the games we play

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the games we play

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Summary

Shane is prepared for it, of course. After a million analyses, one thing is clear: following Rozanov's lead in the first part of the game gives him the best chance of winning.

So. That's what he does—he follows, and he hides a quiet grin in the collar of not his hoodie, seeing Rozanov furrowing his brows as he analyses Shane's movements with brutal ferocity, probably wondering why Shane is playing so passively.

Child chess prodigies Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov grow into being grandmasters. Their rivalry grows during chess tournaments and also makes them feel something more, especially since Rozanov somehow can quieten Shane's anxiety.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

the games we play

Ottawa, 2017 | International Chess Championship

The winds in Ottawa are incredibly cold.

Shane pulls the hood up to hide his face as he slides across the parking straight to the conference center where the tournament is being held. He doesn't immediately go in; instead, he pauses in front of the glass door and looks up at the grey sky above his head.

The pause is warranted—the tournament is important, not just because of its sheer magnitude, but also because of the stakes. Whatever the outcome of tonight is, it's bound to redefine his relationship with chess. And relationships in general.

"Hollander!"

Fuck.

He turns to face Hayden, the little shit of his friend wrapped in chaos. Hayden attacks him in a ferocious hug, making them both almost topple. Somewhat, it also makes Shane's mood slightly better, especially since Hayden is carrying a six-pack of ginger ale—*for him*.

"Hey."

"You were supposed to be here fifteen minutes ago."

"I needed time."

"Right. I forgot that chess players are little divas."

"I am not—"

Hayden makes a face before pulling Shane through the door, straight into the noisy corridor, where all the press and familiars and guests were already gathering. Shane squints at the onslaught of lights and unfamiliar smells; luckily for him, Hayden doesn't stop, but pulls him right into the registration table.

They know Shane, of course, but everyone has to show their ID and sign the papers before getting a boring badge on an equally boring lanyard. It's black, this time, and at least fits his yellow hoodie.

The players are assigned a conference room to rest between the games, so Shane wanders there to drink his ginger ale, leaning against the wall. He rarely interacts with other players, but he likes to watch them talk in little groups. As far as he can see, the groups are mostly formed by people of the same nationality, and he can even hear the chirping in various languages. The mood seems mostly amicable, but—

The chessboard isn't set up yet. The room is also void of another important player.

Shane hates himself for the fact that he's *looking* for him, that he feels a prickle of disappointment upon realising the mop of blonde hair is nowhere to be seen.

He squeezes the can tighter than necessary; the metal digs into his palms. He knows he really should be focusing on clearing his thoughts before the tournament, not filling them with the useless traces of his archrival, but—

He had to *focus*.

Having downed the rest of the ginger ale, he casts a look onto the board outlining the order of play. His first match is scheduled to start at twelve, so—fortunately or unfortunately—plenty of thinking time.

He checks the notifications on his phone. There are a few—one from his parents, wishing him good luck, another one from Hayden, also wishing him good luck, and the third—

The third one is from Rozanov.

LILY: I hope you're ready to lose.

What an asshole—

That's what he decides to say?!

Shane feels his blood boil over that simple sentence, utterly dripping with a typical for Ilya Rozanov arrogance.

With an angry huff, he closes the message, puts the phone on the air-plane mode, and drops it into the depths of his backpack. Nobody was going to destroy the tournament for him, not even *him*.

Ilya *fucking* Rozanov.

Shane raises his head precisely in the moment his archival enters the room.

Speak of the devil, of course.

He steps in with a straight back and equally straight face, his eyes only flickering when he meets Shane's gaze. Then, he has the audacity to *grin* and *wink*, and Shane's murder thoughts increase.

He has to see that stupid smirk disappear. He has to *win*.

He throws the ginger ale can into the trashcan and sneaks away, carefully avoiding slipping into Rozanov's proximity. The corridors are eerily quiet, but it perfectly fits Shane's agenda to quieten his mind.

The corner behind a very large monstera calls his name, so he slides to the floor behind the pot and carefully folds his knees. He leans his head against the wall, the hood sheltering his head from the coldness, and allows himself to close his eyes.

In his mind, he can see the chess pieces stepping onto the chessboard, and it makes his breath slow down and even out. He goes through the motions of the Sicilian Defence, the familiarity of it allowing him to drop into a flow state.

He's much calmer when half an hour later he appears in the game room to watch the matches. Still plenty of time left to his own game, but assessing other players gives him something to occupy himself with.

Hayden finds him with another ginger ale and they sit down on the couch, watching.

"Man, Hunter is on fire today. They are betting on him ranking well enough for top five. Maybe even win the tournament."

Shane raises a brow. "You think? He hasn't ever won."

"I know, he gets burnt out halfway through the tournament, but he seems to be doing pretty well today."

"Enough to pose danger to me?"

Hayden shakes his head.

"No, I don't think so. But I think he can take Rozanov out."

"Impossible. Rozanov is—*Rozanov*."

"Very eloquently put, Shane."

"Shut up," Shane groans. "You know what I mean. Rozanov is unbeatable. A cookie like Scott Hunter can't take him out. Fuck, I don't know if *I* can take him out. He won the last time we played."

"Optimistic."

"Well, it's the truth."

"Hollander, listen to me. You and Rozanov both have the perfect streak, and the tournament will boil down to a duel between you two, regardless of how all other players rank. You know it will. But it also means that you're equals. The chances of him beating you are the same as you beating him."

"Yeah. Like in Montreal three months ago."

"That was a different story." Hayden pats his arm. "Just play your best chess and you'll be fine."

Shane really tries to take Hayden's advice to heart, but it's incredibly hard to do so when the scoreboard announces Rozanov placing first with a perfect score—for now. The tournament isn't even halfway yet, but *Jesus Christ*. Shane knows first hand that Russians are ruthless, but this? This is a show-off.

He swears under his breath when the clock strikes twelve. He's invited to the first table, facing an opponent from Spain. The win is quick, easy, and fills him with the first drops of euphoria. It's a state he knows very well; it sharpens his senses and warps his thoughts only around chess, stopping all other stimuli from entering his mind.

He plays, drinks his ginger ale, and watches. He's also carefully avoiding casting any looks towards Rozanov, but he can always feel the energy the other man carries—it's impossible to miss even in a room full of players, mostly because Shane has gotten simply attuned to his presence.

He considers it his curse, that forsaken ability to locate one of the most important people in his life at any given moment. It lights up his skin with awareness, pulling him out of the blissful focus. He ends up grinding his teeth and pointedly looking away to turn his whole attention to the movements Scott Hunter is currently making.

