the only person in the world to drink the fizzy stuff and everybody knew it. The store didn't stock any ginger ale in the refrigerated section, so he worried the drink wouldn't be cold enough by the time Shane would come over. He knew Shane was specific about what he eats and drinks and Ilya didn't want to disappoint and put him off.

The food was trickier than the drinks. Shane was obsessive about his diet and what he ate was the kind of stuff that made Ilya unhappy just thinking about. But he remembered an interview Hollander had done, one of those fluff pieces meant to humanize him to the masses. The interviewer had asked the Canadian captain about his favorite cheat meal and after some prodding Shane admitted he likes tuna melts. The interviewer had been openly disappointed with how lame that was, but it was the most Shane allowed himself to indulge with food. Shane doesn't normally ever eat cheese or bread, but tuna melts were irresistible to him.

Ilya had to look up what the fuck a "tuna melt" was because how do you melt a fish? But, oh, the melted part was about the cheese. Right. He will never admit to anybody how long he spent googling the perfect tuna melt recipe, scrolling through way too many reviews on cooking blogs.

For dinner they would do take-out, he had decided then. Because he had used up all his brain power. He'd just order whatever Shane wanted. Much easier, but still, thoughtful, yes? "Accommodating", that's the word. He wanted to be *accommodating*.

At some more prying from that interviewer, Shane recalls - fondly, if the article is to be believed - that his dad always took him to get cinnamon rolls after practice. But he hasn't allowed himself a cinnamon roll since he was drafted, no matter how much he wanted one. So Ilya got cinnamon rolls for breakfast, but also eggs and protein shakes from the brand Shane signed with, as a safer back-up. Because he had little faith he could convince him to eat a cinnamon roll, especially on game day, and he wasn't planning on pushing the matter.

He wanted to make Shane feel at ease, not make him self-conscious about how particular his wants are.

Ilya happens to like how particular his wants are, because it made him feel like he knew Shane. They don't know much about each other, they rarely talked and Ilya knows that's on him. But he knows Shane likes ginger ales, tuna melts, the color blue, headphones not earphones, proper spelling and grammar in texts, shampoo from a Korean brand Ilya had to order online, and the labels cut out of the inside of his shirts.

Ilya had spent a good ten minutes picking a pair of sweats and a T. shirt that he thought Shane would like to lounge in and then painstakingly cut the labels out of both, leaving no irritating edges or threads behind.

Ilya has never known someone like that. Never *cared* to know someone like that.

He forgets to drink his beer, staring instead at the empty bar stool at his kitchen island that Shane occupied, curiously watching Ilya go through the steps of making a tuna melt. Ilya had prepared everything beforehand, so he didn't have to embarrass himself by pulling up the recipe. Invested in making it seem like he made tuna melts all the time. That his house was the place to be for ginger ales and tuna melts and blue bedsheets and nice shampoo and labelless clothes. The kind of house where Shane Hollander could feel at home.

He nearly flings his can of beer across the room but he stops himself and dumps it out in the sink instead. He needs something stronger.

But shower first. He is still disgusting after his game.

After he's all cleaned up and dressed in his favorite, comfortable clothes, he pours himself a vodka and settles on the couch. The thought crosses his mind to go out. Find a warm body to distract himself with. But he knows he won't be able to. What would make tonight any different from last Friday when he went home alone? And the time before that? And the time before that?

He sips his drink, flipping through channels and stops when he comes across a replay of tonight's game. The commentators are talking about both coaches deciding to bench the rivaling captains at the top of the first period. One commentator remarks that it's a mistake not letting the two take to the ice and give the crowd what they want. The other jabs that neither Rozanov nor Hollander have been at the top of their game lately.

"Well, we know what has Hollander so distracted," the first one jokes.

"Or rather, who has him so distracted."

Ilya's skin crawls but he tosses the remote out of reach without changing the channel, accepting this as some kind of punishment for his foul on the ice.

When one of them finally says *her name* it's like a punch in the gut.

"So who do you think has Rozanov so off his game?"

The irony of the camera then taking a moment to zoom in on Shane, chewing on his mouthguard like he always does, looking intense like he always does, while the commentators throw names of famous actresses and models back and forth. Most of whom Ilya has never heard of. One of whom Ilya *did* actually hook up with a couple of years ago, unbeknownst to anyone.

The game starts and Ilya watches Marleau body Pike off the puck with ease but then fumbles the pass so the Metros steal it back. He's watched the first two period from the other side of the board. Sometimes, he catches a glimpse of himself sitting on the bench, staring, but he doesn't remember any of it. None of it registered.

Between the first and second period, the commentators commiserate about the 0 goals scored so far and nitpick the lackluster plays from both teams. They bemoan the decision from both coaches to still not put their captains on the ice for the face-off at the start of the second

period. The Metros finally score a goal, off the face-off, which has both the crowd and the commentators groaning. The Raiders redeem themselves shortly after, tying the goal. And then it becomes a boring and fruitless game of puck-stealing again, neither team manages to find the net.

But when the third period starts and *Rozanov* and *Hollander* take to the ice, the men perk up.

“Finally, some spice on the ice,” one jokes.

“Oh you know Rozanov gets spicy.”

Ilya subconsciously straightens up. He observes the stiffness in Shane’s body like the man standing right in front of him at center ice wasn’t Ilya himself and this was all new.

“Rozanov is locked in.”

“Dog with a bone. I love it when he gets like this. I know most fans prefer to see him get under his opponents skin, but when he’s quiet like this, you know he’s confident. No mind tricks.”

“Just hat tricks,” the other quips.

Ilya isn’t even listening or else he would have rolled his eyes.

The puck drops and watching himself he looks like he’s stuck in quicksand with how slow he is to react. Shane gets the puck and then he’s off. *God, he’s fast when he takes off.* Like one of Ilya’s sport cars that Shane isn’t the least bit impressed by. But Rozanov chases after him with the steady power of a freight train. And when they collide... well it’s much like a freight train ramming a sports car. It’s devastating.

The commentators let out a big “Woah!” in unison and one of them is quick to follow-up with:

“Oh the crowd is loving this.”

“Well this is what they came for.”

Watching it from the bird’s eye perspective of the camera, it’s even more brutal than he remembers. It’s shocking Shane didn’t crumble to the ice after that hit. The fact he can remain upright shows his strength.

Rozanov scored a goal with the stolen puck. The broadcast shows a replay of the goal and then several replays, different angles, of the hit before that.

The commentators are making excuses for Ilya, saying it was a clean hit, as if the puck hadn’t been on Pike’s stick by the time Ilya crashed into Shane.

“He couldn’t have stopped in time anyway.”

No, but he could have diverted, if he’d been paying attention.

He jolts at the sound of his phone ringing. He feels the buzzing of it against his thigh as it sits in the deep pocket of his sweats.

Not now, not tonight, he thinks. He can't deal with Alexei or his dad on top of everything else.

He fishes it out of his pocket and blinks at the name on the screen.

Jane.

Shane has never called him. Ever.

Ilya stares at it. His thumb hovers over the green icon. He considers it.

No.

He can't.

Even over the phone Shane's voice will sound too good, too sweet, too irresistible. He'll say he's sorry and Ilya will say it's ok because he's hurt Shane enough tonight. He'll pretend it was never a big deal, like there's not a sixpack of ginger ale still in his fridge, like he didn't cut the labels out of his clothes for him, like he wasn't wearing that exact shirt right now, after never washing it... And before Ilya knows what's happening, he'll be a groomsman at the Hollander-Landry wedding.

No.

He declines the call and regret plummets into his gut like brick into an icy pond. Before he can second-guess himself, he switches off his phone, so he won't be tempted to call back, or read the messages that he's sure Shane is in the process of typing up right now. He tossed it to the far end of the couch and it disappears between the pillows where he hopefully won't even be able to find it if he gets drunk enough.

On TV, the game continues.

Neither team scores another goal. Not surprising. Ilya had been even more lost in his own thoughts, processing the hit. And Shane was dealing with the aftermath of the hit in his own way, guarding his left side and not playing forcefully enough.

The Raiders win, but it's an ugly victory.

"The Raiders send the Metros back home, their spot in the play-offs hanging by a thread."

"I'm sure Hollander wouldn't mind being back in Montreal full time while X-squad is still shooting."

The two commentators share a lewd laugh.

Ilya downs his drink.

"That's why his game sucks so much lately."

He curses at the TV in Russian. Even at his worst, Hollander could still skate circles around 90% of the guys in the league! He shouldn't be so defensive. For starters because this is a local broadcast, these are Boston men, accent and all. Of course they're gonna shit talk the captain of the other team. But mostly, Ilya shouldn't jump to his defense because that's Rose Landry's job.

She was probably watching live, he thinks bitterly, surrounded by her fancy friends. She's probably mad as hell at Rozanov for bruising up her boyfriend's perfect body.

Ilya knows she has no idea of all the things he's done to that body... he's left bruises before; the shapes of his fingertips on his thighs and his hips. Shane had complained that he hadn't dared to shower in the locker rooms for a week after that, for his of his teammates noticing.

Ilya didn't say that he wanted them to look and wanted to see. See that Shane is taken. He'd just chuckled and suggested Shane should get even.

That night, as Ilya fucked into him so hard he had Shane *keening*. His back arched off the bed. His hole clenching with every thrust. Shane dragged his fingers down Ilya's back and while his nails were short, some had managed to scratch the skin, leaving unmistakable marks. The shiver that traveled down Ilya's spine was enough to push him over the edge, spilling into the condom.

Shane had yelled, actually *yelled*: "No!" Locking his ankles at the small of his Ilya's back and urging him to keep moving his hips. "Don't stop! Roza-ah! Ah!" He was close but not close enough. He snaked an arm between them and desperately stroked his wet cock, the precum he'd been leaking let his hand glide smoothly over his shaft. The sound was obscene. It was so slutty. It was perfect.

But Ilya couldn't keep going. His cock was softening and becoming so hyper sensitive it was painful. Plus he needed to get the condom off.

He stopped and grabbed Shane's wrists to pin them to the pillow. The whine that Shane let out was criminal.

"Shh... Shhh..." He leaned in and whispered in his ear: "I take care of you."

Shane sobbed once. "But you're getting soft now..."

Ilya smirked. He loved it when Shane was so thoroughly fucked out of his mind and needy he was beyond any shame. "There's other way I take care of you." He let go of Shane's wrists, lustfully taking note that Shane didn't move his hands an inch. He pried his ankles apart and slipped out of him.

The Canadian man whimpered at the loss. His eyes were squeezed shut. "I don't want a blowjob, I want you to fuck me until I come."

"You should have thought about that before you made me come."

"S not my fault," he muttered.

Ilya peppered kisses to his face. “Yes it is. You make sounds too sexy. Hole too tight.” Too tight for Ilya’s cock, but not too tight for him to easily slip two fingers into him now, wet and pliant.

Shane threw his head back on the pillow and moaned but his face was still twisted into a frustrated expression. “Your fingers aren’t going to be enough now.”

“I know,” Ilya cooed, but still made a valiant effort, curling them inside him and pressing the pads of his fingers into his prostate.

“Fuck. *Fuck!*”

He got Shane so close to the edge that he was too distracted to notice when Ilya extended himself towards the bedside table and pulled open the drawer to get the thing he’s noticed before, but never commented on.

The dildo.

It was wrapped in a velvet bag. It’s weighty. It’s big.

Ilya sat back between Shane’s legs and caught his glazed expression. He smirked at him, noting the lack of protest. Shane just eagerly waited, not a hint of shame as Ilya opened the bag and shook the toy out into the palm of his other hand.

And Ilya smiled, because he finally knew the color.

It was blue.

And Ilya’s heart did a silly thing when he realized: he wasn’t surprised.

He fucked Shane with the toy. Fucked him with it so hard his wrist hurt afterwards but he didn’t care. Not with the sounds the man was making and the way his strong thighs were bracketing Ilya’s body. He was about to make Shane come untouched again when he changed his mind at the last second and took the crown of his cock into his mouth and moaned when he tasted his release.

When Shane came down from his high, he was mortified. Mortified that Ilya had known the entire time exactly where to find his toy. Mortified that he now had the answers to his questions: “What color? Is big?” – Blue and yes. Mortified that he had left scratches on Ilya’s back; scratches that everyone would notice and recognize.

And the Raiders did. The next day when they hit the showers after practice, Ilya made it a point to turn around and face the showerhead, showing his back to the entire room. The marks were bright red and the other men whistled when they caught sight of him. They celebratorily clapped him on the shoulder and asked inappropriate questions that Ilya refused to answer and smirked when they called him a tease.

Ilya is halfway through his second glass of vodka when he wonders if Rose has fucked Shane with his dildo yet. Shane apparently being bi, much like Ilya, didn’t change what he likes in bed. Ilya knows what he likes in bed, the same way he knows about the ginger ales and the

tuna melt. And the things Shane likes in bed, are things Rose can't deliver. Not without the toy.

Does she get him so high on pleasure too that he forgets to be self-conscious and just asks for what he wants?

He gets up from the couch and leaves his glass on the coffee table, deciding, maybe a little too late, that he doesn't want to get drunk. Drunk at a club is fun. Drunk home alone is just going to make him wallow in self-pity more.

He turns off the TV which, in a cruel twist of fate, was playing one of her movies, unknowingly he'd been half-watching most of it, while his thoughts drifted. It's nearly at the climax, she's about to get rescued from her kidnappers by the too-old-to-be-her-love-interest action star.

She's pretty. And Shane is pretty. They'll have pretty babies one day.

Ilya's stomach turns upside down at the thought.

He slides open the door to the backyard and steps out into the bitter cold night. He tips his head back and feels the pinpricks of snowflakes landing on his face and when they melt on his skin, they hide his tears.

The thing that hurts the most of all?

He knows it's his own fault.

He remembers all the times Shane tried to talk to him after sex and every time, Ilya brushed him off, not willing to risk getting attached. Foolishly thinking that he had any say in the matter; that he could stop the inevitable. At times he was an outright dick to Shane, putting in an effort to make it impossible for Shane to actually like him as a person, so that if Ilya ever slipped up, Shane could be trusted to secure a safe distance between them; keep him at arms' length, rather than fall into his arms the way Ilya craved.

One ginger ale and one tuna melt couldn't undo years of groundwork Ilya had painstakingly laid.

And then... fuck... there's the other part of the afternoon that kept replaying in his head.

"Do you like them? Girls?" And when Shane said yes, Ilya pointed out: "I never see you with girls."

He basically told him: *I thought maybe you're gay because I never hear of you dating women.*

And then Shane went and made sure nobody else could make that mistake by finding himself the hottest, most desirable, most public, most unattainable woman in Montreal. In the entirety of the North American continent, arguably. A woman who holds his hands for the paparazzi to see. A woman goes to his games wearing his jersey. A woman who invites him to her birthday party and has Shane *Microbiotic Diet* Hollander stuff his face with a slice of cake. A

woman who dances with him in the hottest club in Montreal, with her hands under his shirt... touching a body that used to be Ilya's. A woman who even the Boston based sports commentators can't stop talking about.

Ilya and Shane had been rivals on the ice for over a decade, but for the first time, Shane beat him at his own game.

And it was Ilya's own goddamn fault.

The cold of the night gets to him. He stands barefoot in the snow and his toes are going numb. He suffers it for as long as he can stand it, letting it sober him up. Then he walks back inside and he lifts his shirt to dry his face, pretending it's only wet from melted snow.

He stalks towards the far end of the couch and fishes his phone out from between the cushions. But as soon as he has the device in hand, he chucks it back down, like it's burned him.

If he turns it on he *will* text Shane. He knows he will.

He'll text something stupid, like: *don't marry Rose*.

What the fuck. He doesn't need to go around planting more stupid ideas in that pretty head of Shane's.

He's pacing again.

"You don't text your sex buddy not to marry his girlfriend," he warns himself in Russian.

He stops.

"You *tell* him. You tell him in person."

Ok, that iss the vodka talking, but it's making a good point...

"And then you tell him you-" He stops himself. He is not about to say *that* out loud for the first time to just himself.

With hurried steps he heads for the front door and snatches his keys along the way. He nearly walks out barefoot again, but backtracks to put on shoes and a jacket too.

He isn't *drunk*, but still, driving was a dumb idea. Just not the *dumbest* idea he is currently acting on, so it seems too unimportant to dwell on. He makes sure to stick to the speed limit, even if that has him gritting his teeth and wringing the steering wheel.

All the while, the only thought in his head:

Hilton. 803.

He should probably use that time to think of what to actually say, maybe ask the linger effect of the vodka for input. But he's not about thinking right now. He's all about his feelings. And

he knows they'll just pour out when he will lay eyes on Shane.

It's risky, walking into the Hilton hotel lobby where the entire Metros team is spending the night. This is Boston, people know Ilya here. The staff at reception shoots him a look. He's not even wearing a baseball cap or anything, curly hair on display. But they've been doing this for years now and nobody has ever caught on. Or maybe some poor janitor or night maid did, but they never came forward, either out of decency or because there is a difference between suspecting the unthinkable and actually *knowing* and having the proof to back it up.

Thankfully one of the elevators is on the ground floor so he doesn't have to wait out in the open. He takes a deep breath as he watches himself in the reflection on the inside of the elevator doors. There's a bit of color to his cheeks, from the alcohol and from the cold and maybe from the nerves too, that he feels fluttering in his belly.

The ride up to the eight floor feels like it takes forever, like time slows down in an attempt to wait him out until he changes his mind. But Ilya is stubborn. He's doing this. He has nothing to lose. He's already hurting, getting rejected again won't hurt him any more. And he doesn't want to friends with Shane anyway, so it doesn't matter if he crosses a line and pisses him off and makes it so the Canadian captain never wants to see him again. Rather than be a groomsman and watch him marry *Rose Landry*.

Room 803 is near the elevators and that feels exposed, but it's almost one in the morning, so he supposes there's not a big risk that he'll run into anyone.

He reaches into his pocket, meaning to whip out his phone and shoot Shane a text to let him know he's hear. They never knock to avoid anybody in the neighboring rooms overhearing. But he realizes with a breathy curse that in his haste he left his phone on the couch.

After a split-second of hesitation, he knocks on the door as softly as possible.

He bounces on the balls of his feet the way little kids do when they line up to meet him; an energy somewhere midway between excited and anxious.

The absolutely ridiculous thought that pops in his head is: what if Rose Landry opens the door?

But then his brain reminds him of the embarrassing moment earlier that day when he had used google to try and find out if Rose had traveled down from Montreal to watch the game. Paparazzi stalking the X-squad set posted pictures online that confirm she is still in Canada, filming.

Still, he gets a surprise when he sees who *does* open the door.

It's Pike.

There's a flare of jealousy even worse than Ilya has ever felt towards Rose.

Shane is fucking Pike when Rose isn't around?

The guys slips out of the hotel room and closes the door behind him soundlessly and then, before Ilya has processed the unexpected situation...

Pike fucking decks him.

The punch lands on Ilya's jaw with a dull thud. To Pike's credit, he put enough of his meager weight behind it to fling Ilya's head to the side.

A Russian curse slips out of him, hissed through gritted teeth.

He balls his fists at his sides but resist the urge to punch back, knowing that if he does punch him, he'll do some actual damage. Pike is fast on the ice and Ilya will begrudgingly admit to nobody but himself that he's a good stick-handler, but the guy is a lightweight. If Ilya punches him, fueled by all the rage and jealousy he's coursing through him right now, he'll break something and get himself into trouble. Shane won't like it if he hurts his friend and... back-up fuck-buddy.

When he stops seeing red he recognizing Pike too is doing his best to hold back from more violence. The guy is visibly shaking. His face is flushed. A vein in his forehead looks about ready to pop. But what stands out above else to Ilya, are his red-rimmed and bloodshot eyes.

Pike has been crying.

The guy seethes: "You fucking asshole."

"What I do?" Ilya pointedly rubs his jaw. "You punch *me*."

"Because you're a piece of shit and you deserve it."

"Is about foul? Was accident. Get a grip."

It's almost laughable the way they are both forced to whisper their way through this argument, neither of them wanting to draw attention.

"This is about you being a selfish prick who doesn't deserve him."

There was a truth to that but he wasn't about to ever tell Pike he's right about anything. He opens his mouth to fire something back but it dies in his throat when something clicks.

Pike knows.

Shane must have told him because no way *this dimwit* could have figured out what nobody else had.

Conversationally, Pike had him on the ropes, so he kept verbally punching him.

"I always knew you were a fucking shithead. I told him. I told him you're an asshole. I can't believe he trusted you and you just walk away." He takes a breath through his nose like a bull about to charge.

Ilya has his hands up, trying to get a word in edgewise. “Pike. Pike.”

But Pike bulldozes on: “You just take what you want from him and when he needs you the most, you can’t be fucking bothered to show up for him. You *don’t want him anymore?*” He spits the words but still with the wherewithal to keep his voice hushed. “How about caring about what *he* wants for once?”

“Whatthefuckyoutalkabout?” He hisses before Pike can continue his tirade.

Pike blinks at him, maybe struggles processing the question with how rushed it was and how Ilya’s accents gets more pronounced when he gets heated. But eventually he says: “He called you tonight.”

“Yes,” he sees Pike open his mouth to throw confusing accusations at him again, so he’s quick to continue: “I did not pick up.”

Pike gapes like a fish for long enough that it would have been funny under any other circumstances.

“Pike, what happened?”

The Canadian stares at him. “You really don’t know.”

“No, I don’t know nothing.” He realized after the fact that’s a double negative but doesn’t bother correcting himself. His heart is hammering in his chest. Now that Pike has shut up, Ilya can actually consider what he said.

When he needs you the most, you can’t be fucking bothered to show up for him.

“Rose break up with him?” Ilya asks as that’s what comes to mind first: heartache. Probably because that has been the state Ilya has been in. He can’t help the hopeful lilt to his tone, even though he feels like a piece of shit about it. If Shane is sad about Rose, Ilya shouldn’t selfishly gloat.

Pike scrunches up his face. “What? No.”

Ilya grimaces.

But then Pike shakes his head and continues: “I mean, *yeah*. They broke up. But like... a month ago or something.”

Ilya’s relief is short-lived because now he’s back to wondering what *did* happen for Shane to *need him the most*.

Rather than elaborate and give Ilya useful information, Pike is set off again. “Why the fuck are you even thinking about Rose right now? Are you *jealous?*” He scoffs. “Oh who exactly? Of Rose, or of Shane?”

“You say I think about Rose Landry because I want to fuck Rode Landry?” He hisses, prodding a finger into Pike’s chest. “I don’t give shit about Rose Landry.” He stops short of

admitting that at one point, definitely drunk, he googled how common it is for actors to die on set and when the search engine spat out some examples of stunts gone wrong, he'd followed up typing into the bar: *does Rose Landry do own stunts?*

"I only care about Shane," Ilya says solemnly. "Please. What happened to Shane?"

Pike deflates. After steadfast holding Ilya's gaze, he finally looks away.

Ilya's heart sinks. "Please," he whispers. Quiet not because he needs to be, but because he can't find his voice.

Pike thinks, perhaps still not trusting Ilya enough to divulge any information. "He was beat-up," he says.

Ilya's jaw clenches. He gives a curt nod. Raiders fans, no doubt. The Metros probably went out for a drink to commiserate the loss and ended up in the wrong bar. He can't stop the accusation that slips out of him. "Why weren't you there to help?" He notices there's no bruise on Pike's face, nor any damage to his knuckles. He definitely hadn't been in a fist fight tonight.

"Why weren't *you* there?" Pike fires back without missing a beat.

"I'm here now," Ilya declares, apologetic. He hopes it counts for something. "Let me in." He juts his chin at the door. "I want to talk to Shane." His voice slips into a low tone that makes it clear he's not above shoving Pike into the wall, taking the keycard he saw him pocket when he snuck out, and letting himself in.

"He's asleep."

"He'll wake up."

"Rozanov."

"Pike."

"I- I need to ask him first. If he even wants to see you."

Ilya sighs impatiently. "Fine." He crosses his arms in front of his chest.

"Ok." Pike turns and unlocks the door.

Ilya knows he's in the wrong, but that doesn't stop him from following Pike into the hotel room before he can close the door behind him. The Canadian makes an attempt to block Ilya's way but, well, that's never worked out for him on the ice either. He needs the big Metros defensemen for that. Ilya elbows Pike out of his path with an ease than should embarrass the Canadian player.

He strides past him into the room, expecting the commotion to have woken up Shane. Another thing he knows about Shane: he's a light sleeper.

But he stops in the middle of the room when he sees Shane still sound asleep in one of the beds, the sheets on the other side tousled in a way that suggests Pike had been in bed with him.

Shane lays on his left side. His right shoulder is in a sling. His right hand is in a splint. Bruises discolor his face. His bottom lip is split. It's much worse than he imagined.

"Fucking asshole," Pike hisses at him.

Ilya ignores him. Doesn't even peel his gaze away from Shane's form. His body goes cold. "Why still asleep?"

"I told you he was asleep."

"Yes. Why *still* asleep? He is light sleeper."

"I know that," Pike argues petulantly, like one of his - fuck - seven children? "I'm his best friend. I know him pretty well. Better than you."

Ilya is not here for a competition. He walks around to the side of the bed Shane sleeps on. Pike trails after him, hovering like a mother hen. When Ilya reaches down a hand, meaning to tenderly stroke Shane's unbruised cheek, Pike snatches his wrist and hold him. Only because Ilya allows it. He could easily shake free. He quirks an eyebrow at the other.

"You can't just touch him."

"I thought you knew me and Shane *touch each other*," he deadpans.

Pike bristles. "Whatever. You can't touch him now."

"Why does he not wake?" Ilya demands. He shakes his hand out of Pike's grip.

"Because he needs to sleep," Pike says after a pause.

"He take something? For sleep?"

More hesitation before Pike stiffly nods.

Ilya takes off his jacket and drapes it over the chair behind him.

"What are you doing?"

Ilya shrugs. "He sleeps. I wait." He nods at the other bed. "I sleep here too."

Pike looks like his eye might start to twitch at any moment at the thought of sharing a room with Rozanov. "No."

"I did not ask."

"I really fucking hate you."

“Ok.”

With that, their stand-off ends.

Pike crawls back into bed, next to Shane and Ilya tries not to feel any sort of way about that. He plants himself in the chair, because it's closer to Shane than the free bed. He's not tired now anyway. From his seated position, he can't see Pike anymore over the slope of Shane's body. He watches his back, watches the barely perceptible movement of his torso as he breathes.

At some point, Ilya doesn't know how much time has passed, he hears Pike's snoring. His poor wife. And poor Shane, for sometimes having to room with him. But maybe he always takes a pill to help him sleep when he has to bunk with his teammate.

Ilya scrubs his face. He wishes he had his phone on him, so he could check if Shane left him a voice mail or any text messages. He feels terrible for rejecting the call, knowing what happened. He wondered if Shane called before he was attacked, or after. Either way, if Ilya had answered, he could have been of some help at least. Could have set him on a different trajectory if it was before. Could have been there for support at the hospital if it was after.

Privately, he's relieved Pike is always there for Shane.

He's a shitty hockey player. But he's a pretty good friend.

He keeps vigil but eventually his eyelids droop and he slumps in the seat more and more until he's low enough to rest the growing weight of his head on the low back of the chair. After that, he falls asleep pretty quickly.

When he next opens his eyes, he's looking up at the ceiling where the pink and orange light of the sunrise dance. Nobody had bothered to close the curtains on the window behind Ilya. He blinks a few times, waiting for the fog of sleep to fully drift away. The more his brain clear, the more it registers how sore his body is after spending the night in the chair.

He lifts his head up and freezes when he makes eye contact with Shane.

He lay on his back now, his head tilted to the side to face Ilya. His bruises look darker now.

Shane blinks in surprise. Not at seeing Ilya, it seemed like he'd been staring at him for a while. He's just caught off guard by Ilya waking up and locking gazes with him. It doesn't last long, brown eyes moving to avoid looking directly at Ilya.

Ilya gingerly straightens up in his seat. Not just to be mindful of his sore muscles, but also because there is something scared and fragile to Shane's expression and instincts tell Ilya that he moves too suddenly, Shane will be spooked.

He cranes his neck to confirm Pike is still asleep on the other side of the bed. Apparently he doesn't snore when he's on his side.

Then Ilya slowly leans forward, closer to Shane, leaning his forearms on his knees. “Hey,” he whispers. Not for Pike's sake.

Shane doesn't speak, nor look at him.

"Pike told me what happened."

Shane's chin wobbles. "Did he?" His voice is raw. It sounds painful to speak.

One time, during an informal, friendly game of hockey, after practice, when nobody was wearing their gear, Marleau had fired a puck at the goal and by sheer misfortune Ilya was in the way and he took that puck straight into the abdomen. Hearing Shane's wrecked voice kind of hurt like that.

"Was it Raiders fans?" Ilya tries to make conversation.

Shane's brow twitches into a frown.

"Who beat you up?"

Shane's expression relaxes. He swallows thickly and then nods.

"Fuckers," Ilya hisses. "I'm sorry I didn't answer your call."

"It's ok," Shane whispers hoarsely. He's still not looking at him.

"No. Don't forgive. Don't." He scoots towards the edge of his seat to get even closer. Close enough so he can reach out to touch Shane's shoulder.

But before he does, Pike shoots upright in bed, startled awake by a dream, and Shane flinches so violently it's followed by a hiss of pain and he's scrunching up his face. His body is taut as he rides out the wave of pain.

"Shit, buddy, I'm sorry." Pike's hands hover over him but he never touches him. His gaze darts to Ilya and he acknowledges stiffly: "Rozanov."

"Pike."

Shane carefully raises himself up into a seated position and leans back against the headboard. His face remains permanently twisted in discomfort although he grunts: "I'm ok".

Without a word Ilya gets up and walks into the bathroom. There he finds clean glasses and he fills one with water. He walks back out, catching the secretive look Shane shoots Pike's way. He doesn't say anything as he holds the glass out to Shane and waits for him to take it with his left hand.

While Shane sips, Ilya sits down again. At least now he feels a little less useless. A little.

With every swallow Shane winces but he forces himself to drink at least a third of the water, if only, Ilya suspects, because it gives him an excuse to ignore him, as he's focused on the task of hydrating his throat and body.

"Pike," Ilya starts, "Is ok if you give me and Shane minute?"

Pike's gaze darts to Shane with open concern. "Do you- Is that alright with you?"

Shane takes two more sips, stalling, but then nods.

Pike checks the time on his phone and declares that he's gonna go talk to the coach, then offers to sneak some food out of the breakfast buffet for Shane, so room service doesn't have to see him like this.

"Not hungry," Shane manages with his weak voice.

Pike gives him a smile that Ilya wants to describe as fatherly, in spite of his lack of reference. "Sorry buddy, but I don't care. I'll be back in like, half an hour, ok?"

Shane nods.

Pike slept in a shirt and jeans, so once he's stepped into his shoes, he gives the two of them one last look and then he's out the door, finally leaving them alone.

Ilya is about to speak when Shane beats him to it.

He just grouches: "I need to piss." He holds the glass of water out and Ilya understands he's expected to take it, so he does. With his left hand now free, Shane uses it to help himself maneuver to the edge of the bed. In spite of how slow and careful he's being, every movement seems to cause him pain. He's taking sharp breaths while biting down any other sounds.

Ilya puts the glass on the nightstand and reaches out to help as Shane gets to his feet. But as soon as his fingers touch Shane's elbow the man yanks himself away and groans as twisting his upper body aggravates his injuries. He half doubles over, freezing as he breathes. Eyes screwed shut.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Ilya hasn't heard his own voice this panicked since he was twelve years old. He doesn't touch him again, no matter how badly he wants to.

Shane straightens up and shuffles to the bathroom, closing and *locking* the door behind him.

Ilya smooths a hand down his stomach, trying to soothe away the sudden onset of queasiness.

Shane doesn't even want me to touch him anymore. He grieves this like a death.

He sinks back down into the chair and waits.

He's had to wait for Shane to pee often enough to know he's taking uncharacteristically long now and he's aware Shane is avoiding him and possibly stalling, killing time until Pike returns. But Ilya doesn't push anything and he waits patiently. Using the time to sort through his thoughts.

He decides he's still going to say what he came here to say. He doesn't believe it will change much, but he believes Shane deserves to hear it, after all these years. And maybe also because he deserves to say it.

The door unlocks but doesn't open right away. Another clue Shane has been using the bathroom to hide.

Eventually, the door slowly opens and Shane steps out, gaze glued to the carpet. He doesn't come back to the bed, he lingers by the door, even though he looks dead on his feet. It's like he's trying to stay close to an escape route.

