

If you're afraid of wolves

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77675996) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77675996>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry_(TV) , Game Changers Heated Rivalry - All Media Types
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Hayden Pike , Ryan Price (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	Kidnapping , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Mental Health Issues , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Internalized Homophobia , shane is working through it okay , Depression , misogynist language , Hockey , Oral Sex , Anal Sex , Shoe Kink , Russian Mafia , Italian Mafia , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Anxious Shane Hollander , Trauma , Past Trauma , Trauma Recovery , BAMF Shane Hollander , Hurt Shane Hollander , Hurt Ilya Rozanov , mafia
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Kidnapped AU
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-14 Completed: 2026-03-01 Words: 79,095 Chapters: 17/17

If you're afraid of wolves

by [gsmaxwell](#)

Summary

Shane was on the mend. Really. Ilya had pulled him out of that icy river before there was any lasting damage.

It didn't matter that he couldn't just fucking forget what had happened.

Ilya wasn't okay, but he wasn't going to tell anyone that. Telling people would mean dealing with it.

And he had Shane now, which was enough.

Or: Shane and Ilya deal with the fall out of being kidnapped and traumatized by the Montreal mafia.

Notes

This is a sequel to 'There have been threats', so I highly suggest reading that first.

I suspect chapters will be longer but take more time to come out!

Keep in mind I'm not a mental health professional, and this is early 2014 Shane and Ilya - no tuna melt, no Rose, Ilya's dad is still alive. Heck, the cottage is still being built I think!

Also, similar to the first story I'm mostly influenced by the book, but I've got the tv visuals in my brain (aka, Ilya has a penthouse but the interior looks suspiciously like the inside of a mansion in Hamilton lol)

Please enjoy?

Chapter 1: Shane

It was strange to be in street clothes and running shoes at the Voyageur's practice rink when everyone else was on the ice.

Shane had been lucky with injuries over the years. He had only ever been on the injury reserve list once after an awful week with the flu. Even then, it had taken him dry heaving on the bench during a TV break and a text from his mom to admit he might need to sit out.

It made him uncomfortable to think that he was shirking his captain duties, so he had come down to watch the morning practice after his medical meeting with the team doctors.

Shane had been staying with his parents in Ottawa, but the Montreal Voyageur's medical team had been in constant consultation with his doctors there. Shane had put off coming in to let them do their own assessments because of the Olympic break, but he had finally been strongly advised to make an appearance in Montreal.

The practice was still in warm-ups, led by Hayden as an alternate captain. They were playing Tampa Bay tomorrow, their third game back after the Olympic break. Shane had meant to come and watch the previous two games from the box, but had had two strong bouts of vertigo and begged out.

The only game he had been to since January was Boston's game in Ottawa the day before.

He glanced at his phone, and it unlocked where he had been rereading messages.

Shane: did you get in okay? Were they mad?

Lily: no, it was fine. Just got home.

Jane: I just had the most fucking awkward conversation with my parents

He flushed, remembering where that conversation had led. He hastily scrolled down to the most recent.

Shane: arrived in Montreal

Shane: made it to the barn

Lily: good

Shane: finished the appointment

Lily: what did the doctors say?

Shane: they were optimistic

Lily: <3

Shane locked his phone and glanced around, but he was still alone.

He had hoped most of the team would opt out of the practice skate. However, the last two games had shown the team was struggling to get back into the rhythm of playing, including a shutout the night before.

Theriault skated over as soon as he spotted him. Shane straightened up automatically, the knot in his stomach making him feel sick.

“Hollander,” the head coach greeted him. “What did the docs say?”

Shane usually admired Theriault's no-nonsense, no-bullshit approach to managing the team, but today his tongue felt stuck to the roof of his mouth at his tone.

He really was on the mend, headaches and vertigo aside. His injuries hadn't been career ending, with the most serious being the stress on his nerves and hyperflexion of his arms and shoulders from being in restraints for so long. He had to fight off a nasty infection from swallowing the filthy water in his icy plunge, but Rozanov had pulled him out too quickly to actually lose any fingers or toes. He wouldn't have been ready for the gruelling pace of the Olympics, but now, almost four weeks out, he was feeling good.

Really, he had been lucky. If he hadn't been at the peak of health, they had said it would have been a lot worse.

Really.

“They were optimistic,” Shane said. “ECG checked out, and my knee is doing fine with physio. It's just the upper-body stuff that they're cautious about. And, uh, some vertigo from the concussion.”

As head coach, Theriault, along with some of the assistant coaches, the GM, and the medical team, knew the true cause for the injuries. But if Shane was expecting any sympathy, he didn't find it.

“Any ETA on when you'll be back on the ice?”

“I'm still week-to-week,” Shane held his breath. It had been a reluctant week-to-week because Shane had passed their benchmarks, but the vertigo and some lingering weakness in his hands had helped him to convince them to keep him out longer.

That clearly wasn't the answer Theriault wanted. “Well, we'll take it week-to-week, then.” Theriault glanced back at the ice, where several members of the team broke away from the circle. “It'll be good for the boys to see you on your feet.”

Theriault's eyes were sharp as Shane shrunk further into his shoulders. “Team needs its captain, right?”

“Yes, sir.” He swallowed hard as the team reached the bench.

“*Captiane!*” JJ threw his arms open as he grabbed Shane in a tight hug over the boards.

—“*Sorry, capitane.*” Two sets of hands gripped him, and he was airborne. Fear like he had never felt, strangling his insides before the hard, frigid impact on the water—

JJ let go quickly when Shane flinched. “Sorry, buddy! Still a bit fragile, *non*?”

“Yeah,” Shane took a step back, shoving his shaking hands back in his pockets. He glanced at Theriault quickly and forced a smile. “But, the docs are optimistic.”

Hayden hung around the back of the small group that had gathered, his brow furrowed as Shane avoided his eyes. Theriault tolerated the well wishes for a few minutes before ordering them back to practice, skating off himself to bark orders.

Shane tensed as Hayden stuck around.

“Hey man, how’ve you been?”

“Good,” Shane nodded, too casually. “Doctors are optimistic.”

“Yeah, you said that.”

“Yeah.” Shane knew he was being rude, but he couldn’t bring himself to meet Hayden’s eyes.

“Did you drive?” Hayden’s voice was too quiet, and Shane felt a flare of irritation. He wasn’t actually fragile.

“I took the train.”

“Are you spending the night, or—”

“No.”

Hayden’s voice dropped. “Shane.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’ve barely been answering my texts.”

Shane fidgeted. Hayden was watching him patiently, which was a fucking weird emotion to see from him. Shane felt like a little kid, squirming before fessing up to breaking a window.

“They’ve been advising against screen time,” Shane lied. They had lifted that restriction ages ago.

Hayden held his gaze longer, letting the minute stretch out before saying, “I guess it’s a good thing you’re here in person then. Can you wait until after practice? We can grab lunch.”

“Yeah,” Shane muttered. “Sure.”

Shane watched the rest of the practice, mentally taking notes on who had slacked off and who had benefited from the rest. It was an easy distraction from what he was trying not to think

about: the guilt of not being out there, and the terrifying relief for the same reason.

After almost an hour, the guys came off the ice and headed to the locker room to change. Shane followed them, accepting more well wishes and commiserations at his bad luck for missing the Games. He forced a smile and made some awkward jokes, but, luckily, no one dug any deeper. Some guys peeled off to the gym; others went for meetings with their special teams and coaches to go over things. Shane expected Hayden to have meetings as well, but he changed back to jeans and his jacket, ready to go.

“Come on, we can go to Manuel’s,” Hayden was cheerful, but Shane kept his shoulders hunched as they walked out to Hayden’s car. It was a mess, as usual.

“Sorry.” Hayden grabbed the random toys and diaper bags scattered around the front seat.