The match is a bloodbath for both of the players—they both pull all the stops to win, and it looks like they've forsaken any subtlety by now. They've been at it for the past three hours, so —

Shane understands the burning need to win.

He eyes the scoreboard again. He's hot on Rozanov's tail, separated from him by mere points, and he still has two matches to play before the final showdown. This year's championship basically boils down to two best-ranking players—and Shane is more than ready to be one of them.

Really, he was planning to stay away from any of the Rozanov's matches, but he found himself curious about the game he's playing with Hunter, curious to see if Hunter can really disrupt Rozanov's streak.

He watches with his arms crossed from the stands, and shakes his head seeing the first mistake Hunter makes, letting the King's guard down. Rozanov takes advantage of that vulnerability, of course, his next move a part of the brutal strategy he's been slowly unfolding. It's an execution, really, an execution that Hunter is unable to stop. He can only move his pieces around the board, hoping to minimize the damage and maybe lead to a draw, but Shane can see in the relaxation of Rozanov's shoulders that Hunter has already lost.

Rozanov's checkmate is perfect. Shane has no notes, no corrections to make, but his mind runs on overdrive analysing the movements and the strategy Rozanov chose to defeat Hunter. He watches as the two opponents shake their hands, accompanied by bright applause, and calculates.

The truth is he knows all Rozanov's tricks intimately—but Rozanov also knows his. Unless someone trips or finds a hook, the game will be evened out.

Of course, he's been thinking and strategising for *months*, but he doesn't think it's enough time to come up with decent defence against someone who can disarm him with just one look.

Still.

After being destroyed by Rozanov, Hunter doesn't play well anymore. Shane finds no joy in cornering him and getting the upper hand on the board—it's like kicking a puppy that's already down. It brings him closer to his goal, though.

"Mr. Hollander, you'll be facing Mr. Rozanov in the final match."

Shane nods to the official, pulling his hood up high onto his head. The need to fiddle with the strings is almost comical, but he resists the urge till the official leaves him alone. Breathing is harder, now, even though he's thought about facing Ilya Rozanov in the finals for ages. It was the most probable outcome, after all, with both of them having similar rankings and going head to head straight for the grandmaster title, accolades and winning the sponsorships.

He can't loose this—not with Rozanov.

"You good, brother?"

Hayden finds him again, stepping out of the shadows like a ghost himself. Shane is grateful for it at the moment—he needs all the support he can get.

"Yes, just—"

"Panicking?"

Shane curses the fact that Hayden knows him so well, years of friendship allowing him to read Shane like a book. Not as good as Rozanov, but—

"It's just—I expected us to meet in the finals, but it still feels impossible to face him, you know? I know I am prepared and I have a chance, but—"

Hayden doesn't know the details of what went down six months ago, and Shane wasn't ready to share the details of his shame with anyone, but he knows the *gist*. And the gist is that *Ilya Rozanov is an asshole, fuck him*.

"That's okay, Shane. He doesn't get to dictate how you feel or what you do."

That's the problem, Shane thinks, because he can feel Ilya Rozanov etched into every bone and cell in his body—still affecting every waking thought Shane has.

When he steps out of the room into the main hall, he's welcomed by applause and cheers. He's grateful for the dimmed lights in the room; it's easier to focus here than in the last location they played, in New York, in a room resembling an aquarium. Literally.

He sits down at the table, waiting for his archrival to make an appearance. Rozanov arrives in a flourish, commanding the room's attention. He's well-dressed, Shane notes, the white crisp

shirt fitting his form extremely well. Yet, it seems casual enough to match the outfits most participants wore to the tournament. It's nothing compared to Shane's hoodie, but—

The federation got shut down with their comments about Shane's outfits a long while ago. The press snarkily commented that it was all because of *his special privileges coming from neurodivergence*, but Shane didn't care as long as he felt safe in his clothes and skin.

He's most certainly not going to start caring now. Yet—as Rozanov's eyes settle on him, clocking in every detail, he squirms on his chair. He already hates the smirk Rozanov carries over to their table.

They shake hands under the arbiter's watchful gaze. Rozanov stands close enough for Shane to see the darker spots in his eyes.

"I like seeing you in my clothes," Rozanov says quietly but gravely, only for Shane to hear in the rain of applause cascading around them. "Even if you stole."

His cheeks immediately start burning as he looks away. Rozanov isn't supposed to be getting under his skin so easily—if anything, he was supposed to be thrown off balance by Shane's outfit.

But he seems to *like it*. Asshole.

"It was just something I had lying around."

Rozanov raises a brow, his smile lethal.

"Ah? Do you wear my hoodie often?"

Luckily for Shane, the arbiter chooses this moment to set up their clocks and do the mandatory speech about rules.

Shane gets to play the black pieces today, but he doesn't mind. He still has a few decent strategies in his sleeve, plus more chances to watch what Rozanov is planning.

And for now, Rozanov starts in a classic Rozanov style—with Russian Defence. Shane follows, out of curiosity, and mirrors the Knight's position. He's seen Rozanov play this opening plenty of times before, but it always ended differently, depending on the opponent's actions.

Shane is prepared for it, of course. After a million analyses, one thing is clear: following Rozanov’s lead in the first part of the game gives him the best chance of winning.

So. That's what he does—*he follows*, and he hides a quiet grin in the collar of *not his* hoodie, seeing Rozanov furrowing his brows as he analyses Shane's movements with brutal ferocity, probably wondering why Shane is playing so passively.

"No good moves left, Rozanov?" he asks because he can't stop himself from running his mouth. It's allowed, of course, the chirping and provoking and nagging at the other player, and Rozanov takes it in stride, a smile of his own forming.

"No," he drawls in his sharp Russian accent, "I got plenty of moves to beat you."

And he really does—he ups his game, his next moves more unpredictable and rapping up the stakes. Shane grins even more—that's precisely what he's been waiting for, the rush of adrenaline when analysing all possible moves and outcomes and outsmarting his opponent.

There may be no real bloodshed on the chessboard, but it definitely feels like they are fighting for real. Going straight for the jugular.

He matches Rozanov's tempo, developing a strategy of his own, and they both struggle for dominating the middle of the board. It's always about it—about controlling the centrepiece, holding the opponent's neck to outsmart him and force him exactly where you want to go—

Shane thrives in such circumstances, but unfortunately so does Rozanov.

When Rozanov's clock is running, Shane watches his opponent's face. It's beautiful even when his brows remain furrowed and face is leaning against his hand. He knows the intensity of his eyes intimately well, so now every time Rozanov looks directly at him, he turns his head away.