Ilya stands but doesn't approach him. Doesn't want to send him fleeing back into the bathroom. "I'm so sorry this happened to you. I make statement at the next pre-game conference. Tell fans I don't want this. Fights only belong on the ice." He takes a deep breath. "And about that... I also am sorry about what I did. The bodycheck." He swallows the lump in his throat. Him ramming Shane on the ice that night would have made the beating he suffered afterwards even worse. Maybe even hampered his ability to defend himself. He puts his hand on his stomach again. Keeps it there. He might be sick.

Shane listens and says nothing. He's starting to tremble, maybe from the exertion of holding his battered body upright.

"And I am sorry for not answering your call. That will never happen again. I will always answer when you call," he promises and he hopes that Shane believes it to be true. And there is another thing he needs him to believe. He steels himself. "But that is not what I came to say. I came to say," he halts when he sees Shane close his eyes in the same way one might close their eyes when they are expecting to get hit. "I came to say... I love you." It feels both right and wrong to say the words out loud. On one hand, it's a relief. And as soon as he speaks the words he knows just how true they are. But on the other hand, there's six feet of distance between them that feels as wide as a whole hockey rink and as cold too.

For the first time since he woke up, Shane looks at him. For a beat, his eyes are unreadable, but Ilya holds his gaze and allows himself to be scrutinized. He knows Shane isn't very good at judging facial expressions, but he hopes the other man sees nothing but vulnerable earnesty on his face.

And then... Shane breaks before his eyes.

A sob rips out of him and his face contorts in agony. His knees buckle under him but before he sinks down to the floor Ilya has crossed the distance between them and holds him up. He tries to touch him as little as possible, because Shane had shirked away from him before, but now Shane presses himself into Ilya's chest and loops his left arm around his shoulder to twist his fingers into the fabric of his shirt over his back. He tucks his nose under Ilya's jaw and tears wet his skin and the collar of his shirt as Shane wails uncontrollably. His entire body shakes. His chest jerks with each struggling breath.

Ilya wraps his arms around him, tight enough to make him feel secure and he knows it will aggravate his bruises but it seems to be what Shane needs. One arm is high enough that he can pet a hand through his hair.

He rocks him gently from side to side and lets him weep. "I am here. I got you," he whispers in his ear. "You cry. Is ok. Is ok." He battles to not let his own emotions show. That's not what Shane needs. Shane needs him to be strong.

Last night must have been terrible, for Shane to crack like this. They are used to getting beatings on the ice, but off the ice was different. There it is personal. Ilya has been bothered by his fair share of rowdy “fans” and some punches had been thrown, but never so bad it left him injured the way Shane is now.

Shane’s crying softens only because the last of his energy bleeds out of him. Ilya can tell he’s hanging all of his weight off Ilya’s shoulder as he clutches him, fully relying on him to not fall to the ground. The trust there is a precious treasure to Ilya and he knows Shane trusts him like this, right now, because he told him he loved him. Because he put that out there, made himself vulnerable first so now Shane can be vulnerable. Whether he feels the same way doesn’t matter in the moment. Ilya will never regret saying those words to him.

Once’s he’s quieted down to sniffles and whimpered breaths, Ilya turns them little by little, with small steps. The way teenagers slow dance at prom, at least as far as Ilya has seen in movies. He shuffles Shane back two steps to the foot of the bed and he carefully lowers him down. He would gladly hold him for hours, but Shane’s body was too battered to be hanging off Ilya’s shoulder for that long, even with his uninjured arm.

With Shane seated at the edge of the bed, Ilya kneels in front of him. He reaches up and brushes away his tears and Shane leans into the touch, pressing his cheek into Ilya’s palm, eyes closed but softly, not screwed shut like they were and he covers Ilya’s hand with his own, grounding him. Ilya’s heart is full of both fondness and concern. Maybe those two always go hand-in-hand.

He strokes his thumb back and forth on Shane’s cheek, touch impossibly light so he won’t hurt him, but he revels in it for as long as he is allowed.

Shane’s eyes flutter open and his eyebrows pinch together as he reaches for Ilya’s jaw. “What happened?” His voice catches Ilya off guard every time, it’s so gravelly and low volume.

Ilya musters up a grin. “Ah, Pike left a bruise, did he?”

“Hayden punched you?”

“Mm.”

“Why?”

“Because I deserved it,” he says and he means it. When Shane’s frown deepens Ilya takes his hand and kisses his bruised knuckles. It’s indulgent and selfish affection and he knows he should push his touches no further. But it’s hard when Shane looks like fragile, like pieces are breaking off of him and all Ilya wants to do is hold him, to hold him together. “Is no matter to me. Only you matter to me. Hm?”

Shane pulls his hand back into his lap and looks down at it.

Ilya puts his hands on the edge of the mattress on either side of the other captain. “Did you report to police?”

Shane miserably shakes his head.

Ilya purses his lips at the answer. It's not what he was hoping for. "Why not?"

He shrugs with his left shoulder.

"Shane, when fans become *animals* they need to be rounded up and put in cage."

"It's not that simple," he mutters.

"Yes, is simple," Ilya stresses. He shouldn't be arguing with Shane but the thought of these assholes getting away unpunished has him seeing red.

"It's not!" Shane snaps, voice cracking. "It's my fault!"

"No! Shane. Is not." Reactively, he reaches for his face – when he had been doing so well keeping his hands to himself, *fuck* – but Shane leans back, ever so slight, enough to let Ilya know the touch is unwanted, so he puts his hand back on the mattress.

"You don't even know what happened."

"Then tell me," he suggests calmly. "I will listen. And then I will tell you again: is not your fault."

Shane scoffs.

Ilya doesn't pressure him, he's comfortable enough on his knees on the carpeted floor, nothing he's not used to, that's for sure, so he waits patiently.

Shane takes a deep breath.

Ilya holds his.

"I was meeting up with someone," Shane starts and in his softest whisper yet, adds: "For... sex."

Ilya schools his face. Shane wasn't even looking at him, but in case he glanced up, he didn't want to see jealousy or any other ugly, selfish emotion.

"When I got to the place, I chickened out." He pinches the fabric of his sweats between his fingers and rolls it back and forth as he talks. The repetitive motion keeps him calm. "He made it seem like that was ok. No hard feelings. He bought me a drink."

Ilya feels like his stomach is starting to flip inside out.

"There was something in the drink."

There it goes. Inside out. Acid pooling in the bottom of his gut. Heart dropping down into it.

"By the time we left, his friend was waiting for us."

Ilya's body is trembling. So is Shane's.

Shane weeps again. His fingers twist into the fabric of his sweats, hand clenching into a fist. Under the bruises and broken skin his knuckles go white. "I think I fought," he whimpers while shaking his head at himself. He wails: "I think I fought but I don't remember!"

"You fought," Ilya assures him and wow his voice barely sounds any better than Shane's. "You fought hard. Your body proves it."

Shane nods miserably, he blinks his eyes open and through the tears he looks at his battered hands. "It wasn't enough."

"You gave it your all. That is always enough."

"It wasn't enough to stop them. They- They-" He looks at Ilya for the first time.

"I know. You don't have to say it. Is ok." Tears are pouring down Ilya's face.

Shane is hyperventilating now. His left hand comes up to his throat and scratches at tender skin there. "I have to," he stammers out. "I have to. I'm gonna choke on it otherwise. I have to!"

"Ok. Ok. You say it then. I am here."

Shane struggles for the word as much as he struggles for breath. After a few aborted attempts, he blurts it out in a raw cry: "They raped me!"

Ilya straightens his shoulders, clinging to his strength. "I know," and just as he promised, he says: "Is not your fault." One day Shane will believe him, he will make sure of it.

When Shane leans forward, Ilya rears himself up to meet him halfway. He wraps his arms around him again and with a hand at the back of his neck, he guides Shane's face into the crook of his shoulder. With the other hand he rubs his back, hoping the touch will soothe him. Shane is desperately sucking in shallow breaths and spilling quiet tears into Ilya's shirt.

Ilya doesn't know what to say, there is only one thing he can think of, so he says it over and over: "I love you."

Today, Shane might not believe him yet when he says it wasn't his fault, but he hopes he will believe that he loves him and that what happened last night doesn't change that.

"I love you, Shane. I love you so much. I'm so in love with you. I've only ever been in love with you."

Slowly, Shane's breathing normalizes and then all of a sudden he relaxes in Ilya's hold and he says against the tear-soaked skin of his neck: "I love you too."

Ilya smiles in spite of everything and says into Shane's hair: "Thank you." He doesn't deserve these words, not today at least, but that's just Shane. Shane is generous. And all Ilya can be is grateful and even more in love.

It's only a few moments later when there's a knock on the door and right after the door unlocks.

The two disentangle from each other and wipe at their own faces to dry the tears.

Pike walks in and, too his credit, makes absolutely no remark about what he sees. He's holding a big plate of food that he puts down on the bed next to Shane, while he talks about smuggling the food out of the buffet like it was a covert operation, as if any of the staff would have actually given him any grief about it.

The plate is stacked with a variety of fruits, a bowl of yoghurt, and, boldly, a *cinnamon roll*.

Sometimes it makes Ilya jealous, how close Pike and Shane are, but in the moment, it only endears him to see how deeply Pike knows Shane as well. The fruits and the yoghurt he got because Shane is most likely to eat those. But the cinnamon roll he got because Pike too knows that when Shane was a kid, it was his favorite treat and something that could bring him comfort now, from all the fond memories attached to the taste.

Shane glances down at the plate and mumbles that he's not hungry.

The other Canadian plops down on the bed, putting on a casual act for Shane's benefit. He leans his weight back on his hands and crosses his ankles. "Buddy, I already told you, I don't give a fuck. You're gonna eat." He pushes the plate one inch closer to Shane.

"You talk to your kids like that, Pike?"

Pike rolls his eyes at Rozanov.

"I'm not a kid," Shane mutters in protest. As if to prove his point, he reaches tentative fingers out.

Ilya expects him to pick up a piece of sliced banana, or a strawberry at best. But to his surprise and delight, he grabs the cinnamon roll. He tears off a small piece and munches on it. Then tears off another, bigger piece.

Ilya melts at the sight of him. He exchanges a look with Pike, who is equally fond.

Ilya is not as brave as Shane, but in that moment he dares to believe that Shane will be alright. And he and Pike will be there for him along the way.

+++

FOUR MONTHS LATER

+++

Hayden has the room to himself. Shane is on the list as his roommate, but whenever they're in Boston, the captain sleeps at Rozanov's. Nobody but Hayden knows. Being privy to that secret makes him miss rooming with his best friend a little less.

Having phone sex with his wife also makes him miss having a roommate a little less.

When he walks out of the bathroom, freshly showered and ready for bed, there is a knock on his door.

One of the Metros guys, he's sure. The running joke is that Hayden has become a bit of a den mother. Everyone's go-to if they forgot their phone charger or toothpaste.

Or lube.

With a sigh he saunters over to the door and doesn't even bother to check through the peephole before opening. He blinks in surprise at Rozanov, who stands in the hallway alone, no Shane in tow.

A panic claws at Hayden's throat and his voice is strained as he asks: "Is everything alright with Shane?" *He's been doing better. He's recovering. Therapy is helping.* It's a mantra he says to himself every time he worries for his friend.

But even though they're not sharing a room tonight, they still bunk together often enough while on the road for Hayden to know Shane still has nightmares that have him waking up in a cold sweat.

Once, Shane has asked to see the pictures Hayden took of him that night. Shane doesn't want them on his own phone, so Hayden keeps them, safeguards them, and has them ready when Shane needs to remind himself how he broke his own body trying to protect himself.

Sometimes when the captain gets bodychecked on the ice he needs to sit out the rest of the game to quietly deal with a panic attack.

Hayden pays close attention to his friend and he didn't notice anything off today during the game but he knows Shane hates playing here. Knows his skin crawls at the idea that *they* might be in the crowd.

Rozanov reassures him Shane is fine. "Is home."

Boston won't be Rozanov's home for much longer. He's a free agent next season and he's been planning a transfer to Ottawa. To be closer to Shane throughout the year and, Hayden suspects, because neither of them feel particularly at ease, or "at home" in Boston, with the knowledge that those monsters are here somewhere.

"Then why-" He doesn't get to finish the question. He recoils when Rozanov shoves his phone in his face.

"I need your help."

That's new. Hayden blinks at the screen. It's a picture of a half naked man in a gym, flexing in front of the mirror. His head is out of frame. *Wait, that's my gym,* he clocks and then: "What the fuck, that's *me!*" And finally: "Why the fucking fuck do I have a Grindr profile, Rozanov?"

The Russian lets out an exaggerated sigh and lowers the phone to glower at him.

“Where did you even get that pic of me?”

“From your Insta. You post too much. Very vain.” He turns the phone briefly to glance at the image and remarks off-handedly: “You need do more spider curls.”

“Oh fuck off.”

“And from other pictures, please, no skipping leg day. You are hockey player. Is embarrassing.”

Hayden groans and throws his gaze up at the ceiling. “What did you need my help with, Rozanov?” He demands.

“Ah. See.” He angles the screen to Hayden again.

Hayden glares at the picture of himself. On Grindr. “What if someone recognizes me?”

The Russian scoffs. “*Please*. Who recognizes 15th best player of Montreal?”

Hayden wants to retort but admittedly... he never gets recognized. Not even when he’s wearing his fucking Metros cap and hoodie. His gaze droops to the text below his image.

Twink with a size kink, he reads. *Looking for threesome*. He curses at Rozanov in French just because he knows how much the Boston captain hates that.

“Get your head in game, Pike,” Rozanov barks, very captain-like.

And even though Rozanov isn’t *his* captain, Hayden snaps his mouth shut.

“I found him,” Rozanov declares with a dangerously low tone.

Instantly, Hayden knows who he means. He wonders how long Rozanov has been tending to this trap on Grindr to finally ensnare him.

“Check DM’s.”

He takes the phone from Rozanov and goes to the private messaging tab, ignoring Rozanov’s jab about how *he sure was quick to find DM’s on Grindr*. He doesn’t feel like quipping back as he reads the text exchange between “himself” and... *Thorne*. He can only imagine what Rozanov had been feeling, texting back and forth with this pathetic excuse of a man, setting up a hook-up between him, Thorne, and Thorne’s “big friend”.

Ah, the size kink thing in the profile was bait to get Thorne to involve the other beast.

The agreed upon meeting place: the alley behind the bar.

Memories make him dizzy and sick and he barely resists the urge to put a hand on the wall to steady himself.

Rozanov is asking him to come meet these monsters.

“Wait... are you planning to *kill them*? I- I have a family, man. I can’t-”

“Ugh. Not kill.” Rozanov makes a dismissive gesture with his giant hand. “I want to. But no. Is not ok with Shane.”

He says that like it’s a conversation the two have actually had.

“We beat them up,” he declares with determination. “Bad. Worse even then they beat up Shane. We bring our sticks. We dislocate both shoulders. Break both cheekbones. You do small guy. I do big guy. And when done, we do bartender too.”

Hayden feels something primal swirling in his chest. Jackie would be disappointed, but yes, he wants this. “They’ll recognize you,” he warns.

“Yes. But they can’t do nothing. Can’t call police. They know they rat themselves out too if they do.” He pockets his phone and locks gazes with Hayden. “So. You help?”

A smirk spreads across Hayden’s lips. “I help.”

Chapter End Notes

You made it to the end! Thank you! Group therapy in the comments? Anyone?

I intended to leave it here but I might write a second chapter about Shane's recovery to help myself feel better, idk

(update: am writing a second chapter indeed)

(update 2: also a third chapter. oops.)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said I was writing one more chapter? Um, it's two. Oops? I tried to finish everything in one big second chapter, but I'm still working on the final scenes, so the story will be a three-parter.

If you're here, you made it through the first chapter, so you know it's rough on our boys.

Some chapter specific warnings:

- Physical violence (Ilya and Hayden get revenge)
- Some more snippets from the rape
- PTSD and panic attack
- Mentions of suicide (Ilya's mother)
- Reminder that this story diverged from canon after ep 4

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

When Ilya walks up to the front door, he sees the lights are on in the house, so he doesn't sneak inside the way he had planned.

As soon as the door falls shut behind him, Shane rounds the corner, coming out of the kitchen and walks towards him, barefoot on the marble tile. He's holding a bag of frozen peas.

Ilya waits with his head tilted. Let's Shane close the distance.

His boyfriend comes to stand in front of him and wordlessly holds out a hand, palm up. He quirks a black eyebrow at him.

There's no point trying to hide the truth. Ilya takes his hands out of his pockets and rests them on Shane's. His knuckles are bruised. The skin is split open. It's nothing. He'd experimentally flexed his fingers before driving himself home, dropping Hayden off at the hotel along the way. Nothing was broken.

Still, Shane's eyebrows pinch with concern as he looks down at the damage. Gingerly, he puts the frozen bag of peas on top and whispers an apology when Ilya hisses at how the cold stings on his battered hands.

"Are you ok?" Shane asks. He looks him over, searching for signs of other injuries.

"Am I in trouble?"

Shane sighs and answers earnestly: "No."

Ilya sucks in a relieved breath that his boyfriend is not upset with him. "Then I'm ok."

Shane cocks his head. "I meant if you're hurt."

Ilya shrugs. "Only hands. Oh and this." He slips his left hand out from under the bag of peas and he lifts up his shirt to show a bruise blooming on his ribcage.

"Jesus! Ilya! Are your ribs broken?"

He drops his shirt. "Is nothing. No worry." He reaches up his hand and brushes his fingers along Shane's cheek.

"Your hand is cold," he mutters while leaning into the touch.

"And who's fault is that, hm?"

"You *need* to ice your hands, we have a game tomorrow!"

"Ugh. Fine." He slips his hand back under the bag, into Shane's hold. "You're going to freeze your own fingers too," he points out.

"Let me take care of you," he pouts stubbornly.

They stand in silence for a few minutes. The bag of peas is losing that biting iciness.

"How's Hayden?" Shane eventually asks, while he lifts up the bag to examine Ilya's hands.

The Russian groans. "Pike blabbed, didn't he?"

"I texted *him*," Shane emphasizes in defense of his friend.

"Ah, and it bet it was real challenge, getting him to narc."

Shane glares at him. "You were really going to hide this from me?"

"No," Ilya swears and he inches closer. "But I would not have told you with text." His voice softens. He leans forward and touches their foreheads together.

"You don't need to walk on eggshells around me. I can handle it."

Ilya isn't entirely sure what eggshells have to do with anything, but he thinks he knows what Shane means. He's implying the same thing he's been saying a while now, that Ilya has been "*fretting*" over him too much. Ilya disagreed as soon as he learned what fretting means. He's *fretting* just the right amount. He repeats Shane's words back to him in a breathy whisper: "Let me take care of you."

Shane scoffs, but it's not sharp with frustration. It's gentle and bemused. "You always do." He angles his face to invite a kiss and Ilya touches his lips to Shane's sweetly.

He takes the bag of peas and unceremoniously drops it to the floor so he can pull his boyfriend into an embrace. Shane in turn loosely wraps his arms around Ilya's torso and it's obvious he's being mindful of his ribs. This won't do. Ilya growls playfully and gives Shane

a squeeze. “Hug me good,” he urges. Shane’s breathy chuckle sweeps over his neck. The Canadian tightens his hold on him and yes it does hurt his ribs, but only a little. It doesn’t matter to Ilya, the hug feels good in every other way.

“Are you sure you’re ok?” Shane mumbles into his skin.

It dawns on Ilya that he is not asking about his physical wellbeing. His heart swells and he hugs Shane tighter still for fear his ribcage might burst open otherwise. He delves his fingers into Shane’s silky hair, which he’s been growing out ever *since*. Ilya thinks maybe because it shows Shane the passage of time when he looks in the mirror. He rubs his scalp with his fingertips, drawing small sounds out of him. He smiles when Shane properly nuzzles into the crook of his neck and Ilya noses along the shell of Shane’s ear.

“... You’re avoiding the question,” Shane hums after a minute.

Ilya grins and Shane must be able to feel the curve of his lips against his ear. Rather than continue his distraction tactic, he pulls back just a little and cups Shane’s face in his hands. He touches the tips of their noses together. Shane still has his eyes closed, waiting for an answer. “I am ok,” Ilya assures him.

Shane’s eyes flutter open and he locks gazes with his boyfriend. “You’re lying,” he accuses but without malice, only concern.

“How would you know. Hm?” The Russian teases.

“I know you,” is his quietly confident response.

Ilya sighs contently. “Yes. Yes, you do.” With gentle pressure he tilts Shane’s head so he can kiss him. He keeps the kiss shallow and sweet. He licks Shane’s full bottom lips but does not lick into his mouth.

When they part, Shane points out: “You’ve been smoking.”

“Just one. Promise.”

Shane isn’t mad at him, because like he said: he knows Ilya and he knows Ilya only smokes when he needs it to cope with the worst of his emotions.

It’s a vulnerable thing to have someone *know* him like that and to be *seen* like that, but with Shane it feels safe. It feels like love.

Finally, Ilya admits: “I am... upset.” He scrunches up his nose. The word doesn’t do justice to the unease that sits in his gut and pushes all his organs into the wrong place.

He thought he’d feel better *after*. After getting the revenge he had been planning for months. Once he had gathered enough details from Shane, he had set the trap on Grindr and had been minding it with the patience of a hunter, waiting for his prey. He told Shane, only because he didn’t want Shane to ever catch him on Grindr and get the wrong idea. He seethed that he would kill those monsters if he found them and Shane didn’t respond until a couple days

later, when he told him to please not do that. Ilya is pretty sure Shane forgot all about it as weeks turned into months.

Shane has been focused on therapy and on hockey. Ilya has been focused on his hunt. He fooled himself into thinking that if he could just get some kind of justice for Shane, it would give him a sense of peace. That these monsters would stop haunting their dreams if he could reduce them back to men of flesh and blood – and draw blood from their flesh. That they would stop holding any power over Shane, if Ilya could exert his power over them.

But there was no peace or relief to be found in his head. He had given the monsters faces and every time he closed his eyes he saw them; saw their sick grins before he landed that first blow in the ambush. These were the faces Shane still sees in his nightmares. Getting revenge didn't change that. Didn't change any of it.

He has so much anger in his body and keeping it bottled up was exhausting. He has tried to take it out on the ice, landing himself in the penalty box more than ever before in his career but still that anger sits in a hollow inside of him. Tonight, he had unleashed it on those beasts, but rather than be left behind, the anger had crawled home with him.

He sucks in a shaky breath and casts a glance down at his boots in shame and notices there is blood on the toe of the right one.

Shane leans into him and lovingly brushes the curls out of Ilya's face.

Ilya shakes his head. "You should not comfort me."

"Why not?" Shane refuses to let go when Ilya makes a weak attempt to step away.

He grunts: "Is not about me."

"Mm. No, it's not," his boyfriend agrees with a soothing tone. "It's about us."

"They hurt *you*," Ilya argues, frustration sharpening his words.

Shane nods and he sucks on his bottom lip for a second. "But when I hurt, you hurt too, right?"

Ilya's face twists in pain. "Da," is all he manages to croak. He snuffles.

"So let us comfort *each other*." Shane brings his hands to Ilya's face and swipes away tears with his thumbs.

The Russian hadn't even realized he was crying. "I love you," he tries to say but no sound comes out of his throat, everything is too tight. Still though, Shane smiles, because he's heard the words often enough that he can read his lips.

And instead of saying it back, Shane mouths: *I love you too*.

Ilya kisses him again. Harder this time. More desperate. But he keeps it short, so Shane doesn't get the wrong idea. That he wants more. Tonight, Ilya just wants to hold Shane and

maybe cry some more. He ends with a kiss to the tip of Shane's nose, which draws a delightful, airy chuckle out of him.

Shane clears his throat before he asks: "Did they recognize you?"

"Yes."

Those plump lips press into a taut line. "What if they go to the police?" His voice trembles.

"They will not," Ilya asserts.

"But what if-"

He shakes his head. "They will not." He can't tell Shane yet why he's so sure. He rubs a thumb over those perfect lips, back and forth until Shane relaxes.

"You didn't kill them after all, did you?" The question is only half serious.

Ilya snorts. "As if you did not already ask Pike." He puts his hands on Shane's hips and looks into his eyes. "I did not. I wanted. I could. But you did not want. So I did not." It isn't quite that simple, but he figures there's no need for him to confess that Pike had to pull him off one of the beasts.

And even though Shane had undoubtedly already pried that answer out of Pike before Ilya even arrived home, he still lets out a small sigh of relief.

"Bed now. Sleep," Ilya commands. "We have big game tomorrow."

Shane carefully puts his hand on Ilya's flank, fingers splayed over the bruise that was hidden under his shirt. The question is evident in his eyes. *How can you play when your ribs are so bruised?*

"Is fine." He pecks another kiss to his mouth. "Just don't tell your defensemen."

Shane pouts. "I wouldn't."

"I know. Come. Bed." He takes his hand and starts to walk him down the hall to the bedroom, but Shane resists and bends down to pick up the bag of peas. The fondness Ilya feels for him is sometimes so strong he worries for his heart health. Ilya refuses to let go of Shane's hand so he follows him to the kitchen where he dumps the half defrosted bag in the bin and then together they walk to the bedroom, bumping shoulders.

They shower together and Shane *frets* some more about Ilya's ribs but every time he does the Russian distracts him with kisses to that one specific spot under the hinge of his jaw that has Shane melting and purring. And when he turns off the shower he shakes his curly hair out like a dog, earning him a laugh that rings off the tiled walls like the chime of a bell.

They crawl into bed naked, their hair still damp. Shane usually sleeps to the left of Ilya, but now he climbs over him, making a show of it, pausing as he straddles Ilya's hips. Then he drops down to Ilya's right side, tucking himself against him and resting his head on his chest.

He thumbs over the dark purple mark on Ilya's left side, the bruise is the size of a dinner plate.

Ilya can't see Shane's face. All he can see is his glossy black hair. But he can picture his concerned expression perfectly; he's seen it often enough. Sometimes he wonders who worries more about whom. He kisses the top of his head and reminds him once more: "Is fine. I've played with worse." He feels Shane press a kiss to his pec and then the other man gets settled.

Ilya can just about reach the switch to turn off the light and as soon as darkness engulfs the room, he sees *their faces*.

+++

ONE HOUR EARLIER

+++

Hayden is shaking as he stands by the fountain, even though it's a warm night for spring in Boston. He keeps his head on a swivel, studying every man who walks along the perimeter of the park to disappear into one of the bars, clubs, or restaurants.

It's busier than when he was here last, in winter. People are loitering outside the entrances of the establishments to have a smoke. Nobody pays him any attention though. People never do. Not unless he has *Shane Hollander* at his side. Hayden's anonymity serves him well. It hurts sometimes, when people don't recognize him, but that's just his ego flaring. He knows he's lucky that he can go anywhere he pleases, even in Montreal, without the teen girls and the middle aged men following his every move, asking for selfies and for him to sign whatever they happen to have on hand.

He doesn't feel particularly lucky in the moment though, being the lure, waiting to meet up with Thorne and Magnus.

No fucking way those are their real names, he thinks to himself, bristling. *It's probably Timmy and Mickey. Ted and Milton. Topher and Melvin*. He tries to think of more lame names starting with T and M but it's hard to think about anything other than the crazy situation he is in. Crazy and dangerous. Jackie would be so mad if she knew, that's possibly the most dangerous part of it all, how she would react. This might be the one thing he can't ever tell her. He's told her everything else. Even what happened to Shane, but with his permission. For him to be able to be Shane's rock, he needed a rock of his own, that was Jackie.

He straightens his shoulders when he catches sight of two men crossing the park towards him. One of them is huge, a brick house of a man, and Hayden is queasy seeing what Shane was up against that night. All of a sudden he wasn't so confident anymore that Rozanov armed with his hockey stick would be enough. They should have brought more back-up. They should have brought J.J. Fuck, they should have brought the whole team.

But of course they couldn't. Nobody but Hayden and Rozanov know.

Well, and Jackie... frankly, she could put up a fight. She's scrappy...

Against this dude though... does anybody stand a chance? He's close to 7 feet tall and he's lugging around a beer gut like it's nothing because he's built like an ox. Thick neck like a tree stump, amid bulky, rounded shoulders. His hands are the size of dinner plates, fingers as thick as sausages.

He swallows nervously when the two near. He wonders if he should abort the plan. They knew *Magnus* would be big, Shane told them as much. But none of Shane's half-remembered, harrowing tales could have prepared them for this beast.

Thorne is the one to speak, with a voice that sounds charming and disarming. "Hi, are you Wilbur?"

Hayden supposes he should be grateful Rozanov hadn't used his real name for the Grindr profile but he can't help but hate it and even finds himself correcting: "Please, call me Will." He keeps his hands firmly in his pockets though. He does not want to shake hands with these two. He doesn't want to touch them at all.

"Oh, much better," Thorne jokes.

"Nice to meet you, Will," says Magnus and then, *oh no*, he holds out a hand expectantly.

Hayden pales and breaks out in sweat. In a split second he decides he has no choice but to shake his hand. He doesn't want the two to grow suspicious or be offended and back out and get away. No matter how dangerous these two might be, he knows for sure Rozanov will kill him if he lets them slip away after all the time he put into luring them out. So he reaches out a sweaty hand and lets Magnus clamp his thick fingers around it. He's yanked forwards, into the beast's personal space; close enough that he can smell his cologne which is both much too strong and still not strong enough to cover the stink of his sweat.

It's a tight handshake and it lasts uncomfortably long. Magnus smirks at him all the while and Hayden gives a smile back even though he's about a second away from throwing up in his mouth.

While still not letting go of him, Magnus rumbles, entirely too self-pleased: "I hear you were looking for a guy like me."

There's a flash of panic, it burns brightly but briefly. He realizes Magnus is talking about the "size kink" part in his profile that Rozanov played up even more in DM's. "Hmhm," he manages.

"Happy to be of service."

Finally Hayden's hand is let go of. He tucks it back into his pocket.

"Shall we?" Thorne nods to the North, to the alley.

"Yep," is Hayden's clipped response.

As the three walk, Magnus claps a hand on Hayden's shoulder and then slides his fingers to the back of his neck where he gives a squeeze and Hayden nearly trips over his own feet remembering the red handprints on Shane's throat. Handprints left behind by that same giant hand that is touching him right now.

He closes his eyes for a second. He needs to remember to hug Shane again the next time he sees him.

Magnus chuckles. "Don't be nervous. Me and Thorne are a good team. You're in good hands. We'll all have a good time."

"Yeah." He hesitates by the alley but only because he wants the other two to walk ahead. He's committed now.

"You good?"

"Lead the way," he says and is relieved when the two do just that. He trails after them closely as they walk down the narrow alley to the back.

Just like when he was here last, the music from the club to the left is booming. This time, it will drown out Thorne's and Magnus' screams.

Hayden has his gaze glued to Thorne because he was his responsibility. Rozanov would take Magnus down with his stick. He watches the smaller man – exactly his size, actually – fish his phone out of his pocket, the way you do when you know you're about to not pay attention to it for a while. It means he has his head down and is distracted as they round the corner to the secluded area at the back.

"What the- AAHHH!" The scream Magnus lets out when Rozanov hits him across both knees with his stick doesn't even sound human. And that makes sense because the hit might have broken two kneecaps at once with an audible, sickening crack and the big man collapses to the ground under his own weight.

Hayden knocks the phone out of Thorne's hand and follows up with a well-placed punch to his nose that sends him staggering back, further into the dead end. Blood runs from his nose like a faucet. Hayden has some on his knuckles and at the sight of it he goes bloodthirsty.

The men are now caught in their own trap, with nowhere to escape. Their screams, just like Shane's, won't be heard.

Rozanov stands over Magnus, who lies prone on the ground. Magnus can do nothing but grunt in pain and hold up his big hands in anticipation of Rozanov using that stick on him again.

The Russian looks away from the man only long enough to call Pike's name and tosses Pike his own stick.

"Please, man..." Thorne begs. He tears his gaze away from Hayden, who stands closest to him, to look at the man standing over his friend and in any other circumstance it would be

comical the way his mouth and eyes open wide. “*Ilya Rozanov?* What the fuck?”

Hayden adjusts the hold on his stick and he barks at Thorne with a voice that scares himself. “Don’t look at him, look at me! *Look at me!*” He emphasizes each word by prodding Thorne in the chest with the end of his stick.

Thorne tries to grab it but Hayden easily twists it out of his grip.

“My name is Hayden Pike,” he declares, because he knows Thorne won’t recognize him but he wants the piece of scum to know exactly who he is. “I’m the left wing for the Montreal Metros. And *Shane fucking Hollander* is my best friend.”

“Look man, he *wanted* to be-”

Hayden knocks the filthy lie out of his mouth with his stick. Blood sprays out along with it, getting on his stick. A tooth falls to the ground.