Shane saw the two car seats in the back, strapped back properly since the last time he had seen the car.

—“*Keep your fucking eyes open, Hollander,*” the Russian accent cut through the haze.

“*Rozanov, is he—*”

“*Shane, don’t fucking do this to me.*”—

Shane blinked when Hayden snapped his fingers an inch from his body. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, feeling dizzy and sick. “Can we go, please?”

“Yeah, sure.” Hayden finished cleaning the car, throwing worried glances. It felt like forever for Hayden to be done, and Shane rolled down the windows despite the freezing air as soon as he turned the car on.

“Is that the concussion making you nauseous?”

“Yeah,” Shane lied again. “But the doctors are—”

“--optimistic, yeah, I *know*.” Hayden sounded frustrated as he pulled out. “But it’s been a month and you’re still—”

“Can we just get to the place?” Shane cut him off, focussing on the frigid air. “I’ll feel better when we’re settled.”

Hayden’s hands tightened on the wheel, but Shane just watched the street pass by. By the time they got to the bistro, the car was icy and they were both shivering. Shane rolled up the window, and they went in.

The place was popular among the team, so the waitress sat them at a usual spot by the back, obscured by some tall plants. They put in their drink orders, then Shane opened the menu even though he ordered the same thing every time they came here.

Hayden reached out and pushed it down. “Okay, buddy. You’ve got to stop avoiding me.”

“I’m not,” Shane sputtered.

“Bullshit,” Hayden’s voice hardened. “I might have taken a few pucks to the head, but I’m not a complete idiot.”

Shane picked up the napkin and began to tear it into pieces. “Okay, fine, so I’m avoiding you.”

“Did I do something—”

“No,” Shane said quickly. “No, you didn’t do anything. It’s me.”

The waitress fumbled with her drink tray as she came around the plants. Hayden and Shane both jumped to help steady it as she flushed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Are you ready to order?”

Shane buried his head in his hands as Hayden ordered for them, and the waitress hurried away.

“Help me understand, dude,” Hayden picked up like nothing had happened.

Shane sighed. “I don’t know. I just...” Shane tried to organize his thoughts, but they kept slipping away. He used to talk to Hayden about everything.

Well, almost everything.

But Hayden was his best friend: his ride-or-die. It didn’t matter that Shane put his foot in his mouth or that making friends had never come easily for him. Hayden was there with a stupid grin on his face and a fist bump through every win and loss.

Hayden literally teamed up with fucking *Rozanov* and faced down the fucking mafia for him.

What was he supposed to say? That he was grateful for Hayden, but talking to him brought back a patchwork of hellish memories? That he felt a twist of guilt for putting Hayden in danger in the first place? That talking with Hayden meant probably talking about Rozanov?

He didn’t want to acknowledge those things were real, let alone talk about them.

And there it was.

He didn’t want them to be real. Wouldn’t it be easier just to cut that day out of existence? If it only lived in his head, maybe it didn’t really happen.

Except it did. And there was one fucking thing he didn’t exactly want to go away.

And saying those things out loud to Hayden, who had been there, was going to make them real. The kidnapping, the fear, the whatever he had with Ilya now—he was afraid Hayden was going to look at him differently. Like he was soft. Like he was the liar he had been all along. Like he was gay.

He didn't want to open those doors, so instead he stayed locked up alone.

It felt like there was a nightmare on either side of the door. But that was an really fucking stupid thought. Hayden wasn't a nightmare. The man was here knowing, at least a little, what was on the other side, and he was begging Shane to let him in. It was the furthest thing from whatever distorted reality Shane was imagining.

His chest felt tight. God, when he put it like that he felt so fucking stupid. Selfish.

When he looked up, he realised he had been quiet for too long. The hardened expression on Hayden's face was softening to hurt.

He reached out before thinking, grabbing Hayden's wrist when he leaned back.

"Wait—" Shane struggled to put his thoughts into words. "Hayds. Listen, okay?"

"That's all I'm trying to do, man," Hayden said.

"I think... I've just been afraid," Shane swallowed hard. "I've been trying to forget the whole thing and, when I see you, it all comes back. And I haven't been ready to talk about it. I'm still... not, I think."

There was a long pause. Shane glanced up, his stomach turning painfully. But, luckily for him, Hayden's face was an open book. He grabbed Shane's forearm tight, his jaw set with stubborn determination.

I don't know what I did to deserve this kind of friendship. Shane's inner voice was finally calm.

"I get it," Hayden said. "And we don't have to talk about it, okay? I just miss my friend."

It was like a pile of bricks was lifted from his chest. "Me too."

The waitress came back with their meals. She gave them a lopsided smile as they pulled their hands back, making way for their plates.

"Enjoy," she winked as she left, and Hayden rolled his eyes. Shane eagerly dug into his food. He had missed this place.

"Well, there is one thing we have to talk about," Hayden said as he picked up his sandwich. Shane froze.

"We do?"

"When the *fuck* did you and Rozanov start hooking up?"

Shane had already given his parents an awkward rundown after Ilya had left yesterday, but it didn't make this any easier.

"We've been kind of seeing each other for a while."

“Define ‘a while’,” Hayden pushed. “Because I’ve seen you take chicks home.”

“Well, not *seeing each other*,” Shane clarified. “But for a few years now. Just when we play against each other. Sometimes.”

Hayden mulled over the information while he chewed, then made a mildly disgusted face.

“Wait, so the games were, like, foreplay?”

“No!” Shane felt like hiding under the table, then sighed. “I mean, kind of? Aren’t you always happy to get home to Jackie when we win?”

“Yeah, but what happens when we lose? Is that, like, how you decide who... who’s the—?” He made a crude gesture involving a hole made with his thumb and index finger.

This time, Shane made a disgusted face. “Jesus, Hayden!”

“Sorry!” Hayden threw up his hands, having the decency to look apologetic. “I’ve never really, like, thought about it before. I mean, after we kinda talked in the hospital, I looked some stuff up, but it got weird thinking about my best friend... you know.”

“Getting fucked?” Shane said bitterly.

“Well... yeah. I mean, it looked pretty... intense.”

Shane paused. “Did you *just* look at gay porn?”

“Not *just*.” Hayden’s ears were pink.

Shane buried his head in his hands.

“I’m *trying* to be an ally!”

“You’re trying alright,” Shane mumbled. He couldn’t blame Hayden. Not really. Not when he had done the same thing after the first World Juniors.

“But... you are gay, right? You never really cleared that up.”

Shane sighed and put his hands down, squeezing his knees. “I don’t know, man. Maybe. But maybe not. Sometimes I think I’m just waiting for the right woman to make me feel like I do with Ilya.”

Hayden made a face at the name but looked immediately chagrined. “Why, though?”

“What do you mean, why?”

Hayden paused for a moment, like he was trying to make sure he was saying the right thing.

“You were there the night I met Jackie, right?”

“Yeah,” Shane frowned. “You two were slobbering all over each other. It was disgusting.”

“Yeah, well, it was fucking love at first sight. And I’ve never felt that way before, or after. Like, I was done, man. Am done. Don’t need to keep looking.”

“I’m... happy for you?”

Hayden sighed like Shane was being dense on purpose. “What I’m saying is, if you and Rozanov,” he winced at the name still, “feel that way—why look somewhere else? You got it, dude. Like, enjoy it.”

The protein bowl sat in front of Shane, suddenly unappetizing. “But, I mean, I don’t—“ Shane couldn’t find the right words.

“Do you love him?”

“No!” Shane said automatically. *Yes*, his brain countered. He looked at Hayden's waiting expression. “Maybe?”

“*Maybe?*”

“I don’t know!” Shane felt sick. Did he love Ilya? Was that the conversation they had had in the parking lot yesterday? Had that been a love thing?