Instead of looking up, he continues to fiddle with the strings of the hoodie, and he can *feel* Rozanov's focus vanish.

Good, he thinks even as his cheeks burn. Good, because that means—

He sees bright as a day the moment when Rozanov *slips*. The position he chose for his Knight is *good*, but not *enough*, and it's placed all the pieces exactly where Shane wanted them on the chessboard.

He feels euphoria creeping up.

Rozanov notices, as if he's catalogued every single change on Shane's face. He tilts his head, glancing from Shane to the chessboard. And when Shane places the next piece in the correct place, Rozanov realises he's starting to lose control over the board.

And Shane grins.

New York, 2008 | Juniors International Cup

— We've got our own Canadian, a chess prodigy, Shane Hollander! He may be young, but he's already showing great talent, having won five tournaments even against higher ranked players. He really has talent for strategising and outsmarting his opponents. He may become a new grandmaster one day, the first Canadian to do so…

— And young Ilya Rozanov came straight from Russia! He's won a few championships in his home country, turning into a new bright star of the Russian chess world. His playing style is quick, merciless, even brutal, but he's said to become a grandmaster as great as Kasparov…

*

The obscure library in New York has to be the most obscure place to play chess, Shane thinks as he crosses the threshold of the building together with his mom. It looks like a great place to be murdered.

It's grey, all grey, the spines of the books sad and covered in dust. The linoleum sticks to his shoes, making him grimace, and he pulls the hood of his grey hoodie over his head.

The actual room they are playing in looks only slightly nicer. Shane signs up on the list and tries not to look around too much, avoiding eye contact with other players.

"Hoodies aren't appropriate for tournaments, surely you must know that, Mrs. Hollander—"

"He's here to *play*, not to put on a fashion show—"

His mind is buzzing, as it always does before a big tournament. This one is significant—it will probably be the last one before he enters the adult league and starts playing with big names.

"Have fun, sweetie!"

Mom kisses his forehead and steps away, knowing all too well when to give him space. She talks to other chess moms, gathered in the improvised stands—just a bunch of chairs put together. Shane, in turn, takes his assigned seat and patiently waits for the tournament to start.

He wins the first round.

And the second.

And third.

It's boring, honestly. He sees his opponents' mistakes before he even makes them, and allows them to trip over themselves. He doesn't even need to work hard to get to the highest score and play against higher ranking players—still, the challenge isn't challenging until—

Until he's matched with Ilya Rozanov.

The Russian doesn't scare him, despite his reputation, but he makes Shane feel at unease—mostly because of the way he stares: intensively, like a predator ready to swallow its victim. It makes Shane's knees weaken.

Still, he's not scared.

Only—thrilled.

"I'm Shane Hollander," he says, reaching out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Rozanov."

"I know who you are."

Rozanov's accent is heavy, sharpening English words into a lethal weapon, the way one would hold a Kalashnikov.

"How are you finding New York?" Shane asks, oddly compelled to ease the tension.

"Boring."

Despite himself, Shane grins. He could agree with Rozanov's assessment—New York so far has been boring and way too noisy.

They start to play—and Shane's brain finally finds the thrill he's been looking for. Rozanov *is* a splendid player, though with his aggressiveness their playing styles clash. Shane hasn't had this much fun in ages since nobody has been able to match his freak and streak, and here was Rozanov—

Relaxed, smiling, with blonde hair peeking up from under his beanie. He looks like an angel, Shane thinks dazed, barely able to rise to his feet when they conclude the game—it's a draw, a fair outcome of a very even game.

"Thank you for playing with me," he says, his eyes yet again finding Rozanov's.

"Yes."

"See you in the next tournament!"

Toronto, 2009 | Chess United Tournament

They do see each other in the next tournament, and this time blood is shed.

They both play in the adult league now, and the stakes are much higher than winning just a small plastic cup in the juniors. Now they play for the first time in with big names.

It makes Shane's head completely dizzy with panic. He doesn't really know what he's doing with all these big names who have been ranking before he was even born. It doesn't help that the room is absolutely packed, chaos and lights attacking his senses like persistent flies.

He pulls the hood of his hoodie up, covering his hair and partially his face. It helps, but not enough to take him off the edge of a panic attack—and it *is* close, burning oxygen off in his chest and not allowing him to breathe.

He leans against the wall, hand clutching tightly onto his chest as he tries to calm his breathing and heart. There's no time to go out and look for a more secluded spot—he isn't even sure if he could find it with the way the whole building is packed.

Time fractures. Shane feels a burst of pain exploding in his mind and chest. His thoughts scatter in the sea of panic. He can't find a single coherent thought to hold onto—he's slipping. The void is sticky and dark and scary, hard to escape, and—

"Hollander."

He blinks. The accent in his name is somewhat familiar, but he finds it hard to place in the mist he's shrouded in.

"Hollander, are you okay?"

He's very much not *okay*, but his rival shouldn't know this, should he?

With some difficulty, Shane opens his eyes and looks up, at Rozanov standing in front of him. He's close enough to block the crowds from Shane's field of vision, and it's easier to face just one person without thinking about the lingering stares of others.

"Fuck, Hollander. You're—"

He finds no words, but his eyes are searching, intense, full of hesitation and—worry?

Shane doesn't want to think what it means, but he focuses on Rozanov's face. It's a pretty face, he registers with an absolute conviction. His blonde hair is longer than the last time they saw each other, maybe even messier, and it's not covered by a beanie. And his features—they are sharp, softened only by worry, and Shane wonders if that's a Russian trait.

But the best part of his face are his eyes, brown, expressive, unlike anything Shane has experienced.

"Hi, Rozanov," he says with a dumb smile, feeling slightly hazed. His anxiety hasn't fully eased, but it's dulled now that he has something else to focus on.

Rozanov eyes him critically, hand snapping up but freezing mid-air between them.

"Hi," he replies, never stopping to study Shane. With some sort of embarrassment, Shane wonders what Rozanov sees—he doesn't seem repulsed by the state Shane is in, just. Concerned? Which is strange. "Are you okay?"

Shane doesn't know what possesses him to whisper, "No. I'm freaking out, but I'll be okay in a few."

He looks down, swallowing hard as he tries to rein in his darkest thoughts. He needs to carefully untangle them, put them in separate drawers, find an anchor, and finally start *breathing*.

It's hard, though. His chest is still burning.

"Hollander, look at me."