Thorne cups a hand over his mouth but can’t stop the blood flowing down his chin. He is wide-eyed when he looks at Hayden next and Hayden takes pleasure in seeing the fear there.

The guy tries to make a run for it, going around Hayden in an attempt to escape down the alley, but Hayden swipes his stick low and Thorne catches his foot on it. He’s sent flying to the ground and lands with a thud and a groan.

Thorne’s words set Rozanov off too. He’s whipping Magnus with his stick so hard it makes sharp, swooshing sounds as it cuts through the air, followed by a pained cry every time.

The Canadian left wing tries to tune that out and focus on his own prey. His blood boils just below the surface of his skin. He bends down and shouts at him: “He wanted it?! He *wanted* it?! He broke his fucking hand trying to fight you two off!” Without thinking Hayden flips his stick around and slams the blunt end of his stick down onto Thorne’s hand which lay splayed on the ground. The shriek the man lets out is dangerously satisfying.

He prods the stick between Thorne’s legs. “I should shove this so far up your ass it hits the back of your throat and you choke on it! And then fucking tell everyone you *wanted* it,” he spits. But instead he yanks it back and he kicks him against his ribs and Thorne howls like the animal he is.

Hayden looks over at the clatter of a stick hitting the ground and he sees Rozanov has tossed it aside and climbs on top of Magnus. The man is somehow still clinging to consciousness and with the Raiders captain within reach, he punches his ribcage in the same place every time. Rozanov lets him. He straddles his big body and wraps his hands around his thick neck.

Magnus’ face soon goes red, then purple. His punches grow weaker and weaker until eventually his big arms flop down to his sides.

Jesus, Rozanov is gonna kill him.

Thorne isn’t getting up any time soon, so Hayden rushes over to the other player. He hooks his arms under his armpits and tries to pry him off but Rozanov won’t budge. He doesn’t

even try to shove Hayden off, he just keeps his vice-like grip on Magnus' throat.

"Don't!" Hayden shouts as he locks an arm around Rozanov's chest and pulls harder. When he realizes he stands no chance overpowering the captain with brute force, he shouts at him: "Shane doesn't want you to!"

And like a switch has been flipped, Rozanov lets go and it sends both hockey players tumbling backwards. Hayden still loosely has his arms around the Russian captain, who literally falls on top of him, catching his breath.

In that moment, Thorne sees his chance and scrambles to his feet. He stumbles as he tries to escape, but still has to run past them. He won't go far.

Rozanov effortlessly gets up from the ground, swiping Hayden's stick as he goes. With two strides he blocks the man's escape route and hooks the blade of the stick behind his ankle to drop him to the ground again. Like an animal playing with its food, he lets Thorne catch his breath and get back up. When he does, instead of punch him, he slaps him and Hayden knows he did that to add insult to injury. The slap is so loud it makes Hayden flinch. It flings Thorne's head sideways and his entire body spins around from the force of the slap as he drops back to the ground again.

Hayden kneels by Magnus and presses a finger to his neck. There's a pulse. He's not exactly relieved, he'd prefer to see both men dead too, but he knows that crosses a line. He watches Rozanov stand over Thorne. The man gets up on his hands and knees and tries to crawl away and Rozanov stalks after him. A shiver goes through Hayden's body. He thought he had seen the scariest Rozanov could be when he was on the ice, but this was terrifying beyond comparison. The way he alternates between calm and rage, like Jeckyll and Hyde, is nerve wrecking.

With a nudge to his side, Thorne rolls over onto his back and stares up at Rozanov.

"Say it again," The Russian says, his voice steady and calm.

Thorne is just whimpering.

Rozanov moves to stand over him, one foot on either side of him. "Say it again," he seethes. He tosses the stick, preferring to use his bare hands.

"I don't know what-"

Rozanov spits: "That he *wanted* it! Say. It. Again." His hands are balled into fists at his sides. "Lie to my face," he commands. "I need you to piss me off more so I can give you the beating you deserve."

Hayden looks away, because it's hard to see Rozanov like this. He catches a glimpse at Thorne's phone, lying discarded on the ground, screen facing up and lit. He gets up to grab it. It's still unlocked. He has a suspicion that he hopes to prove wrong.

Shane once told Hayden that he thinks he remembers *a flash*, but he wasn't sure. It's one of many details that have slipped into crevices of his mind where he can't reach them, they just sit there and irritate.

His fingers are shaking as he opens the gallery app. He scrolls through the camera roll. Thorne takes a lot of pictures, which does not bode well.

He keeps scrolling, going back through the months.

In the meantime Thorne is still refusing to give Rozanov what he wants, acutely aware that it won't end well for him.

Hayden slows as he nears the right date. A picture makes him stop.

It makes his heart stop.

"Rozanov..." he utters as he stands frozen, his fear confirmed not dispelled.

He shouldn't show this to Rozanov, not now. It will set him off in the worst way possible but... that's exactly what Hayden wants right now. He wants to unleash Rozanov onto this guy like a rabid guard dog.

"Rozanov!"

"What?" The man snaps, whipping his head around to glare at Hayden for interrupting.

With clenched jaw Hayden walks over to him, holding the phone to his chest.

Thorne knows what's happening. He puts a hand on Rozanov's calf and pleads and apologizes. Rozanov has already scared him so much he's weeping, his face wet with tears and snot.

Rozanov's gaze drops down to the phone and the way he rolls his shoulders in preparation suggests it has clicked for him too. He holds his hand out. "Give."

Hayden puts the phone into his palm, image open, and says: "There's a video too, if you scroll to the right."

Rozanov takes a second to steel himself before he looks down. His face is stone cold.

The picture is a bit blurry but brightly lit by the flash of camera. Thorne has his tongue out like a dog, licking Shane's cheek, drooling on him. His eyes are closed in satisfaction. Shane's eyes are open but glazed over and unfocused. His expression is blank. His other cheek is pressed against the ground. He looks... dead.

After the picture there is a 30-second video that shows Magnus on top of Shane. His big paw holds a fistful of Shane's black, matted hair to lift his face up from the ground and show him to the camera. Shane's eyes are closed here, but his mouth open, lips spit-slick. His body jolts with each sickening, powerful thrust of Magnus' hips.

Both Hayden and Rozanov know that Shane doesn't remember any of this, he wasn't conscious for this part of it. But the video proves in excruciating detail that Magnus took his turn too.

Hayden stands by as Rozanov watches the video in full. Hayden can't see the screen and doesn't want to. He never wants to see that video again but he is regretfully aware that it will replay in many nightmares to come.

The volume has been turned up though and he can hear the slap of skin against skin, the deep grunts Magnus lets out, and Thorne laughing and egging his friend on all the while: "*You're fucking Shane Hollander right now.*"

The captain hands the phone to Hayden and instructs: "Text these to yourself."

As soon as the phone is in Hayden's hands, Rozanov drops himself down on top of Thorne and like a machine he begins to punch him in the face. Over and over and over. The power of each punch consistent and devastating.

Hayden focuses on the task given to him and then pockets the phone and... *watches*. A sick part of him considers filming it.

He hopes he doesn't have to stop Rozanov from killing him because he doesn't know if he can. He doesn't know if he *wants to*.

Thorne's head lolls to the side and Rozanov stops.

Hayden observes, with his heart hammering in his chest, as Rozanov gets up, smooths a hand through his curly hair and then, with a cold and detached demeanor, he rolls Thorne onto his back and methodically dislocates both his shoulders, just as he said he would when he came to pick Hayden up at the hotel earlier that night.

Thorne is lucky to be unconscious at this point.

He does the same to Magnus next. His every movement radiates a calm determination. He does it almost casually, with such impeccable technique it has Hayden briefly wondering about just how rough his childhood in Russia was.

Magnus wakes up with a strangled cry when the first shoulder pops out, but by the second he's blacked out again from the pain. He too is lucky then.

They were both luckier than Shane.

The Russian straightens up and Hayden flinches when he makes eye contact with him. His eyes are... dead. Like Shane's, in the picture. "Bartender now," Rozanov says and he strides off. He tries the back door but it doesn't open from the outside, so he starts down the alley and Hayden rushes after him, picking up their discarded sticks.

It's by pure coincidence that they find the bar empty except for the barkeep. They know it's the same bartender as that night because Shane remembers him well, much better than most of the horror that followed.

It's pathetic the way the man's face lights up when he recognizes *Ilya Rozanov* strutting into his shitty bar. He doesn't think to be alarmed until it is too late. By that time Rozanov is rounding the bar and he has no escape.

Hayden is rooted in place and watches as Rozanov smacks him around a little bit, frankly going easy on him in comparison to what he did to the guys outside. The Canadian has the ridiculous thought if maybe he should show him the picture and video again, to activate his rage.

But while Rozanov has the man pinned to the bar, he grabs a bottle of Corona, shakes it hard, pops off the cap on the edge of the bar and while fizz is spouting out of the opening like a geyser, he puts it to the bartender's nose and *holy shit that's some sort of Russian street mob torture technique or something*. The guy spasms like he's being electrocuted.

When the fizzing stops, the bartender goes limp and Rozanov has to hold him upright by his collar. Rozanov says something to him that Hayden can't hear and then knees him in the groin and let's go. The man drops to the floor behind the bar.

As Rozanov walks past Hayden, out the door, he asks the Russian what he told him and Rozanov says he warned him that they have proof of everything now.

They did. They had the pictures that identified both Thorne and Magnus. They had Thorne's phone with all his contacts and personal information. The hospital had a record of Shane's injuries from that night and the results of the blood tests that proved he'd been roofied.

Hayden scurries after Rozanov and wonders: "Do you think Shane will-"

"No," Rozanov says grimly. "He will not report. But neither will they."

Hayden nods and picks up the pace to keep up with the other man.

Ten minutes later they're sitting in Rozanov's bright orange sports car in the parking garage down the block. Rozanov has yet to start the car, he's just staring ahead at the concrete wall before them.

They sit in silence as they process what just happened. What they did.

At some point, they hear the sirens of an ambulance in the distance. Neither of them responds.

A while later, Hayden's bottom lip begins to tremble, even more so than the rest of his body. The adrenaline is leaving his system and all the emotions in its wake are overwhelming.

"Give me phone," Rozanov says, holding out his hand.

Hayden hands it over. The screen has gone black and now they won't be able to open it without the code, but still they have it for leverage. Along with the graphic evidence Hayden texted to himself. Without needing to be asked, he sends them to Rozanov as well. He has him in his list of contacts as "Asshole". Because he *is* an asshole. To Hayden at least. But not

to Shane. Hayden sees how loving he is with him, so because of that, Hayden suffers his presence. They'd exchanged numbers a while ago in case of a Shane-related emergency.

He still gets chills when he remembers one January night when Rozanov called him in a panic...

Rozanov pockets the phone and doesn't pull out his own when it beeps to alert him of the messages from Hayden. He lets out a grunt and gestures at the glove compartment.

"What, you have a gun in there? You gonna whack the one witness?" Hayden jokes, because it's what he does. However, his voice sounds flat. Rozanov is unamused so Hayden leans forward and pops open the compartment. The only things in there are a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He passes them along to the other man and realizes Rozanov must notice his hands are trembling because it's when he notices the Russian's hands are shaking too.

Still, of the two of them, Hayden is the only one self-conscious enough to offer an embarrassed apology.

Rozanov puts the cigarette between his lips and needs a few attempts to light it. His knuckles are almost black from the bruising and the blood. After the first drag, he says: "Is ok. Is adrenaline."

"Yeah," Hayden croaks. He looks at his own hands, which aren't in such bad shape. He'd mostly used his stick but he understood why Rozanov needed the satisfaction of using his bare fists. "I thought you quit smoking. Shane doesn't like it when you smoke," he rambles.

"Shane has forgiven me for worse," Rozanov says. The tip of the cigarette burns brighter as he hollows his cheeks on the inhale. He starts the engine of the car but only to roll down the window so he can tap the ashes off the end of the cigarette.

After a beat Hayden dares to ask: "Are you going to tell him?"

"Mm? About cigarette?"

"No..." He looks down at his laps where he curls his hands into fists. "About the-" *the picture, the video*. "About-" *it having been both of them*. He hears the burn of the cigarette in the silence between them.

Ilya releases the smoke in a shaky breath but he maintains a monotone voice. "Yes. He want to know."

He nods curtly. He knows it's a question that has been plaguing Shane; whether it had just been Thorne or both of them. The Montreal captain knows he blacked out before Thorne... *finished* and the next thing he knew he was waking up abandoned. He's admitted to Hayden that he feels stuck in the gap in between, that he can't climb out of it. But Hayden can't help but tentatively suggest: "Would that really be good for him though? To know?" Hayden worries that the only reason Shane is so desperate to know, is because he hopes the answer will be that it was just Thorne. That Magnus was too put off by the bitter cold of the night to

take his turn. But now they know that's not how it happened. He glances sideways, noting Rozanov has been avoiding eye contact all the while.

The other man takes a long drag. His voice is pinched now when he says: "He want to know. Is his choice. I tell him."

Hayden looks away, conflicted. His emotions are a mess right now. He clings to a selfish relief that he won't be the one who has to tell Shane.

Another drag from the cigarette and then: "But not yet. Not tonight. We have game tomorrow. Is important."

Hayden pointedly looks at Rozanov's battered hands. They'll be stiff and sore tomorrow. And he has to be feeling his ribs too, trading Magnus some punches for the satisfaction of choking him out the way he had Shane. There's no way the Russian captain could be playing at the top of his game tomorrow. So was the game really all that important?

No, not to Rozanov. He meant it was *important to Shane*. And that was an understatement.

After recovering enough from his physical injuries to return to the ice, Shane had thrown himself into the game. Nobody knows what really happened. The public story is that Rozanov hitting him on the ice that night did more damage than Shane initially felt. It must have been hard for Rozanov to carry that blame, but he took all the hate without ever snapping back at fans and reporters. Probably feeling like he deserved it.

Six weeks of physical therapy kept Shane out of the game, during which time the Metros barely clung to their position in the play-offs. Since Shane's return, he's been *dominating*. Everybody is talking about it. His play had been lackluster before his injury but now that he is back, he is at the top of his game. Faster than ever. Sharper than ever. Smarter than ever. He is always two steps ahead. Hayden and everyone else struggle to keep up. He knows some of the guys aren't happy with Shane's new play style; being more greedy with the puck, they feel he's stealing the spotlight. But as long as he keeps stealing pucks from the opposing teams and scoring goal after goal, nobody openly complains. Least of all the coach. Nor the fans.

Shane's only weakness is... getting hit. If he gets hit hard on the ice, it triggers a panic attack that he has to hide from the camera's and the crowd. The excuse is that Rozanov's hit had herniated a disk and even now, months later, it acts up. He has to sit out the rest of the period, sometimes even the rest of the game.

Opposing teams were quick to catch on and have become hyper aggressive in targeting the Montreal captain. It scares the shit out of Hayden the way they go after him in careless attempts to bench the star player. The Montreal defensemen and even Hayden himself have taken some brutal hits to protect their captain.

Local commentators in rival cities note wryly that "Hollander plays like he had something to prove" and they mean to compensate for the period before. But of course Hayden knows the truth. Shane needs to prove his power, after having it so brutally taken away for a night. He needs to prove it to himself most of all but also, possibly, to two particular Boston fans.

Yes, the game is *very important* to Shane.

Shane wants that cup; he wants it more than he ever has.

Hayden feels the pressure to screw his own head back on straight so he doesn't let Shane down tomorrow.

When he looks over to Rozanov next, he sees the man is crying and doing his best to stay silent. His hands shake so much that the grey smoke going up from the cigarette makes a wavy plume.

Immediately, the tears he'd been fighting himself spring into his eyes. He doesn't think twice – probably should have – and reaches out. Him and Rozanov aren't friends, *fuck no*, but they both love Shane and that, in a way, makes them brothers. He puts a hand on Rozanov's shoulder, feeling the other man tense, perhaps resist the urge to shirk away from the touch or punch him. Hayden isn't even sure if the touch is meant to comfort Rozanov, or himself.

Rozanov moves and Hayden expects his hand to get shoved away and for the Russian to swallow down his emotions so he can make fun of him. Hayden is about to pre-emptively retract his hand and beat Rozanov to it with a self-deprecating remark, but the Russian surprises him by putting that big hand on his leg, squeezing his knee.

They both stare ahead and don't speak, only anchored together with their touch to their shoulder and knee, so they don't drift away as each rides out the storm in their own head.

Rozanov has his other arm draped out the window, letting the cigarette slowly burn up without even thinking to take another drag.

The moment Hayden feels the hand slip away from his knee, he pulls his own hand back and wipes at his face. His eyes are puffy and red, nothing he can do about that, but he can dry his cheeks at least.

Without a word Rozanov backs the car out of the parking spot.

Ten minutes later, Hayden is in his hotel room again and he has no idea how to get himself together before the game tomorrow.

+++

THE NEXT DAY

+++

Shane takes a seat next to Hayden in the locker room and as he toes off his sneakers he leans over and bumps his shoulder into his friend's. Hayden looks terrible. Ashen, with bags under his eyes. He slept about as well as Ilya and Shane then. It was going to be a rough game. There was a lot at stake for both teams.

He glances around, makes sure all the other teammates are caught up in their routine as they get dressed. He turns to the side and says: "Thank you for not letting him go alone."

“Heh.” Hayden self-consciously scratches at the back of his head. “You know me and him are besties. Attached at the hip.”

Part of Shane wishes that were true, it would be nice. Mostly because Ilya could use a good friend like Hayden too. While Ilya has professionally patched things over with Marleau, their friendship was never the same after Ilya lost his cool with him.

With only about an hour left until the puck drops, Shane should be focusing on the game ahead, but all he wants to do is grab Hayden by the arm, pull him into a private corner, and interrogate him about last night. His boyfriend hadn’t volunteered any information.

Ilya had mentioned months ago that he was trying to find Thorne and his friend via Grindr.

It had angered Shane at first. “And then what?”

Ilya vowed: “I beat them.”

Shane recoiled. “You think that’s *easy*?” His chest constricted. Was Ilya planning to take them both on by himself? Did Ilya think the same thing Shane had been thinking for weeks now? “You think *I* should have been able to beat them?”

“No, Shane. No. I would not be alone. I cannot beat them alone.”

Shane pursed his lips in an attempt to stop his bottom lip from quivering. “You really think so?”

“Shane,” Ilya scooted closer. His hands hovered but he did not touch. He was careful with that lately because neither of them fully understood or could predict when a touch would be welcome, or would set Shane off. It was a hard process of trial and error. “Shane, if you can not beat them alone, I can not beat them alone.” He held his gaze the entire while.

It was still a hard thing to believe, but Shane nodded once.

“I would bring someone,” his boyfriend explained.

“Who?”

After a beat, Ilya said: “Hayden.”

“Hayden? *You* would bring Hayden?” The two still fought like cats and dogs whenever they were in the same room together, so Ilya’s suggestion was so ridiculous it lightened Shane’s mood.

In response, Ilya smiled. “Yes. Hayden. And we bring hockey stick. Even though Hayden is no good with stick.”

That had made Shane laugh. Hayden was an expert stick handler and even Ilya had to recognize that.

The tone shifted again when Ilya blurted: “I want to kill them.”

Shane didn't say anything. He pulled Ilya into a hug and the man hugged him back gratefully.

A few days later, after talking through the *purely hypothetical situation* with his therapist, Shane told Ilya that if he found them, he should not kill them. He didn't want that.

After that, they never spoke of it again. Shane never thought anything would come of Ilya's endeavor. He had no mental energy to spend on it. He poured his everything into the team, into his game. Whatever he had left, his therapist monopolized. So, frankly, he had forgotten what Ilya was up to.

But when he woke from a nap on the couch late last evening to find a note stuck to his protein shake saying "back soon, don't worry", *worry* is exactly what he did. He couldn't explain why, but it clicked instantly: *he's found them*.

He had rushed to the bedroom where his phone was on the charger on the table at *his side* of Ilya's bed. He had every intention to call and ask him to just come home. But when he tried to think of what to say and how to explain that he didn't want Ilya to go through with it, he realized he wasn't sure what he wanted. Maybe he *did* want Ilya to enact revenge on his behalf? He stood frozen with indecision until, eventually, he dropped the phone onto the bed and walked back to the couch where he sat and waited for Ilya to come home. At one point he went to get his phone after all but only to text Hayden.

Did he come get you?

The message was left on delivered for a long time, so yes, that meant Ilya had come to get Hayden.

That had been a relief. Not just because that meant he had to worry less for Ilya's safety, knowing he had back-up. But also because it proved Ilya meant what he had said before. That he didn't believe he could fight both men on his own. So maybe... maybe that meant there really was no way Shane could have fought them on his own.

He's pulled out of his thoughts when the PR manager of the team pokes his head into the locker room and asks him to come talk to some news outlets.

"Yep." He trails after the man into the hallway where a small clutch of journalists is waiting.

It's the same as always. The same questions. The same answers. Until...

"Shane, how does it feel to be playing in Boston again after what happened here?"

The floor opens up beneath his feet.

What happened here...

In his silence, the camera's start to flash and he flinches.

He clamps his jaw shut. His mouth goes so dry he can't swallow. "Sorry?" Is all he manages to croak.

“Last time you were here, Rozanov dealt you what could have been a career-ending injury and you had to sit out six weeks’ worth of games, nearly costing the Metros the whole season,” the reporter specifies, “You’ve been making a historic comeback, but does it get into your head, facing off against Rozanov again on Boston ice?”

He nods along to the question, schooling his expression. The tension slowly seeps out of his body but it leaves behind a tacky residue in his mind that every thought sticks to and gets stained by.

The Metros and the Raiders have played against each other once before, after that night, but that game was in Montreal. This is the first time they are battling each other in Boston again. It’s not the first time Shane has been back in Boston though, but nobody knows about that.

He takes a second longer to compose himself. He knows they’re just fishing for a soundbite to fuel this rivalry they made up between them, which has been rather tepid and played-out for years, but now they are bloodthirsty again to amp it up as much as possible. The Montreal media had their shot milking the drama with their first rematch and now the Boston outlets want their turn. But it’s been tough watching Ilya deal with the unbridled resentment from the media, since they played up the injuries he caused Shane that game to hide what happened afterwards. The press can’t leave it alone.

“We both play passionately for our teams,” he starts diplomatically. “There are no hard feelings there. Every time any of us steps out onto the ice we risk a career-ending injury, but we take that risk for the career-making wins. That’s what the Metros came to do. That’s what the Raiders came to do. Whoever wins, it’s always a team effort. In my absence the Metros got through the games at the end of last year and that’s because with or without me they’re a great team. I’ve been playing hard to make up for lost time and make the team even better.”

“No hard feelings towards Rozanov?” The reporter double checks, not hiding his disappointment that he’s not getting the kind of snarky clip that would do well on social media.

Shane shakes his head and confirms: “No hard feelings.”

“That’s very Canadian of you.”

He rewards him with a forced chuckle.

“How is your back?”

“The back is good. I’m looking forward to lifting that cup at the end of the season and we’ll circle back to that ‘historic comeback’ comment.”

The journalists laugh. As awkward as Shane is in any other social situation, he never had any trouble having reporters eat out of his hand. His mother had trained him well.

“I should head back guys. Thanks.”

They shout more questions after him as he walks off.

When he walks back into the locker room he realizes he has his fists clenched so he shakes them out and regrets how commentators will definitely zero in on that when his interview is broadcast. They'll spin it to mean that he's secretly still angry with Rozanov and will want to take his revenge on the ice tonight, *so stay tuned folks, you don't want to miss this epic clash*.

He hates this part of it. The public part. His mom helped him navigate it well enough to at least serve him financially, but he hates how everything he says and does is overanalyzed. He's ok with people scrutinizing and pulling apart his plays, nitpicking every stroke of his stick, but it's different when it's interviews and brand deals and fan interactions. He hasn't been doing a lot of those lately, to the chagrin and concern of his mother. He's just too afraid everyone will see right through his skin and his practiced smile and see the marks left on him that night. See his new *etches*. See how scratched-up and damaged he is now.

Especially his sexually charged brand deals – which was most of them – have Shane cringing now. He's glad his contract with that underwear brand has ended and there aren't life-sized pictures of him in his briefs in every airport in Canada anymore.

He doesn't want his body to be seen like that anymore. He was never particularly comfortable in his own skin, not pleased with his physique beyond what it could achieve on skates, but he was ok with other people getting enjoyment out of it.

Not anymore.

The thought of someone opening a magazine and not looking at the can of orange soda he's holding but his chest through his wet, white T. shirt makes his skin crawl.

Most of all, he's afraid *they* will see it. That *they're* watching his conferences and commercials and snickering to themselves.

His therapist says it's the loss of control and self-agency and how consent expires when the circumstances change. He agreed to those photoshoots when he was of a different mindset, when he was still ok with the abstract notion of people getting some kind of pleasure from his body, albeit in an indirect way. But *that night* has reframed everything and now *strangers enjoying his body* has a very different mental and emotional load. He doesn't have to be ok with that anymore, just because he once was. That's what she keeps telling him at least.

She also says his feelings are understandable. But so far, Shane understands very little of what he feels nowadays.

Why should it bother him if Thorne jerks off to Shane's old underwear ad? Or laughs if he stammers and gets red-faced at a news conference? Shane's not there. How could it hurt him if he's not even there? It's such a silly thing to stress about.

When he sits down, Hayden leans into him and asks with a hushed voice: "You ok, bud?"

"Yeah," he lies but it's clipped. Hayden doesn't lean away, so he knows he's been caught. "That obvious?"

“Only to me.”

Shane gets the sense that’s a lie. When he looks up and gives the room a quick scan, several of his team mates sharply look away. Only J.J. meets his gaze and gives him a smile and a thumbs up. Shane manages to return the gesture.

The Boston crowd fills the stadium with booming noise. They chant their team’s name, even as the Metros step out onto the ice. As always, there is a small section of dedicated Montreal fans, close to the Metros bench, but their cheering is completely drowned out.

Shane can’t focus on any of that though. He keeps his head down as she skates towards the center.

Coach always puts him in at the top of the first period to let him get a head start in the scoring numbers. Opposing teams are out for his blood and it’s inevitable that at some point he’ll get hit in a way that takes him back to that night and he’ll be out for the rest of the period, sometimes even the rest of the game. His job is for that to not matter at that point. To rack up a lead that the other team can’t possibly catch up to. It’s been working well for them so far but Ilya Rozanov famously isn’t shaken by his team being behind in goals, not even when the third period ticks away. The Russian captain loves a challenge and Shane knows – and loves – that Ilya won’t go easy on the Metros for the sake of their relationship.

Shane and Ilya skate up to each other at center ice. The crowd is loving this face-off. They chant Rozanov’s name like he’s the most famous gladiator of old Rome and they thirst for Shane’s blood to be spilled.

Shane makes the mistake of glancing at the crowd and by happenstance he makes eye contact with a big Raiders fan in the stands, clapping meaty hands together. And he looks like...

Shane fixes his gaze down on the ice, but that face sticks to the back of his mind.

How does it feel to be playing in Boston again after what happened here?

He can’t help it. He looks up again. His gaze searches for that one fan. Was it really him? He can’t find him in the crowd anymore. All the faces blend together.

He adjusts his grip on his stick as his hands go numb inside his gloves.

Oh no.

Oh nononono.

This isn’t supposed to be happening yet.

The rink spins around him. The roar of the crowd dulls until all he hears is the rushing of blood in his ears. His breaths are shallow because there’s something else in his chest taking up all the space, pressing every organ against the inside of his ribcage.

“Hollander. *Shane.*”

He blinks and redirects his gaze to Ilya, whose face is close to his as they are ready for the referee to drop the puck. Only the ref is close enough to them to hear them and he wouldn't care about Ilya calling Shane by his first name.

Once he's locked gazes with the other captain, the man assures him: "They're not here."

It takes a moment for the words to sink in.

Right. Yeah. They can't be. They're gonna be in the hospital.

Ilya hadn't volunteered any information and Shane hadn't asked, not wanting to be distracted ahead of the game. But the damage to Ilya's knuckles told Shane all he wanted to know for now.

With a deep exhale he expels that big mass that was in his chest and he can breathe again.

Just in time too.

The puck drops.

Ilya wins the face-off.

It only makes Shane grin, knowing that Ilya was not taking any pity on him. He wasn't going to hand him this victory. If Shane wanted the Metros to get closer to that cup, he was going to have to steal that puck and the victory from Ilya's own goddamn stick.

The Metros put up a good enough blockade that Rozanov has to weave back and forth on the ice. Rozanov is faster in a straight line, but Shane can make sharper corners without losing speed. As the Russian captain heads for the net, he passes the puck to Marleau, but only briefly, in an attempt to lead Shane astray. Shane doesn't fall for it. He's been watching this man play for about a decade now. Shane struggles reading facial expressions and tone of voice, but one thing he can read like a book is Ilya's game. So he stays on him, not crossing the rink to follow the puck to Marleau. As expected, Marleau holds the puck on his stick for only a second before passing it right back to Rozanov, who has a clear shot of the goal now.

But Shane is right behind him.

Ilya doesn't even know he's there when he pokes his stick out and steals the puck. He flashes his opponent a smile as he turns on a dime and heads in the opposite direction.

The other Raiders come barreling towards them and he passes the puck right between their sticks to Hayden.

Pike's strength is that even now players still underestimate him and he's devilishly quick on his skates and quick-witted when he's least expected to be. The puck passes between several Metros players while Shane outskates his tail and gets into position.

Hayden has the puck again and in a clean pass shoots it to Shane.

The goalie does his best to block the goal but Shane slips the puck right under the pads of his legs as he drops down.

The goal horn blows and the crowd erupts with boos and leers.

1-0

Ilya gets his revenge 9 minutes later and evens the score to thunderous applause.

1-1

In their next face-off, they're smiling at each other.

Shane gets the puck when it drops. Ilya gives him a shove, trying to steal the puck, but Shane holds his ground and Ilya gets bodied out of his way by a Metros defenseman.

But when Shane takes off, his "body guards" can't keep up with him and he can't dodge the Raider that comes towards him from up ahead. They clash out on the open ice. Shane keeps the puck and his footing but the Raider keeps pushing and pushing him towards the edge of the rink and then rams him into the boards.

It forces the air out of his lungs and in his breathlessness he nearly drops his stick to reach for his throat where he thinks he feels hands constricting his airway.

This is it, he thinks. The onset of the panic attack that will bench him. It's still too soon. He's only scored one goal!

The Raider skates off with the puck. It's a clean hit so the game continues.

On the other side of the plexiglass that's he's up against, the Raiders fans are shouting and laughing at him and when it's clear he's glued in place they start slamming their palms against the glass and it makes him recoil.

He looks at them. Their faces are blurry.

In his head he hears Ilya say: *"They're not here."*

He repeats the words in his head like a mantra. He steels himself and pushes off the glass.

In the meantime the play has ended with a foul and Hayden takes the moment to skate up to Shane.

"Hey, you ok?"

Over Hayden's shoulder, Shane's gaze meets Ilya's. The Russian captain doesn't even bother hiding his concern as he stares at Shane from the opposite end of the rink.

Shane takes a deep breath and declares, much to his surprise: "I'm ok." He nods so Ilya can see he's good.

And he is.

He got hit and he didn't panic.

After that, he feels unstoppable.

And he is.

2-1

3-1

The crowd is going feral but Shane tunes them out.

They're not here.

The Raiders fans turn on their own team, screaming at their goalie and the team captain for doing a lousy job but the reality is: they're playing great. They're all playing great. If Ilya is feeling his hands or his ribs, it doesn't show in his game. But Shane is playing *better* and he *feels better* than he has in months. He's in sync with Hayden and the rest of the team. It's like they're reading his mind and are exactly where he needs them to be, exactly when he needs them.

4-2

Ilya scores again but it doesn't phase Shane.

5-2

And with only 20 seconds left on the clock:

6-2

Four goals and two assists.

The Metros crowd him when the horn blows. They're one step closer to their third cup win. The Montreal fans in the stands are now making enough noise that even the disheartened Boston audience can't drown out.

When the teams line up to shake hands afterward, Ilya squeezes his hand and holds on a little longer than he should, making sure Shane can see the pride on his face when he says: "Good game."

Shane feels glib enough to reply: "That's an understatement." He winks and enjoys how Ilya has to purse his lips to hide his smile.

+++

LAST DECEMBER

+++

Ilya is nervous. That doesn't happen often. But he's about to meet Shane's parents for the first time.

The MLH holiday roster freeze has just started: no games, not even practice, for three days.

In the past years, Ilya would use the free time to fly home and spend a forced Christmas with the family. Just because it's tradition and his father was all about tradition. But now his father is dead and Alexei wasn't about to extend an invitation, nor would Ilya have accepted.

So this year he is spending Christmas with the Hollanders and he's stressed about making a good impression. After all, he wants to get reinvited for all the years to come...