“I went to the Bears’s game in Ottawa,” he confessed.

“You didn't wear his jersey, did you?” Hayden held his hands up defensively when Shane glared. “Just checking!”

“He stayed over at my parents’ place after.”

“Oh?” Hayden was trying so hard to be supportive, Shane could tell.

“It felt... different.”

“Like... uh, how?” Supportive, but struggling and Shane sighed. “Did you... uh—“ he made the gesture again.

“I’m not going to give you sex details.”

“You can if you need to,” Hayden said bravely.

Shane kicked him under the table and gritted his teeth. “Different like, it wasn't just hooking up. And when I dropped him off at the airport, I didn’t want him to leave, okay? It’s never... really been like that before. Usually, once it’s... done, we just kind of leave. Quickly.”

Hayden was grinning. “You love him.”

“I do not!”

“Well, you’ve got a fucking crush at least.”

“We’re not in high school, Hayds,” Shane pushed his food around.

“You might as well be! Haven’t you ever had a crush before?”

Shane thought about it. He had found other guys attractive, sure. High school was a blur for him. He had only really paid attention enough to pass. Otherwise, he had focused on hockey.

There were plenty of attractive players during his time in the junior leagues and after. But everyone found hockey players like Carter Vaughn, Ryan Price and Eric Bennet sexy.

Right?

“Not... not like this.”

Hayden rubbed his shins. “And what? You’re worried he doesn’t feel the same or something? Because that guy did not want to fucking leave the hospital when you were still out. From the way Boston was yelling at him over the phone, I thought they were going to fire the guy. And he was going to just let them.”

Shane leaned forward, nearly knocking his drink. “What?”

“Yeah! They switched to Russian for a bit, and Rozanov looked like he was going to murder someone, but he finally left after that.”

“Really?”

“The dude fucking risked his career for you! And his life.”

“I know, but—“

“So, if you’re worried he’s not, like, interested in something serious, dude, he totally is.”

He was. Shane thought about the way Ilya had clung to him until he had fallen asleep, exhausted from crying. Shane had spent longer just holding him that night, his mind a jumbled mess.

Yeah.

“You think?”

“Dude,” Hayden looked at him incredulously. “He wants your babies. Trust me, I know. It’s how Jackie looks at me,” he winked.

“Gross,” Shane laughed. The tension in his body had relaxed. He hadn’t realized how tightly it was wound around him until it was gone.

He suddenly felt an overwhelming rush of incomprehensible feelings: fondness, warmth, guilt, anger at his own idiocy. The urge to crawl under the table came up again, strong.

“Hey, dude.” He focused back as Hayden touched his arm. “I’m an awesome wingman. I got everyone laid in high school, guys and girls, girls and guys, and, now, guys and guys. I’ve got you.”

Shane wiped at his eyes and then gave a shaky laugh. “You’re a real one, Hayden. Thank you.” He straightened up. “But enough about me, okay? How’s Jackie? And the girls?”

They dug into their food and caught up on normal things—the kids, the Olympics and the team.

Shane was exhausted when Hayden dropped him off at the Via Rail station. “Let me know when you’re *back* back,” Hayden said as Shane got out. “We can have a family dinner again.”

“Soon,” Shane promised and closed the door. He felt confident saying it, though the thought of moving back to Montreal, stepping into life again like nothing had happened, was still terrifying.

He had bought two seats on the train to make sure no one sat next to him. He stared out the window on the way back.

What if Hayden was right? What if Ilya...

He picked up his phone.

Shane: on my way back to Ottawa

Shane: I’m on week to week

Three dots popped up.

Lily: still? Did they say why?

Shane knew why. He had fucking lied to them. He wasn’t ready to go back. He wasn’t ready to be under the cameras, on TV, knowing that some guy in a warehouse was watching him.

Shane: vertigo.

There were a few minutes when nothing happened. Then:

Lily: I am also week to week

Shane frowned.

Shane: what? Why didn’t you tell me?

Lily: is not a big deal

Shane: did you get hurt? are you sick I haven’t seen anything posted

Lily: yes, sick. Must be flu or something

Shane: why didnt you say something?? I thought you were bullshitting your team about the sick thing!!

Lily: I’m fine.

Shane: are you alone? Who's taking care of you?

Lily: ?? No one. It's just flu

Shane put down his phone, frustrated. Ilya had played like shit in the Centaurs game. He had assumed it was because... well, maybe he had assumed it was because Ilya had been messed up from seeing him. Shane certainly had been.

He hadn't *seemed* sick when Shane dropped him off, but the flu moved fast. Shane's parents had taken their sick days to stay at his place and take care of him when he had had it. He couldn't imagine being alone and feeling that bad.

Shane's fingers started moving before he could talk himself out of it.

Shane: I can do my physio anywhere

Shane: and I'm not in Montreal for the week

Shane: I'll come to Boston and take care of you

He felt like he had a rubber band in his hand waiting to snap. Thankfully, the dots appeared quickly. Then it disappeared.

More dots started, then stopped. Then started again.

Lily: I'm fine

Shane: no way

Lily: you will get sick too

Shane: we were swapping spit literally yesterday

Lily: don't come

Shane: I'm coming

Lily: shane

Shane: you didn't even make that dirty

Shane: thats how I know you're not okay

Shane: give me your address

Shane: or I'll just wander around Boston in dark alleys asking strangers for directions

Lily: you are a cruel man

The next message was a pin to a penthouse in Boston. Shane started looking up flights.

Chapter 2: Ilya

Chapter Notes

For some reason, Shane's chapter takes place tomorrow in this story's timeline. Let's go with it.

Ilya ordered two vodka shots on the plane before they had levelled out. A weekday flight from Ottawa to Boston was fairly quiet, so he sat undisturbed. He held off drinking them until he could convince himself he couldn't taste Shane on his tongue anymore.

He glanced at his phone. Even though he had switched to airplane mode, he could see the list of missed calls and messages.

Some were from LeClaire, which started out as concerned and escalated to professional anger. A few more were from teammates, which ranged from congratulations at finding a girl in Ottawa of all places that would make him miss the flight, to passive-aggressive jabs at his responsibility. A few more were from some of the assistant coaches. The worst were from Pasha Morozov, the Bear's defence coach.

Morozov had moved to America in the eighties chasing a girl and a contract. He had eventually found a place in Boston coaching goons and being the unofficial wrangler for any Russian players.

When Ilya Rozanov joined the team at eighteen, Morozov had been indispensable. He'd helped him find an apartment, translated paperwork, walked him through remitting money back home. He'd laughed with Ilya's father in Russian-owned bars, the two of them swapping stories and shaking their heads at how soft the next generation was becoming.

As he'd gotten older, Ilya had befriended his teammates, which helped his English immensely. He learned how to handle things himself, and Ilya knew Morozov resented him for it.

Morozov's messages were always in Russian, and the ones Ilya hated reading most.

Morozov: LeClaire asked me if everything was all right with you

Morozov: If this is about a woman or money, it happens

Morozov: These girls know how to get men in trouble

Morozov: Your father warned you about this. They see a salary and think they can take what they want

Morozov: If she's causing problems, we know how to help

Morozov: Don't let something temporary ruin your career, Ilya

Sometimes, Ilya fucking hated hockey.

When Ilya got off the plane from Ottawa, he took a taxi to the practice barn, almost two hours late.

LeClaire was a respectable coach for the most part. He could be tough, but tough love often motivated the Bears, especially since Ilya balanced out some of the harsher remarks from management. Usually, Ilya would have ignored Morozov's bullshit, but he had dragged the coach's name into it. It was better to show his face than to give Morozov more ammunition.

At best, they would think he was being egotistical. At worst, they might think he was on drugs. If Morozov was dripping poison in LeClaire's ear, Ilya had to play this right, and soon.