The command cuts right through the haze, making Shane glance up. This time Rozanov doesn't hesitate—he reaches out to touch Shane's face, angling it towards him and making it hard to escape the hardness of his stare.

"Good. Now breathe."

Rozanov is throwing him a life buoy, Shane realises, and he clutches hard onto it. He tries to breathe, observing the steady rise of Rozanov's chest. The skin contact is grounding, too, forbidding him from slipping into another spiral. His thoughts start to smooth out.

It's embarrassing to say that he feels much better in a span of minutes, and he can now see Rozanov with a sharp clarity.

"Thank you," he mutters, feeling his cheeks growing hot. "I'm feeling better. I just don't like crowds."

Rozanov casts a look over his arm, but doesn't pull away.

"Me neither. You good to play?"

"Yeah."

With that, Rozanov finally steps back, his lips stretching into a soft grin. He acknowledges Shane's words with a nod.

"Good luck."

Shane doesn't like the fuzziness in his chest caused by those words.

And he's able to play well tonight, climbing up the ranks. Still, he loses against Rozanov, who's in exceptional form today—*of course he is*. Shane doesn't even have the heart nor energy to feel bad about the loss, which is surprising, because usually he beats himself up about every single failure.

But Rozanov—

For one, he deserved it. He's been unstoppable tonight, even against one of the grandmasters he faced, and the same thing couldn't really be said about Shane.

And two, Rozanov was somewhat gracious about his win over Shane. He didn't give him space to counterattack, no, he gained control over the board so fast that Shane could barely breathe with how fast his heart was beating, but—

He didn't laugh at Shane when they shook hands after the game. He just—regarded him with the same softness as before, and said, "You played really good."

Shane didn't, but he appreciates the compliment while his heart is fluttering at the contact.

Rome, 2010 | Italian Open Championships

Shane is almost defeated by the jet lag.

He hasn't expected the flight to be so miserable, though he had been mentally prepared for ten hours in enclosed space—he downloaded movies to watch, some articles to read, he even had Kasparov's biography to read and white headphones to listen to music and drown out the typical plane background sounds.

But the seat in the economy class was fucking uncomfortable, even for someone not taking much space like Shane, the food tasted like sandpaper, and toilets became clogged halfway

the flight.

And he couldn't sleep. He couldn't even *nap* with the way his brain was twirling and focusing on the fact that he was in a metal tin that could drop any time.

So yes. The flight was miserable, the jet lag made everything worse, but Rome—

He fell in love with the city. The tournament lasted three whole days, so he took his time to explore and stuff his stomach with Italian food and drink ungodly amounts of Italian espresso. It was too good to pass up this opportunity.

He's getting better at handling the pressure of big tournaments, so this one is much better—he enters it without another panic attack, at least. Still, his heart does a weird flip-flop when he spots Rozanov, with his stupid messy hair and a smirk that can cut through any snarky remarks directed at him. He looks at ease, too, and Shane is jealous about it. He can't chill out *just like that*.

"Do you know each other?" he hears the whispered question and turns slightly to look at the woman who joined him. She's wearing a pretty red dress, and looks familiar, though he can't put a name to her face.

"Not well."

"He has a reputation of being an asshole."

Shane knows this and he's seen it with other players—Rozanov really likes to chirp at them and involve dirty tactics to trip them up—but with him, Rozanov has never been like this, not in any of the games they played against each other. It's not like Rozanov lets him off the hook easily, no, he doesn't, it's just—there's just respected in the way he plays against Shane. Respect and maybe admiration and maybe some mischievousness.

"He's not that bad."

Rozanov chooses the same exact moment to look up, locating Shane with precision. Their eyes meet—and Rozanov *winks* at him.

"I see," the woman says casually, no doubt having clocked the strange wordless exchange between them. Shane's ears and cheeks are burning as he turns to face her. "I'm Rose Landry."

They shake hands, and Shane finds himself smiling despite the awkwardness of the situation —Rose has such a warm smile that it's hard not to reciprocate.

"Shane Hollander."

"Nice to meet you, Shane. Say—would you fancy a drink tonight? We could bond over cocktails and vent about the tournament."

"We might play against each other," Shane notes with faint amusement. He really likes Rose —she's not obnoxious like other girls. And she shrugs, as expected.

"So what? It's not that serious. We're just gathering points, there are no expectations for neither of us, so we can really let go. I don't care."

Why the hell not, Shane finds himself thinking. He could actually use some unwinding to get rid of the tension constantly nagging at his arms, and Rose seems fun.

"Okay. Sounds good."

They exchange numbers and go their separate ways. They don't cross paths the whole day, but Shane catches Rose waving to him a few times when they head over to their respective tables. He feels warm the whole day, and his mind is clear, sharp—perfect for beating every single opponent.

He walks out of the conference center with a feeling of euphoria dawning on him. Rose is right, there's no pressure in this tournament, and for the first time in ages Shane finds pleasure in playing.

He meets Rose punctually at seven in one of the bars located along the Tiber. Rose clearly has good taste—she picked something local but not too crowded. They order drinks and slip into one of the booths to talk.

"Ginger ale? Seriously?"

She points at his drink with a straw, squinting.

"It's good," Shane answers defensively, because *nothing* and *nobody* stands in the way of him and his ginger ale.

"You don't drink alcohol?"

"Not during tournaments. I prefer to keep my head clear. I do like beer, though."

"How boring!"

Shane smiles, not insulted in the slightest.

"How's your drink, though?"

They fall into a pleasant flow of a conversation—they talk strategy, they trash talk other players, they discuss the schedule. It seems to overlap in most of the part for them, so they also make a promise to meet more frequently.

It's easy to be in Rose's company, Shane thinks. She's easy to talk, she's friendly, and they seem to click instantly. She doesn't make his head spin with the weight of expectations and doesn't fill his limbic system with dread about what to say next.

"What about Rozanov and you, though? Sounds like there *is* something serious going on between you."

Yeah—it's great till she fires that question at him, and Shane finds himself fumbling with the almost empty can of ginger ale.

"There's literally nothing between us," he scrambles to say. "They are pitching us against each other, that's all. We're meeting all the time during tournaments."

"I know you're rivals and all, but—" Rose furrows her brows. "It looked like something more to me."

"It's Rozanov. He was being stupid."

"He seemed interested in you. He looked at you the whole time."

Shane feels another wave of heat rising, because what—how would Rozanov even be interested in him, plain little boring Shane Hollander with charisma of a kitchen mouse?

"You're seeing things."

"Am I?" Rose leans forward. "You should talk to him, get to know each other. It can be something good, I think. There is a spark between you."