Shane's parents have a cottage close to Shane's in Ottawa. Shane is living at his cottage while he recovers and Ilya visits as much as possible. A day here. A day there. Shane's life has slowed down now that he's temporarily out of the game but Ilya has been flying all over the place, playing game and after game. He hasn't been playing his best he knows. Even if he can't be with Shane, his thoughts are always with him.

It's only been 5 weeks since the assault. Shane's body is recovering well but Ilya is concerned for his mental health. The only therapy Shane has been willing to go to is with his *physical therapist*. Shane keeps telling him not to worry whenever Ilya dares to bring it up during their face time calls. He doesn't need therapy, Shane says. He has Ilya, and his parents.

Ilya doesn't think that's enough, but he doesn't push it.

The drive has been quiet.

Ilya arrived in Ottawa earlier that day and they spent the afternoon decorating Shane's cottage.

"Why you not decorate?" Ilya had exclaimed when he carried his suitcase into the cottage.

Shane had shrugged adorably and said: "I thought we could do it together."

As they put up a tree, strung lights, and hung wreaths all over the place, Ilya asked: "You told them about me, yes?"

The Canadian captain had clocked his tone instantly and that's when Ilya knew just how much he's started wearing his heart on his sleeve around Shane, because the man is otherwise not very perceptive of emotions and it's easy to hide them from him if he wants. It's just.. *he doesn't want*. "You're nervous," Shane surmised with a glint in his beautiful eyes.

"Am not," Ilya pouted, plugging in another string of lights and being pleasantly surprised that they're the colorful kind, not the soft white ones.

"Ilya Rozanov you are *scared*," Shane teased.

"Never in my life have I ever been scared," he argued but as soon as the words left his mouth he regretted them. Because it wasn't true. It's never been true, of course. Ilya remembers

being terrified coming home to a quiet house after school one day... But lately... Well, lately he's been scared a lot. Scared for Shane. It started *that night* and it never went away.

Every day, for five weeks now, he's been terrified that Shane will take his own life, just like Ilya's mother.

Every day, for five weeks now, he googles: *Shane Hollander dead?* And in the time it takes for the pages to load, he dies a little bit more and more himself.

He knows Shane is *strong*. But so was his mother. And yet...

He's never blamed his mother for taking her own life. She couldn't bear it anymore and he understood. Even as a child he understood. The terrifying thing was that he'd understand if Shane couldn't bear it either, what had happened to him.

Again, there he went, wearing his heart on his sleeve for Shane to see. The shift in the mood was impossible to ignore.

Shane's shoulders drooped. The smile fell from his face and he avoided eye contact the way he always does when this topic comes up. He fidgeted with a string of lights, trying to untangle it. "Can we please not think about it?" He pleaded. "It's Christmas."

"I try."

They hadn't talked much after that.

Ilya straightens up when the car stops in front of the kind of suburban home he has only seen in those Christmas movies he pretends not to like.

Even though David Hollander has a good job, Ilya knows Shane bought them this house. It's nowhere near as outlandish as the MLH star could afford, but edges close enough to the definition of a mansion.

They get out of the car and Ilya idles as he waits for Shane to get the bag with presents out of the trunk. He's being mindful not to be "too helpful" even though it feels awkward standing by. Shane gets snappy sometimes when he thinks Ilya is *fretting* too much.

As they walk up to the front door it swings open and Yuna appears in the doorway, with David behind her. David is sporting a smile and waves over his wife's shoulder, but Yuna has her arms crossed in front of her chest and stoically holds Ilya's gaze as he closes the distance to the front step.

"Mom, Dad, this is Ilya. Rozanov."

"We're aware," David says with an easy smile.

It's clear David won't give Ilya any grief. But Yuna looks unimpressed.

He shakes hands with both parents before he is invited inside.

The house is artfully decorated for the holidays. Nothing garish. The Christmas tree in the living room is huge and Shane adds the presents he brought to the pile already there.

“Hey, well done on the game last night,” David starts. “3-0, that has to feel good.”

Ilya shrugs. “Against the Centaurs, not really.”

David chuckles warmly. “Yeah, they’re in dire need of their own star player.”

Ilya smirks knowingly, earning a confused look from Shane.

“You know something... Who did they sign?”

Ilya playfully retorts: “Hayden Pike. The Centaurs collect bad players.”

“Ha. Ha. Come on... What did you hear?”

“Tsk. You are such a gossip.”

Shane sulks comically when it becomes obvious to him Ilya won’t tell him.

Yuna cuts in to *fret* over Shane. Ilya doesn’t blame her, after what her son has been through. Actually, he thinks she’s being remarkably restrained.

“How are you feeling, honey?”

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“How does your physical therapist feel about you going back on the ice next week?”

Shane sighs. “Can we just, like, sit down and have a drink and— I don’t know, celebrate Christmas?”

A few minutes later the four of them are seated at a mahogany dining table with steaming mugs of spiced apple cider in front of them. Only a few sips in, David lets out a laugh at Ilya’s grimace and pours both Ilya and himself a glass of vodka from a Russian brand.

Ilya beams a smile at him.

Yuna is talking about hockey when David interrupts her. “Ilya, thank you for spending the holidays with us and Shane.”

“I am happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me.”

“We heard on the news about your father’s passing. We’re so sorry.”

He nods curtly. “Thank you.”

“That must be hard for you and your family, during the holidays.”

He shrugs but regrets it when he sees Yuna reel back at that. He doesn't want to come off as uncaring and he's aware that's how he *does* come off where his family is concerned, but he can't fake it. "Family is... complicated." He makes a dismissive gesture, not wanting to get into it.

David gives him an understanding smile, even though, of course, he doesn't fully understand what Ilya is alluding too.

Yuna continues to refuse to engage with him. She sits across from Shane and leans in as if she's trying to exclude both David and Ilya from the conversation as she mentions: "Shane, I know you said no, but Calvin Klein keeps asking."

"Mom..."

Ilya takes a sip of his vodka to hide his dismay that she's pushing this campaign on Shane when it should be obvious why her son is no longer interested in putting himself out there like that for others to see.

"I know, I know, but I have to let you know that a brand has never chased you like this! They've been kicking themselves in the head ever since that other underwear brand snapped you up and now that your contract with them is over, they are *really keen* to swoop in and get you signed on."

"Cool," Shane says flatly. "I'm not interested though."

Yuna sighs and tilts her head. "But this is something the fans are really wanting."

"The *fans* should just want me to score goals," Shane bites.

"That's what the *hockey fans* want, Shane, but you have fans outside of hockey. And that's a fanbase that is going to get you opportunities after you retire, *if* you play into them now."

"Retire?" Shane balks at the word.

"Yuna, love," David tries, throwing an apologetic look across the table at Ilya who has been quietly biting his tongue.

Yuna reaches out a hand to Shane. "Not yet. Hopefully not any time soon. Of course. But that hit from Rozanov..." she throws a dirty look Ilya's way, "you're lucky it wasn't any worse but a spinal injury is serious, Shane."

A cold settles in Ilya's body that freezes his heart.

She doesn't know.

She doesn't know what really happened.

She thinks what every else thinks, what they told the press: that Shane slipped a disc when Ilya bodychecked him. Adrenaline kept him playing for the rest of that third period but afterwards it required physical therapy that kept him out of the rink for a total of six weeks.

Which was how long his physician and physical therapist said it would take to heal his actual injuries. The injuries nobody knows about. Apparently, not even his mother.

Even though Shane said to Ilya that he had told his parents about *that night*.

He lied.

Ilya fixes his gaze on Shane but his boyfriend refuses to look back.

No wonder Yuna is so pissed at Ilya. She blames him for Shane being out of the game. It also explains why she's ignorantly pushing an underwear campaign on him.

"Mom, can we just... stop? I don't want to talk about retirement and- and I don't want to talk about underwear."

"This isn't just underwear, Shane. This is *Calvin Klein*. This is a better offer than Rolex. Much better. You're a Bonafide star now and Calvin Klein is not stingy about the price tag they're putting on that."

Shane pointedly stares down into his mug, his jaw clenched.

Ilya wants to be angry at Shane for lying to him, but all he feels is concern.

"Ok, fine, not underwear then. But how about I email them back with a counter offer? Hm?" She's pulling her phone out of her pocket like she's about to type up that email on the spot. When she slips on glasses too, Ilya thinks she might. This woman is all business. "Maybe jeans? You could do jeans for them instead. They do suits too but I think for suits you can aim higher. I've been putting some feelers out and *Armani* is interested," she shares with a conspiratorial smile.

Shane snaps. "Mom, stop!"

Both parents startle.

"I don't want to do *jeans*. I don't want to do *suits*. I just want to play hockey!"

"But you can do it all," Yuna tries.

"I don't want to," he reiterates, hissing the words through his teeth.

Yuna throws another look at Ilya and then asks coolly: "Is this about him?"

Shane sighs in frustration.

"Shane, you've been saying no to every brand I bring to you lately. You don't want to renew your contract with Rolex. You told me to backtrack on the iPhone offer. You've been avoiding me and your dad all this time, not even letting us come see you while you're barely an hour away... This isn't like you. So, I'm asking: is it about *Rozanov*?"

"His name is Ilya, Mom."

“Is *Ilya* threatened by your success?”

“Mom, Jesus!” Shane buries his face in his hands.

When Ilya catches David’s look, he just shakes his head and David offers him a nod and a smile.

“What am I supposed to think? For years you say you hate this man and now he’s at our dinner table for Christmas and the things you used to care about you don’t care about anymore.”

Shane drops his hands to glare at her. “I never cared about the brand stuff!”

“I mean being a role model for young kids who need to see that someone like you – someone like them – can be successful.”

“I think I’ve proven that point by now, don’t you agree?”

Yuna takes her glasses off and folds her hands on the table.

Shane continues: “And why would Ilya be ‘threatened’ by my success? As if he isn’t successful himself. He’s the best hockey player in the world for fuck’s sake.”

“Language,” David chimes in unseriously.

“Second best,” Ilya corrects and stiffens a bit when all three look at him. “Second best,” he repeats casually. “I am second best hockey player in the world. But,” he turns to look at Shane, “I am not jealous of best player.”

Shane looks at him fondly. “You can’t be cute while I’m being angry.”

“Oh, I meant Scott Hunter.”

Shane snorts out a laugh and Ilya’s heart melts. There’s no stopping the self-satisfied grin that spreads across his lips. “What? Admirals have real chance at cup this year.”

“Shut up,” he whines like a little kid and Ilya loves it.

Ilya faces Yuna, whose expression has softened somewhat but still looks at him with apprehension. “No, Shane is best,” he says seriously. “But I am not jealous. I am only in love.” He covers Shane’s hand with his own. “I want the best for him. Because he deserves it.”

“Well Calvin Klein *is the best*,” Yuna mutters but her voice is mild now.

Shane rolls his eyes. “No, Mom.”

“Ok. Ok,” she relents and she makes a show of putting her phone and glasses away in her pockets. “No more business talk then.”

“Thank you.” Shane releases a deep sigh.

Yuna pushes her empty mug towards her husband and says: “Pour me some of that vodka, darling.”

With a chuckle, David obliges.

Conversation is friendly the rest of the night. Well, David is friendly and Yuna is at least not openly antagonistic. Ilya does his best to stay in the moment and not think about the fact that Shane is hiding a huge secret from them and that Shane has had no one to talk to about what happened to him except Ilya and Hayden. And given how little Shane talks to Ilya about it, he gets a sense he’s not sharing much with his teammate either. Which means he’s not talking to anyone...

Thinking that he at least might be sharing with his parents, while he was living in the cottage not far from here, was the one thing that quieted some of Ilya’s worst concerns. Whenever he was on the road and couldn’t sleep in whatever hotel bed he was in, too worried about Shane being alone, he consoled himself by thinking that if Shane needed to talk, or had a panic attack, or something as silly as not being able to open a jar of pickles one-handed, he could reach out to his parents.

But Yuna just said Shane’s been avoiding them altogether while holed up at the cottage.

Now Ilya understands why Shane was pushing his physician so much on signing off on taking off the splint and sling before the holidays. He knew he wouldn’t be able to dodge his family any longer and he couldn’t have them see any evidence of the injuries he’d been hiding from them, the same as he’d been hiding them from the leagues, his teammates, and the fans.

Ilya knows he will have to confront Shane later tonight, but first he tries to enjoy his debut evening with the Hollanders.

After dinner they exchange presents.

Ilya gives the Hollanders his gift with an apologetic smile. “I did not know you already had good vodka.” His gift is a bottle of his favorite brand, with a set of proper, crystal vodka glasses.

“Can never have too much, thank you,” David says.

Yuna gifts Shane a butter-soft, butter-yellow sweater. “Since your stylist finally has you wearing more color.”

Shane holds the sweater to his chest, his expression hesitant but Ilya already loves the color on him.

Then she passes him a gift from his aunt in Korea; a mixed selection of skincare products.

“Don’t judge,” Shane pleads Ilya.

“No. No. Makes sense.” He indulges for a second and touches his knuckle to Shane’s soft cheek.

Shane has gotten his mom an Hermès scarf and a tennis bracelet. For his dad he has a watch and a chess set. Apparently David is headed towards retirement and mentioned he wants to learn new things in his old age, like chess.

“I got Ilya a present,” the older man announces to the surprise of everyone. With quickened pace he heads for the living room to retrieve a present from under the tree. When he walks back into the dining room he is grinning. He sits down and puts the present in front of Ilya.

Ilya shoots Shane a look and at his unknowing shrug he tears away the wrapping paper to find a flat, white box. When he lifts up the lid his grin matches David’s.

It’s a Metros jersey.

“*Dad*,” Shane drawls in embarrassment.

Eagerly, Ilya lifts the jersey out of the box, holds it up and turns it and of course it is a *Hollander jersey* specifically. Without hesitation he shirks off the dinner jacket he is wearing and he puts the jersey on over his T. shirt.

“Ilya, you don’t have to humor him,” Shane says, tugging at the sleeve.

“Is not humor. All girlfriends and wives wear partner’s jersey.” *Rose Fucking Landry wore your jersey*, he thinks to himself.

Shane laughs. “Yeah but you’re not my wife or girlfriend.”

“No, I am boyfriend. So?”

“...Boyfriend?”

“Yes,” Ilya says easily. “*Shane*. This should not surprise you.”

“I’m not surprised,” he pouts. “I’m... I’ve just never...” His eyes get watery. “I’ve never had a boyfriend.”

“Now you do.” Ilya puts his hand on Shane’s knee and gives a squeeze. “For the record, you are my first boyfriend too.”

Shane’s pretty lips curl into a smile. “Well... you’re a natural at it.”

“Ah. The best maybe?” He asks with a wink. “Best hockey player and best boyfriend,” he says gesturing at Shane and himself respectively. More softly he adds: “I did say you deserve the best.”

Oh, Shane blushes so bright and Ilya wishes he could kiss the heated skin of his cheeks.

Instead, Ilya looks down at himself, at the jersey, because if he keeps looking at Shane any longer he might not be able to resist kissing him and not just on the cheeks. “Looks good on me.” With the way Shane can’t peel his gaze off Ilya, it’s clear he feels the same.

When he looks over at Yuna next, she’s looking back at him warmly and it’s the first time a woman has made Ilya blush.

She approves.

“You don’t have gifts for each other?” David wonders.

“Ah. Hm. I did not bring. I thought we would exchange in private.”

David’s eyebrows shoot up. “Ohhh... I get it. I get it.”

“No, Dad! Oh my God. It’s not- I’m sure it’s not-” Shane shoots a flustered look at Ilya but regrets it and goes beet red when he catches his smirk. “I did bring Ilya’s gift.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small box.

Not quite small enough to be a ring box, thankfully, or else Ilya thinks both he and Yuna might have a stroke on the spot, albeit for different reasons.

Shane awkwardly slides it along the surface of the table, towards Ilya. “If you want to unwrap it now... You don’t have to.”

“I want.” He snatches it up. “But your gift is at the cottage, so you have to wait. Is unfair, maybe.”

Shane shakes his head. “No, it’s alright. Go ahead.” He’s flushed with anticipation.

Ilya can’t deny that he feels like a little kid again, opening presents. He plucks off the tape and slides a black box out of the wrapping paper. Too big for a ring, too small for a watch. He pops it open and pauses.

It’s a key.

A stainless steel house key.

“It’s uhm for the cottage,” Shane explains. “And you already have the code for the apartment in Montreal. So you can... you can come and go whenever you want.”

I never want to go, Ilya thinks.

The silence stretches on long enough for Shane to exhale self-consciously: “It’s a bad gift, I’m sorry.”

“No!” He startles all of them including himself with his exclamation. “No, is perfect gift. I love it. I love the cottage. And I love you.”

At that Shane smiles wider than he’s seen him smile in months. Maybe ever.

Bravely, Ilya leans in and puts two fingers under Shane's chin. He kisses him chastely and then forces himself to sit back. He makes a big show of putting the key on his keychain, to the delight of his boyfriend and his boyfriend's parents.

But as happy the moment is, when they leave at the end of the night, Ilya's thoughts go right back to the lie Shane told his parents and the lie Shane told *him*.

Yuna and David stand in the doorway and wave as they drive off.

Ilya waves back.

They're good parents. They love Shane. Shane is lucky to have them. They would be able to help him and comfort him if he could just be honest to them about what happened to him...

They drive off.

Shane will be back at the house tomorrow, to celebrate Christmas with the extended family. Ilya can't join because that's too many people to expect to keep a big secret. Shane has promised that he won't be long, just a couple of hours and then they have the rest of the MLH holiday roster freeze to spend together before Ilya is expected back in Boston for practice.

He doesn't want to waste any of that time arguing, he hopes they won't *argue* at all, but he can't not bring up Shane's lie.

It's about an hour drive from Shane's parents' house back to the cottage and Ilya figures they might as well spend it having this difficult conversation.

He's playing with the strings of the jersey he's still wearing under his coat when he starts gently: "Shane..."

After a beat the other man sighs. "I know. I'm sorry." Shane is staunchly looking up ahead as he drives.

"Is your choice who to tell," Ilya makes sure to lead with. "I would never make you tell if you do not want. Is ok for your parents to blame me for you missing games. Is not important. I do not care. But you lied. I do care that you lied."

"I didn't want you to worry about me."

"I worry about you anyway," Ilya asserts sternly but not harshly. "Nothing you can do to make me stop. I love you. So I worry. Hm?"

Shane nods.

Ilya takes a moment to gather his thoughts. He closes his eyes as he says: "My mother took her own life." There was really no way to ease into that topic, so he just puts it out there bluntly.

Shane breathes his name in shock.

The car slows and wobbles as Shane steers it onto the shoulder of the road and rolls it to a stop. Ilya feels Shane's hand reach for his and he gratefully takes it and squeezes his fingers.

"I found her, when I was twelve," he continues. It is hard to find the words. It is the first time he has ever told anybody this story in English. "She took pills. Too many." He takes a shaky breath. "I don't want you to think she was weak."

"I don't," Shane says immediately and he's so painfully genuine it makes Ilya smile in spite of everything.

Ilya blinks his eyes open and looks at his boyfriend. "So I need you to know I think you are not weak either when I say... I am afraid I will find you, like I found her."

"Ilya-

"What you been through..." Against his will, tears begin to fall. "There are no words, not in English, not in Russian, for how awful. But you are not letting anyone help. Like my mother did not get help. You are strong, but even strong people need help."

"I have you. You help me."

Ilya roughly shakes his head. "How do I help? You do not talk to me about it."

"You help," Shane whispers. "I can't explain it. But you help."

It's not enough. How is he supposed to be helping? Is this one of Shane's meditation things? Transferring healing thoughts through osmosis? It doesn't appease Ilya. "Do you talk to Hayden?"

Shane leans back in his seat. His hand slips from Ilya's arm. "No. I mean, yeah we *talk*, about hockey and stuff." He shrugs. He restarts the engine and pulls the car back out onto the road to continue their journey home.

"But not about-?"

"No."

Ilya chews on the inside of his cheek. He wipes his face to dry his tears. Even though it still makes him jealous to think of Shane and Rose together in any capacity, he's desperate for Shane to at least have someone to talk to about it. He'd rather Shane confide in Rose and find comfort with her, than not at all. So he asks: "What about Rose?"

Shane's fingers tighten on the steering wheel. "I didn't tell her." He let's out a dry, breathy chuckle. "Of course I didn't tell her."

"Why of course?" Ilya challenges. "You are friends." Frankly, as a woman in the industry, Rose probably had the misfortune of dealing with her own perverted monsters, although even Ilya in all of his ugly envy, would not wish that experience on her, not even if it might mean she could understand and help Shane better than anyone else in his life.

“Yeah, but- I can’t, ok?”

“Is it shame?” Ilya blurts. He’s seated sideways to study Shane’s expression and body language but can pick up on very little. Mostly just stiffness. Like the little wooden boy Pinocchio. Maybe his nose, *his beautiful nose*, will grow next time he lies. When Shane doesn’t reply, Ilya presses on but does his best to be gentle about it. “Is shame why you do not tell your parents?”

“No!” Shane clenches his jaw. “Fuck. Sorry.”

“Is ok. Just talk to me. Please.”

“Look, I literally just came out to them last week and told them about you, about us.” He takes a deep breath. “That was a lot. For me. For them.”

Ilya nods and waits for him to continue.

“It’s just hard to follow that up right away with: by the way, I got myself- I got myself raped,” he quiets his voice, “going out looking for gay sex.”

The Russian shifts uncomfortably in his seat as his intestines get all knotted up. “Why you say it like that? You did not *get* yourself raped. This was done *to you*. Not your fault.”

“... I know.”

It breaks Ilya’s heart to hear the uncertainty in his voice. “If you know, then why you keep phrasing it like your fault?”

Shane shrugs and Ilya can tell that it’s all Shane can do not to cry.

He hates to push him now. He hates seeing Shane cry. But he also thinks Shane hasn’t been crying enough. He’s been so focused on physical therapy and healing the injuries to his body that he’s not allowing himself to spend any time or energy on working through his emotions and healing his mind.

“You think your parents will blame you, if you tell?” He watches Shane’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallows audibly.

Then it’s silent between for at least a minute. Ilya waits, he knows it’s just a matter of patience. He doesn’t touch Shane, no matter how much he wants to. Instead, he places his hand on the center console, so Shane can reach for it if he wants, if he needs, if he thinks it will help in some small way.

Shane still has both hands on the steering wheel, gripping firmly, as he admits: “Maybe.” His voice cracks on the one word and his chin wobbles but he keeps it contained by biting on his lower lip.

He says “maybe” but Ilya can tell that what he really means is: “yes.”

“Shane...” Ilya struggles for words and hates himself for it. He wishes he knew what to say to convince Shane that none of this was his fault but just telling him isn’t working.

“I literally did what moms everywhere tell their kids not to do: go with strangers.”

“You are not child. You are grown man.”

“I am *her kid*,” Shane rebuff. “And I did the stupid thing she always told me not to do.”

“I do not know your mother well,” Ilya admits, having only just met her tonight after all, “But I do not believe she will blame anyone but *them*. I think she want to kill them. I think she could.”

Shane scoffs but at least it seems to release some of the tension in his body and he shifts his hands on the steering wheel, his fingers more relaxed.

Seeing an angle to lighten the mood, Ilya continues: “I am serious. If I find them, she will want to come with. Do more damage than me even, with her tiny fists. She works out, looks like.”

A small chuckle bubbles out of the other man. He mutters with a half-smile: “She’s an Asian mom, she’s *lethal* with a slipper.”

Ilya doesn’t get the joke but he smiles anyway. His heart feels lighter now, floating back up into its spot in his ribcage after sitting in his gut like a brick for the entire car ride. “Thank you for talking to me. Even if just little bit.”

For the first time, Shane glances over at him and then down at his hand, still on the center console like an invitation. Shane takes his right hand off the steering wheel and interlaces their fingers.

In response, Ilya gives a grateful squeeze and lifts the bundle of their hands to his mouth to press a kiss to Shane’s knuckles. “Talking is good, yes?”

Shane side-eyes him, wary of where this is going. “I guess.”

“Will you think about therapy? Please?” He’s brought this up before, only to be dismissed, but he’s more convinced than ever that he needs to keep trying.

“Ilya...”

“Please,” he reiterates before Shane has the chance to outright say no. He envelops Shane’s hand with both of his and holds on for dear life.

“Maybe.”

Funny how earlier, Shane’s *maybe* sounded like a definite *yes* and now this *maybe* sounds like *no*. Ilya repeats his name in a pleading tone.

With a sigh his boyfriend concedes: “I’ll think about it.”

“Ok. Thank you.” He accepts that that’s as much success as he’ll have tonight.

The rest of the drive not a word is exchanged between them, but Ilya keeps holding Shane’s hand and that is good enough for him. He softly brushes his thumb over the peaks of his knuckles. Only last week this hand was still in a splint. This was the hand he broke by punching so hard in self-defense. Ilya has long been obsessed with Shane’s hands: they’re beautiful, strong, and talented both on the ice and in bed. But now, more than ever, he holds his hand in reverence.

At the cottage, Ilya sprints ahead of Shane and gleefully jingles his bundle of keys. Shane watches, amused but adoring, as Ilya uses his newly gifted key to unlock the front door.

They take their turns in the bathroom, getting ready for bed. Both taking longer than they are used to of each other. As much as they love being together, sometimes they need a moment of privacy. Ilya takes the time in the shower to replay the evening. It has been a roller coaster, but overall, all things considered, he decides it had gone well.

Yuna warmed up to him by the end of the dinner, seeing him put on Shane’s jersey so proudly seemed to put most of her concerns to rest. David was boring in the same way Shane was boring: reliable and comforting. And Shane had finally agreed to at least consider going to therapy, which was an improvement from any other time Ilya had suggested it.

So with that he finally turns off the water, which had gone lukewarm anyway. He hastily dries himself off and with his curly hair still wet he steps out into the bedroom.

He pauses in the doorway, taking in the sight of Shane in bed, reading glasses on, book propped up against his raised knees.

Feeling his stare, Shane cocks his head and looks up at him. A self-conscious smile tugs at the corner of his lips. “You know,” he starts with coy tone as he closes the book but doesn’t take off his glasses, “You haven’t given me my Christmas present yet.”

“Mm. Yes. This is true.”

Shane puts the book away but his glasses remain on.

He knows exactly what that does to Ilya.

Ilya smirks. “Do you want it now?”

“Yes. I want *it* now.”

Ah, Shane thinks his gift is sex. That thought sends something hot and sticky dropping into his belly, like molten wax. But they haven’t had sex *since*... The most they’ve done is kiss and some petting over clothes. Ilya doesn’t believe Shane is ready for more, although the look his boyfriend is giving him is making him second-guess his conviction. But his gift is something very different.

“Wait here,” Ilya says, holding up a finger. “I get it.” He darts out of the bedroom, catching a glimpse of Shane’s confused expression.

After unpacking his suitcase that afternoon, he had hidden the gift in one of the kitchen cabinets.

He struts back into the bedroom, the poorly wrapped, flattened gift propped up on his splayed palm.

Under Shane's watchful gaze he climbs into bed with him and he can see the cogs turning in Shane's head as he examines the shape and size of the gift. When Ilya hands it over, Shane is further surprised that it is pliable and as he touches it through the paper, he says with a frown:

"It's a baseball cap."

"Ugh. Why you spoil it?"

"I thought you got me something... sexy."

"Baseball cap can be sexy."

Shane quirks an eyebrow at him.

Ilya holds his gaze and likes how Shane's ears slowly go red. "Yes. If you wear baseball cap and only baseball cap." He nods at the package. "Open it."

"I swear... if it's a Raiders cap..." Shane mutters as he tears into the wrapping paper.

"So what? I wear Metros jersey. You can wear Raiders cap."

But in spite of his teasing, it's not a Raiders cap.

The cap is red. Not the Raiders color. Also definitely not Shane's color. The logo on the front is colorful and garish. Ugly even.

Shane stares at it, his black eyebrows pinched together. "You got me a Centaurs cap?"

Ilya loves how his boyfriend doesn't even bother to hide his disappointment, even if it is mild and further softened by his bemusement.

Shane laughs. "You forgot to get me something, didn't you? So you just got this from the gift shop at the stadium yesterday."

"I did get from gift shop, yes. Cashier was very confused."

"No shit."

Ilya snatches the cap out of Shane's loose grip and puts it on, fitting it over his still-damp curls. "How does it look on me?"

"I thought it was *my gift*?"

"Oh, you want to wear?" Ilya challenges.

Shane laughs out a “no”.

“I think it look good on me,” The Russian brags.

Shane’s gaze softens. “Everything does.”

“Good. You will see me wear it a lot.”

“I don’t think the Raiders will like that very much.”

“No,” he agrees with a knowing smirk. “No, they will not like me playing for Centaurs.”

It takes a beat for his words to register with Shane. His jaw drops open and he turns his shoulders to fully face Ilya in bed. “What?”

“Is not done deal yet and is still secret.” He puts his finger to his lips and makes a shushing sound. “But I am free agent next season and Centaurs want me very much.”

“Of course they do, but-”

Ilya interjects Shane’s protest and rambles on: “We had meetings. Couple now. The money is good. Not Boston-good. But good. Fair. And houses are cheaper here anyway. There is nice one in Montebello.”

Shane perks up even more at the mention of the mention of the small town. “Montebello? That’s halfway between Ottawa and Montreal.”

Ilya tilts his head at him. “Oh, is it?” He breaks his dry act with a laugh when Shane playfully punches him. “I only looked because it has good golf course.” *Not because it was right off the highway that connects the two big cities or anything.*

“You would really move here?” Shane is breathless with disbelief.

“Mm.”

“Really?” He’s smiling from ear to ear again.

Ilya turns the baseball cap around on his head, which Shane seems to like very much. Maybe because this way he doesn’t have to look at the dumb Centaurs logo anymore. He curls a finger under Shane’s chin and leans in to press a kiss to his lips, but the other man can’t stop smiling, not even to return the kiss and that leaves Ilya grinning like an idiot. So he gives up and speaks, letting his lips brush Shane’s: “Really.”

Shane giggles. He *actually giggles*. Ilya has no choice but to make another attempt at kissing him. But with Shane unable to kiss back, Ilya moves his lips along his jaw and neck, peppering him with kisses, whispering Russian “I love you’s” between each.

He stops when Shane goes still in his arms and fear courses through Ilya’s body like wildfire. Did he accidentally jar a bad memory? He had been mindful not to kiss below his collar bone, even though the naked expanse of Shane’s chest made his mouth water.

Ilya jerks back and is relieved that the expression on Shane's face is not one of fear or upset, but concern.

The Montreal captain bites his lip, as if he doesn't want to say anything to change Ilya's mind, but is compelled to risk it. "What about your career?" He asks because he loves Ilya so much, he cares more about the Russian's career than the Raider himself does.

The Russian deflates in relief.

"What about it?" He fires back flippantly. "I am *second best hockey player* in the world. I make Centaurs better. I win cup with Centaurs next season." He makes gestures with his hands like it's a simple, step-by-step plan and not absolutely ridiculous and impossible given what a *shit* team the Centaurs are. Maybe someday they could be good enough, but Ilya won't be able to whip them into shape in one season. Still, it doesn't bother him. It crossed his mind when he first had the idea, but only to note how little he cared. He certainly isn't going to start caring now, after seeing Shane so happy at the thought of them living close together.

"This year I still win cup with Raiders," he adds with a sly smile that puts his boyfriend at ease.

Shane gets that confident, competitive glint in his eyes that Ilya finds so deeply attractive. "You wish. The Metros are taking that cup again."

"Again? *So greedy*," he admonishes. Dotingly, he says: "We will see."

"I won't go easy on you just because it'll be your last chance at a cup."

"As if I care about cup... when I have best prize right here..." He nuzzles back into the crook of Shane's shoulder, relishing in his soft and warm skin.

"Oh, I'm a prize, huh?"

Ilya hums, letting the sound rumble deep in his throat and enjoying the effect it has on the other man, who shudders in response and then arches his back off the bed.

The cap gets snatched off Ilya's head and tossed clear across the room. It hits the window with a hollow bang. A chuckle transforms into a moan as it comes up in Ilya's throat and out of his mouth when Shane delves his hands into his curly hair.

Emboldened by the response, Ilya rolls half on top of the other man.

His mouth finds Shane's again and neither of them are smiling now. They kiss hungrily and sloppily.

Shane ruts his hips off the bed, seeking friction against Ilya.

It's the first time they've... since...

It gnaws at the back of Ilya's mind that it's too soon and too sudden. They should talk about this before diving in; figure out Shane's boundaries for now. But in the heat of the moment, Ilya doesn't know how to tackle it without only causing upset. All he wants is to make him feel good and make him forget. Maybe make himself forget too.