By the time he reached the barn, the on-ice practice was done and most of the team had already gone home. The ice was empty and slick from the Zamboni. Ilya headed to the team's dedicated practice area in the back.

He caught a glimpse of himself in a window. His suit was wrinkled, and his eyes were bloodshot. He smelled like the cheap vodka from the other shots he had charmed out of the flight attendants, even though he had tried to cover it with breath mints and cologne.

Just fucking great.

He stopped by the empty locker room and stripped out of his jacket and tie, and sat in his stall, elbows on his knees and head in his hands.

He had to fucking get it together.

He took a deep breath and changed into one of the spare sets of clothes he kept here. They at least didn't smell like it had spent the night on Shane Hollander's bedroom floor.

Don't spiral. Just talk to LeClaire. They need you.

He stood up and grabbed a water bottle, heading toward the offices before he could talk himself out of it.

While the players had headed home, the office staff was still there. He passed the equipment managers getting tomorrow's gear ready. They were talking, but fell silent when Ilya walked past. He smiled and greeted them like he normally did, but their replies were short, and they pretended to be very interested in their checklists.

LeClaire's office light was on.

The relief was immediate, but it died just as fast when he saw who was already there.

Morozov stood half-turned in the doorway, thick arms crossed, posture casual in a way that was anything but. Of fucking course.

“Ilya,” Morozov said in Russian, voice mild. “You finally decided to come in.”

“I need to speak with the coach,” Ilya said, sticking to English like he normally did. He focused on the half-open door. This was still salvageable if he could get in there to talk.

Morozov stepped aside, which made the hairs on Ilya’s arm stand up. He felt as if he were walking into a trap.

When he opened the door, LeClaire glanced up, a sour expression on his face. He shifted, closing a window on his computer before he cleared his throat. “Rozanov, I was just about to call you. Again.”

Ilya stepped inside, and Morozov followed, closing the door. Ilya felt like the room’s temperature climbed several degrees.

“Yes.” Ilya’s eyes darted between the two. “I wanted to explain what happened.”

LeClaire gestured to the chair across from him. “Sit.”

Ilya hesitated. “Could we speak privately, please?”

LeClaire and Morozov exchanged a look before Morozov finally turned and left. Ilya noticed the door didn’t close fully this time. He turned and firmly shut it before he sat in the chair across from the desk.

“You missed curfew,” LeClaire said. He kept his tone professional, but his eyes were alert. Ilya had to keep from squirming. “And then missed the flight.”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I was sick.”

“I remember. Bad fish,” LeClaire said dryly. “Where were you then? Puking in a back alley somewhere? We have medical staff for a reason.”

“No,” Ilya shook his head. He hoped he looked as sick as he felt. “I had a friend in Ottawa. They offered to let me stay at their place for the night. It was... more comfortable than the hotel.”

“And you didn’t think to let anyone know?”

Ilya looked down.

“I was... not feeling well.” Ilya wished he knew a better term to use in English.

LeClaire steepled his fingers. “And this morning? Your friend couldn’t take you to the airport on time?”

“We slept in. I’m sorry for that. I will pay whatever fine the team thinks is fair.”

There was a long, uncomfortable stretch of silence.

“You’ve had a rough stretch,” LeClaire said at last. “Montreal was a girl as well. And, I know, your performance in Sochi isn’t something we can comment on, but it was concerning to say the least. And now this. Morozov is worried. Hell, *I’m* worried.”

“I know,” Ilya said quickly. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I’m not trying to dodge responsibility. I just—”

“With respect, captain,” LeClaire interrupted, “this is becoming a pattern.”

“I won’t let it happen again.”

“Yes, you won’t, if you’re suspended.”

“What? Coach—”

“Don’t fucking argue with me, Rozanov.” LeClaire cut him off. “You’ll pay the fine, and you’ll be benched until things turn around.”

“It was one game—”

“You haven’t been right for a month now,” LeClaire’s voice was hard. “Since the Olympics. I don’t know what happened there, but you lose to *Latvia*, you can barely skate and now you come in smelling like a fucking bar.”

Ilya clenched his jaw.

“It’s a safety issue at this point,” LeClaire continued. “I can’t have you being physical on the ice when your head is somewhere else.”

“You’re right,” Ilya said, voice ragged. “I— I am... dealing with something. But, I have been with this team for years. I have never missed a flight before. Never missed curfew. I have earned some trust, no?”

“You have,” LeClaire said, surprising him. “And out of respect for that, we’re calling this a healthy scratch. For now.”

A healthy scratch. Ilya swallowed hard. That was the code management often used to let the team know when a player was on thin ice, so to speak. Less consequential than announcing disciplinary actions, he supposed, but still a stinging slap on the wrist.

“We’ll take it week by week,” LeClaire said. “I want you in warm-ups and games. I want to see that whatever you’re dealing with out of the barn stays out of the barn. And if it can’t, we’ll revisit whether there’s something here that would warrant further investigation. Got it?”

Ilya nodded, his chest tight.

“Whatever it is – whoever it is – keep it off the ice,” LeClaire’s voice enunciated the past part slowly.

“Yes, sir.”

“I expect you to be in the box for tomorrow’s game, keeping everyone’s spirits up, just like you usually do.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, go home and shower.”

Ilya nodded and stood. Morozov was waiting outside the door, but Ilya shouldered past him. He heard LeClaire call the assistant coach into his office and quickly made his escape.

He messaged the car service the players used when they couldn’t drive and waited in the cold for it to arrive.

Healthy scratch. Fuck.

It was almost worse than a suspension. A suspension would be explainable. A healthy scratch would make the media speculate. Gossip would piss his father off more than just an infraction.

By the time Ilya got up to his penthouse, dropped his stuff in the hall, and collapsed face first on his couch, he was done. He didn’t even bother with the lights. He wanted to pull a blanket over his head and sleep forever. Maybe if he closed his eyes, he’d wake up a different person.

The couch was comfortable, but it felt cold and empty. He pulled one of the softer cushions into his arms, pressing it to his chest, feeling so hollow he thought he could push it through his ribcage to his spine.

He had felt fine before Ottawa, and he had felt at peace for the first time in a long time lying in Shane’s bed.

Here, it was as if a deep hole had opened in his stomach. He was sitting at the bottom, cold, numb. A wave of darkness seemed to shudder through him, and he let it.

Sleep. He just needed to sleep so the nightmare could be over.

But before he could drift off, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

He pulled it out, ready to snarl, but all the anger dissipated when he unlocked the screen, the brightness stinging his eyes.

Jane: did you get in okay? Were they mad?

Ilya shifted so he could type faster.

Ilya: no, it was fine. Just got home.

Jane: I just had the most fucking awkward conversation with my parents

Ilya snorted. He hadn't met Shane's parents under the best circumstances, but he loved the way Shane couldn't shut up about them. Ilya could go months without mentioning his father. Years, if Morozov didn't harass him about it.

Ilya: did you draw them a picture?

Jane: Shut up.

Jane: I can't tell if they're being cool just because its you

He wasn't sure he liked how that thought made his skin itch. Sure, he chased their son across the frozen, criminal landscape of Montreal and dove into a frigid river to pull him out, but did that make him the kind of guy parents wanted around their son?

Ilya: I am a good catch. Hot. Rich. Amazing at sex.

Ilya: I hope they know the last one

Jane: Annoying. Egomaniac. You forgot some

Ilya: you love it

Jane: they're serious Rozanov fans now, you know. My mom had your stats memorized but now she won't shut up about them. Dad is ready to buy a jersey

He hoped she wasn't looking at his recent stuff.

Jane: they seriously didn't care you missed the flight?

Jane: Theriault will fine guys just for being late

Ilya: no, it's okay

Ilya: we have more fun in boston

Ilya: fuck more people

Ilya: its okay to be late if we are getting laid 🍆

Jane: 😡

Ilya: what did your parents really say?