And really, it gives Shane plenty of food for thought, but it also scares him to hell and back, the mere *possibility* of being seen and liked, by Rozanov, of all people.

It's not like Rozanov doesn't already fill his every waking thought, no—

"What, you want me and Rozanov to become besties?"

Rose shrugs. "It isn't that scary."

But it *is*.

And Shane still has Rose's words ringing in his head the next day. He approaches Rozanov lounging on the couch with a can of Sprite after a long bout of hesitation. Rozanov is alone, for once, unbothered by other players or his worshippers, and so Shane has made the brave decision to join him.

"Hi," he says timidly as he sees Rozanov smile already blooming. "How is it going?"

That sounds awkward, and Shane cringes. Rozanov doesn't seem to be deterred, though; if anything, he moves *slightly* closer, angling his body to face Shane.

"We're playing together today."

"Are we?" Shane notes with fake disinterest.

"Yes. And I'm going to sweep you off the board."

Shane laughs. "In your dreams, maybe."

"Let's bet, then. I win, you come to my room tonight."

"And if I win?"

Rozanov shrugs, that stupid grin back on his lips. He stretches on the couch, and Shane can't look away from his chest where his white shirt rides up.

"You won't."

"Fuck you."

Still, there's fondness in Shane's words. He can't find it in himself to be angry at Rozanov, not when he makes his panic bleed away.

"You want to fuck me?"

Okay, *fuck Rozanov*, really—

"Absolutely not," Shane says quickly, too quickly, and he hates the way his whole body heats. And Rozanov has the audacity to *laugh*. "Seriously, Rozanov, stop it."

"You're shy, Hollander. Is okay, though. I promise to fuck it out of you."

"Jesus Christ, Rozanov. We're in public."

Rozanov shrugs, not concerned in the slightest. He tries to look innocent, and he even succeeds—of course he does, he's *Rozanov*, and Shane leans away with a groan.

"1221 at seven. Don't be late, Hollander."

Shane can only stare after him with his mouth hanging open.

Jesus Christ.

Rozanov is merciless when they face each other today, too. Shane already has a better understanding of Rozanov's style of play, but still, it's hard to find any weaknesses in it tonight. And he's too flustered to focus on the game, especially when Rozanov gives him that stupid, knowing grin, and when their feet brush under the table.

Rozanov is doing it on purpose, Shane knows—it's actually the first time Rozanov is really fully employing the distraction technique against him, and Shane hates the fact that it works so well.

He's flustered. He's hot. He wants the game to be over as soon as possible, so he breathes with relief only when his defeat is announced. Then he escapes the room as if his ass were on fire. And it was.

Fuck Rozanov, fuck his smirks, fuck chess—

Shane still finds himself facing door number 1221 in their hotel. It's ten seconds past seven, so he's technically late, but he can't force himself to knock.

It's stupid, really. He shouldn't be there, he shouldn't have accepted that stupid bet, he shouldn't be following Rozanov's orders like a lost puppy—

But here he is. At Rozanov's door and mercy.

To his surprise, the door opens despite the fact that he still haven't knocked. Rozanov leans against the doorframe, arms crossed. He looks casual in the black tank top—it's so different from his usual outfit that Shane finds himself at a loss for words.

"Well?" Rozanov raises a brow at him. "Are you coming in?"

"Fuck you," he mutters, but enters the room as soon as Rozanov allows him to pass.

It looks exactly the same as his own, no surprise there, maybe aside from the fridge being stacked with ginger ale. It stuns him for a second as he watches Rozanov sit on the bed. His gaze is expectant but patient, waiting for Shane to gather his bearings first.

"Don't look at me like that," Shane pleads, and it falls between them helplessly.

"You look like scared deer, Hollander. Scared doe."

"I'm not scared."

There it is—that famous Rozanov's smirk.

"No?"

"*I hate you*."

Pointedly avoiding Rozanov's gaze, Shane glances around the bed. The bedside cabinet is stacked—there's a book in Russian, a bottle of water, some pills, and a phone. Shane opens his mouth to comment on it, but Rozanov takes that moment to take his wrist and pull him closer, right between Rozanov's spread knees.

Rozanov mutters something in Russian—it might be a curse, Shane wouldn't know—and it forces Shane to look at him for the first time since he's enters the room.

"I shouldn't be here," he mutters under his breath when his body sighs with the rightness of it.

"Stop overthinking."

Just like that, Shane's brain quietens.

"So bossy."

"You like it."

The worst part is that Shane can't even find a retort to it—because he realises that Rozanov is right.

He likes Rozanov being bossy. And that's scary.

"Uh oh. I said no overthinking."

Rozanov brings him closer, his knees caging as he reaches to touch Shane's face. Shane leans into the touch, realising that nobody has ever touched him like this before, nobody has ever given him so much patience and gentleness.

He wants to reciprocate it, so he touches Rozanov's hair and neck, finding the messy locks as smooth as silk. He tugs experimentally, and Rozanov groans. Shane tucks that information in his brain, adding it to the collection of things that make Rozanov tick—the same way he knows Rozanov is cataloguing him.

Rozanov's hand comes to rest at Shane neck. They meet in a messy kiss, shocking Shane's system to the core. He brings himself closer till their chests touch, greedy for any form of contact. He's burning, but for once he doesn't mind it, especially when he makes Rozanov loose the tank top and his hands are free to roam over his chest.

For a chess player, he has quite the build—it looks like he's training regularly, maybe not professionally, but—

"How often do you go to the gym?" he asks against Rozanov's lips, his thoughts barely coherent with the way Rozanov is mapping his body with his hands.

"Every day. Is a good way to burn energy off, no?"

Shane shrugs. He wouldn't know.

"I'm not good at sports."

Rozanov hums against Shane's skin, his kisses sloppy on Shane's neck. "I played hockey long time ago. And gym is good. So. Now shut up and kiss me."

Shane snickers, complying.

He doesn't protest when Rozanov sneaks his hand into Shane's sweatpants.

"Can I…?"

He nods quickly, holding onto Rozanov's shoulders. He's been hard for a while, and Rozanov takes full advantage of it. It feels much better than when Shane is doing it by himself; Rozanov already seems an expert to Shane's body, with the way he tugs and touches just *right* to make Shane moan.

He comes embarrassingly fast, with a broken moan and a flush to his face akin to fever. Rozanov's smile is smug, but also warm, making Shane feel things he really shouldn't be feeling even after a strong orgasm given to him by his archenemy.

And since he can barely stand on his own legs, he ends up sitting awkwardly on Rozanov's lap.