He supports the weight of his upper body on one elbow, with his forearm under Shane's neck and his fingers buried in his hair. His other hand is on Shane's shoulder, thumbing over the skin, sometimes squeezing the meaty muscle. At most he runs his palm down his bicep before coming back up. He doesn't dare to touch lower, not without asking permission, and he doesn't know how to ask.

He's perfectly content with this though, licking into Shane's mouth, drinking his moans. Shane's erection pressed against his hip and vice versa.

But Shane is not content; he's eager for more. He throws his head back with a groan that blends into a lovely whine when Ilya latches his mouth onto his neck. "Touch me, please..." he breathes and he wraps his fingers around Ilya's wrist to tug his hand down from his shoulder to his chest.

Ilya cups his palm over the curve of his pec and feels the press of the pert nipple into his sensitive skin. He kneads the flesh, delighted when Shane desperately seeks out his lips again. The only one who seems to be struggling to not let his mind wander to the recent past is Ilya and he berates himself for it. Shane would be so hurt and violated to know Ilya was fighting those thoughts.

He kisses him harder and starts rocking his hips in rhythm with Shane's.

"Ah, yeah," Shane mutters into Ilya's mouth, before teasing him again with the tip of his tongue.

Ilya brushes his hand down and thumbs back and forth over the nipple. Shane loses the ability to focus on the kiss, just let's Ilya suck and lick his lips as he moans.

The Russian ducks his head down, pressing his face into the pillow, next to Shane's head. The pleasure is overwhelming and it's challenging to stay in control of his urges. He doesn't want to accidentally touch him wrong and-

He shakes his head and grits his teeth.

Stop thinking about that.

Shane certainly doesn't seem to be thinking about it. He is as pliant and responsive under his touch as he always is.

Shane turns his head, pressing his nose into Ilya's curls and his lips against his ears, brushing the heated shell as he whispers with a smirk: "I wish I had prepped in the shower..."

Ilya grunts Shane's name into the pillow and grinds his hips into his lover's harder.

"... so you could fuck me... Want you to," he whimpers.

“Another time,” he grits out. Secretly he’s glad that it’s off the table. He takes his face out of the pillow and kisses the other man again, while steadily rolling his hips. After thoroughly kissing him breathless, he moans: “I could come like this. Just like this.” It’s true. He’s painfully hard in his underwear, rubbing himself against Shane. And he wants Shane to know that he’s more than ok with leaving it at that. They don’t need to go further.

Shane himself is in his blue, silk pajama pants that are a favorite of his – and a favorite of Ilya’s too – also taking great pleasure in the simple friction. “Me too,” he whines, voice going up in pitch as it always does when he gets needier.

Ilya places kisses wherever his mouth can reach, while his hand restlessly explores Shane’s chest and abdomen like it’s all new to him. Like he hasn’t dipped his fingers into the valleys of his tense muscles a thousand times before. Like he doesn’t know *exactly* how to pinch and roll those dark nipples to have Shane’s breath hitch in his throat.

“I love making you feel like this,” Ilya says reverently. “Like we’re two horny, teenaged boyfriends-”

Shane gasps pleasantly at the word and bucks up into him.

“-ready to come in our pants.”

“Yeah. *Yeah*.” But then Shane shakes his head. “Wait, no.”

Ilya stops instantly and pulls back. “No?”

Shane raises his head off the pillow to rub their noses together. “Wanna suck you.”

The words go straight to his dick and Ilya puffs his cheeks out with an exhale. He turns his head away when Shane pushes up further for a kiss.

He drops his head back down on the pillow, his hurt shows in his furrowed brow. “You don’t want me to?” His voice is timid and vulnerable and there was a quiver on the “me” that suggests to Ilya what he is really asking is:

You don’t want me?

He’s quick to lean his weight back onto his chest and between kisses he assures him: “Of course I want. I want so much.”

When Shane pushes him to roll over, he doesn’t resist. He rests on his back and spreads his thighs just enough to make room for the other. His hands glide over Shane’s shoulders and along his arms as the man kisses down his body. Ilya is equal parts tense with arousal and apprehension. But based on the meager bits Shane has shared about *that night*, he doesn’t think *they*... did anything... with his mouth. So hopefully this would be ok. Hopefully this wouldn’t jog any difficult memories.

He switches his hands over to stroke through his glossy hair. The way his hair slips through his fingers like silk has him shivering. He hasn’t been getting haircuts and the longer his hair grows, the more thrilling it is for Ilya to play with, although, until then, never sexually. He

just loves brushing the longer hair out of his face, or thoughtlessly curling the hair at the nape of his neck around his finger as they watch TV and Ilya has his arm draped along the back of the couch towards Shane. Who always ends up resting his head on his arms once he got too sleepy to hold it up.

He looks down his body as Shane's mouth reaches his groin. He mouths along the shape of his erection through his underwear but then freezes for a second.

Ilya's body locks up in response. "You ok?"

Shane clears his throat. "Yeah." He tugs his underwear down, which Ilya doesn't make easy on him as he neglects to raise his hips off the bed.

"You do not have to."

"I want to." Shane's words are clipped. He's getting irritated about the *fretting* again.

All conversation stops short when Shane promptly takes his cock into his mouth with a directness that certainly suggests he is eager and willing.

"Mmmmm, *Shane...*" He watches him make shallow, bobbing motions, not sliding his lips far down the shaft but focusing on the tip, expertly rubbing his tongue into the slit. Shane is rolling his hips into the mattress all the while, which is a good indicator that he is enjoying it, so Ilya wills his body to relax so he can enjoy it too. It would be really bad, he thinks, if he struggles to come. Worse still if he loses his hard-on because he's thinking about the wrong things. He doesn't ever want to make Shane feel like he's unwanted, like he's no longer the sexiest person on earth to Ilya. Because he is and always will be.

So Ilya makes sure to be vocal. "Your mouth so good. Ah, *so good*, baby. Da." He interrupts himself with a drawn-out moan. "Your lips are so pretty around my cock. Hm?" He pets his head but is careful to never apply any pressure or tug on his hair, even though it takes conscious effort to suppress muscle memory. Shane always loved it when he grabbed handfuls of his hair and took control, moving his head down lower, slowly making him take his cock deeper into his throat. Shane loves to deepthroat him and he's good at it too. Other times, Ilya would hold his head still so he could fuck up into his mouth.

He does none of that now and it feels a bit strange and unlike themselves, but the pleasure still builds relentlessly.

"You are good. You are too good," he mumbles because he knows how much Shane loves to be praised and he deserves it.

Eager to please, Shane dips his head lower, bottom lip running along that vein on the underside of his cock as he slides his mouth down.

Ilya throws his head back. He can't look, it's too intense, he'll buck up into him. It'll be involuntarily. He'll just never tire of the sight of his cock getting swallowed by this perfect man, lips so pink and stretched around his flesh. It drives him wild.

The head of his cock hits the back of Shane's throat and for a *split second* it is heaven.

And then it is hell.

Shane gags and yanks his head up and away but even with his throat and mouth cleared he makes a strangled noise.

Ilya sits up instantly, alarmed by his boyfriend's red face and the way he's gasping for breath and then goes into a coughing fit. He reaches for him but Shane scrambles off the bed and collapses to the floor. He has a hand clamped over his mouth. He makes an attempt to crawl away, towards the bathroom, but after another gagging noise he miserably hunches over and vomits on the floor.

Ilya rushes to him, pulling his underwear up as he goes to cover himself, not because he has any modesty but because he knows Shane has been triggered and he doesn't want to add to that by being exposed. He kneels next to him on the floor as Shane retches again while fighting hyperventilation.

"Is ok. Get it out. Is fine." He hesitates to touch him and he hates that he does and he hates that he should. But he decides to try a touch to Shane's back, putting his hand flat between his shoulder blades and rubbing in small circles.

Shane coughs and cries and gasps for air and spits out more bile. His face, neck, and chest are fiery red. A vein throbs visibly in his throat. It's terrible to see and Ilya can't imagine how bad it is for Shane to experience.

"Try to breathe, love." He slowly puts his other hand on Shane's chest, making sure Shane sees the approach of his hand and has time to jerk away if he does not want to be touched. But the man allows it. With one hand on his back and the other on his chest he consistently squeezes and releases, encouraging a normal breathing pattern.

Just as he considers calling an ambulance, it starts to work.

Shane's breathing calms. He's stopped coughing and throwing up. He's on his hands and knees. His arms tremble holding himself up. His head hangs between his shoulders. One of his hands touches the edge of the pool of vomit under him. It doesn't matter. Not right now. All that matters is that he is breathing.

Ilya sits back against the side of the bed and gently tugs Shane along until he is seated with his back against his chest, bracketed by Ilya's thighs.

He pulls on the edge of the sheets and meticulously wipes Shane's hand and then wipes his mouth with a clean corner.

Shane allows it all. He's barely moving unless directed by Ilya. He doesn't seem entirely present.

But he's breathing. That's the most important thing.

He pushes the sheets away. He'll have to change out all of it before they can sleep, not to mention clean up the vomit on the floor. But he doesn't care.

He loosely wraps his arms around Shane's chest. He wants him to feel secure and loved but not restrained. He slowly rocks him side-to-side and speaks softly into his ear. It's not until much much later that he realizes he's been talking in Russian, slipping into his mother tongue as English fails him when the emotions become too much.

"I'm sorry," Shane eventually croaks as he gradually regains his awareness.

"No," Ilya says firmly but not unkindly. "No sorry. No need."

"I really wanted to," he says meekly. "I thought I was doing well."

"You did very well. This was very brave."

Shane scoffs and the sound is full of self-hate. "Sucking dick is *brave* now?"

Ilya thinks a moment of how to explain. "Remember when Pike got hit bad in 2014?" Ilya remembers because with Pike out with severe head trauma and Miitka their goalie injured too, the Metros were out of the play-offs and it cleared the way for the Raiders to take the cup that year.

"Yeah..."

"Was bad. Was scary."

"I mean, yeah."

Ilya nodded. "Was brave when he came back, yes?"

"I guess. Well... Yeah. Yeah, it was."

"Is brave to get hurt and then come back." The analogy doesn't quite fit, but he hopes he gets his point across. Involving a hockey comparison was always the best bet to helping Shane understand something.

He presses a kiss to the side of Shane's neck. He tastes the salt of dried sweat on his skin. To lighten the mood somewhat, he jokes: "Don't tell Pike I say he was brave."

Shane lets out a breath in what could almost pass as a chuckle.

"I mean it." He gives him a little squeeze.

"I won't," Shane promises.

"Was brave," Ilya reiterates, petting a hand through Shane's hair now. "But coming back too soon is no good, right? Hm?"

Shane reluctantly agrees.

Ilya nods. "This was too soon for you."

"But I didn't- *They* didn't-" He makes a weak, dismissive gesture. His whole body feels boneless in Ilya's arms. "I thought it would be ok."

"I did too. I am sorry."

"No." Shane shakes his head sluggishly. "If I don't get to apologize, then you don't get to either."

"Ok." He puts gentle fingers on his chin and encourages Shane to twist his head to face him over his shoulder. He presses a light kiss to his lips.

Shane self-consciously rubs his mouth. "You shouldn't. I'm gross."

"You are not gross."

"I just threw up."

"I don't care. You are not gross. Kissing you is never gross." To prove his point, he kisses him again.

They sit for a few more minutes until Shane starts to fuss over the mess and that clues Ilya in that his boyfriend is starting to feel better; more like himself.

He helps him up from the floor and fetches the shirt that matches his silk pajama bottoms and then walks him to the living room where he sits him down on the couch with a glass of water and orders him to drink. Shane makes a half-hearted protest that he should help clean up, but he's always been receptive to getting bossed around so when Ilya reiterates his command, he takes it to heart. He slumps on the couch and sips his water.

It takes Ilya about half an hour to clean the floor and change the sheets. None of it phases him. What does settle into his stomach like a deep-rooted queasiness is replaying the events that led up to Shane's *episode* – for lack of a better word. Something triggered him and Ilya aches to know what it was. He just wants to understand so he can be mindful for the both of them, when Shane intends to push himself too far, too soon.

Once he's done he goes back out into the living room, where Shane is right where he left him, staring at his reflection in the black window with a focus that unnerves Ilya, but, thankfully, he's holding an empty glass.

"Good," Ilya praises and Shane blinks awake out of his haze to look up at him.

The Russian takes the glass, refills it, and orders his boyfriend to drink more. He takes a seat on the couch next to him. He has gotten dressed in sweats and a T. shirt, because it's too cold and too inappropriate to be walking around in his underwear. He sits sideways, his entire body facing Shane. He has an arm draped along the back of the couch and his hand rests at the back of Shane's neck. His thumb rubs circles over the prominent bump of his spine.

He watches Shane sip slowly.

“Was it something I did?” He asks and his voice cracks halfway.

Shane whips his head sideways to look at him. “No! No.” He shakes his head aggressively. “It was something *I* did.” Anger bleeds into his voice. The hand that isn’t hold the glass balls into a fist in his lap.

Ilya shushes him and cups the back of his head with his hand to massage his scalp with his fingertips, knowing how this always relaxes Shane. “Will you tell me?”

Shane huffs out a breath. “They- They put a rag in my mouth. To keep me quiet.”

The motion of his fingers in Shane’s hair falters. Only briefly, but long enough for Shane to notice.

“You don’t want to hear this,” he says with a grimace.

“You had to live it. I can handle hearing it.” He scoots a little closer. “You always say you want to know, right? The parts you forget. The parts you were not awake for.” It’s the only thing Shane had been willing to talk to him about; venting his frustration at how fragmented his memories were in a self-deprecating way. Angry at himself and confused for being so upset over something that he only half remembers. “You say you want to know. Fill in blanks. Is same for me. I want to know. Want to know so I can help.”

Shane closes his eyes and nods once. “Ok.” But he’s quick to snap his head up and declare that he’s not ready to tell Ilya everything. Not yet.

“Is ok. Tell me something. Anything.”

He takes a moment to collect his thoughts. All the while his gaze darts around the cottage like he’s checking to make sure *they* aren’t there, lurking in a corner. “The rag they put in my mouth,” he starts, “they pushed it in so far... It was at the back of my throat.” His voice is clinical, detached. If that’s the headspace he needs to go to, to be able to share, that is ok with Ilya, even as it makes shivers run down his spine. “It had me gagging. I nearly threw up and I was afraid if I did, I would choke. When I- When I tried to blow you, I gagged and I just...” he doesn’t finish the sentence. His eyebrows pinch together as he recalls something else. “But I think what set me off was before that. When I licked you through your underwear. The drag of the fabric on my tongue, it-” Another aborted sentence.

Ilya nods. He remembers Shane tensing up at that moment and now he could kick himself for brushing that off as unimportant. “Why did you not stop then?”

Shane looks at him and pitifully admits: “I really wanted to suck your cock.” His words are so earnest there is no vulgarity to them, like he just told Ilya he wanted to hold his hand, or slow-dance with him. “I miss... *sex*. I miss feeling that closeness with you.”

“I miss too. But we should not rush, mm? No need to rush. We will have so much time, love. I move here. We will be together. All the time in the world.” Until then, most of their time would be spent apart, with Shane going back to practice and rejoining the team on the road. Their schedules will largely keep them apart, for weeks at a time, as has always been the case

for them. Ilya fears it. “We have hockey now. After summer, we have time. We have each other.”

Shane puts the glass on the coffee table. It’s still half full and Ilya is about to tell him to finish drinking, but stops himself when Shane shifts on the couch and tucks himself against him, making himself small with his knees drawn up to his chest.

Ilya wraps his arms around all of him, encircling his shoulders and his legs. He feels the other man tremble in his embrace. Ilya presses a long kiss to the top of his head and simply holds him.

When Shane is all cried out and his body goes limp in Ilya’s arms, completely exhausted, he whispers:

“I will try therapy.”

Chapter End Notes

There IS a happy ending coming, it's just a little challenging in my current headspace, after writing this dark stuff, so it's taking longer than I expected.

Wanted to get this out right now and get you the satisfaction of the boys taking revenge. Any comment to boost my mood to where it needs to be to finish that happy ending asap is much appreciated.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

yayy I was finally in a type of headspace that allowed me to write the happy ending. Before we get there though, be mindful that the triggering themes of this fic of course do still persist in this final chapter.

Also, my idea of a happy ending is a smutty ending, I feel like I should warn you, in case you are uncomfortable with that after the type of story it's been.

Happy Shane Hollander day (yes, that's actually, officially a thing) to all who celebrate! (me)

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

+++

JANUARY

+++

“I must say, Shane,” Dr. Emma starts, “After our first session, I didn’t get the sense you would come back.”

He’s just gotten settled in the plush chair across from hers and avoids eye-contact like that would make him feel any less vulnerable.

He first met Dr. Emma last week in what her website describes as a casual, get-to-know-each-other session. Ilya had found her, showing Shane her website shortly after New Year’s, subtly prodding Shane to make good on his agreement to try therapy.

Her private practice is a tiny home-office attached to a modest and quaint house, at the end of a long, gated driveway. The house is understated but the plot of land surrounding it is generous and wild; centuries’ old trees were left alone to grow as they pleased. It is very private. He could pull up in his car unseen.

Dr. Emma, as she insisted to be called, rather than by her last name – *just Emma* was fine too – was specifically specialized in PTSD and there was a whole page on her website about the Me Too movement that was gaining traction, with a touching testimonial written by a former, anonymous patient who spoke highly of Dr. Emma coaching her through a dealing with her trauma.

During the first session, Shane hadn’t said much. She asked a lot of questions about hockey, about the Metros, about the play-offs; small talk that was supposed to make Shane feel at ease but all it achieved was make him acutely aware of how *not-anonymous* he was. But he

acknowledged that it would probably be impossible to find a therapist in Canada who wouldn't know who he was. So he sat out the session and near the end he was able to answer the pointed question:

"You don't seem like the kind of guy who goes to therapy for regular mental health checks, so, Shane, can you tell me what brought you here?"

He had blurted he had been raped and that he had promised his boyfriend he would try therapy. He glanced up expecting a shocked expression, at either the rape or the mention of a boyfriend, but her face was neutral. At least, as far as Shane could tell.

With only five minutes left on the clock at that point, there wasn't much more information she could get out of him, nor help she could offer. And how could she help, really? How could any of this help? She couldn't turn back time. She couldn't undo what had been done. So what hope was there?

Shane had been eager to get out as soon as he was "allowed". Of course he was free to leave whenever, but he had booked an hour-long session, so...

Sitting here again now, for another hour-long session, he plucked thoughtlessly at a seam in the leather over the arm rest. "To be honest, I didn't think I'd be back either."

She nods in understanding. "What changed your mind?"

He fits his hands between his thighs and squeezes his knees together. "I tried to have sex with my boyfriend again." His face was burning. "And I freaked out again."

He realizes he hadn't told her about the first time he freaked out, at Christmas. He had barely told her anything after all. But she doesn't seem to mind skipping a step.

"What do you mean with 'freaked out'?"

The tension in his body makes him pull up his shoulders. "I panicked. I hung up. I broke a lamp."

He should probably explain that they were having phone sex, but he supposes she can infer that now.

It was a couple of days ago. The Raiders were in Buffalo for a game and they won 4-0. Shane was still in Montreal and had only had practice that day. His first game back wouldn't be for another week, so he'd had time to watch the TV broadcast of Ilya's game. He loved watching him play. It always turned him on but now more than ever since they hadn't *done anything* for almost 7 weeks, except for that awful attempt at Christmas, and he was going crazy. Surely he could manage phone sex at least, right? It would just be him, touching his own body. It was completely safe.

That's how he convinced Ilya too. It didn't take much, he was on a high after dominating on the ice.

It was *so fucking good* to hear Ilya moan like that again. Shane had the phone on speaker and on the pillow right by his ear so he could relish in every sound and filthy thing Ilya said to him. He wasn't quiet himself either. He never had been with Ilya.

"Love sound you make," Ilya gritted out. *"Not just moans, hm. Moans are good, so sexy. But also, I can hear how wet you are."*

A groan ripped out of him with such force it threw his head back. He really was so *wet*. He hadn't even reached for the lube yet. He was leaking pre-cum in pulses. He always got wet when he was turned on, but never like this. It was his body telling him it had been too long. It needed this. It needed a release so badly it couldn't even wait until his orgasm.

As he stroked himself with one hand, he cupped his balls with the other. He spread his thighs wider. He was naked on the bed, he had taken off all his clothes and put the lube next to him before even calling Ilya. He knew what he wanted. Thankfully Ilya hadn't been forced to share a hotel room with a teammate that night.

Before long, his fingers trailed lower. He rubbed his taint and let out a broken moan.

"Shane, fuck. I wish I could taste you right now."

"Yes," he hissed. "I want your mouth on me. So good." But what he really wanted was something else. He wanted Ilya to fuck him, hard, like he did... *before*. He wanted to be fucked and not think about anything else but how good it was to be filled by Ilya's dick.

He experimentally circled his hole with the tips of his fingers and arched off the bed with a sharp cry at just that simple touch.

Yes. Yes. Yes. I need this.

With jittery movements he snatched the lube off the bed and stopped stroking himself just long enough to slick up both his hands, so he could slip his fingers into himself and glide his palm over his cock even better.

He didn't mention his actions to Ilya, even though that was probably a phone sex faux pas. Instead he even made sure to moan loud enough to ensure Ilya didn't hear his temporary pause and the cap of the bottle. Something told him Ilya would be too cautious, too concerned. Ilya wouldn't understand how much Shane needed to feel that *stretch* and feel the pressure of at least *something* against his prostate.

He went slow. He could tell how much tighter he was after not doing this for a while. For too long.

"Mmm, I'm close, baby," Ilya grounded out on the other side of the line.

Shane's scrunched his eyes shut. He had only managed to work one finger into himself so far. "Please, no. Just a bit longer. Please," he whined. "Don't want this to be over."

"Me neither, but- fuck, baby." Ilya was taking sharp breaths through his nose. It wouldn't be long until he'd come.

In a hurry to catch up, Shane pressed a second finger into himself and his breath hitched at how that extra stretch stung.

Without warning, his body locked up. It was nothing, it didn't even hurt much. In fact, it was the kind of sting he even enjoyed *before*, when Ilya would push into him after too little prep and he felt that girthy cock split him open. But not this time. His body shivered like it did on that cold Boston night. He jerked his fingers out of himself and that hurt more than going in.

His mind betrayed him by not reminding him of all the times Ilya had pulled his fingers out of him to make way for his cock, but instead replaying the one time Thorne took out his fingers after a perfunctory stretch and forced his length into him.

Ilya was still moaning in his ear, so close to orgasm he hadn't noticed yet that Shane had gone quiet, that he was holding his breath even. But Shane knew it wouldn't be long until Mr. Perceptive clocked that Shane was not participating anymore. So in a panic and acting on impulse, he took his right hand off his flagging erection, wiped it on the sheets as he brought it up, and tapped the red phone icon, needing several tries with how much his fingers were shaking.

The call was ended.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

He sat up in the bed, twisting both hands into the sheets to steady them.

His phone rang. Ilya of course.

It kept ringing, ringing, ringing.

He couldn't answer.

Some sort of chemical reaction happened between his fear and his guilt and the result was anger. He boiled over with an anger he had never felt before, not even on the ice.

He broke a lamp. Threw it off the table into the window, which cracked. He swiped all the dirty dishes off the kitchen island, shattering glasses and plates. He punched the TV. Didn't even notice his knuckles were bleeding until he punched a wall and saw the red stain.

Half an hour later, Hayden showed up at Shane's apartment and helped him clean up.

"Why did you hang up on your boyfriend?" Dr. Emma asks.

Shane blinks as he sluggishly remembers where he is; coming back into the present. He casts a glance at his right hand, at the bandage that still covers the cuts on his knuckles. He remembers how gentle Hayden was when he cleaned the shallow wounds and bandaged his hand. Ilya hasn't seen it yet and Shane feels wrecked with guilt knowing how much it will hurt Ilya once he does. They've only face timed since the failed phone sex and Ilya was already devastated to hear him admit to what happened during and after their call.

"You said you hung up. Broke a lamp," she reminds him. "Why did you hang up?"

“What about the lamp?” He wonders why she glossed over the violence.

“We’ll get to the lamp,” she says and asks again: “Why did you hang up?”

He swallows. “I didn’t want him to hear. To know.”

“Hear what? Know what?”

His jaw clenched. Was she going to ask him to explain everything? Wasn’t she supposed to be able to tell what he meant? “That I was freaking out!”

The small outburst doesn’t affect her at all. She doesn’t even blink at him raising his voice at her. “Why didn’t you want him to know that?”

He shrugs and the movement shakes some of that frustration off of him, like shaking off snow. “Many reasons.”

“Tell me some of them.”

He nervously rubs his lips. “He’d be upset. Because I was upset.”

“Is that bad?” She counters gently.

“Idunno,” he mumbles. “It’s just... unfair. To him. To have to deal with this when it didn’t happen to him. It’s a burden.” *I’m a burden.* “Before- Uhm. Just, *before*, we were pretty casual. Easy. Fun. Our relationship changed really suddenly, *after*.”

“Do you think it changed because of what happened?”

He shakes his head. “No, it was... bad timing.” He chuckles bitterly at that. “Two things at once. But- you know, he didn’t sign up for *this*.” He makes a vague gesture at himself and his surroundings.

“If the roles were reversed, would ‘this’ change your mind about the relationship?”

He purses his lips, immediately clocking what she was getting at. “...No,” he begrudgingly admits, acknowledging that with that single word he has knocked the legs out from under his own reasoning. “He has his own stuff from the past though, that I’m making worse.” He doesn’t mention Ilya’s mother to Dr. Emma. Even though she doesn’t know the boyfriend he is talking about is Ilya Rozanov, that’s not something for him to share with a stranger.

“Did you think you made the situation easier on him by hanging up on him?”

Another touché.

“No.”

Ilya had been a wreck when Shane had finally accepted his call. The man couldn’t speak through his sobs beyond just begging over and over “talk to me, keep talking to me”. He had desperately needed to hear Shane’s voice. Hayden had convinced him that he needed to let

Ilya hear from him, let him know he was ok. Shane struggled with that because... was he? Was he ok? But he agreed, the least he could do was call Ilya back and let him know that at least he was still *here*.

The Russian had called Hayden in an absolute state of panic after Shane had hung up on him. Hayden told Shane Rozanov was scared Shane was hurting himself in that very moment and Hayden had rushed to Shane's apartment right away. They had both feared the worst.

"Ok. Then tell me another reason."

"Huh?"

"You said you had many reasons to hang up on him. What's another reason? Let's tackle them one-by-one."

He's plucking at the leather seam again. "Well, just one other reason, I guess."

Dr. Emma waits patiently.

"I knew he'd say things that would make me feel better... And I didn't want to feel better."

"Why not?"

He sighs and leans back. "It's hard to say."

"I understand. But let's try."

He moves his hand to rub his lips again.

"Is it because you wanted to punish yourself?" Dr. Emma suggests.

He shakes his head. "I- It's like I'm falling and then he catches me, saying all the right things, but I feel this... *abyss* beneath my feet. I don't know how deep it goes, I don't know where the ground is, because he never lets me fall." The words tumble out of him. He's not sure he's making sense, but he doesn't try. "It feels so insecure, not finding the ground under my feet because he won't let me fall." He scrubs his face.

"So when you hung up, did you touch the ground?"

He takes a moment to consider it. "I think so."

"And how did that feel?"

"Well... I broke a lamp," he says humorlessly.

Dr. Emma smiles softly. "I told you we'd get to the lamp."

He huffs out a half-hearted chuckle. "I broke more than a lamp," he feels comfortable enough to admit. He flexes the fingers of his right hand. They are still sore, but the team's physician had already checked him over and confirmed the damage was superficial.

She doesn't judge him for his violent reaction and instead asks if he felt better afterwards.

"A little." He chews on the inside of his cheek. "Is that- is that bad?"

"No. As long as that's from hockey." She nods down at his bandaged hand.

"It's not." He'd cut it when he punched the TV. Only afterwards does he realize he could have lied, but he supposes there's no point to lying here.

Dr. Emma nods. "It's ok to damage *things*. But it's not ok to damage yourself."

"I'm not suicidal," he insists.

She tilts her head. "I didn't think you were. But I am a bit concerned now that you brought that up. Why did you feel the need to tell me that?" Her tone stays mild all throughout.

He looks down at the arm rest and starts counting the stitches in the leather.

"Is this the 'stuff' from your boyfriend's past that you mentioned earlier?"

Oh, she is also perceptive after all. He smiles wryly. Without looking up he says: "You are very observant."

"I try to be. But I can't make assumptions. I still need your help to understand everything. Only then can I help you."

"I can't talk about it."

"Why not?"

"It's not my story to tell."

She accepts this easily. "So you think your boyfriend is worried you will take your own life?"

"I don't think it, I know it. He told me." His stomach twists at that. It pains him that he makes Ilya feel that way; that he's reminding him of the tragedy of losing his mom.

"But you're not having suicidal thoughts?"

"No." For a second he wonders if he *should*. If it's wrong or abnormal that he doesn't think about ending his life. But he doesn't want to end it. He has Ilya and Hayden and his parents and hockey and his cottage. Even if it all looks different now. Even if *he* looks different now; the beautiful pattern of etches Ilya left on his soul ruined by the ugly cracks from where he broke apart. The pieces of himself are now barely held together, like a child trying to fix a broken mug with Elmer's glue.

No, he doesn't want to end his life. He just doesn't know how to fix it either.

"Have you told him that?"

"Yes, of course!"

“Do you tell him more?”

He blinks up at her. “More?”

“About what you’re thinking and feeling. About what happened to you. Do you tell him about that?”

“Not really,” he confesses, knowing he just admitted to something bad.

“So, hanging up on him wasn’t a one-time thing,” she surmises. “You’re always hanging up on him.” At his frown she clarifies: “Metaphorically speaking, I mean. You’re always shutting down the conversation.”

He nods, only once.

“Because you think you should keep it fun and easy for him?”

“Over Christmas he had to clean my puke off the floor!” Shane erupts, gripping both armrests with his hands. “I don’t want *that* for him!”

Again Dr. Emma doesn’t even blink at his outburst. “I’ve cleaned up my husband’s puke and he didn’t have PTSD, he just had the Man Flu.” She offers Shane a small smile. “He’s cleaned up my puke too. It’s what we do for the people we love. It’s not a big deal.”

“Ok, but me freaking out when we try to have sex *is* a big deal,” he snaps.

“But do you think not talking to your boyfriend is helping either of you?” She challenges. “You said you don’t really talk, but you still threw up, you still ‘freaked out’, you still worry him.”

With a grumble he processes what she is saying. She’s making a point.

“It seems to me like not talking isn’t having the effect you want it to have.”

“Yeah, alright,” he concedes with a pout, not at all happy that she is right.

“Maybe if you’ll talk, you’ll feel that sturdy ground under your feet again, that you said you wanted. Let your boyfriend know that he doesn’t always have to catch you. If you fall, you’ll land on your feet. And if you need to break another lamp, that’s ok. As long as you don’t hurt yourself,” she emphasizes that last part.

He sits in silence, fear pouring into him like water into a cup and it won’t be long until it spills over. He sucks in a breath and holds it.

“It’s ok that it scares you.” Her reassuring tone achieves very little. She puts her notebook aside – she hasn’t been using it all session anyway, maybe it’s more a prop than anything. She leans forward and folds her hands together. Their chairs are far enough apart that even with her leaning in, she doesn’t feel close, certainly not *too close*. She’s not in his personal space and far out of arm’s reach. The shift in her body language doesn’t feel scary, it feels like a friend, or, given her age, a mother-figure, leaning in.

“You haven’t really told me what happened to you yet. Have you told *anyone*?”

“Yes. Or- well... I guess not *really*. Like details and stuff. My friend picked me up after and was with me in the hospital, so he knows a lot of it. My boyfriend.. I told him that I was- That I was raped. That it was two of them.” He scrunches his nose. “I mean, maybe. Maybe it was two of them... He knows it was a hook-up gone wrong and that I was roofied. But nothing else. Oh, no, that’s not true. At Christmas, I told him about the rag.”

She doesn’t ask for any clarification even though his words are a disjointed mess, with a lot of blanks she couldn’t possibly fill in. She says: “Sometimes, telling people is hard not because we don’t want to tell but because we don’t know how to say it. Do you want to practice with me?”

“What, like roleplay?” He doesn’t add that she can’t exactly pass as a six-foot tall pro hockey player and that he doubts she could do Ilya’s accent justice.

“Not roleplay necessarily. Consider it like a first draft of an essay. The first draft isn’t always very structured, or clear, or gets the right point across. But once you have the first draft out there, you can organize your thoughts. You could even actually write it out, if that helps.”