Ilya didn't type what he wanted: what had Shane told them exactly?

There was a long wait as the three dots pulsed. Ilya stayed curled around the phone in the darkness, waiting.

Jane: they said it was a shock but i haven't really dated any girls in a while so it kinda made sense. I think they understand now why you were there. In montreal

Ilya: what did they think before?

Jane: I told them that we were friends

Jane: mom thought it was weird

Jane: but they were kinda distracted with the whole kidnapping thing

Ilya: yes, we were very special friends 🧑🧑

Jane: youre an asshole

Jane: are you playing tomorrow?

Ilya: will you cheer?

Jane: I'll watch

Ilya's heart fluttered slightly.

Jane: I have to go to Montreal to meet with the medical team, but I'll be home in time

Ilya: are you going alone?

Jane: yes

Jane: I'm taking the train. Four hours in the car is too much driving right now

Ilya: you will text me?

Jane: you, mom, dad. Trust me, I can't sneeze without someone knowing about it

Jane: they've got a tracker on my phone

Ilya: good

Ilya: where are you?

Jane: home. At my parents. I'm hiding in my room

Ilya: alone 😈

Jane: they're upstairs but

Jane: yes

Ilya smiled as Shane seemed to start and stop several times.

Jane: do you want to know what I'm wearing?

There was something endearing about those words. Ilya could imagine him, biting his lip nervously as he typed that.

Ilya: I'm picturing you in nothing

Shane was probably fumbling with his phone. He always got so clumsy when Ilya teased him like this in person.

Now, Ilya knew what his childhood bedroom looked like. He could picture Shane there, in his sweatpants and hoodie, because the room had a slight chill. The soft, dark texture of the sheets. Ilya closed his eyes for a minute, remembering the lemon of detergent, and the smell of sweat and musk when he woke up there. Shane, sleepy and dishevelled.

His phone buzzed.

Jane. Okay. Naked.

Fuck.

Ilya cupped himself through his pants.

Ilya: send me picture

Jane: what?? No! What if it gets out or something?

Ilya: not of your face. I want to see your cock. I hope its out

Jane: you send me one

Ilya had several in a folder he used when he was texting girls. It was easier to do than trying to take an attractive one in the heat of the moment. Instead he opened the camera, pushing down his joggers so his cock was in his hand. The lighting was bad. He wasn't even fully hard yet. He still felt gross from the plane, and he was a little drunk.

Ilya: (photo sent)

Jane: fuck

Jane: hang on

Ilya stroked himself, thinking about Shane scrambling around. Had he ever done this before? Probably not. Ilya was willing to risk photos when he was texting girls. It was hardly out of character for someone like Ilya Rozanov to have a few dick pics floating around. But Shane Hollander? That good Canadian boy?

He stroked harder.

Was Shane trying to get hard? Or get the angle right?

Ilya wanted to see them all.

Jane: (photo sent)

Ilya dick twitched. He felt something warm in his chest as looked at Shane's hard cock, pointed to the side and sticking up from his abs.

He was on his bed, like Ilya imagined. One of Shane's hands was holding it, but Ilya could see his dark pubic hair trailing up his pelvis. Shane didn't have much body hair, but he kept himself groomed.

Ilya stroked faster, palming the head of his dick, as he saw the bead of white already on the slit of Shane's cock. So fucking eager. Had he gotten hard just talking to Ilya about his day?

Jane: was that okay?

Ilya took a short video of himself, his hand moving, pulling his foreskin back and forth over the head of his dick, and sent it.

Jane: fuck

Jane: thats so hot

Ilya abandoned texting and hit voice recording. "Did you think about my cock to get yourself so wet?"

Jane: fuck u

Jane: why is yiur voice so sexy

The warmth in his chest grew.

He hit record for another video, aiming the camera down.

"Because you like it when I tell you what to do. Is okay. I like it too. Look how hard it makes me, thinking about you touching yourself."

He sent the video.

Twenty seconds later, he got a reply.

The camera was shaky as Shane was jerking off hard; the blanket tangled around his feet, his thighs and stomach tensed.

He was panting right by the microphone. Ilya saw a bottle of unopened lube next to Shane's hip, unnecessary because Shane's cock was wet from his pre-cum.

"Fuck, Ilya," Shane's voice was strained. *"I'm not going to last."*

The video ended with a cut off moan.

Ilya was going to have to delete that because Shane had said his name out loud. For now, he held his phone, speeding up as the sound of Shane's voice replayed over and over.

He was getting close, so fucking quick. What was it about this guy that got under his skin, pulled him out of whatever dark recess he was in? Shane wasn't even aware, wasn't even fucking *trying*.

Here he was, jerking off on his couch for Shane shamelessly. It was like a cocoon of warmth, lust, and affection was seeping into his body, not letting him escape.

He was so fucking close.

His phone buzzed, and he glanced at it, smiling.

The small world that had been encompassing Ilya shattered like a gunshot.

Incoming call: Papa

He let go of his dick like it burned and hastily fixed his clothes. Quickly, he stood up, trying to calm his racing heart as he picked up the call.

"Papa," Ilya said, cautiously. He never knew what kind of mood his father would be in. Had he spoken to Morozov already? Had Andrei fucking up again? Or would this be one of the confusing conversations about something that happened years ago?

"Healthy scratch? What kind of embarrassment are you for the Americans to want to publicly humiliate us like that?"

"It was a mistake, papa." Ilya paced. "I was sick and—"

"Then you would be on the injury list. What am I supposed to tell people? That they pay my son this ludicrous contract to make him sit on a bench? They will think I'm crazy."

"People are put on the healthy scratch all the time. In America they—"

"You are not American," his father said firmly. *"If you were in Russia, they would keep you in line. None of this soft, passive aggressive bullshit."*

Ilya remembered the cutthroat competitive nature of his junior teams. The coaches didn't even need to do much; the players policed themselves. Ilya's raw talent and confidence protected him mostly, but he was always one hit from everything being stripped away.

"They wouldn't pay me like this in Russia," Ilya said bitterly before he could stop himself.

"Always about money. Your generation doesn't understand pride. First you embarrass Russia in Sochi. Now you make us look like entitled assholes who won't even play for the teams they sell themselves to."

Ilya closed his eyes as the words washed over him.

"Like your mother, you can't take things seriously. Always indulging yourself. When are you going to grow up and realize you have responsibilities?"

Any other arguments he had died on his tongue.

“And now Pascha says there are women involved. If you can’t keep your dick out of trouble, then find someone to keep it at home.”

Ilya sucked in a sharp breath. “What, you want me married now? Papa, I’m only twenty-four.”

“Old enough if you can’t keep yourself in check. I will tell Pascha to find you someone. Someone Russian, young.”

“Papa—“

“You’re beginning to look like a mistake.”

The call ended. Ilya stood in his darkened room, feeling like his bones weighed a thousand pounds.

His phone buzzed.

Jane: 6 missed messages

Ilya sat down on the couch and pressed the heel of his hands into his eyes, before he opened them, the screen painfully bright.

Jane: fuck that was so hot

Jane: I came over everything

Jane: one sec

Jane: (picture)

A ghost of a smile appeared on his face at the large pile of crumpled tissues.

Jane: shit, should I have sent a photo before i cleaned up?

Jane: ??

Ilya’s eyes pricked at the corner, and he sniffed, clearing the sudden tightness in his throat. He started to tap a response.

Ilya: I wish I could kiss you

Ilya deleted it.

Ilya: things are so fucked up and I need—

He deleted that too. Finally, he settled on a response.

Ilya: messy

He hit send, his heart aching.

Jane: did you come too?