"Can I—" he starts brokenly, feeling like his brain needs a solid restart in order to start functioning again. "Should I…?"

Rozanov's amusement is palpable and Shane swats at his arm and says a fond *fuck you* while he tries to collect his thoughts.

"Was that good?" Rozanov asks, still smirking.

"Do you want to come, too? I haven't—before—but I could try—"

This time Rozanov seems to at least understand what Shane is saying in broken English, and he considers him for a moment before nodding.

"Get on your knees."

Shane kneels before his brain even registers the command. He's glad to have a carpet under his knees as he positions himself between Rozanov's legs and pulls off the shorts with his shaky hands. It's intimidating, just a little bit, but also incredibly good. He may be staring at another man's cock for the first time in his life, but—*holy shit*.

"Take only as much as you can, *da*?"

Shane smiles as Rozanov puts his hand in his hair, putting some pressure on the back of his neck, and slowly leans forward. He's glad for some guidance since he has no fucking idea what he's doing. Rozanov seems to know, and he directs Shane to help him out, and god—

Shane loves the fact that he can bring a man like Rozanov to the highest point of pleasure with his lips. The power coming from that makes him feel intoxicated, even though he's technically not in control here—Rozanov's grip on his neck is strong enough to be a constant reminder of it.

Still—it's because of *him* that Rozanov moans and releases straight into Shane's throat and pants heavily for a long while. He brings his thumb to Shane's lips, wiping the traces of his come, and Shane can only look up at him, still on his knees.

"That was perfect," Rozanov says, adding something in Russian that Shane can't comprehend. "Get up, yeah? Slowly."

They fall into the bed together, basking in the silence and post-orgasmic euphoria. They aren't touching anymore, lying on the respective sides of the bed, but Shane wishes they were. He'd love to cuddle, maybe hear more of the praise said in that rough Russian accent, maybe get another orgasm—

But no. They *can't*.

He leaves Rozanov's room half an hour later, feeling the shakiness of his limbs and wishing for more.

Toronto, 2012 | American Chess Championships

It turns out that they *can* and they *will*.

They meet regularly after each tournament they play in, regardless of the outcome of the game played against each other. Shane, of course, makes it his business to understand all the movements and strategies Rozanov uses on the chessboard and outside of it; he studies all of his previous matches like a diligent student, discovering patterns, favourite moves, and mistakes he makes.

Turns out Rozanov *is* as brutal as they paint him, though there's also a lot of inspiration after the Russian grandmasters in the way he plays; he borrows plenty of openings and traps, then modifies them depending on the situation on the chessboard. It's brilliant, really, especially since he's also using his talent for reading people to throw people off their game. Of course, the games allow for it, for getting other players agitated, maybe even flustered, and in consequence, Rozanov has them making mistakes.

He enjoys making Shane flustered, too, but under the watchful gaze of the federation, he waters it down in comparison to what he says when they are alone. Then and only then he never stops whispering the dirty words in both Russian and English, muttering them against Shane's skin and making him come again and again and again.

Sometime after the third or fourth game they exchange phone numbers, and Shane can now feed his newly found obsession with Ilya Rozanov outside of the tournaments, too, even though he's quite struggling with sexting.

It's clear that Rozanov has no fucking filter and he will pull all the stops to make Shane burning with fever and need just for him, but also—holy shit—he's so good at silencing Shane's internal panic that it feels impossible.

JANE: I think I'm going to loose tonight.

LILY: what did I say about losing

LILY: loser has to come twice untouched

JANE: *fuck you*

LILY: with pleasure :)))

So yeah, with every message from Rozanov Shane's shoulders just drop, as if he's allowed to exist without anxiety when he talks to Rozanov.

It's strange, really—not just because Rozanov is a man, and Shane is hidden deeply in his closet, but it's also the fact that they are archenemies—always pitted against each other, always finding themselves at the top of the scoreboard, always fighting for the highest spot. The media seems to eat it up, especially since chess in itself is such a non-exciting sport for everyone not playing it—but when it's two players providing entertainment, it suddenly becomes a phenomenon.

Shane understands it, but it also scares him.

San Francisco, 2013 | friendly matches

"What are you reading?"

It's one of the rare times when he finds Rozanov lounging in his hotel room with a book. He doesn't understand a word he sees on the cover—it's all, of course, in Russian, a language of aliens, it seems.

"*War and peace*," Rozanov answers in a tone that means 'you're being boring'. Shane is interested to hear more, though, and that's why he crawls closer, almost touching Rozanov's very naked body spread on the bedsheets.

"What is it about?"

"Is very Russian book about very Russian things. You'd be bored to death by it."

"No," Shane insists, kissing Rozanov's stomach and arms; he gets bolder when Rozanov doesn't swat him away. "I know you're a little nerdy at heart and you love your boring Russian books. Tell me more."

Rozanov swallows hard when their eyes meet.

"It's a story about a few aristocratic families," he says slowly, seemingly distracted by the kiss Shane gits upon his neck. "In, ah, Napoleon Wars. It's boring book about history and philosophy and customs."

"What do you love the most about it?"

"Family dynamics." Rozanov closes his eyes; the book falls to his stomach as he uses his thumb to bookmark the last read page. "It's fascinating how—ah. Fuck. Hollander, you'll be the death of me."

"I hope not."

Shane smirks against his skin, but ends up emitting an unholy squeak as Rozanov throws the book away and wraps him in his arms, only to turn them over. Rozanov ends up hovering over Shane, his eyes mischievous and full of mirth and need.

"Now is my turn."

"Rozanov—"

Yes, Rozanov is capable of robbing him of all coherent thoughts as much as Shane is of him.

London, 2014 | Chess United Championships

The loss in the tournament is the most sour failure Shane has experienced in a long while. He's not entirely sure what made him lose—there might have been a few overlapping factors

that contributed to it, but he doesn't even want to analyse them all too closely.

It may be the fact that he's been distracted as of lately, his contact with Rozanov limited till it disappeared completely. Rozanov hasn't been making any appearances in the tournaments recently, with his rankings also dropping, and he stopped answering any of Shane's messages.

As much as Shane has analysed their whole relationship, there hasn't been a clear reason for it—after all, they've been meeting quite regularly, fucking, talking, then messaging over their phones in the days in-between tournaments. Even when they were busy, they managed to maintain contact even in form of some memes or jokes or even sexting.

But this—the silence—is disconcerting.

JANE: Are you okay?

The message sits on delivered and read, but there's no response.