A smirk tugs at his lips. “I haven’t exactly been writing a lot of essays, in my line of work.”

“That’s ok. Here.” She grabs her notebook and pen and holds them out to him.

He has to get up from his seat to accept the items. “Isn’t there private patient stuff in here?” He asks warily as he keeps the notebook firmly shut.

Her smile is warm. “Every patient has their own notebook. I don’t take a lot of notes during sessions, as you’ve noticed, so I haven’t written much, but anything I do write, you are always welcome to read. This is your notebook. And you can write in it too.”

With a stuff nod he flips it open. The first page says his name and below a paragraph to summarize him, which she must have written after the first session. He scans it quickly, not reading all of it. But it’s like the notes teaches wrote in his report. *Shane Hollander; plays hockey, reserved personality*, that sort of thing. He moves on to an empty page but finds the blank space intimidating.

“How would you start?” Dr. Emma prompts.

“I uh... I don’t know.”

“With any trauma, there is a chain of events,” she explains. “For example with a car accident, it might start with having too much to drink, or the roads being icy. What is the first link in the chain for you?”

He fixates his gaze on the page. The pen that hovers over the paper is starting to shake. Of course, it’s not the *pen*, it’s his *hand*. He clicks the pen off and snaps the notebook shut.

“There really isn’t much to say, or write. I don’t even remember half of it.”

She’s not letting him off the hook. “What do you remember?”

He doesn't answer.

"You said just now it was a hook-up gone wrong. Would that be the first link in the chain? Can you tell me about that?"

"I met a guy on Grindr," he says to the wall, unable to look at Dr. Emma. "I wanted to have sex." His leg jitters under the notebook. "But I chickened out." The silence that she allows to stretch between them feels like a vacuum that keeps sucking more and more words out of him. "He offered to get me a drink. The bartender put a roofie in it. Then he took me out through the back door to an alley where his friend was waiting. After that it's just bits and pieces."

She doesn't miss a beat and just easily accepts the new framework: "Pieces, ok. So then let's not look at it as a chain with links. Let's look at it as a puzzle. Say it's a hundred-piece puzzle. How many pieces do you think you have?" She gets up from her chair and walks to a cabinet behind the desk in the corner.

He observes her curiously while he struggles wrapping his head around the question and he takes a long time to tentatively answers: "I guess... maybe... half?"

"And how many of those are in the right place and how many are jumbled?" She asks as she rummages through a bottom drawer.

"Fifty/fifty?"

She doesn't push for him to be more exact or more certain. She walks back to her chair holding a box. A puzzle box. "And the part of the puzzle that is complete is everything up to stepping out into the alley?"

"Yeah."

She sits back down with the box in her lap and takes off the lid. The picture on the front is of a painting, some classic that Shane is probably supposed to know and would know if his life hadn't revolved around hockey since he was twelve years old. The picture doesn't seem to matter. She puts the lid away off to the side. "Some of my patients I ask to lay a puzzle during our sessions. Being distracted by the task allows them to talk more freely about their emotions, without carefully filtering them through a cognitive sieve. But for you today, let's use the pieces to visualize."

"Ok," he drawls apprehensively.

She scoops up a handful of random pieces and then sets the box on the side table next to her chair, nearly knocking her neglected cup of tea off the edge. "I want you to name a couple of pieces. Don't worry about where they fit in the puzzle. Where they fit chronologically." She picks one of the pieces out of her palm and holds it up. "Tell me about a piece of your puzzle."

"Uhm... I remember... his fingers. *In me*." He's beet red he knows. "He prepped me. He had lube with him. Because we were supposed to- We were gonna-" he trails off.

Dr. Emma holds up another piece.

“He had condoms too,” he blurts, intently looking at the puzzle piece as if he could actually *see* the condom wrapper the way he could that night, on the ground in front of his face, glimmering gold. “He wore one, when he-... The friend told him to.” He drops his head down and mutters to himself in disgust: “Which is why it’s so stupid.”

“What is stupid?”

“He prepped me! He used a condom!” He stabs the pen into the cover of the notebook with each admission.

Dr. Emma doesn’t respond.

“I remember *that*. That’s no different than the sex I was looking for!” *Fuck*, he’s crying now. He hates that. He wipes furiously at his face.

“But you just told me you had ‘chickened out’ before then,” she reminds him. “Your words. Not the words I would choose. You didn’t want sex anymore. You did not consent. So what he did to you was vile. Any other steps involved, that would be right in a consensual situation, do not change the fact that he violated you.”

Like a child he holds the notebook in front of his face to hide behind it as he weeps.

Dr. Emma lets him cry. She doesn’t speak a single word. By the time he lowers the notebook, he sees she’s merely looking at him. She points out the tissues on the table next to him and he makes use of them.

Once he’s calmed down enough to speak, she has him name 8 more puzzle pieces, holding up one for each.

He names the rag, the flash of a camera, fingers pulling on his hair, knees digging into his back, getting choked, Thorne’s grunting, their laughter, and the way they kept saying his full name, *Shane Hollander*, over and over.

By the time he is done, the hour long session is over and he’s holding 10 symbolic puzzle pieces. Dr. Emma gives him a homework assignment: to tell his boyfriend about one of the pieces.

“Just one?”

“Just one.”

But the next time he sees Ilya, he tells him about everything.

+++

JUNE

+++

Hayden startles when Rozanov drops into the seat next to his.

“This taken?”

“Nope.”

He stresses for a second about the optics: the Raiders captain plopping down next to the Metros left wing. That’s not right. But he figures people will just think Rozanov is sitting with him to fuck with him.

Heck, that’s probably the truth.

“No plus-one, Pike? Your wife finally realize she can do better?”

Ok, it’s definitely the truth.

Hayden twists in his seat to glower at the Russian captain. “My wife just had a baby, you dick.”

Rozanov raises his eyebrows in mock surprise. The asshole knows damn well. “How many kids is that? Eleven?”

Hayden groans at the tired joke. The number keeps going up every time Rozanov does this schtick. “It’s my *fourth* kid.” If he had to take half a second before answering to count in his head, well, that’s none of Rozanov’s business. Plus, he’s just tired, being up with the new baby.

“Mm. Hopefully they take after your wife. Maybe then they be good at hockey.”

“Oh, fuck you, Roz!” He cringes when he hears people around him shush him like he is the child.

Everyone looks up ahead at the podium as commissioner Crowell walks on, the spotlight following him across the stage. His suit is ill-fitted but probably more expensive than anyone else’s, because he’s the only guy in the room who cares about that sort of stuff. He strides towards the microphone, next to the table that displays the final trophy of the night.

He leans too close to the microphone, making his voice uncomfortably loud over the speakers, but Hayden suspects he does it on purpose. The man is obsessed with the sound of his own voice and thinks the shit he has to say is way more important than it is.

“Every year, it is my honor to present the Major League Hockey Award for the most valuable player of the season. This year’s winner embodies the triumph that can be achieved through perseverance. Earlier this year, he was hesitant to agree with a reporter who called his comeback ‘historic’. But he’s went on to make history indeed. Leading the Montreal Metros to their *third*, consecutive cup victory.”

Hayden shoots Rozanov a grin, but the Russian only side-eyes him, not impressed.

“I welcome to the stage 2017’s MVP...” He pauses for dramatic effect. “Shane Hollander.”

The crowd applauds as Shane walks out from the wings and approaches Crowell at the center of the stage.

Hayden jumps up from his seat, cups his hand around his mouth and cheers. The other Metros follow suit. Any jealousy they felt at Shane's playstyle being more of a "puck-hog" this year than usual, was all forgotten when the horn blew on the finals and they'd beaten the Admirals 3-2. All three of those goals were scored by Hollander.

The swell of pride in Hayden's chest as he watches his best friend shake Crowell's hand and step up to the microphone is almost painful. Tears prickle in the corner of his eyes but he trusts nobody is paying attention to him to make fun of him. Least of all Rozanov.

As Shane's arch rival and the guy who's been blamed for Shane's six-week absence, the Russian captain can't get up to applaud his boyfriend and Hayden knows it must be killing him that he has to sit there and only clap the polite amount. He must be feeling as overwhelmed as Hayden, probably even more so.

Ah fucking shit, Hayden thinks to himself when a tear slips down his cheek. He blames it on Jackie having literally given birth 3 days ago. He's an emotional wreck. Not helped by the fact that he hasn't slept since, except on the plane. He wouldn't have attended the awards this year if not for the fact that it was an open secret that Shane was the MVP winner. Jackie insisted that Hayden fly out to cheer him on. With Shane's permission, she knows everything. She knows the real reason for his absence. She knows about him and Rozanov. She knows he needs his best friend with him here tonight.

Hayden hopes she also knows how awesome she is. He sure as fuck tells her all the time.

The crowd quiets so Shane can make his speech.

"Thanks. I'll keep it short so we can make the most of the open bar."

Everyone laughs and one player in the back hollers: "Heck yeah!"

Shane grins. "I think *you* 've had enough."

Another wave of laughter rolls through the audience.

"I know it's such a Canadian thing to say, but it's never made sense to me to have MVP awards for a team sport. None of my achievements this year are mine alone. Not on the ice and not off the ice either. I've had a pretty terrible year, you have no idea."

The crowd is able to laugh at the euphemism because they truly have no fucking clue what he's been through.

Hayden leans his shoulder into Rozanov's, for just a second. Neither of them are laughing.

"I was determined to get that cup. I felt like I had something to prove; that winning the cup would prove I'm all better now; good as new, like nothing ever happened. The truth is... I'm not all better. Not yet. But holding that cup did prove to me that I'm getting there. I've been feeling confident that I will be ok. That I can overcome even the worst, with the right people

at my side.” He looks at the MVP trophy. “So I want to thank my team, the Montreal Metros.”

Woops and cheers sound from the audience.

Shane smiles and locks eyes with Hayden. “I want to thank my best friend Hayden and his beautiful wife, who isn’t here today because she just had their *seventh* beautiful baby.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Hayden let’s out and the people around him laugh at his expense, including Rozanov.

“I want to thank my parents, who are hiding in the back somewhere. My dad might have been the drunk guy from earlier. He’s not as boring as some might think.”

Next to Hayden, Rozanov chuckles fondly, like that joke was just for him. He covers his mouth with his hand to hide it. He’s supposed to be his rival after all.

“And finally, I want to thank my boyfriend.”

The audience goes dead quiet. So quiet everyone must hear Hayden mutter under his breath: “*Holy shit.*”

A couple of people in the crowd laugh awkwardly, thinking it was another joke that just didn’t land.

Shane doesn’t say Rozanov’s name, doesn’t look in his direction either. He just smiles to himself and then says: “Thank you. Goodnight.” With a confident stride he walks off the stage. He doesn’t even take the trophy with him, because like he said, it doesn’t make sense to him.

Oh Crowell isn’t gonna like that, Hayden thinks. *Crowell isn’t gonna like any of this.*

The audience is still shocked and the applause is slow to build and sounds hesitant and confused.

Hayden leans close to Rozanov and asks in a hush: “Did you know he was going to do that?”

“No.” He rushes up out of his seat with a proud and lustful glint in his eyes.

Oh God, Hayden thinks. He hisses after him before he’s out of earshot: “Remember Lewinski. Don’t stain anything!” He realizes too late the reference might be lost on the Russian immigrant.

The auditorium empties out and everyone heads for the restaurant and specifically the bar. Every conversation Hayden catches a snippet of is about Shane’s surprise coming-out. The tone is mixed. He is entirely displeased to hear some of the Metros teammates that have splintered off are not discussing the news with kind words.

Hayden finds a quiet corner to check his phone, which had been buzzing in his pocket so consistently the vibrations were about to turn him on.

He forgives himself for that because, come on, his wife just went through pregnancy and he hasn't gotten laid in over a month as Jackie did not feel as sexy as she looked to Hayden.

Speaking of Jackie, most of the messages are from her. She'd been keeping up with all the live news from the awards and of course the first hastily written news articles went online before Shane had even walked off the stage.

Holy shit, is the text at the start of a long string. Which is hilarious because she never curses.

Holy fucking shit.

Fuck!

Hayden

Hayden.

Putting money in the swear jar

Putting a whole ass deposit down

Because what the fuck

Oh my god

Hayden!

Call me

Calllll meeeeeee

He does so right away and Jackie picks up absolutely *sobbing*. "Jackie? Are you ok?"

"It's the hormones I swear," she weeps, voice loud and squeaky. *"I just watched a clip of the speech on YouTube."*

"Are these good tears? What is happening?"

"I'm so proud of him," she can barely speak as she cries. *"I think we have a fifth child because I'm having the Proud Mom Feels right now."*

Hayden chuckles at her. Her remark reminds him of Shane's parents. He should look for them. And probably explain why their son won't be showing up for the party until later.

Until Rozanov is done *celebrating* with him...

"Is he ok?"

"I haven't talked to him."

"What about Ilya?"

“They’re both kinda busy right now.”

“...Oh, right. They better not get in trouble! Check their suits for stains when you see them! This better not become a Rozanovski gate.”

He bursts out laughing. She truly is his soulmate. “I love you, baby. Give all the kids a kiss from me and I’ll call you later.”

“Love you too. And you give our adopted son a kiss from me.”

“Will do. Bye. Love you.”

He pockets his phone and goes to search for Shane’s actual parents. He finds the Hollanders at the bar, thankfully, so he can kill two birds with one stone. He shakes their hand to congratulate them and waves over the bartender for a drink.

“Quite the speech,” Hayden remarks.

“Sure was,” David chimes in. “For the record, I wasn’t the drunk guy.”

“I figured.”

“Guess I am that boring. Right, honey?”

Yuna has her glasses on and is typing on her phone. As Shane’s manager, she probably has a lot to deal with right now.

“Have you seen Shane?” David asks Hayden, shrugging off his wife’s dedication to her email inbox.

“Not since the speech but I think Rozanov went to go see him right after.” He makes sure to say the Russian’s name in a low tone.

“Ah. They’ll be a while then.”

Hayden smiles. He’s always liked David. He really wasn’t all that boring. Just a good dad. The kind of dad Hayden hopes he’ll be to his kids when they are older. “Did you guys know? That he was going to say that?”

“Yes, otherwise this one would be carried out on a stretcher right now,” David says, putting his hand on Yuna’s waist. “She’s prepared. There’s a gameplan.”

“And Shane has dropped all of his brand deals anyway,” Yuna says without peeling her gaze off her phone. “So nobody left to wave a morality clause in his face. I guess that’s why he dropped them,” she muses, like that only just now dawned on her.

“Well, he probably dropped them because-” He stops himself short just in time as it hits him.

They don’t know.

For the first time, Yuna looks up. “Because what, sweetie?”

“No, yeah, like you said, because he’s probably been planning this for a while. Sorry.” He takes a nervous sip. “I’m a bit rattled.”

“Rattled by what? You’re the boyfriend I mentioned,” Shane jests casually as he joins them.

Rozanov is rubbing off on him way too much.

Hayden cringes.

Ew, don’t think about Rozanov and Shane rubbing anything!

At that thought, he looks Shane up and down.

Am I seriously checking my best friend’s suit for cum stains right now?!

Yes. Yes, I am.

Fuck.

“Honey!” Yuna pulls him into a long, tight hug. Afterwards, she gives her phone one last glance and then puts it away in her purse. “I’m so proud of you. You did great up there.”

“Sorry for causing you work on a Sunday evening.”

“Don’t worry about that. It’s mostly positive. A lot of new brands are interested, they are not wasting any time. I just got an email by a queer-owned skincare brand, that would be right up your alley!”

“Mom,” Shane sighs. “I told you.”

“I know, I know, you wanted to focus on hockey. But now you’re a three-time cup winner and MVP. Surely you can take your foot off the gas pedal a little bit? You could be a really positive role model for queer kids!”

Hayden feels uncomfortable witnessing the exchange, knowing exactly why Shane has withdrawn from sponsorships while his mom is in the dark.

Shane’s jaw clenches. “I’m really not in the headspace to be anyone’s role model right now. Wasian, gay, whatever. Please...”

“Sorry!” Yuna is quick to say. “Forget it. I didn’t say anything. Let’s just enjoy your night.” She grabs her champagne off the bar, which must have gone flat and lukewarm with how long she’d been on her phone, but she raises it in a toast and takes a sip.

David claps his son on his shoulder. “Proud of you, son.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Hayden pipes up: “Jackie told me to kiss you for her but I think after your speech, people are gonna get the wrong idea if I do. But she’s happy for you.” He enjoys how that makes Shane’s eyes sparkle. He gives him a hug instead and then unceremoniously announces he has to take a leak and walks off.

He doesn’t have to piss, he has to find Rozanov.

He weaves through the crowd in search of him. His ears pick up on a loud conversation in Russian and he makes his way over to see Rozanov talking to a Russian player from another team.

Hayden waits for Rozanov to notice him and when his gaze shifts his way, Hayden nods at the double doors that open up to the elevators of the hotel. Rozanov doesn’t react, but Hayden trusts that he got the message and that he won’t ignore him.

He walks through the doors to find the hallway empty, except for the occasional waiter that comes out of the door on the far end that leads into the kitchen. He puts his phone to his ear but only pretends to be on a call so he doesn’t look super suspicious loitering in the hallway by himself.

“Why are you fake-calling like spy?”

Hayden nearly jumps out of his skin at how close Rozanov has gotten without him noticing.

“You are bad spy,” Rozanov chirps.

“Fuck you.” He glances up and down to give Rozanov the Cum Stain Once-Over too.

The things I’m willing to do for my best friend...

“What is it?”

“I think we should talk,” Hayden starts but then doesn’t say anything.

Rozanov makes an impatient hand gesture. “Get to it then. Shane and I are ditching party soon.”

“Well it’s Shane we should talk about.”

“Yes, I figure. What else we talk about? Is not like you know enough about hockey to talk about hockey.”

Hayden groans and rolls his eyes. “Will you give it a rest, Rozanov? I’m being serious.”

“Ok. Sorry.”

The apology takes him aback. It’s probably the first time Rozanov has said sorry to him. He sounds like he means it too.

“*Well?*” The captain prompts.

“You’re gonna tell him tonight, right? I know this should probably just be a thing between you two, but I just wanted to say that I can be there too. For him. For you. If you think that would help.” Finding out Shane has been keeping a secret from his parents was a sharp reminder to Hayden that he and Rozanov had been keeping a secret from Shane.

Rozanov takes a deep breath and rolls his shoulders. The way he can’t retain eye contact confirms he knows Hayden is talking about the picture and video they found on Thorne’s phone, even if he’s being purposefully vague. “I will tell. Just me.”

Hayden can’t deny that he’s relieved he won’t have to be there, won’t have to see Shane’s devastation.

“But not tonight.”

Ok, no longer relieved. “What?” He hisses incredulously.

“Why ruin his night? He is so happy.”

Why does Rozanov sound like one of his kids right now? Petulant and pouty.

“Rozanov, you can’t keep moving the goalpost.”

His blonde eyebrows pinch into a frown. “I do not know what goals have to do with it.”

“I mean... you keep *postponing* this. First it was after the game in Boston. Then after the cup finals. Then after the awards. And now what? After summer? After fucking retirement?” He bites his tongue when a waiter walks past them with a tray of food to pass around. When the double doors fall shut behind him, Hayden continues: “You were the one who said Shane wants to know. And you were *right*. He does. He needs to know this. So you have to tell him.”

“His parents are here,” Ilya argues. “If I tell, he will not be able to face them in morning.”

“He’s been keeping all of it a secret from them pretty successfully, it seems. What’s another bullshit excuse to get out of seeing them over breakfast before their flight? Just tell them he’s hung-over or whatever. You’re not the only one keeping this huge secret from him. I’m complicit too and you’re making it worse the longer you drag this out. You have to tell him, Rozanov.” The implied *‘if you don’t, I will’* hangs in the air.

“Ok.”

“You have to!”

“I said ok!” Rozanov flares his nostrils like a bull.

The two men glare at each other until the next waiter briskly walks by.

“Ok,” Hayden says. “Text me, if he needs me.”

If he'll even want to talk to either of us when he hears how long we've been keeping this from him.

Hayden walks off, back into the restaurant.

He knows Rozanov probably made the right judgment call keeping the image and video a secret during the season. He hadn't argued that call.

Since winning the cup, Shane has come to realize that it wasn't as important as he had built it up in his mind to be. But right up until that moment he hoisted the cup on the ice as the captain of the winning team, working towards that victory was the only thing that kept his self-esteem intact. Kept him feeling like himself. It gave him the confidence boosts he needed to face his weekly therapy sessions. Hayden had been terrified of what would happen if they lost the cup. He wasn't sure Shane would be able to handle the blow. Learning about the video could have derailed everything.

But the season is over now and the longer they wait to tell him, the more unforgivable it becomes.

He really hopes Rozanov follows through though, because Hayden isn't sure he'd be able to do it himself.

+++

ONE HOUR LATER

+++

Ilya waits in the penthouse. He left the party first, made sure to leave well ahead of Shane, so nobody could even have the inkling that they were leaving to be with each other. He made sure to let everyone know he was ditching the Awards afterparty for the Las Vegas casinos and see if he could "get lucky". He had to thwart some of his teammates' attempts to invite themselves along, saying they'd be "bad luck".

Understandably, Shane stuck around the party for longer. It was, in a very real sense, *his party* after all. Captain of the cup-winning team. Winner of the MVP award. For once, Ilya had wished he could have stayed at the stiff, lame party and just orbit around Shane like a planet around the sun and enjoy his radiance.

Not all of the hushed conversations in the restaurant were kind and Ilya had to bite his tongue more than once, especially where the Metros were concerned. But a group of players and their families swarmed around Shane vibrating with adoration, all waiting their turn to shake his hand. He caught snippets of them telling him they're already getting calls and text messages from gay friends and family members expressing their exuberance at someone like Shane coming out, on the heels of such undeniable achievements. And none of them even knew just how much Shane had overcome to reach this point.

This is more than a personal victory, more than hockey history, this is a cultural reset.

Ilya carries so much pride in his heart that his body feels heavy with it.

But there is also another weight he carries. One that sits uncomfortably in his stomach.

He has to tell him.

Hayden is right, he can't hold off any longer. As much as he hates ruining this night for Shane, he knows if he waits even a day more, all of his *reasons* will sound like *excuses*.

As he waits for Shane, he shirks off his tuxedo jacket and undoes his bowtie and the top buttons of his shirt.

He pours himself a drink, just one, to take the edge off. He hadn't had anything to drink at the party, too afraid of losing control over the filter between his heart and his mouth and saying something too sweet about the rival captain.

Standing in front of the windows, he remembers the last time he and Shane were in this exact penthouse. It was years ago, right after *Ilya* had won MVP. The chair from which he watched Shane is still here, back where it belongs at the boundary between the living area and the bedroom. Sinking into the seat is like sinking into the past. When he closes his eyes he can see Shane on the bed, nervous at first but then his confidence steadily building as he recognized the effect he had on Ilya.

Soon, a very different memory will be tied to this penthouse.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and goes to the bottom folder of the gallery app. The folder is titled "Pain" in Russian. It was the only word he could find, laughably inadequate as it was to describe how he feels whenever he thinks about it.

The folder contains just the one picture and the one video.

He forces himself to look at them. He hasn't been able to since he first saw them, standing over Thorne's body. He needs to see it again before Shane comes up. He can't be watching these *with* Shane for the first time in months and be unprepared for how sick it makes him feel.

The picture is, in comparison, easy to handle. Thorne lapping at Shane's cheek while the Montreal captain is absent behind glassy eyes.

The video is vile beyond comprehension. It's only half a minute, but watching it all the way through feels like an agonizing eternity. Ilya could barely stand watching it and that wasn't even *him*; that wasn't *his body* being violated. He's terrified of what seeing this will do to Shane, to have his worst fears confirmed.

Shane deserves to know what happened to him. To keep it a secret from him was a violation in and of itself and as much as Ilya believes he made the right choice to *wait*, he still feels sick and he sits in that feeling as punishment. He doesn't squirm away from it.

After watching the video one more time, forcing himself to note details in case Shane prefers to have Ilya describe it to him, rather than watch it himself, he calls into his voicemail.

“You have two new messages. And one saved message,” the robotic voice says with stilted cadence.

He deletes the new messages without listening to them, both being from unknown numbers.

He hits play on the saved message and as he puts the phone to his ear and hear Shane’s crying, he remembers the first time he listened to it.

He had stayed in room 803 of Hilton with Shane and Hayden until the Montreal team all packed up and left that afternoon. Shane was committed to keeping as much a secret as possible – as far as his coach and the team knew, he just got beaten up, so he was expected to fly home with them and he did.

Letting Shane leave wasn’t the hardest part of that day. That came later.

Once the Metros had left the hotel and the coast was clear, Ilya went home, which felt strange in the worst way. Like coming home after his mom’s funeral.

After standing in the hallway for a few minutes, rooted in place like a dead tree, he remembered:

Shane called him.

His body felt heavy as he lugged it to the living room and he dug his hands into the cushions of the couch to find his phone.

Never before had the device taking so long to boot up.

He had missed messages and missed calls from his coach and team members because he had skipped practice without telling anyone. He didn’t care about any of those. Buried under their messages from this morning, was the notification of new messages in his chat with Jane.

He opened the chat and gulped down bile that comes up.

I need help.

Please.

Seventeen minutes separated the messages. For seventeen minutes Shane had sat there, waiting for Ilya to respond to his *“I need help”* but Ilya never did.

The realization was heavy and profound: he would *always* regret not answering Shane’s call and not being there for him. Like he would always regret not skipping classes to come home early the day his mom took her life. These regrets were shackled to him for life.

Eventually, Shane had called Pike and Ilya is grateful that Shane has a trustworthy friend like him, but he should not have needed to call Pike. He called Ilya first. He messages Ilya first. He *wanted* Ilya. He *needed* Ilya.

He closed the chat and called into his voicemail.

The robotic voice announced he had seven new messages but the first six were from his coach, each just a variation of the same thing: demanding to know where the hell he was. Ilya skipped through all of them, deleting as he went.

Then, the final message played. The message from Shane.

At first, he heard nothing except the sharp howl of the wind in the distance. But as the seconds dragged on, Shane's first whimper was heard and Ilya slowly lowered himself down to the floor, next to the couch.

Shane's crying got louder and louder until he was sobbing uncontrollably and Ilya cried with him.

The recording was almost two minutes long and then suddenly cut off.

Immediately, Ilya replayed it.

He replayed it over and over and every time. He let it ruin him.

He sat, collapsed on the floor, all afternoon. This one afternoon he allowed himself. After that, he made a promise to himself to be strong for Shane.

And tonight, here in Vegas, he had to honor that promise.

Listening to the voicemail again, he wants nothing more than to slip down to the floor and curl up into a ball and cry, but he won't do that. He can't do that.

He fumbles at the sound of the door unlocking, stuffing his phone away in his pocket

Shane steps in, smile bright as his gaze finds Ilya. "Hey. Sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Not problem." Ilya does his best to appear casual and hopes his heart isn't visibly beating through his ribs, muscles, skin, and shirt. So many layers but the organ feels exposed.

His boyfriend, *3-time cup-winning champion*, and *MLH MVP*, pauses by the door and takes in the room with a wistful expression. When he meets Ilya's gaze again, he says impishly: "Brings back memories."

"Mm. Yes."

He pushes off the door and walks to the couch, taking his jacket off along the way.

The mood switches very suddenly.

Shane's eyes go hooded and dark as he stalks towards Ilya. Between the couch and the chair he undoes his bowtie and when he stands between Ilya's knees, he drops the strip of black fabric into his lap.

Ilya has to exert control over every muscle in his body to not grab Shane's hips and mouth him through his pants.

A giggle escapes Shane. His sly demeanor cracks and he covers his quickly reddening face with one hand. "In my head that was sexy but that was *so dumb*, I'm sorry." He's speaking through his breathy chuckles.

Ilya launches up from the chair and stands chest-to-chest with the other man and asserts: "It was very sexy." His voice drips with want.

Shane puts his hands on Ilya's shoulders. "Yeah?" He asks coyly, fishing for more compliments to ease away his insecurity.

"So sexy. Always so sexy." He loops an arm around his waist to hold him close.

Shane's eyelids droop as his gaze sinks to Ilya's lips.

"Shane-

"I want to show off for you again," the Canadian says, pausing to bite his bottom lip. He glides his hands down from Ilya's shoulders, to his chest, to his abdomen, to the waistband of his pants and hooks his fingers into them. "I want you to watch me while I jerk off and finger myself," his voice is soft and low, "and after I come all over myself, I want to suck you off."

They've been having sex again for a couple of weeks now: jerking each other off, frotting, the still-rare exchange of blowjobs, and once, Ilya made Shane come on his fingers. It's been a relief for them both to be able to be intimate together again, even if it looks different from *before*. It fills Ilya with joy to be able to give Shane pleasure in any way he can, whenever he can.

They've seen so little of each other these past months. Only stolen days and nights here and there when their schedules had them in the same place at the same time, or when Ilya had a bit more freedom to travel to meet Shane once the Raiders were out of the playoffs. But even then, these moments to meet were rare. Ilya hasn't even had the chance to miss anal sex, although he suspects Shane does, but he's proud that in spite of that, Shane knows his own boundaries now and doesn't push himself past them.

Now they have two uninterrupted, private weeks ahead of them at the cottage.

Ilya wants nothing more than to spend those two weeks making Shane laugh and come. Both over and over. But instead...

"Shane," he tries again and he clears his throat when he hears how gruff his voice is. "We need to talk."

With one step backwards Shane vacates Ilya's personal space. "That sounds scary."

Ilya nods. *It is scary*. He feels terrified. "I have something I must tell." He gestures at the curved couch. "We should sit."

"Please don't break up with me," Shane blurts meekly.

“What?” Ilya recoils at the idea. “No! Shane.” He takes Shane’s hand. “I will not. I will never,” he vows shakily. “Why would you even think?”

“Because you’re scaring the fuck out of me with this ‘*we need to talk*’ shit!”

Ilya guides him to the couch, needing to tug his hand to get him to move. He directs Shane to sit and then plants himself on the coffee table to face him. Hearing Shane’s quickened breath and seeing it in the rapid rise and fall of his chest, he says: “I love you.”

Shane exhales deeply. “I love you too.”

“Good.” Ilya nods. “You will be mad at me soon. But I hope you will still love.”

Shane cups Ilya’s face in his hands and leans in close. Not quite close enough to kiss, but enough for the playful bangs that frame his face to blend with the blonde curls that fall over Ilya’s forehead. “Stop scaring me,” Shane urges in a whisper. “Just tell me what’s going on. Please.”

Ilya takes hold of Shane’s wrists and coaxes him to release his face. He presses a kiss into each palm and then directs his hands onto his own knees, where he leaves them with a gentle pat. “It’s about November, my love.”

Shane’s shoulders slump. “Everything always is, it seems,” he mutters in defeat.

The words stab into Ilya’s heart and he knows the pain is only going to get worse from here, but he has to push through it. “You say you want to know. Is still true, yes? You want to know?” He watches Shane’s expression closely.

The man worries his bottom lip with his teeth. When he releases it, it looks painfully red. His gaze is off to the side, staring at nothing.

Ilya doesn’t rush him. He’s glad Shane is considering his answer, in the moment, not reactively agreeing. He needs him to really think about this.

Finally, Shane decides: “I do.” When he locks eyes with Ilya again, his gaze is steady and certain.

Ilya nods in understanding. He starts saying the words he has rehearsed many times before. “When me and Hayden kicked their asses, we found something on Thorne’s phone.”

Shane sits back against the backrest of the couch with a sigh. “So I was right about the camera flash. He took a picture.”

“Yes.” The words ‘*there is also a video*’ he swallows for now, first letting Shane process this.

Shane scratches his short fingernails over his thighs, like his skin itches at the thought. “Do you think he shared it with anyone?”

“I do not know. But I think not.”

Ilya is a rich man and as a rich man, you can find a solution to most problems, like unlocking Thorne's phone, so he could comb through it. In the time he and Shane spent apart, while Shane was devoted to the playoffs, Ilya spent hours scrolling through the chats and emails on Thorne's phone and found no evidence of him ever sharing the picture or video with anyone, not even with Magnus. Although he did find the text exchange between the two from that night; Magnus reluctantly agreeing to come meet the guy Thorne 'claimed' was *Shane Hollander*. They used a racial slur that made Ilya regret not killing them.

Since then, Ilya has also taken it upon himself to carefully monitor social media. If anything had been shared publicly, it would have blown up online in certain circles that Ilya wishes he knew nothing about. But there was nothing. Both Thorne and Magnus were quiet online anyway. A private detective Ilya hired keeps him up-to-date on the two men. Neither of them are doing well, physically nor mentally. Magnus is still wheelchair bound, his recovery is not going well and he is getting bankrupted by medical bills. Thorne has been self-medicating his new anxiety disorder with opioids and recently checked into and then promptly fled a rehab facility.