Ilya: what do you think

Jane: fuck off. I just showed you my fucking Kleenex pile like a teenager asshole

Ilya: yes

Ilya: came so hard my brain exploded

Ilya: can you picture it

Jane: your brain exploding?

Jane: messy 😊

Ilya hugged the couch cushion to his chest, like it might hold him together. In all the years they had been doing this, he had met Shane when the man was nervous, turned on, fiercely competitive and achingly cute.

He wished he could see Shane's face. He wondered what he looked like laughing at Ilya's jokes. What would his freckles feel like when he smiled?

Jane: ok, I have to actually clean up

Jane: dad is making some complicated thing tonight and he's making me help

Jane: I've never had this much free time and they won't let me breathe

Jane: its worse than high school

Jane: talk tomorrow?

Ilya: yes. Tell me when you are in Montreal

He hesitated.

Ilya: I

Shit. He hadn't meant to send that. Speaking to his father brought every raw wound to the surface, and he didn't have a chance to cover them up yet. He took a deep breath.

Ilya: I worry

He held onto the phone tightly as Shane started to reply.

Jane: I will

Jane: I promise.

Jane: I don't want you to worry, okay?

Ilya took another deep breath, this one shuddering.

Ilya: 

Chapter 3: Shane

Shane slouched in the taxi's seat. He had pulled his baseball cap low, but he was sure who he was fooling. Who cared about baseball in February in Boston?

He could see the route on his phone heading towards the pin that Ilya had sent him. It wasn't far from the Bears arena in the port, which had him a bit on edge. The game had finished as his plane landed (Boston had lost 3-1, which was embarrassing against Buffalo), so he was worried the fans would be out on the streets.

However, the car service Ilya suggested had tinted windows, so he knew he was probably safe. Ilya's building was another issue. They had only hooked up in hotels in Boston. He had kind of forced an invitation to Ilya's home, so maybe there had been a good reason Ilya hadn't brought him there before. What if there were other players who lived in the building?

What if Ilya had a girlfriend?

No, Shane pushed the thought away. He would have heard about it. Locker rooms thrived on gossip.

Shane: I'm turning off the tracker on my phone

Mom: Shane

Shane: It's been glitching since I crossed the border

Shane: It keeps jumping locations, so its not exactly useful here

Shane: and its draining my battery

Mom: It never glitched before

It had been hard enough to tell his parents he was going to Boston, alone, for the week. His parents had acted like he was planning a murder, not flying a few hours away to visit his—

To visit Ilya.

He had already bought a flight leaving that evening, so he had stood his ground.

Shane: Boston's a GPS nightmare

Shane: tall buildings, whatever

Shane: I'll text when I get there

Mom: We don't like not knowing where you are

Shane: I know

Shane: but seeing it actually makes me more anxious sometimes

Shane felt a stab of guilt, one of many he got daily. He knew he worried them. Over the last month, he had felt like they aged a year. For the first few weeks, at least one of them had been by his side. Hell, for the first week they took shifts secretly sleeping on the couch in the den outside his room before he caught them. He hadn't known how to tell them that waking up to someone outside his door made it harder to sleep, not easier.

They had not been pleased with the lack of police response, to the point where Shane was worried the Montrel police were going to lock his mom up for harassment. Shane wasn't exactly happy either, but in a way it had been a relief. If the police had launched a massive investigation, if it had leaked to the press, if more than a few select people knew, then he couldn't just forget about it.

He could see his parents writing responses and drummed his fingers on his knee. Finally, his phone buzzed.

Mom: Anxious how?

Shane sighed. He knew it was going to be a discussion when he got home. But it was the truth, and he hated lying to them, especially now that it felt like everything should be out in the open.

Shane: like I'm waiting for something bad to happen

Shane: I dunno. I just want to try to be... normal

Shane: it's been a month

He needed to know he could do this without the world exploding.

There was a long wait for the next reply. The taxi was crossing the bridge to downtown, and Shane turned away from the window, his heart pounding. He felt like he was asking for permission, like a child, not a twenty-four-year-old professional hockey player.

He wasn't going to break at the first sign of trouble. He was pretty sure, anyway.

Mom: Okay. But if you feel worse, even a little, let us know

Shane: I will

Shane: I promise

Mom: Morning and night check-ins.

Shane: deal

Dad: Text when you're inside

Dad: And tell Ilya we hope he feels better

Shane: I will. love you both

Mom: Love you. Be careful.

He turned off the tracking app on his phone and felt immediately lighter. And more terrified.

The cab let him off outside of a large, luxury-looking building. It was obnoxiously ritzy and exactly what Shane pictured when he thought about where Ilya would live. Ilya had told him which elevator to go to, so he pulled his cap even lower and turned his back to the lobby as he texted Ilya he was here.

The elevator eventually opened, and Shane stepped in, his heart pounding.

He wasn't sure what he expected when he stepped off into the penthouse. Large windows faced the harbour, which was lit up with lights at this time of night. The penthouse itself was dimly lit with soft lamps. Shane took off his shoes and jacket and left his bag by the door as he stepped further in.

Ilya was nowhere to be seen yet, but if he was as sick as Shane had been in the fall, he wouldn't have expected the man out of bed either.

"Ilya?" he called out as he passed from the kitchen into the living room. It was definitely a rich-looking place, immaculately decorated and modern, like something in a magazine.

He jumped when he finally heard noise and the opening of a door. Across the living room, Ilya stepped out of the bathroom, hair wet from the shower and with only a towel around his waist. Shane flushed as his eyes dragged up Ilya's bare chest before meeting Ilya's smirking face.

"You made it," Ilya leaned on the door, the towel dangerously low.

"I-I have to text my parents," Shane stammered, his mouth dry. Ilya watched as Shane nearly dropped his phone.

Shane: inside. Ilya is here. Talk tomorrow

Ilya stalked across the room as Shane dropped his phone now, his fingers feeling fat and clumsy, as Ilya backed him against a beam.

He claimed Shane's mouth, hard, and possessive as he pushed Shane's sweater up. His hands roamed over his lower back before dipping below the waist of his jeans and boxers, hauling his hips hard against Ilya's.

"You're feeling better?" Shane managed to ask when Ilya switched to his neck.

"I don't know," Ilya practically purred. "You might have to give me a checkup."

His hands went to Shane's ass, then thighs, lifting him off the ground with an arrogant ease. Shane wrapped his legs around his waist, hating and loving how easily Ilya could handle him.

The penthouse was spacious, but Ilya carried him into the bedroom, seemingly undeterred by Shane hungrily kissing him the whole way. Once he was flat on his back, he hurried to pull his sweater off as Ilya worked on his pants. The towel was lost along the way somewhere, and they were grinding, naked and sweaty.

Shane fisted Ilya's damp curls, whining as Ilya kissed down his chest, biting at his sides until he was kneeling between Shane's spread legs.

"Fuck," the word punched out of him as Ilya's mouth engulfed him in wet, blistering heat. Blood rushed south so fast his vision swam, the edges of the room blurring. He fisted a hand in the sheets, the soft fabric the only thing keeping him anchored to the earth. "Ilya—"

Ilya pulled off with an obscene wet sound and gave his hip a firm pat. "Move back."

Ilya went to the nightstand, and Shane heard the familiar crinkle of a condom wrapper and lube. This was achingly familiar territory, and he found a strange comfort in the way Ilya could unravel him so completely, so quickly.

Then, Ilya was back on the bed, a warm, solid presence beside him. "Turn over."

He did, drawing his knees under him so he could press his face into Ilya's pillows, inhaling his scent. It was different from the bleached feeling of a hotel pillow, the unique scent of Ilya making him shiver as Ilya's slick fingers pressed into him.