Shane even hears gossip from Rose, saying that Rozanov apparently had to come back to Russia following a family emergency. Nobody seems to know what's really going on, though, and Shane is none the wiser, too.

So, yes. He's been distracted. He's making an incredible effort to focus on chess and advancing in ranks—he's already seeing the chance to become the youngest grandmaster to ever play chess, but he finds little joy even in the fact how close he is to achieving his dreams.

Without Rozanov, without his archrival, it doesn't feel the same.

Ottawa, 2015 | New Year's International Championships

LILY: Shane

LILY: pick the call

LILY: answer

JANE: no

Shane puts his plane on the air plane mode and curls on the bed as the world comes crashing onto his head.

The defeat today was enough to make him tip completely over the edge. It was transmitted overseas, since he was facing a grandmaster and the whole match was hailed as the CHESS MUST-WATCH OF THE DECADE.

He lost. Of course he lost.

And then he was forced to do the press conference with his face completely red and panic in his eyes for the whole world to see.

He closes his eyes as he's unable to stop tears falling down his cheeks. His chest feels tight and he can't breathe and—

There's a knock to his door.

He doesn't move from the bed. In fact, his whole body is paralysed.

"Hollander, for fuck's sake," he hears from the other side of the door, and the familiar tilt on the words makes his heart stutter even if it really shouldn't. After all, Rozanov was done with him, so— "Open the door or I'll be calling the reception and breaking the door."

The threat is enough to make Shane move. His legs feel like lead when he pulls the door open —and finds Ilya Rozanov standing on the other side of the door. He's not smiling, he looks as wrecked as Shane feels, and he steps in, and Shane finds himself enveloped in a strong hug.

He sinks.

"I'm so sorry, Hollander," Rozanov mutters into his hair, the embrace tight, barely giving any space to breathe, but Shane doesn't mind. He desperately needs it. "What they pulled—it's shite."

Rozanov drags them to the bed, never stopping the praise, never letting Shane out of his embrace, and Shane lets himself fall.

He's dreamed about Rozanov coming back for weeks, but he never expected it to happen under such circumstances. Even though it makes him feel embarrassed, he allows himself to *rest* for he feels safe in a very long time.

Rozanov takes care of him, and him being gentle gives Shane a whiplash. It shouldn't be all that surprising since besides the rough sex Rozanov has really showered Shane in praise and showed him he can be gentle, but *this*—this is different since Shane allows him to really be looked after.

And it scares him since nobody ever cares enough to take care of him even after he's completely broken down.

Yet, here they are—Rozanov making him drink his ginger ale and forcing food into him (he threatened to feed him with a spoon if needed), Rozanov cuddling him and never letting Shane out of his sight, Rozanov counting Shane's freckles, Rozanov lending Shane his favourite yellow hoodie. Shane instantly falls in love with it since the hoodie is big and smells like Rozanov and allows him to forget the whole world for a while.

Rozanov is the least expected person to care about anyone, yet—

"I'm stealing your hoodie," Shane whispers as he wraps all of his limbs around Rozanov. "Thank you, Ilya."

"You're welcome. Shane."

'Shane' in his lips sounds like he's testing the melody of it, and honestly Shane could get used to hearing it more, even in that heavy Russian accent.

In all fairness, he loves Ilya's voice, and that's probably why he can't help but stare at him like an enchanted doe as Ilya reads '*War and Peace*' to him in his perfect Russian accent. It makes Shane relaxed and all woozy inside, all the traces of his anxiety disappearing.

"Can I ask you something?"

Ilya hums, putting the book away.

"Why did you stop playing? Why did you disappear?"

"I…" Ilya is quiet for a moment, considering his answer. "I had to go back to Russia. My father died."

"*Jesus Christ,* I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't worry. I never liked him. He was—wasn't a good father, da? And he got sick. In the end. So I had to go back. To the fu—"

"Funeral?"

"*Da*. That. Complicated, yes? Then I sorted out the house, the papers, the documents, and couldn't go back for a while. And it was safer to not text. Russia is—" He swallows visibly. "Not kind for queer."

"Oh." Shane lets their foreheads touch. "I see. I wish it were different."

"It is. It will be."

Shane really hopes for it to be true.

Las Vegas, 2015 | International Chess Championships

Shane wins with Ilya this time round. It's dizzying, really, to see the sparks in Ilya's eyes as they play. Shane gets flustered as their shoes touch under the table, but tries to keep his head cool.

He plays the Queen's Gambit, he gets right past Ilya's defences, and he conquers the middle of the board, leading straight to the first mate.

And Ilya isn't angry the way he turns with other players—in fact, he's *delighted* about being outsmarted, and Shane loves him for it.

Wait.

What?

Lo—

No.

He can't—

He escapes the hall as soon as the hand shaking is done; right on the verge of a meltdown. It feels big, the word, spinning round and round in his head.

He makes to the bathroom right on time, and leans against the sink, taking ragged, irregular breaths as his brain falls. He can't even look at his reflection in the mirror. He just—

"Shane?"

He doesn't turn, but Ilya's voice cuts right through the mist in his mind. He wishes it didn't. He wishes everyone left him in peace.

"What do you want with me, Rozanov?" he asks in a tight voice.

"So we're back to surnames, now?"

Shane has no energy to reply since his thoughts feel like molasses.

"Fuck you," he swears under his breath. There's no heat in it, just exhaustion. His shoulders seem to be weighting a lot—too much for him to handle right now.

"Hollander, look at me."

The pull of Rozanov's command is irresistible, so Shane raises his head—just enough to meet Rozanov's stare in the mirror. There's enough distance between them for him to feel safe.

"What do you want, Rozanov?" he asks again.

"You're having a panic attack…? You just won a game. With me. You should be proud, not panicking in this bathroom. What happened?"

Shane takes a deep breath.

"I'm not ready for this," he whispers.

"For…?"

Jesus Christ, Rozanov is really going to make him spell it out for him, right?

"What do you want with me, Rozanov. For real."

"Nothing." Rozanov shrugs. "We're friends, yes? Friends who fuck sometimes."

Yeah. That.

It brings hot tears straight to Shane's eyes, but he tries his best to keep his eyes trained on Rozanov in the mirror.

"So you can go back to your other friends you fuck and fuck off my back."

Rozanov furrows his brows and takes a step closer. "What is it about?"

"I can't give you what you want."

"What do you think I want?"

"Freedom? Rozanov, we're fucked up, you and I. You prefer pretty women who can drink as much vodka as you do and keep you entertained."

Rozanov is silent for a moment, and as still as a statue.