Knowing how poorly they are doing, doesn't bring Ilya any relief, but it makes him admire Shane all the more for his strength.

"What does the picture show?"

Ilya takes his phone out of his pocket. He doesn't unlock it yet, simply holds it in his lap as he says: "I can tell, or I can show. If you want."

"You have it?"

It was a redundant question of course, but Ilya doesn't blame Shane for struggling to wrap his head around this. He nods.

Shane bites on his lip again while he considers the offer to see it. "Is it bad?" He wonders with a small, quiet voice.

Ilya presses his mouth into a taut line. "Everything about that night is bad," he says.

"Right. Yeah."

"If you do not want, you do not have to see. Or if not ready, you can some other time."

Shane shakes his head and leans forwards again. "No, I want to see it. Now."

Ilya doesn't ask if he's sure, because he sounds sure and he has to trust that. He doesn't want to second-guess Shane's judgment and make him feel like Ilya is trying to dictate what he should do. So without another word he unlocks his phone. He has the screen angled away as he pulls up the image. He notices his hand is shaking. He looks up at Shane and takes a deep breath.

Shane mimics him.

“Ok. I am here with you,” he says, for what it’s worth. Then he turns his phone around to show his boyfriend the screen.

Shane glances at it for a split second and then looks away, taking a moment to suck in another deep breath through his nose. When he’s ready, his gaze shifts back to study the image, his jaw and fists clenching as he does.

Ilya holds the phone out for him for several minutes. Shane doesn’t take the device from him, like he can look at the picture but not physically come near it. Ilya doesn’t mind, he just hopes the obvious shake of his hand doesn’t make Shane’s own emotional turmoil any worse.

“Ok.” Shane leans back again and crosses his arms to hug his own chest to self-soothe.

Ilya puts the phone face down on his leg. He’s relieved to see how relatively calm Shane is, although he knows there is still an axe hanging over their heads. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know if I can say it with it making sense to you.”

“You don’t have to make sense to me. Just talk to me.”

“I’m glad,” Shane starts and he makes a face at himself because that word is so out of place given the context. “Not about-” He unfolds his arms to make a vague gesture. “I’m glad I was right, I mean. I’m glad to know that I didn’t misremember. I *thought* there was a flash, but I’ve been doubting my memories so much. Some days it feels like I made up half the stuff I think I remember.” A wry laugh wrenches out of him. “Like I had a nightmare when I passed out and I can’t tell what’s real and what was just a bad dream.”

“That does make sense.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” Ilya extends his arm to put a hand on Shane’s knee and feels a burst of relief when Shane doesn’t only allow the touch, but covers his hand with his own. It’s at that moment that he breaks, because he knows what comes next; the thing he’s been dreading for months. The thing that has been gnawing its way through his body.

“Hey. Hey.” Shane braces Ilya’s head with his hands, fingers delving into his curls. He is so close Ilya can feel his breath as he speaks softly, offering Ilya a comfort he does not deserve. “I promise you, I’m ok. I can handle this. That’s thanks to you and thanks to therapy. Which- I only went to because *you* found Dr. Emma for me. So that’s thanks to you too.” He swipes his thumbs over Ilya’s cheeks to dry his tears.

Ilya yanks his face back, out of Shane’s hold. “There’s more,” he croaks.

“More? ...More pictures?” His tone wavers.

He takes a deep breath before meeting Shane’s gaze again. “A video.”

Shane clamps his hands together and tucks them between his knees. “What kind of video?”

“It answers the question.” Ilya doesn’t have to explain what he means with that.

The question that Shane keeps circling back to: *Did Magnus take his turn after Shane passed out?*

Shane’s whole body stills. He’s not moving. He’s not breathing. His heart might have stopped too. The color has drained from his face. The first movement is the wobble of his chin. It spreads to his lower lip, which quivers. Then his nostrils flare as he finally sucks in a shaky breath. Next, tears spring into the corners of his eyes.

It’s agony for Ilya to witness the realization hit him like this, but he doesn’t allow himself to look away.

“He did, didn’t he?” Shane’s voice is strained.

Ilya is barely managing to stay in control of his own emotions. He opens his mouth to speak but he can’t find his voice. So he ends up giving a single, devastating nod.

Shane is silent for one second and then a cry rips out of him.

And Ilya feels like his heart has been ripped out of his chest. Seeing Shane this distraught feels like every fiber in his body is being torn apart. Every nerve hurts. And it hurts even more when he thinks how much worse it is for Shane right now. He doesn’t deserve this pain. He risks touching Shane’s knee, not knowing how it will be received, but he needs to do something, however lame and inadequate, to try and help soothe him.

It is not received well.

Shane jerks away from the touch and he shouts: “No! I need to feel this!” In the little space between them, he rises to his feet and walks away. He walks around the couch, to the other side and Ilya hates that he’s putting an obstacle between them.

Ilya subdues the urge to chase after him, even if he vibrates with the need to make this right some way. Shane has told him about this. Sometimes he doesn’t want to be comforted. He needs to go through it. So Ilya sits there, uselessly, and watches his love’s whole upper body *spasm* with the power of his sobs. The man barely keeps himself standing upright, behind the couch, heels of his palms pressing into his eyes and fingers buried in his hair.

Ilya cries as quietly as possible, continuously rubbing his face, trying to be ready for when Shane will look at him again. Hoping that he will ever *want* to look at him again.

Suddenly, Shane spins around and storms back to Ilya’s side of the couch and he drops down in front of him. “I want to see it.” He holds out his hand for the phone.

Ilya tightens his sweaty fingers around the device. He’s not sure if Shane should subject himself to it when merely knowing the answer already left him so broken. He was worried he’d break into smaller pieces; shatter beyond any hope of repair. “Shane-”

“Show me!”

With shaky fingers he unlocks his phone and pulls up the video.

This time, Shane snatches the phone out of his hand, like he doesn't trust Ilya to not refuse to let him watch the whole thing.

Ilya can't see the screen, but he can hear *the noises*: the clapping of skin, the grunts, Thorne's laughter and taunts. He watches Shane's face, sees how horrified and mortified he is.

Then the video repeats and Shane doesn't stop watching. He holds the device cupped in his hands, close to his face, forcing himself to take in every detail.

And then it repeats again.

"Shane..." He inches to the edge of the coffee table. Their knees are close to knocking together but he's mindful to not quite touch him. He just wants to be close enough for Shane to feel that he is there and for him to know that all he has to do is reach out and then Ilya will hold him. "Shane, please. Enough."

The video loops for a fourth time.

Shane might punch him, but Ilya doesn't care. He experimentally touches the phone, gauging Shane's reaction. His gaze is glued to the screen. Tears are pouring from his red eyes. Slowly, Ilya takes the phone out of his hands and unexpectedly he is met with zero protest. Shane's hands fall limply into his lap. Ilya turns the phone off and puts it on the coffee table.

Shane screws his eyes shut. "Fuck. Fuck!" He puts a hand over his stomach, applying pressure.

"I'm so sorry."

When Shane gets up again, he pushes Ilya back to clear enough space for him to walk away. He roars: "You knew all this time!" He walks around the couch again and there he paces back and forth.

"Yes. I am sorry," he repeats sincerely.

"And Hayden? He's seen it too?"

"Yes. But it was my decision to wait." He doesn't mention that Hayden at one point questioned if they should tell Shane at all. It wouldn't be fair. Since then Hayden has been urging Ilya to tell Shane the full story. If Shane hates Ilya now, he wants him to still be able to trust his best friend and turn to him for comfort.

"You two kept it from me all this time!" He shouts, his voice going hoarse. "When you knew-you *both knew* I needed to know this!"

"I also knew you needed to win the cup," Ilya says although any defense he has for his decision tastes like bile in his mouth. "I did not want this to cost you the cup."

"Because you think I'm too weak to handle it?!"

Ilya vehemently shakes his head. “Is not weak! My love, please, you are not weak. You are strong. The strongest I’ve ever met. But even for the strong, this would be too much.”

“But it shouldn’t even matter! I wasn’t even awake for any of it! Fuck!” He exclaims, turning away from Ilya. His hands fumble at his throat and Ilya recognizes he’s undoing the top buttons of his shirt. When he can’t manage, he rips the sides apart and buttons pop off, flying across the room. He sucks in a deep breath and doubles over.

Ilya is holding his own thighs so tightly he knows he’s leaving bruises.

When Shane faces him again, his voice is raw as he speaks through his sobs: “You were right, ok? *Fuck*. You were right not to tell me sooner. ‘Cause I don’t know- *I don’t know* how to fucking handle this!” Stiff fingers claw at his chest in jerky movements. He’s sucking in quick, shallow breaths, dangerously teetering on the edge of hyperventilating and going into a full-blown panic attack.

Ilya finds no relief at all at being let off the hook for keeping the secret. “I’m so sorry.”

“I hate this,” he says miserably. He squeezes his eyes shut and lets his head hang. “Maybe I didn’t want to know after all...”

It’s like a puck to the gut. “Oh, sweetheart...”

“What I hate even more than seeing it myself... is that *you* saw it.”

“Do not worry yourself about me.”

Shane straightens up, a hand still on his chest but his breathing is calmer now. “But after seeing that... you must see *me* differently.”

Ilya gets up, but stops himself from moving towards Shane. “I do see you differently,” he admits reverently. “I see you differently ever since.”

Shane sobs.

“No. Listen. I see you even more brave. Even more strong. More than ever before.”

“How can you say that when I’m a mess?”

“Is ok to be mess right now. This goes away. And then you are again cup winner and MVP,” he reminds him. “You remember when I won cup? When I won MVP?”

Shane hiccups at the tail end of his weeping. Timidly, he jokes: “You seriously gonna brag about that right now?”

Ilya’s face splits into a smile. The quip is a positive sign. “No brag. I could not have won, if I went through what you went through.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes I do.” He laughs dryly at his own expense. “Shane, I could not even handle texting you! All I did was hockey. You had physical therapy, and therapy with Dr. Emma. You had panic attacks on the ice but you came back for every game and score more than anybody else. *Nobody* could have done what you done.”

Shane scrutinizes his face like he’s looking for a sign that Ilya is being deceitful.

Ilya stands there and allows himself to be studied, knowing that all Shane could see is deep and genuine admiration and love.

“You can hug me now.”

“Thank God,” Ilya breathes. With big strides he navigates around the couch and pulls Shane into his embrace. He cradles the back of his head with his hand and whispers in his hair: “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Shane tightens his arms around him and mumbles into his shoulder: “I hate how this is going to affect our two weeks at the cottage.”

“The cottage will be good.” He sways him side-to-side gently. “We just swim and eat and read and sleep. Is good. Because we will be together.”

+++

ONE WEEK LATER

+++

Shane drums his fingers on the steering wheel. He has just parked the car in the driveway at his parents’ cottage. They appear at the window and he catches his mom waving. Before he even thinks to wave back, they walk away, headed for the front door to welcome him and Ilya.

“Are you ready?” Ilya puts a hand on his shoulder.

“No,” he replies sheepishly, “but let’s do this anyway.”

They both get out of the vehicle and in spite of what they are here for, Shane smiles when he sees his mom excitedly wave at them. She’s warmed up a lot to Ilya since Christmas and how could she not? How could she not love a man who so unwaveringly loves Shane? And she doesn’t even know yet the full extent of how supportive and healing Ilya has been for him.

His boyfriend leads the way up the steps.

A heavy dampness hangs in the air after the summer storm that came rolling through the area earlier. Him and Ilya spent the afternoon on the couch, in each other’s arms. Shane wishes he could go back and stay cocooned inside Ilya’s embrace forever. But once he had decided to tell his parents about that night, he knew he had to get it over with quickly. So he wouldn’t lose his nerve.

Their first week at the cottage wasn't what Shane had hoped for, but Ilya had been right: it was still good, because they were together. They swam, took out the jet skis, cooked together, ate a lot.

Ilya had brought a Russian book along with him and at Shane's request, he read him passages while they were in bed together. To Shane, it sounded like poetry, Ilya certainly read it to him with an appropriately somber and solemn tone. When he asked what the book was about, Ilya told him it was a novelty book with dirty jokes, it had been a gag gift from his new coach at the Centaurs.

It was the first time Shane had laughed since seeing the video.

"There are illustrations too, you want to see?"

He laughed harder.

The second time he laughed was when he tried to teach Ilya yoga and the Russian lost his balance and rolled off the dock into the lake.

It helped him realize how far he had come, that he was able to laugh already. He is far enough along in his recovery that he has the mental resources to combat the worst, most self-loathing of his thoughts. If Ilya had told him about the video any sooner in his journey, Shane thinks it probably would have ruined him; definitely would have cost him the cup. But he has both feet on solid ground now and as much as the video left him shaken, he is still standing.

He isn't mad at Ilya and Hayden for keeping the secret as long as they did, nor does he regret knowing the answer now. It isn't the answer he wanted, but it is better than not knowing.

That realization convinced him he has to tell his parents.

He had decided that morning and went to find Ilya to tell him right away.

"I'm going to tell them today," Shane had declared.

Awkwardly, Ilya was in the middle of brushing his teeth. But he smiled a frothy smile at him. After rinsing his mouth he offered to come with and Shane gratefully accepted.

"Hey, boys," Yuna says, beaming a smile at them as they walk up the steps now. She pulls Ilya into a hug and doesn't let go. Rubbing his back, she says: "I made spaghetti."

"I love you," Ilya says easily.

"Mom," Shane chimes in as he takes his turn to get hugged, "I told you, we're not staying for dinner."

"We'll see," she says with a grin.

"Hey, Dad."

"Boys. Come on in."

They all shuffle through the cramped living space and find a seat at the table.

Shane fidgets with his fingers in his lap, unseen under the table, as his mom gets everyone coffee. All the while she's rambling on about all the reactions she's been getting from her friends and the whole family about her son being a three-time, consecutive cup winner.

"I have to be frank," David cuts in, "half the time she brings it up herself."

"Well, *excuse me* for being proud of my son's achievements." Yuna seats herself across from Shane.

Before she can continue recounting all the times she's bothered cashiers, uber drivers, and wait staff by boasting about Shane's victory, David asks the two men: "How have you boys been enjoying the first week of your break?"

"It's been good," Shane says tersely. Although he's committed to telling his parents about what happened to him and he's convinced it's the right decision, the building nerves make it a challenge to even just engage in small talk.

"We have fun," Ilya takes over. With the widest, cheekiest grin he shares: "I like the jet skis."

"Oh, yes, those are fun," David agrees.

"Just be careful with those on choppy water. Bouncing on those things could really hurt your back," Yuna says.

It's like the room's temperate drops to below freezing in a split second as Shane realizes: *this is it*. No longer does it feel like a balmy summer day, it feels like a frosty winter night in Boston. He can practically feel the snowflakes prick his skin. "My back is fine, Mom."

"Oh, I know. You can't win a cup with a bad back," she says with a wink, but she slips into a more concerned motherly tone as she continues: "But those kinds of injuries can play up again when you least expect them."

"There's nothing wrong with my back," Shane barks and he regrets his tone because he has no right to be frustrated. The only reason she can't stop bringing up his back problems is because he lied to her and told her he had a herniated disk to begin with. He can't blame her for taking his word for it and being concerned.

He can't blame her for trusting him.

A queasiness swirls in his stomach. First he lied to them about being gay. Then he lied to them about his injuries. They're so proud of him for what he has achieved, when they have every right to be mad and deeply disappointed.

"I'm sorry," he offers when both his parents look at him in confused silence. He scrubs his face with his hands. "Sorry, I need a second," he mutters into his palms. And a second is all he gives himself. He puts his hands on the table, lacing his fingers together. When his mother reaches out to put her hand on his, he sits back and slides his hands into his lap. "No, don't."

“Ok.” Yuna throws a concerned glance at her husband.

“I never hurt my back,” he starts, watching both their brow lines furrow into frowns. “Ilya didn’t injure me. That was just a lie we told the press to explain my absence. To hide what really happened.” He casts his gaze down, finding it impossible to maintain eye contact with his parents.

“What do you mean, what really happened?” There’s hurt in her tone at being sold the same lie as they did the press, but it’s merely an undercurrent to a fear that makes her voice waver ever so slightly.

When Shane is silent too long, unable to speak, Yuna asks Ilya what’s going on.

“Is Shane’s story. He will tell.” He scoots his chair closer to Shane and puts his hand on the back of Shane’s chair.

He nods and clears his throat. “I couldn’t play for six weeks because I had broken my hand and dislocated my shoulder.”

Both parents blink in unison, shocked at the news.

“How? What happened?” David asks when, for once, Yuna can’t find her voice, as if her motherly instincts are telling her all the worst case scenarios already.

“After the game in Boston, I went out and I was... attacked.” His mouth tightens at the word. It’s not the right word, it’s not the word he planned on using, but it was the word that came out anyway.

“*Attacked?*!” Yuna’s eyes widen and her gaze darts frantically between the two young men. She asks Ilya: “Were you with him?”

“No, Mom,” Shane jumps in before she can get back to her old habit of blaming Rozanov. “I was alone. Ilya and I, we weren’t- at that time. I went... *out*.”

After a beat the two parents figure out what he means and they exchange a quick look to confirm the other had caught on too.

“Was it a hate crime?” Yuna asks through gritted teeth, already angry at the idea.

When Shane had come out to them late last year, one of the many emotional reactions his parents had was fear of him encountering homophobes, considering the hyper masculine circles he moves around in. Yuna told Shane that his entire life she’d been worried about him suffering racial violence, especially when he rose to fame in such a Caucasian-dominated sport. Him being gay made her all the more afraid for his safety.

Shane covers his mouth to hide the grim, reactive quirk of his lips at her worrying about homophobes bashing him, when it is so far from the reality. Once he has schooled his expression, he lowers his hand again. “No mom, it wasn’t a hate crime.”

The way her shoulders relax with relief, suddenly has him blurting out the words, before she gets too comfortable and he'll lose the nerve.

"I was raped."

It comes out wrong. It comes out casual. But he feels disconnected from it, like he's telling them about something mundane that happened to another person. Not something life-altering that happened to him.

The two parents sit frozen in disbelief.

Shane doesn't know how much time passes. He doesn't think his heart beats even once, but that might be because it sits high up in his throat, constricted.

Yuna's breath hitches with a squeak. The eyebrows that were raised high in surprise slant down in the deepest expression of sadness he has ever seen.

He swallows and at least it sends his heart back in the right spot and he can talk again, but only if he doesn't look at them.

But there's no place for him to rest his gaze to disassociate. Everything in this cottage has a memory tied to it. This is where he spent the summers of his childhood. Not to mention the place is like a museum to him; the walls are covered with pictures of him and old jerseys. It's all the memories of him that his parents treasured and now he's given them this horrible memory that casts an ugly shadow on all of it.

So with his gaze affixed to the edge of the table, he rambles: "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have blurted it out like that. And I'm sorry for lying. But I couldn't tell you yet. I wasn't ready. I had to sort through some stuff. I know it's not my *fault*, but it wouldn't have happened if I wasn't gay. I was scared you'd be mad. Or maybe disappoint-"

"Shane." Ilya stops him with a tender touch to his arm.

Shane's gaze darts up at Ilya. His boyfriend nods across the table. Shane looks over at his parents.

They're both crying. His mom's shoulders are shaking with barely contained sobs.

When she leaps up from her chair, he flinches and reactively gets up. He thinks she might walk away, but she doesn't bolt for the door. She walks around the table and throws her arms around him and pulls him against her tightly. With her hand at the back of his head she guides his face into the crook of her neck and he shrinks himself to fit against her smaller stature.

"My boy. My perfect boy," she cries as her other hand rubs his back.

Without warning, he starts to cry. He hadn't even felt the onset. It suddenly erupts out him. He goes weak against her and she adjusts her stance to hold more of his weight as he leans on her.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you," she says into his hair.

He croaks out: "I fought, Mom. I promise I fought."

"Oh, sweetheart." She surprises him with his strength when she somehow manages to hold him even tighter than she already was. "I know you did. I know how strong you are."

That feels like the best compliment, coming from her and it lifts a weight off his shoulders that only she could lift.

"I got you, my boy. You are safe." Her words sound like a lullaby.

"I shouldn't have lied to you."

"Shhh. You did what you had to do to make it through. And you did, right?" She pulls away only far enough to cup his face in her palms and study his features. "You made it through?"

"I think so. Yes. I think so."

She wraps her arms around him again. "I'm proud of you, Shane. I'm *so infinitely proud* of you."

Shane loses track of time again. He lets himself be rocked back and forth in his mother's arms as she tells him over and over how much she loves him.

When they finally part, she first dries his cheeks before drying her own.

Shane turns and sees a sight that makes his heart flutter.

His dad is hugging Ilya. They're holding onto each other for dear life, rocking side-to-side just like Shane and Yuna had.

Ilya catches his gaze over David's shoulder and detaches himself.

A second later, Shane is wrapped up in his dad's arms and Shane watches as his mom latches onto Ilya.

He wishes he had told them sooner, because he feels wonderfully light, for the first time in half a year.

They stay and eat spaghetti and Shane feels like a young boy again, at home and at ease.

+++

ONE WEEK LATER

+++

It's the first time Shane and Ilya have been apart in two weeks and it's a taste of what to come.

It tastes vile.

Even though Ilya playing for the Centaurs in the upcoming season means they will get to spend much more time together than when they were rivals for the Raiders and the Metros, it won't be enough. The two weeks at the cottage have shown Ilya that he can never get enough of Shane.

Fuck, they've been apart for barely two hours and Ilya's nerves are already fried. His whole body aches for Shane. He wants his weight spooned against him. He wants to feel his naked skin stick to his, a little sweaty in the morning after a warm night. He wants the sweep of his breath across his chest. He wants the tickle of his ever-longer hair under his chin. He wants the scent of his shampoo to fill his nose. He wants to hear him make those small, content sounds he makes when he's waking up but doesn't want to.

"Rozanov, you with us?" Coach Wiebe waves a hand in his face.

Ilya blinks out of his stupor. "Sorry."

I am addicted to Shane, he thinks and he should be concerned but he's not.

The coach is introducing him to his new teammates. The Centaurs do things very differently from the Raiders. They seem close-knit and friendly. The season kicks off tomorrow but Ilya was invited to come meet everyone the day before and "break the ice" – yes, pun intended, Wiebe clarified over text. There's a barbeque later today and all the WAGs are invited. Shane badgered him to stick around for it, to make a good impression. But Ilya has already made up an excuse to bow out and surprise Shane by coming home early so they could fully enjoy the last evening of their summer break.

The Centaurs look at him the way little kids look at superheroes. One of them asked him earlier to sign his cap. Ilya politely refused, saying: "Soon we will all be cup winners and you be much less impressed with me." He used the term "soon" loosely.

There's some up-and-coming talent among them but they've never had a player of his caliber on the team and they are openly shocked that he voluntarily traded his spot in Boston for Ottawa. When they ask him about that decision, he has no sincere answer for them. Because he can't tell them he just wants to fall asleep and wake up next to Shane Hollander as much as possible. So his joking reply is that he likes a challenge and they accept that with a lighthearted laugh.

They seem like a good bunch and Ilya gets the sense that he made the right call for more than just his relationship.

He remembers that when Shane came out in his MVP speech, afterwards, a lot of the people who surrounded him and fawned over him were Centaurs. Ilya didn't catch a single snide remark when they splintered off, they were only ever in awe of how 'fucking brave' *Shane Hollander* is.

"Are you sure I can't convince you to stay and have a burger with us?" Wiebe tries as he walks him back to the parking garage.

"Sorry, I have plans."

The man nods. “Ahhh. I get it. Getting a head start on breaking hearts in Ottawa, huh?”

Ilya smiled at him. “I hope not.”

“Oh? Someone serious? You should bring her along for the next barbeque.”

All Ilya can really do is chuckle evasively.

“Sorry. Sorry. We’re a bit too familiar here. That might not be your style, I respect that. Call me out on it, ok, I don’t mean to overstep.”

“Hopefully, one day, it be my style,” Ilya quips meaningfully. With a press of the button on his car key he unlocks the door, then idly plays with the front door key of the cottage. He can’t wait to get back.

Wiebe takes a good look at the car and whistles like he’s looking at a pretty woman. “Why do I suddenly get the sense you agreed to a low-ball offer?”

The other cars in the garage are nice; expensive luxury cars. This was still an MLH team, after all. But none of the cars quite measure up to Ilya’s one-of-a-kind Italian sportscar. It’s the only car of his extensive collection that he kept.

“Don’t worry about my salary. I got something out of transfer that, how do you say?” Ilya makes a vague gesture while sporting a cheeky smile. “Sweetens the pot? I’m very happy.”

Wiebe laughs. “She sounds like a keeper.”

Before he says too much, Ilya extends his arm and they shake hands. “See you tomorrow, coach.”

“See you tomorrow.”

He slips into his car and grins at how Wiebe gives him the thumbs up in appreciation when the engine rumbles to life.

It’s about an hour long drive back to the cottage. It’s a beautiful, winding road, but even with his beautiful car he doesn’t enjoy it. Every minute is too long. He can’t wait to see the look of surprise on Shane’s face when he comes home early. The Montreal captain will pretend to give him grief for skipping on a team-bonding experience, but he won’t be able to hide how happy he really is to have Ilya to himself.

At the first traffic light, his phone buzzes in his pocket. He has to undo his seatbelt to get it out. It takes a while and it alarms him that the buzzing doesn’t stop. The person calling *really* needs to get a hold of him and that’s not a good sign. He curses in Russian as the light goes green while he’s fumbling with his hand in his pocket. The car behind him honks, just once. So politely. So Canadian.

He’s too distracted to respond. Too focused on his phone.

The light goes red again but Ilya doesn't bother holding up a hand in apology for the driver behind him.

Shane is calling him.

He feels his heart hammering in his throat. He might choke on it.

He puts the phone to his ear.

“Baby?”

+++

HALF HOUR EARLIER

+++

Shane is fresh out of the shower but slips on one of Ilya's T. shirts that was headed for laundry. He doesn't bother with underwear and steps into his blue shorts.

Ilya is away for a few hours, getting acquainted with his new team. Shane hopes he successfully convinced Ilya that the thought of being without him doesn't make him crazy. Doesn't make him do gross, lovesick shit like put on the shirt his boyfriend had been wearing for two days straight because it smells like him.

Barefoot he walks through to the cottage to the closet by the door, where he had put away his duffel bag after unpacking. That was two weeks ago. The idea of having to pack up later tonight makes him feel like a kid again, on the last day of summer break, dreading school the next day.

He's not going to get to packing quite yet, but he does pull his bag off one of the top shelves.

It's not entirely empty.

He'd smuggled something with him from his apartment in Montreal. Just in case. Luckily, Ilya hadn't found it in the meantime, because he'd be full of concern and say it's too soon. And up until today Shane thought he'd probably be right. But since this morning something has been thrumming in his veins. It's something he used to feel all the time in Ilya's presence, *before*, but now it is his imminent absence that had seemingly triggered it.

For lack of a better word: he's horny.

Not until he had jerked off in the shower only to find it did nothing to satisfy him, did it dawn on him that he is a very *specific kind of horny*.

Shane delves his hand into the inside compartment of the duffel bag and produces the velvet pouch that contains his dildo. He had packed it with the hope that he might feel this type of horniness again.

What he really wants is for his boyfriend to fuck him, but he doesn't want a repeat of past incidents when he thought he was ready only to discover that he was very, very much *not*. The blow job that left him puking on the floor. The phone sex that had him wrecking his apartment. Those times were traumatizing for both himself and Ilya. This time, he is going to run an experiment.

There is some trepidation ricocheting in his chest as he walks back to the bedroom.

What if the experiment is a failure and he has a panic attack? He doesn't like having a panic attack with Ilya around, but he definitely doesn't like having one without him around either. Still, it's something he must risk. He needs to know if he's ready and this is the best way he knows how without scaring Ilya out of laying a hand on him again for the foreseeable future.

In the bedroom he presses the button to activate the automated blinds and as they lower he climbs onto the bed and gets settled at the center. He puts the hefty velvet pouch next to him and retrieves the lube from the nightstand drawer.

He sits and waits for the blinds to touch the floor. They don't completely black out the room, so he can still see, but it's cozier and more secure this way.

He leans back against the pillows and, embarrassingly, turns his head to touch his nose to his shoulder, so he can breathe in Ilya's scent that clings to the shirt. He runs a hand down from his neck, over his chest and then over his abdomen. The cotton feels nice under his palm and beneath it his skin warms to the touch. He glides the hand back up, brushing over a nipple now and it perks up in response. He focuses his touch there, rubbing the sensitive spot through the shirt with two fingers.

A gasp escapes him and he tilts his head back against the headboard. His cock firms in his shorts in reaction to him pinching and rolling his nipple between his fingers. The shirt is a barrier but the fabric adds a delicious friction to the touch.

He thinks of Ilya and imagines how Ilya would touch him.

He would grip my hair, he concludes and promptly delves his fingers into his locks, tugging ever so slightly in a way that makes his scalp tingle. Little sparks that set his brain alight.

Ilya loves his longer hair, Shane can tell. In all honesty, he had only started growing it out because when he looked in the mirror he wanted to see a different Shane from the Shane he was *that night*. So he could pretend he was a different person that none of that had ever happened to. But now... Shane just likes it too. Not really for his looks, but for how it feels when Ilya pets a hand through it, or when he grabs a handful while they kiss. Ilya is always gentle with him, still afraid of triggering bad memories. But Shane yearns for him to twist his fingers in his hair and pull his head back to ravish his throat while he fucks into him hard.

He tugs on his own hair a little harder and whines.

His cock is fully hard now, straining against his shorts. He splays his thighs open, making room for Ilya as if he was there to climb onto the bed and settle between his legs where he wants him.

He lets go of his hair to palm over his dick, rubbing it through the shorts. His other hand slips under his shirt to find the other nipple and thumb over it, treating it to the same ministrations as he did the left one. He moans unabashedly and bucks his hips up into his palm.

“Fuck. Ah...”

Phase one of the experiment is definitely a success, so he strips off his shorts and breathes in relief to have his cock freed. He considers taking off the shirt but decides against it. He pushes it up his chest and bunches it under his armpits, so he can touch his chest but still greedily touch his nose to the fabric over his shoulder and breathe in Ilya's scent.

He should be embarrassed, but all he is, is so fucking turned on that nothing matters to him.

He runs a finger through the slit of his cock and he can hear Ilya tease him for how wet he always gets. Or maybe it's not a tease. Maybe it's praise.

His finger glistens when he lets go of his dick and a thought pops up in his head.

Ilya would lick it.

Without second-guessing how this fantasy is supposed to work when it's just him, by himself, he sucks the index finger into his mouth and moans. The taste is soon gone but he adds his middle finger into his mouth and sucks on both just because it feels good on his tongue. When he releases his fingers they're dripping with his saliva and he slips that hand between his legs, taking his cock in his left hand. He strokes it absentmindedly as he touches his fingers to his hole and as soon as he does a moan rips out of him and he throws his head back against the headboard with a thud.

It reminds him of Magnus slamming his head back against the brick wall. Hard enough to crack his skull and leave him concussed.

But as soon as that thought appears, it's gone again like it was never there. It vanishes like smoke.

He reminds himself what Dr. Emma told him, it's natural that sometimes he still remembers. He doesn't have to overthink those memories or give them any attention that will make them linger.

He lets it all slip from his mind.

His dick pulses in his loose fist, not discouraged. Pre-cum leaks down the shaft. He rubs his fingers over his rim, feeling it clench and unclench.

Ok, ready for the next phase.

He scoots down the bed to lay flat and pours a generous amount of lube into his palm. Rubbing his hands together gets them both slick and warm up the lubricant. He switches his hands: right on his cock, left between his legs. One hand strokes his length from root to tip, palming over the crown every time. The fingers of his other hand he works into himself one

at a time, until he's clenching around three of them, having them as deep inside him as they'll go.

He's tossing his head on the pillow. Moans tumble freely from his lips. He's been fingering himself more often again lately, with great success. But never quite as good as the one time, recently, when Ilya fucked him with his fingers and made him come with his cock untouched.

Fingers are good. The stretch is nice and the stimulation to his prostate is precise and focused.

But he wants more. He craves that fullness and the constant pressure against that sensitive spot inside of him. Paired with the weight of Ilya's body on top of his. Ilya's hot breaths and moans in his ear. The expert caresses of his big hands.

For now, for the purpose of the experiment, the toy will have to do. The rest he will have to imagine.