The initial stretch was a welcome burn that crowded out every other thought. Ilya worked him open, methodically, curling his fingers just so until Shane was pushing back against his hand in a silent, shameless plea for more. All the tension, all the lingering fear, was melting away, replaced by a singular, desperate need. He needed Ilya to fill him, to erase everything else until there was nothing left but the two of them.

Ilya added more fingers, making everything intensify and his toes to curl. His knee was feeling pinched, but he ignored it, focusing instead on Ilya's hand pressing his shoulders down. He moaned into the pillow, for once not worrying about someone listening in.

"Yes," Ilya squeezed his shoulder as he added a third finger. "Fucking, listen to you Hollander. So eager for my cock, always, *moy krasívy mal'chik*."

Shane had no idea what that meant, but it felt possessive, and his stomach melted in a molten pool of want.

Ilya's fingers brushed against his prostate, and Shane cried out, his hips bucking involuntarily. "There it is," Ilya chuckled. He did it again, harder this time, holding his fingers in place to rub mercilessly against that sensitive bundle of nerves. "You like that, don't you?"

"Jesus Christ," Shane carefully controlled sounds shattered to pieces as he whimpered and cried out, tears pricking in his eyes as Ilya tortured him. His cock was rock hard, not quite close enough for him to press against the mattress as Ilya used his other hand to hold Shane's hip steady. "You're a fucking sadist."

“Maybe,” Ilya taunted. “But you’re the one who flew all the way out here for this.” As if to prove a point, he curled his fingers, a punishing pressure that made Shane cry out and his body to seize up.

“Just fuck me already,” Shane braced his forehead on the bed as Ilya pulled his fingers out, moving so the blunt head of his condom-covered cock rested on Shane’s ass.

“Ask me nicely.”

“Fuck me, *please*.” Shane hated how much he enjoyed begging for this; how much he loved that it narrowed his world down to something so simple.

“Hm,” Ilya hummed as if he were thinking about it. “I don’t know how much you want it. You should tell me.”

Shane gritted his teeth, gripping the pillow tight. His cock throbbed, ignored and trapped, demanding friction. He felt Ilya’s hands squeezing his sides, pressing where his bruises had mostly faded. His hair, still wet, dripped on his back as Ilya leaned over to growl in his ear.

“Tell me, Hollander, tell me—”

“Tell me where it hurts,” Ilya’s voice was ragged. His hands were chilly, but Shane could barely feel them as they ran over his bare chest, under Ilya’s jacket.

Ilya was soaking wet; his hair dripped ice onto Shane’s face, but he was too cold to flinch.

“Hollander—”

“Hollander! Shane.”

Shane blinked, Ilya hovering over him, his eyes worried. The pillow was wet with tears. He struggled to breathe, and goosebumps covered his skin; he felt cold and clammy even though Ilya was warm against his back.

“Hey.” Ilya turned Shane’s head towards him. “Hey, what happened?”

Ilya’s voice was low with concern as Shane tried to pull in more air, his whole body shivering. He tried to speak, but his mouth was too dry to get more than a croak out.

“Shane, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Shane wheezed. He closed his eyes for a moment, but that was worse, so he opened them again. This time the world was clearer. Ilya seemed to check every inch of Shane for something wrong, and Shane buried his face in the pillow, frustrated.

This was so fucking embarrassing.

“Shit,” Shane said in a muffled voice. He tried to focus on his racing heart, trying to force it to slow the fuck down. “Sorry. Fuck.”

“Stop,” Ilya said hoarsely. “Talk to me. Did I hurt you?”

“No.” Shane turned his head.

Ilya shifted quickly so his weight was off Shane, lying on his side. Shane winced as he eased his knee to lie flat on his stomach. His cock had wilted, and he huffed in frustration.

“I... I need a minute,” Shane muttered as Ilya ran his hand up and down Shane’s back, soothing and making him shiver at the same time. He could feel his own pulse hammering in his ears.

Ilya shifted closer, his face inches from Shane’s, but the tension around his eyes hadn’t left. “Shane...” His voice was softer now, but still urgent. “What happened? Tell me.”

An icy shiver ran down his spine, but Shane just shuddered, hands pressed into the mattress to ground himself. “Nothing,” he said, forcing a breath that came out shakier than he intended. “I just... moved wrong. My ribs are still sore, still.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t push. Instead, he pulled Shane against him, the heat of his body pressing comfortingly along Shane’s side. Shane could feel the steady thrum of Ilya’s heartbeat and focused on it.

“Just... give me a second,” Shane muttered, trying to sound calm.

Ilya’s hands stayed on his back, light but firm, fingers brushing over the bruises that had mostly healed. Shane felt the tension in his own muscles ebb slightly. The panic hadn’t gone entirely, but he could manage it.

“You’re shaking,” Ilya said quietly.

“I’m not,” Shane said quickly. “Just... tired. That’s all.” He didn’t want to admit the rush of panic, the memories that tripped him up.

Shane wasn’t stupid. He had sat through enough sports health workshops to know that concussions took a long time to heal, and trauma could bring up many unexpected reactions. He knew logically that this... thing. These... flashbacks. They were part of that. But he wasn’t out of control, or dangerous. And these memories weren’t dangerous either—they were things that were over. He wasn’t really back in the river. He had survived the car ride.

It was adrenaline and fear—irrational, yes, but explainable and, more importantly, fixable. It would go away, like the headaches and vertigo. He just had to wait it out.

But knowing that somehow didn’t make it any easier.

And he wasn’t about to make Ilya worry, not anymore than he already did.

Ilya pressed his forehead briefly against Shane’s. “If you say so,” he murmured.

Shane exhaled, feeling the heat of Ilya and the soft pressure of his hands. He let himself lean in, just a little, enough to feel grounded.

After a moment he pulled away and frowned. “You aren’t sick.”

“What?”

Shane lifted his hand and pressed it to Ilya’s forehead. “You don’t have a fever.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Genius. Is this why they pay you the big bucks?”

“You said you had the flu.”

Ilya looked away. “I said maybe flu.”

Shane further pulled away, frowning. “You said you were week-to-week. But you look fine to me.”

“It is not a big deal, Hollander.” Ilya groaned and rolled away. Shane watched as Ilya started pulling on sweatpants.

“Not a big deal?” he asked incredulously. “I hopped on an airplane because I thought you were dying.”

“I did not ask you to.”

“I brought you soup!”

Ilya paused, a shirt halfway on. “You what?”

“My dad made you soup! I smuggled it through customs.”

Ilya stared at him, with a confused look on his face. “You smuggled... soup.”

“Yes, through customs. For you!” Shane sat up, looking around for his clothes. Ilya folded his arms and leaned against the dresser, watching as Shane floundered. He grabbed his joggers and underwear from the floor, glowering. “I could have gotten into a lot of trouble.”

Ilya shook his head, a smile tugging at his face. “You are fucking ridiculous.”

“Excuse me,” Shane muttered. “I thought you were dying or something, and I was trying to be nice. Instead, you’re just here, fucking, being all hot and naked in your penthouse.”

“You thought I was dying?” Ilya covered his smile, his voice amused.

Shane sat on the bed, giving up on finding his sweater for now. “Well, not *dying*. But the flu is serious!”

“I said maybe flu,” Ilya repeated, but this time he looked at Shane fondly, which was fucking irritating.

“Well, sorry if I take you seriously,” Shane huffed. “Next time I’ll leave you to rot.”

“No.” Ilya moved to stand over Shane, pushing his knees aside and tilting Shane’s chin up. “I want your dad’s soup.” He leaned down and kissed Shane until he forgot to be mad.

Shane refused to be distracted. He pushed Ilya away and stood up. Ilya followed him as Shane went out to his duffel bag and pulled out the insulated bag.

His dad had pulled some frozen chicken noodle soup cubes he kept on hand from the freezer. It was still mostly frozen because of the ice packs.