"You're as smart as you're stupid," he finally says. "Fine. I'll leave you alone if that's what you want. I'll go fuck other women and make you miss this fine Russian ass—"

"Get the hell out, Rozanov."

Rozanov nods tersely, then he finally leaves—but not before muttering "Stupid Hollander" under his breath.

Shane lets himself cry as soon as the door closes.

Montreal, 2017 | World Cup

Rozanov beats Shane.

He's merciless, cold, brutal; all traces of his gentleness gone, and Shane steels himself when in reality he wants to cry.

All he can do after the match is go back to his room, drink a shot of vodka and cry himself to sleep, remembering the coldness in Rozanov's eyes.

Ottawa, 2017 | International Chess Championships: Pre-party

Shane isn't a fan of parties, but they make him attend this one.

Hayden said it's good for publicity and he should also really loosen up from time to time, loose his serious chess persona face, and Shane rolls his eyes at him.

He makes Rose go with him, because Rose is always excellent company. She does whisky shots while he sips on his ginger ale, trying not to get overwhelmed by the chaos of the party. The flickering red and blue lights are utterly irritating.

"Prepared for tomorrow, Shane?" Rose asks him, swaying on her feet. He has to catch her waist in order to keep her from flopping.

"For what?" he asks distractedly, taking the next shot out of Rose's hand. "No, Rose, you had enough alcohol for today. You'll hate yourself tomorrow."

"For the match against Rozanov," she slurs. "You both want to win, don't you? For the grandmaster title. The youngest man on earth to become a grandmaster—"

"You should really sit down."

"I'm fine! I'm great! You should just—" She twirls, her arms wrapping around Shane. "Heyyy, your freckles are prettyyy—"

"Thank you?"

Shane keeps her upright, unsure how to handle a drunk woman other than through manhandling her. He looks around, trying to seek for help, and—

His gaze somehow finds Rozanov. His archival isn't alone, no—he's currently very occupied with sucking on a very pretty blonde woman's neck. He's completely basked in the red lights, and Shane hates to admit that he looks good. As good as always.

He looks away, and this time he's able to flag Rose's closest friend, Miles. Together, they haul Rose out of the club and order a taxi for her, straight to the hotel. Miles goes with her while Shane stays, deciding to join Hayden.

He gets a text from Miles half an hour later:

MILES: shes alseep. thanks for taking care of her

SHANE: likewise.

He shoves his phone back into his pocket, deciding to go for another ginger ale and then head out. He needs to get up early tomorrow, and he really isn't sure why his brain made him stay.

Hayden is fun, of course, though maybe not as fun as Rose. His commentary on the emerging chess stars is amusing, though, so Shane listens to him while looking around half-heartedly. He's feeling a migraine gathering in his temples, all because of the noise and lights, so—

"Leaving so soon, Hollander?"

He hates that his cursed heart makes a lurch at Rozanov's words. His accent is like velvet, wrapping around Shane's mind and will and tugging him *hard* towards Rozanov.

He looks up.

"Yes, to avoid staring at your ugly ass," he fires back, feeling fever creeping back. He doesn't want to talk to Rozanov. Hell, he doesn't want to be in the same proximity as Rozanov.

"My ass isn't ugly!"

Rozanov's laughter chases him as Shane makes the rapid beeline towards the exit.

No, Rozanov's ass isn't ugly.

But that's something he'd never admit to him.

Ottawa, 2017 | International Chess Championship

He sees bright as a day the moment when Rozanov *slips*. The position he chose for his Knight is *good*, but not *enough*, and it's placed all the pieces exactly where Shane wanted them on the chessboard.

He feels euphoria creeping.

Rozanov notices, as if he's catalogued every single change on Shane's face. He tilts his head, glancing from Shane to the chessboard. And when Shane places the next piece in the correct place, Rozanov realises he's starting to lose control over the board.

Shane grins when Rozanov curses, his fist hitting the table quite explosively.

He's never seen Rozanov loose control before, and he relishes in the feeling that he can make him. He's not used to it, not when it comes to Rozanov—it tended to be Rozanov holding his neck and making him follow, and Shane happily complied.

But now—*no*. He wants Rozanov defeated and on his knees.

He remembers the loss he experienced in Montreal a few months ago, where Rozanov murdered him with his mere pieces on the chessboard, and *fuck*—it's a great feeling to beat him now.

"Planning to kill me today, Hollander?" Rozanov asks in a quiet murmur, his voice surprisingly soft after his outburst. It seems like he's getting himself under control, and Shane desperately wants him to stay unmoored. "Having your vengeance, are you?"

"You won't be winning every single time."

"You're sadist, admit it."

No, Shane doesn't think he really is a sadist—if anything, the way he always follows Rozanov's orders, voice and aura, he's a masochist. He's also a masochist because he can't really stop thinking about the person who brings him the most pain.

"Just for today."

It falls softer than he wanted it to, and Rozanov catches it. For a moment, he stares openly at Shane, his hand hovering over the King. They are getting close to a checkmate, and they both know it.

"No sexy ladies cheering for you today?" he asks, slowly dragging the King away.

"What sexy ladies?"

Shane's next move is quick. He slaps the clock and it feels like an echo of a gunshot.

"Ones you visit clubs with."

Shane furrows his brows. "We're just friends. Are you jealous, Rozanov?"

"I know what your *we're just friends* talk means, Hollander."

Rozanov's next move is also quite fast since he they both know there's nowhere for him to go anymore. He can't get out of the trap Shane has set for him.

"Fuck you," Shane says, almost fondly. "I don't fuck around with everyone who has legs."

Shane responds. Another check.

"I don't either."

"No?" He raises his head to look at Rozanov, who's looking oddly relaxed despite his looming defeat. Rozanov has never been a sore loser, maybe not counting that outburst from a few moments ago. But—the way he's sitting makes Shane feel like he's the one being caught and defeated.

"Not since y—"

"Make your move, Rozanov," he snaps before Rozanov says something that can't be unheard —something that wouldn't be the best thing to say in the presence of cameras, referees, other chess players, and audience all over the world.

And he's not ready to let his relationship or lack of thereof to get out of the closet during a chess tournament. That would be fucked up.

"What, you're scared? And here I thought we had something good going on."

Rozanov complies, though his grin is feral.

And Shane's voice is tight when he says, "Checkmate."

"Congratulations, *Shane*. You can collect your reward in room 284 tonight."

Well fuck.

End Notes

I went feral for hollanov and wrote 10k words of a Chess AU over the weekend 🙈 I hope you liked it bye 😂

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!