He opens the pouch and lets the blue dildo land on the mattress with a bounce. He wipes his forearm along his mouth, thinking he might be drooling at the thought of sucking the hefty toy into his mouth, wetting it with his saliva instead of lube. The weight on his tongue would feel so good... But he decides he's too impatient. So he coats it generously with lube and while his mind is buzzing he reminds himself that he needs to take it slow. Even though he stretched himself well, with three fingers, it's been a long time since he's had something bigger inside of him.

One knee he draws up to his chest, hooking a hand behind it to hold the leg in place. It angles his pelvis just right. The other leg he keeps extended, but with the thigh to the side, foot kicked towards the edge of the bed.

He sobs in relief when the blunt tip of the toy touches his opening. After a deep breath, he applies more and more pressure and revels in the sensation of his rim slowly stretching to accommodate the silicone cock. When the head is inside of him, he pauses again. *Slow*, he reminds himself, even though his arm trembles with the suppressed need to ram the toy inside of him.

An inch at a time he pushes it inside, halting whenever he clenches around it so tightly it won't budge anyway.

The toy is big. It's not the same toy as the first one he ever bought, but his dildos have always been big. Big like Ilya. He remembers how delirious he felt when he got ready to use a toy for the very first time, when he was just eighteen years old. He never thought of using something like that on himself. Until that night he put his mouth on Rozanov's cock and he knew exactly what he wanted with sudden clarity. So he got a toy about the size of the dick that he'd held between his lips. It felt even bigger in his ass than in his mouth. But even better too. Since then, he always bought the near exact same toy. Same color too. Even though it was always cleaned properly, it seemed hygienic to replace it once every couple years. When he confessed that to Rozanov – back when Ilya was still Rozanov to him – the Russian had laughed at him and said:

“Yes, of course you replace. You use so much you wear it down to a nub.”

He did use it a lot. *Fuck*, he used it so often. It was the only thing that kept him from going *crazy* in the long stretches between seeing Rozanov in random hotels.

But now, the friction and the fullness wasn't keeping him from going crazy, it was the thing driving him crazy.

Once it was fully settled inside of him he let go of the base and just let it sit so he could feel it, squeezing his intimate muscles around it.

His head tosses left to right.

It's so good.

Oh thank God.

He treats his cock to a few strokes with his slick hand but has to stop and bite down on his bottom lip as the pleasure edges him dangerously close to orgasm already. He supposes that makes sense, with how long it's been since he's felt this good.

Shane turns over and sits up on his knees. He grasps the base again and eases the toy out of him until his rim only barely clutches onto the crown. The other end of the dildo is against the mattress, providing it leverage. He lets go of it and puts the hand back on his dick, only to hold the shaft. His other hand cups his chest. He pays no special attention to his nipple but electricity still arcs from that sensitive spot as his rough palm rubs against it while he squeezes his pec like Ilya would. He lowers his hips down to the bed, sinking into the toy, as if he's straddling Ilya and sinking down on his cock.

“Oh, fuck!” His dick twitches in his loose fist.

With the toy deep inside of him again he lets himself fall forward. Now he has his face and chest into the mattress and his ass up high. He fantasizes that the toy is Ilya's cock. He imagines his hands on his hips, gripping him hard. It's been so long but the memory is crystal clear. He can feel it. It's no surprise. They've done it so often over the years, that sensation of Rozanov's big hands holding him while he fucks him is ingrained in his nerve endings.

With his left hand he reaches around and moves the dildo in and out of him in shallow thrusts. It's not how Ilya would fuck him. Ilya's thrusts would be deep and hard. But this is all he can manage himself if he doesn't want to spill his load on the sheets right away.

And he doesn't. He wants to enjoy this.

It's a very successful experiment.

He can't wait to tell Ilya. He can't wait to tell him that he fucked himself with his dildo and it felt *so good*. And as soon as he's told him, he'll ask him to fuck him. Because he's ready. He's so fucking ready!

He's aware he is sporting a stupid grin but he can't wipe it off his face.

A thought occurs to him: *why wait to tell him?*

He takes his hand off his cock. It's not doing much anyway. It doesn't need to be doing much. The stimulation to his prostate has him rock hard and dripping pre-cum on the sheets between his spread knees. He wipes his hand on his thigh to get most of the lube off and pries his phone out of the pocket of his shorts that lie next to him.

While navigating to Ilya's name in his phone, he has to clench his hand into a fist as he clenches his hole. He hums riding a wave of pleasure that nearly crests into a climax.

Just from haphazardly jostling a dildo up my ass, he thinks to himself and he chuckles.

It's gonna be so good when Ilya fucks him tonight.

He starts the call and puts the phone on speaker, then returns that hand to his body, touching himself restlessly. A stroke to his cock. A pinch to his nipple. Squeezing an ass cheek. Scratching blunt fingernails along his thigh.

The phone rings over and over and Shane worries he's going to come before Ilya picks up.

Fuck, he probably can't pick up, surrounded by his new teammates.

Shane lets it ring anyway. It'll go to voicemail soon enough and then he'll leave him a dirty message for his boyfriend to listen to later.

But when he finally hears Ilya's voice, it's not the pre-recorded outgoing message.

"Shane?"

In the back of his head he's distantly aware that Ilya sounds alarmed, so much so even he can tell, even now. But hearing that voice say his name, he can't form a coherent reply. He can't tell him he's ok. All he can do is set free the moan that bubbles out of him.

"Ohhh baby..." Ilya's voice loses that sharp edge of concern. He moans too.

Fuck. Oh, hearing him moan is dangerous right now.

"Are you making yourself feel good, baby?" His boyfriend coos.

"Yes." He groans. "Yes, so good." He presses his face into the bed to quiet a shout that rips out of him. When he turns his head back to the phone, he says: "I'm fucking myself..." He doesn't mean to pause for dramatic effect, he just has to swallow thickly. "...With my dildo."

"Shane..." He grits out a Russian curse.

Before Ilya can worry about anything, Shane moans: "It's so good, Ilya." A sob hiccups out of him. "I've missed it so much."

"I know, love."

“I miss your cock.” His voice goes up in pitch but he’s way beyond embarrassment.

“It misses you too,” Ilya responds with a cheeky laugh.

“I want it. Mmm... I want it, tonight. I want you to- to fuck me. I want it so much,” he rambles.

“I’ll be home soon, baby. I’ll fuck you good. Hm?”

“Ah! Yeah.” He grabs his cock again and strokes himself in earnest. “I’m close.”

“Good. Make yourself come for me, sweetheart.”

“Tell me,” he squeaks, “tell me how you’re gonna fuck me.”

“I’ll fuck you just how you need,” Ilya purrs easily. *“Hard and deep. Your body will be so ready for me, after you’ve fucked yourself like this. I won’t even need to stretch you.”*

Listening to Ilya talk, his moans get loader and loader until he can’t even make out his words anymore.

Finally, after lasting longer than expected, he comes with a cry that he doesn’t bother to muffle with the sheets. He makes sure the toy is as deep inside of him as it will go and clenching around it keeps the pressure on his prostate throughout his orgasm, which feels like it lasts forever.

“Sound so sexy, my baby. Fuck. Shane.” The way he’s grunting, it sounds like he’s close to the edge himself.

“I can’t stop. It’s not stopping,” he whines pathetically, riding out wave after wave. His cock has stopped spurting and there’s a mess on the sheets that he has to bend his head to look at and confirm that he did indeed come, because his *need* isn’t subsiding like it normally does after orgasm.

He still feels like there’s more. He still feels like he’s chasing release. He feels delirious.

He begins thrusting the toy in and out of himself again. He’s so overstimulated, but in the best way. “Ah! Oh, God! Ilya! I’m- I’m-!”

“Jesus, Shane...”

“I’m gonna-! Again!” The second orgasm has his whole body locking up. While it feels like it’s ripping out of him, his cock only leaks a little more come over his fists as he works it over himself. Makes sense, with how much was on the sheets below him already. It’s no less intense though. It has his toes curling, his spine curving, and his eyes scrunching shut to see stars.

With a groan that half sounds like Shane’s name, Ilya comes too.

He inches his face closer to the phone, enjoying the subdued sounds Ilya makes. It occurs to him Ilya probably needs to be mindful of people possibly overhearing him. No, not just people, his *new teammates*.

Fortunately for Shane, he was too blissed out in the moment to freak out about ruining Ilya's first impression with the Centaurs.

He heavily rolls onto his side, the toy still buried within him. He's in no rush to take it out. He puts the phone on the pillow by his face.

They both take their time catching their breath.

When Shane can finally feel his arms again, he carefully slides the toy out of him. He means to put it on the bed but it rolls off and falls to the floor with a heavy, wet thud.

Another thing he can't be bothered to care about now.

"Was that ok?" Shane thinks to ask. His mind is still comfortably foggy.

Ilya laughs deliriously. "*Was it ok?*" He mirrors with an incredulous tone. "*Shane, it was-... I have no words.*" Then, after a beat, he whispers: "*Everything. Was everything.*"

"No, I mean... You're still at the rink, right?"

Another laugh. "No, I'm in my car."

"Your car?"

"*I left early. I'm on my way home. I'm literally parked right by a-*" he pauses, seemingly to check his surroundings, "*right by a Dollarama, whatever fuck that is.*"

Shane rolls onto his back with laughter. "Oh my God! Ilya! What if somebody saw you?!" Ilya doesn't exactly have a car that blends right in in a Dollarama parking lot, or anywhere in Canada or the world at large really. But thankfully all windows except for the windshield are tinted. That is at least something.

"Some guy notice car, but I do not think he knows there was someone inside." He chuckles breathlessly. "I do not care anyway. Was too good. You was too good." His voice drops low as he praises him.

Shane hums and bites his lip. His whole body still vibrates from the double orgasm. He had never experienced something like that before. He closes his eyes, enjoying the way the pleasure sits warm in his belly.

"You nap," Ilya commands. "I will be home soon to fuck you."

"Mhm."

He grins. He can't wait.

+++

45 MINUTES LATER

+++

Ilya still gets giddy whenever he uses the key to unlock the front door of the cottage. But especially now. He's so eager he barely remembers to toe off his shoes in the hallway before crossing through the living space to the master bedroom.

The room is softly lit by the sunlight that filters through the blinds. Shane lies on his stomach on the bed. The top sheet has been kicked to the floor at the top of the bed. It's warm enough that he doesn't need it and Ilya can imagine what a mess he would have made of those sheets, coming twice. The blue toy is on the floor.

He pauses in the doorway to take in the sight of his boyfriend.

Shane is only wearing a T. shirt. One of *Ilya's* T. shirts, he notes. That realization makes possessiveness flare in his belly like the kind of burning heat to your tongue when you drink coffee that's too hot. His bare ass cheeks and slightly spread thighs look delectable and Ilya wants to burn his mouth on *those*.

He approaches the bed and picks up the toy to put it on the nightstand. It seems like too much of an insult to leave it discarded on the floor after it did Shane and Ilya one hell of a service.

The mattress dips when Ilya puts his knee on it. He moves slowly, crawling towards Shane, smiling as he hears his boyfriend hum and come to. He strokes a hand from one shoulder to another, feeling the relaxed muscles under the shirt. He drapes himself over Shane's body, which is boneless underneath him.

Shane is awake but yet to open his eyes. He laces his fingers together with Ilya's and sighs contently at the full body contact and the way Ilya is nosing along the shell of his ear and then placing kisses on the side of his face that isn't pressed into the pillow.

"Are y'gonna fuck me now?" Shane slurs, wiggling his hips under Ilya.

Ilya's breathy chuckle must have been warm in Shane's ear and he shivers in response. "In a minute, baby" Ilya coos. He pets his hand through his silky hair. "How do you feel?"

"Mmmm... good. S'good." He grinds his pelvis into the mattress, which also rubs his naked ass against Ilya. "I came twice," he mumbles.

"Da. I heard." His grin is audible in his tone of voice. He pauses to suck a mark onto the side of Shane's neck, reveling in his full-body tremble. "You have another one in you? Orgasm, I mean."

"Let's find out."

Ilya laps at the sore spot he created on Shane's skin and his boyfriend whimpers under the attention. But Ilya can't help but be cautious. "Are you sure it's not too soon?" He asks, letting

his lips brush the side of his neck with every word.

Shane smirks in a way that crinkles the corners of his eyes. “Scared of a challenge, Rozanov?” He thinks Ilya is questioning his ability to come a third time this late afternoon.

“Never,” he whispers, but rears his head up slightly to take his mouth away from Shane’s skin. After a thoughtful pause he clarifies: “I’m scared of scaring you.”

For the first time since Ilya came home and plastered himself to Shane’s back, his boyfriend blinks his eyes open.

Ilya leans his head over Shane’s shoulder to lay it on the pillow next to his, facing him, so they can look into each other’s eyes. But he keeps his weight pressed on top of Shane’s body. He takes a moment to kiss his lips, short and sweet and then keeps his face close enough that the very tips of their noses touch.

“You won’t scare me,” Shane whispers. He shifts closer ever so slightly, puckering his lips against Ilya. “You won’t hurt me.”

Ilya slides off him to lay on his side, but makes sure to stay close; keeps their noses together, their hands entwined, a leg possessively hooked over Shane’s. “Are you sure is not too soon?” He asks again, because last time Shane misunderstood the question.

“It’s been over half a year, Ilya,” Shane reminds him, gently.

“Only been two weeks since video.” He hates bringing it up, but he has to. He has to be sure that is the right thing, the right time.

Shane turns onto his side and scoots forward until the entire length of his body is pressed up against Ilya’s and they absentmindedly play with each other’s toes. “When you showed it to me, I didn’t think I could handle it...”

Ilya nods. He remembers Shane telling him as much, in that Vegas penthouse. Voice raw with emotion, his body vibrating like it was about to split apart on a molecular level.

“But I could. I can,” he assures him. “I have healed so much these past months, Ilya. The video *hurt*,” he swallows and momentarily closes his eyes, but when he opens them again, he is calm and sure, “but it didn’t open the wound back up. It would have if you had shown me sooner, but the wound is closed now. There’s just a scar there. A scar that I’ll always hate, a scar I’ll think about sometimes and still cry over,” he admits with watery eyes, “But it doesn’t split open anymore.” He cards his fingers through Ilya’s curls. “I could handle that video. If I can handle knowing the worst answer to my question. I feel like-” he smiles and it’s so bright and so warm it leaves Ilya starstruck, “-I can handle anything. As long as I have you.”

“You have me,” he vows, even before Shane has finished speaking.

While biting on his bottom lip Shane rolls Ilya onto his back and maneuvers on top of him with fluid motions. “Then let me *have* you,” he murmurs with a greedy gruffness to his voice. He dips his head down and latches his hot mouth onto the side of Ilya’s neck to suck a mark

there that mirrors his own. His hands slip under his shirt, gliding up his abdomen and chest, then back down, restless.

Ilya cups Shane's face and guides his mouth to his, locking them together in a kiss. The slide of Shane's tongue against his own is confident. He knows what he wants. Ilya is determined to give Shane *everything* he wants. Always.

Shane's lips leave his and the string of saliva that connects them breaks as he sit back, straddling Ilya. With a roll of his hips he grinds his ass against Ilya's crotch. Shane is already hard and Ilya isn't far behind, with his boyfriend looking so pretty and wanton on top of him.

"Yeah?" Shane asks.

Ilya's hands find their familiar spot on Shane's hips, like he's magnetized and his palms stick to him. "Yeah," Ilya agrees. He trusts Shane to know what he's ready for.

Shane closes his eyes and throws his head back in relief at knowing Ilya was going to give him what he wants.

Ilya moves one hand off his hipbone to tug at the hem of the shirt Shane is wearing. "Off. Want to see you."

The comply is instant. Shane strips it off and tosses it off the bed. The action leaves his longer hair tousled but he fixes it by running a hand through the silky locks and they easily fall into place. One hand covers Ilya's on his hip, the other skitters down his sternum and the midline of his abs to treat his leaking cock to a few strokes and thumb over the tip.

After he absentmindedly wipes his hand on his torso, under his right pec, leaving a glistening smear, Ilya surges upright and curves his spine to lick that spot of skin clean. He laps up the taste of him greedily and then moves his mouth up to suck on a nipple and worry it between his teeth.

"Ah!" Both of Shane's hands come up to hold Ilya's head in place, as if Ilya had any intention to stop. It's only after a long while that Ilya allows his lips to be redirected to the other nipple to treat it to the same loving attention.

His cock is painfully hard in his linen pants, which were perfect and airy for the hot weather, but were now restrictive and unforgiving with the fabric having zero stretch to accommodate his swollen length.

He doesn't stop licking, sucking, and kissing Shane's chest until he has to, when Shane scrambles to pry his shirt off him and pulls it over his head. The way he presses his nose into the bundle of fabric before tossing it aside and then grabbing Ilya's hair to yank his face closer and nose into his curls, has Ilya moaning. The sound gets swallowed by Shane when he pulls his head back by his hair and reconnects their mouths. They kiss until they are breathless, while Ilya alternates kneading the supple flesh of his ass cheeks, with lightly ghosting his fingers over the skin and trace the striped pattern of his stretchmarks.

Fuck, his ass is perfect. It's a thought he's had almost every day, often times multiple times a day, for nearly a decade now. But it still hits him like a revelation.

It takes willpower to move one hand. He grabs Shane's chin, firmly but not roughly, to interrupt their kiss. His boyfriend's amber brown eyes are blacked out by his dilated pupils as he stares at him with hooded eyelids. Holding his gaze, he puts two fingers to Shane's lips and Shane's hushed, honey-smooth tone when he says "I'm probably still wet" punches a groan out of him. But Shane does not object and with a hum he welcomes the fingers into his mouth. His eyelids flutter as he enjoys the sensation on his tongue, but he manages to keep looking at Ilya.

"Good boy," Ilya murmurs and presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth while Shane is sucking on his coarse fingers and moaning around them.

When he pulls his hand back, Shane chases his fingers and Ilya rewards him with a kiss instead. He brings his hand back around to his ass. He's grasping one ass cheek firmly, pulling the muscle aside enough that his two spit-slick fingers instantly find his hole.

"Still ok?" He asks.

An eager hum is his response.

Rather than tease him, he pushes his fingers right in, knowing he'll still be open from fucking himself with the toy. He does still feel wet too, from using an excess amount of lube, but Ilya wanted to be sure.

Shane's mouth opens wide with a moan and Ilya selfishly licks at his lips, his teeth, and tongue.

Ilya has mapped Shane's body so well that he knows all his favorite, most sensitive spots to press into and caress, but none more so than his prostate. He zeroes in on it. No pre-amble. It has Shane arching his spine and tipping his head back, exposing his throat so Ilya can suck another mark into the skin. He doesn't care that Shane will be back at practice tomorrow, just like him. He doesn't care that the Metros will see. Picturing how brightly Shane will blush only makes him suck harder.

Shane ruts his hips, fucking himself on Ilya's fingers and making his dick rub against the Russian Captain's washboard abs. Ilya fucking loves feeling the wetness of pre-cum on his skin.

The longer they continue, the more Shane squirms. With a hiss he attempts to scoot back and remove the friction from his cock, but Ilya won't let him, looping his arm low around his waist.

"*Ilya!* Mm!" His body shakes with effort as he holds himself still. If Ilya won't let him pull away, then at least he has to stop his rocking. The sensation to his erection being less intense if there's no motion.

Ilya grins and bumps his nose against Shane's Adam's apple. His fingers never relent.

“Ilya, I’m s-serious- I’m close,” he says through gritted.

“So? We know you can come twice.”

“Ah! I won’t. Not- Not *again*.”

Ilya knows that to be true and he has no intention of making him come right now. He just enjoys teasing him; bringing him close to the edge. He knows exactly how much Shane can take. He knows all his tells, better than Shane himself does. Yes, he’s close, but not as close as he thinks.

“Well then... if you want me to fuck you, you better not come,” he urges. He leans back and waits for Shane to look at him. When he does, he winks at him, to let him in on the game he’s playing.

“Fuck. *Fuck you*.” But in spite of himself, he smirks. He loves being toyed with like this. He loves a challenge; even in the bed he has a competitive streak.

Ilya licks into the hollow of his collarbone where droplets of sweat were gathering. “All of you tastes good,” he praises, noting how a simple, filthy compliment is enough to tighten the muscles around his fingers. “I’m thinking how to fuck you, so I can eat your cum later.”

“Fuck, Ilya.”

He continues to muse aloud: “Maybe you ride me until you come and we see if you can shoot all the way into my mouth? Mm? And then you lick all the rest off my chest but you do not swallow. No. You kiss me instead.” To emphasize his point, he captures his mouth in a wet kiss, licking into him and over his tongue like he would if he were scooping up his load.

“Mmmm, da, I like that. Licking your cum out of your own mouth.”

“*Jesus Christ...*” Shane’s cock bounces between them with a surge of arousal.

“Maybe is best I put you on your back when I fuck you. Fold you in half. You come on your own face. On your own tongue. Look so pretty. Taste so good. I drink it out of your mouth.”

Ilya knows damn well that by that time any thought of this plan will have slipped his mind and all he’ll want to do is kiss him while he fucks him through a toe-curling orgasm and Shane will want the exact same thing. But he loves riling up his boyfriend with filthy talk like this. He’ll make good on it one day, but not today.

The pitch of Shane’s moans changes until suddenly his breath hitches and he holds it and Ilya knows he’s reached the limit of what he can take. He doesn’t blame Shane for not giving another warning, the poor thing probably can’t form a coherent thought anymore. He slips his fingers out of him, massaging his buttocks with both hands now. He studies his gorgeous face as the tide of his arousal ebbs away slowly.

Shane lets out the breath he’d been holding and drops his face into the crook of Ilya’s shoulder. His hands are on his biceps, but barely holding on.

“Good boy,” the Russian drawls. “Very good.” He feels Shane’s cock throb against his abdomen in need of release.

Shane murmurs something against Ilya’s neck but it’s incoherent.

“Hm?”

“I said: *I am good*, but *you* are evil.”

A laugh bubbles out of him. “Da,” he agrees and he laughs harder when Shane shoves him back down to the mattress and pins him with his hands on his chest, leaning his weight on him.

He has that same glint in his eyes that he gets when he’s about to score a winning goal.

Ilya loves that glint.

“Your turn to suffer,” he announces with a smirk.

“Suffer?” Ilya quirks an eyebrow and pointedly glances down at Shane’s hard cock, the head red and glossy and a trail of pre-cum running down the underside of the shaft. He teases: “You do not look like you are suffering. Look like you are having good time.”

“Alright. Then I’ll show you a ‘good time’,” he fires back. He plants one kiss on his lips and then scoots down Ilya’s legs, stopping when he’s straddling his shins.

Realizing his intent, Ilya props himself up on his elbows so he can indulge in watching the show. He hisses as Shane unzips his pants and roughly yanks them down to mid-thigh. His heavy erection springs up and falls back onto his abdomen with an audible slap.

Shane sinks forward. The way he braces himself with his hands on Ilya’s hips has his weight pressing Ilya into the bed and keeps Ilya from reactively bucking up when he licks a strip up his cock and then sucks him into his mouth. Just as Ilya didn’t ease into fingering Shane, Shane doesn’t build up either. With the very first downward motion of his head, he’s deepthroating him and has Ilya shouting out his name.

They’ve done this before, *since*. A couple of times. But it’s different now. There’s a confidence and comfort that was missing before. They were both tentative and mindful – as they very much should have been. It was evident in the tightness in their bodies and the pinch to their facial expressions. But now, Ilya felt loose and boneless, sinking into the mattress under Shane’s weight. His boyfriend’s expression is peaceful and blissed out as he takes as much pleasure from the blowjob as he gives. His tongue and lips are a wonder. The vibrations of his moans a godsend.

Before long, Ilya is teetering on the edge of orgasm and he doesn’t even realize it until Shane suddenly releases him with a pop and tightly encircles the base of his cock with his fingers to help keep his climax at bay. They both watch his erection twitch and pulse and produce a bead of pre-cum that sits on the head.

Shane flicks his gaze up and waits for Ilya's love-drunk stare to lock with him and while holding eye contact, he licks up the droplet with just the tip of his tongue and swirls it over the tip.

"*Fuck.*"

Soon, that talented tongue flattens and treats him to stronger licks until he can't resist but take him into his mouth once more and it takes him about half the time to get Ilya to nearly come again only to deny him that final push over the edge and it has the Russian exclaim:

"Ok! Ok! It is suffering! I'm suffering! Please, Shane. Please, baby." It devolves into babbling: "Your mouth so sweet, but your hole even sweeter. Please, baby, ride me. Please..." He grasps at his hair, his shoulders, his arms, anything he can reach. "Please. I beg for no one but you. Only you."

Shane crawls back up his body and locks their lips together while he rocks his hips down into Ilya's, rubbing his cock against Ilya, made smooth and slippery by his own saliva.

Not much more time is wasted. Shane sits up over his pelvis and scoots into position.

"Wait. Wait," Ilya grounds out. His hand blindly searches the bed and finds the bottle of lube there.

Shane rolls his eyes yet manages to make it look soft and fond. "We're both *wet*." To prove his point he reaches back and rubs Ilya's spit-slick cock into the cleft of his ass, which does indeed still feel lubed.

"More." Ilya musters all he has to make his tone as commanding as he intended it to be.

With a grunt, Shane complies. Because Shane always complies when Ilya *commands* him. He makes a show of drizzling lube into his palm and then puts that hand behind his back again.

Ilya yelps and flinches when that hand wraps around him. The lube feels ice-cold against his burning skin. He curses in Russian, but there's no bite to it. He's quick to melt and warm up again from the inside out under Shane's coy stare.

Once Ilya's erection is coated in lube Shane strokes himself a few times to spread lube onto his shaft and under Ilya's confused gaze he grabs the bottle again and pours out even more directly onto Ilya's belly; another jolt of a cold sensation but it's like a single puff of a fire extinguisher on a wildfire.

Shane shifts into position and lines up Ilya's cock, but the Russian grips his hips tightly and holds him still. "Are you sure you still want? Still ok?"

Shane nods eagerly and attempts to sink down onto Ilya's length, but the grip Ilya has on him doesn't allow it.

"I need real answer, Shane. Please." His voice is firm.

His boyfriend regards him softly and adoringly. "I'm good, Ilya. I want this."

He exhales in relief, satisfied with his answer. His hold on his hips loosens, just keeping his fingers pleasantly dug into his flesh but not controlling his movement. "I want too. Want you so much."

"Then let me give myself to you," he whispers. His words are like throwing gasoline onto that fire.

Shane slowly sinks down onto his cock, savoring every inch as he goes.

Ilya looks up at him in reverence. The sight of him he enjoys even more than the physical pleasure. He doesn't understand how that is possible, because Shane feels *so good*, but he supposes that's just what loving someone does to you and he's not meant to *understand* it, only to experience it with gratitude. He slides a hand up Shane's abdomen to his chest, placing it flat over his sternum to feel his love's heart beating underneath; strong and steady. "I love you," he whispers and doesn't mind that his voice cracks.

Shane's eyes flutter open. Not until he is seated, taking all of Ilya inside of him, does he reply: "I love you too."

They hold still for a moment, cherishing this connection of their bodies after so long.

Time truly does not make any sense to Ilya. He reminisces about the past, when they would go months without even laying eyes on each other, much less hands, much less be united as one. With regret he remembers the time he ignored Shane for six months so he could pursue the cup to make up for Olympic loss. They went without contact almost as long as they had not had anal sex now, and those six months felt *long*, but also like the blink of an eye in comparison.

With a smile, Shane begins to move, rocking his hips back and forth in a slow, controlled rhythm.

A moan tears out of Ilya's throat and he repositions his hands back to Shane's hipbones, grasping them just so he can feel the expert roll of his pelvis.

Shane presses a flat hand down onto his cock, sandwiching his erection between his palm and Ilya's abs, sliding back and forth between the two as he fucks himself on Ilya's dick.

Ah. Realization dawns on Ilya. *This is why he put lube on my stomach.* He wonders what the coarse hairs of his happy trail feel like to the underside of Shane's shaft, drenched with lube.

It must feel good, too good, because it doesn't take long for him to remove his hand and sit back so his cock just bobs back and forth with his movements. Any direct stimulation would be too much. Shane's hands find Ilya's thighs behind him and he squeezes them as he uses them for leverage. His control shatters. The muscles of his own thighs flex under his skin as he puts his legs to good use, riding Ilya hard. His abdomen is tight, engaging his core. His chest heaves with deep breaths, each released in a moan, but he's never out of breath. His body is tireless in pursuit of pleasure.

This, Ilya has learned long ago, is the benefit of your lover also being a professional athlete; the power and the stamina is unrivaled.

“So pretty,” he grounds out and Shane preens under the praise. “How do you feel?”

Shane locks gazes with him. “Like I was made for this. Made for you.”

“You were,” Ilya asserts. “So perfect for me.”

Before long, Shane lurches forward and grabs Ilya’s shoulders. Like he’s performing a wrestling move, he surges his weight sideways and with the momentum he rolls them both over until Shane is the one on his back and Ilya is on top, without his cock ever slipping out of him. Shane locks his ankles behind the small of his back and yanks him down by the neck to sear a kiss to his lips.

“Fuck me, Rozanov,” he goads.

“Fucking hell, Hollander.”

Ilya plants his hands on either side of Shane’s head and unleashes his lust through brutal thrusts that have Shane keening. He knows neither of them will last long this way, but it doesn’t matter. He’ll only have to miss Shane for a little bit. They can steal weekends and nights off to be together. They don’t have to wait months anymore, like they used to. They can have this often. Not as often as either of them would want, but more often than ever before.

And maybe one day, when the Centaurs are worthy, Ilya will ask Shane to join *their* team, and they will be together on the ice and off the ice. They will never have to miss each other again.

Every thrust punches a cry out of Shane and each was shoving Ilya closer to the edge of his orgasm.

“Mmmm. Close. Fuck. Shane. I’m close.” He lets his head hang and looks down at where his dick is ramming into Shane and Shane’s erection is red and leaking onto his stomach. “Touch yourself. Make yourself come.”

Shane frantically shakes his head and when he moves his arms it’s only to put his hands above his head. “No. Ah! N-no, *you* make me come. Just like this. With your cock. Fu-ahh! Harder! Please!”

Ilya intensifies his thrusts beyond what he thought was possible. He fights to keep his eyes open and watch Shane’s face. Part of him yearns to kiss him but another part just wants to watch and that’s the part that wins.

He’s so beautiful.

“I’m co- Mmm! Ilya! Oh!” He throws his head back and scrunches his eyes shut. His back arches off the bed as he comes, painting his belly and chest with milky white. All the while, he shouts: “Oh! Thank you! Thank you! Ilya! Fuck. Ah! Thank you!”

His hole getting impossibly tighter drags Ilya over the edge and his vision whites out as his body rides the waves of it. Then with one final snap of his hips he makes sure he is buried deep and he collapses on top of Shane.

Immediately, Shane wraps his arms around him, locking him in place along with the hold his legs have on him.

They engage in a sloppy, open-mouthed kiss, sharing each other's breaths.

Shane's fingers are delicate and gentle as they card through Ilya's hair, in contrast to the power of his hands on the ice as they wield his hockey stick. In contrast to the power with which he fought *them*. This Shane was only for Ilya. Only Ilya gets his softness. He treasures it.

He pulls back, as far as Shane allows, which isn't very far at all. He drinks in the sight of him and it tastes sweet and feels warm. "Was good?"

There's a sparkle of unshed happy tears in Shane's eyes but in spite of that he gives a small shrug. "It was ok."

Ilya drops his head and exhales a chuckle into the soft, warm valley between Shane's pecs.

"I feel cheated," he continues to joke, "you were gonna lick my cum out of my mouth."

It doesn't happen often, but Ilya blushes. Shane just has the most unexpected effects on him. He rears his head back up, letting Shane see. It's adorable how his boyfriend looks proud of himself. But nothing compares to the pride Ilya feels for Shane. After a kiss, Ilya promises: "Next time."

"Next time," Shane agrees with a smirk.

Both with the understanding that next time would be soon.

Ilya enjoys the way the light feeling of happiness sits in his body, hovering within him, ticklish. Tenderly holding his gaze, he asks: "Now tell me. Seriously. Was good? You feel ok?"

"I'm good. We feel like us again. I feel like me again." Shane's eyes and voice go softer still. "You've etched me so beautifully, the cracks from when I was broken don't even show."

"*Etched?*" Ilya frowns as he tries the foreign word. He thinks he knows what Shane means, but the word is unknown to him and he wants to be sure. "I do not know-" He is interrupted by a kiss.

"I'll tell you later. Shower first." He adorably crinkles his nose and squirms under Ilya, their chests tacky with his release.

Ilya chuckles.

Yes, they are themselves again.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much reading this and for the many kind comments. I hope it was a sufficiently happy ending, you would certainly make me happy if you share your parting thoughts!

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