“I kind of thought they would have confiscated it,” Shane said. “But it’s frozen, so Dad said it would probably be okay, but I checked it.”

Ilya was staring at him strangely. Shane shifted, aware that he was sweaty and shirtless, the yellowing bruises around his stomach probably ugly in this warm light. “What? Are you hungry? We should probably eat it soon because it feels like it’s already defrosting, and we shouldn’t refreeze it—“

Shane had to hold the soup out to the side as Ilya held his face and kissed him deeply. He gave an embarrassing squeaking sound when Ilya let him go, still holding his face, his eyes intense.

“Soup or sex, Rozanov.” Shane’s voice was breathy. “Pick.”

He grabbed the back of his neck and groaned. “You cannot make me pick.”

“Well, the soup is melting, and I’m stuck here for a week, so...”

Ilya kissed him again, hard, like he couldn’t help it.

Eventually, they detangled, and Ilya put the soup on the stove to cook while Shane cleaned up. When he came out of the shower, still shirtless with one of Ilya’s starchy towels around his neck, he paused. There was something that tugged at his chest seeing Ilya humming to himself in front of the stove, stirring soup. So normal.

Ilya glanced up, snapping Shane out of it.

“I made sandwiches.” He pointed to the plates on the kitchen island. He had also put out some other snacks and two cans of ginger ale and Coke. Shane never remembered telling Ilya what he liked. He had a sudden overwhelming desire to grab Ilya and finish what they started in bed, but Ilya was already dishing out the soup.

They settled in front of Ilya’s embarrassingly big TV to watch the last half of the Las Vegas-Vancouver game.

“That’s embarrassing,” Shane winced as Darcy Reeds kicked the puck into his own net during a confusing pileup.

“Not surprising,” Ilya snorted. “He never knows where his feet are.”

Shane put his empty bowl on the coffee table and stretched out, getting comfortable. He felt Ilya's hand in his hair, and closed his eyes slightly, his fingers ghosted over the scar behind his ear. Ilya's fingers traced the blemish before tugging gently. Shane allowed himself to be pulled down, shifting so he could get comfortable resting against Ilya's chest.

He was exhausted. The stress of going to Montreal, running a million scenarios of how he was going to talk to the medical team, his teammates, and the actual conversation with Hayden was catching up. Nevermind, the rash decision to hop on a plane and fly to Boston at the slight mention Ilya might need him.

It was suddenly all worth it, lying here on Ilya, his hands still slowly combing through his hair.

His eyes drifted closed, not asleep but soaking in the feeling of warmth and contentment.

They watched the rest of the game stretched out together. The commentary faded into the background. Shane dozed in and out, only half-aware of the score, his cheek warm against Ilya's chest. Every so often, Ilya's fingers would catch in his hair or trace slow, absent lines along his arm, like he was reassuring himself Shane was still there.

When the final buzzer sounded, Ilya muted the TV instead of turning it off. Neither of them moved right away.

"You asleep?" Ilya asked quietly.

"Mm," Shane hummed. "Thinking about it."

"Dangerous."

"Exhausting," Shane corrected. He shifted, rolling onto his back and blinking up at the ceiling. "We should go to bed."

They put the dishes in the dishwasher, and Shane retrieved his phone from where it had fallen under the coffee table. It was nearly dead, but his parents hadn't messaged since he had checked in.

"Everything okay?" Ilya looked tired as well, his head already nestled on a pillow. His curls had dried wild, and Shane could see a minor cut on his jaw from when he had shaved.

Shane hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah." He settled into the bed, his heart fluttering a bit as Ilya opened his arms. He rested his head on Ilya's chest again, breathing deep. It felt natural, too natural, and he should freak out a bit.

But he was too tired, and Ilya was too warm. The voice that had been nagging him incessantly, pointing out every nitpicking detail, finally quieted.

Ilya accepted his answer without pushing. He pressed a kiss to Shane's temple and tucked his chin over the crown of Shane's head, one hand resting warm and solid at his back.

They lay like that, breathing syncing slowly.

Shane fell asleep first.

Ilya stayed awake a little longer, listening to him breathe, before finally letting himself rest too.

Chapter 4: Ilya

Chapter Notes

Sorry if the formatting is weird, I wrote this and posted from my phone.

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

It wasn't the first time Ilya had let someone spend the night after a hookup. He didn't mind waking up to someone, especially when it led to morning sex.

And even more so when the morning sex involved Shane Hollander, flushed and panting as he lowered himself on Ilya's cock, inch-by-inch.

"Fuck," Shane swore as he braced himself on the headboard. Ilya back resting on the headboard as well, still in a bit of disbelief that this was happening.

Shane bit his lip as he finally managed to take the last of it. "Out of practice?" Ilya teased. "I thought you had toys."

"I can use those instead if you want." Shane's glare lacked seriousness, but he shifted as if he were going to get up.

"No!" Ilya practically growled and gripped Shane's hips to keep him squirming in place. He held him down tight for an extra beat, reassuring himself this wasn't a dream, that Shane was actually in his bed, in his lap, fucking himself on Ilya's cock. "But I want to watch you someday."

"You'd better be nice to me then," Shane said, leaning to kiss Ilya, all heat and promise.

When he pulled away, Ilya found himself chasing his lips.

It had been almost five months since they had done more than blow jobs. Ilya didn't need sex to be penetrative to have a good time, but with Shane, there was an intimacy to it, something grounding and dizzying all at once. It felt like something familiar and dangerous and perfect. He craved that more than anything or any other partner he had been with.

Shane started moving, tentative at first, then surer, leaning in closer as he found a rhythm. They had only done it like this once, when they had been a bit drunk and Shane kept worrying about losing his balance, so Ilya had taken over. Now, sober and steadier, Ilya was happy to let Shane try again.

He planted his feet on the bed, bracing himself to match Shane's movements with his own, causing Shane to slow, drawing a sharp gasp from his mouth. Ilya tensed for a moment, remembering last night when Shane had gone stiff and cold suddenly.

“Wait,” Shane said, his eyes closed and breath uneven as Ilya knew he was pressing up in just the right place. “Feels too fucking good when you do that.”

Ilya let out a breath, and rubbed his thumb on Shane’s thigh, reassuring him wordlessly.

"No parents upstairs," Ilya said in a tight voice. “I want to hear you scream.”

Shane’s eyes opened, dark and blown wide. “You going to make me?”

Ilya was lost, so fucking lost in this man. So deep in he didn’t ever want to crawl out.

Ilya flexed up again, watching as Shane’s eyes fluttered when he pressed against his prostate. Ilya grinned and did it again, fascinated with the way Shane’s eyebrows furrowed. He picked up his pace slowly, enjoying Shane’s slow descent from stifled moans to louder gasps.

He was always so tight and perfect and eager. He fucking loved watching Shane lose his composure. Ilya wanted nothing more than to take him apart and then hold him together again.

“Fuck, Ilya!”

The way he said his name drove Ilya crazy, and he moved faster, addicted to the slack-jawed pants and moans. Shane’s hips were moving fast now, a building rhythm as he took his pleasure from Ilya like he deserved it. Ilya let Shane set the pace, the headboard creaking dangerously.

Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore and gripped Shane’s lower back so he could flip them over. Ilya took control, pinning him flat on his back as he drove into the tight, warm heat.

He was so fucking noisy, moaning and crying out as Ilya bit his chest, neck, marking him like he always wanted to, the obscene slap of skin on skin making him want to go even harder.

“Ilya!” Shane threw his head back as Ilya practically attacked it. There it was—there was what Ilya wanted: Shane thinking about nothing but him, Shane feeling nothing but him. He watched with greedy eyes as Shane yelled, his eyes fluttering.

“I—I’m, fuck—”

It pleased Ilya to no end that Shane came as soon as Ilya closed a hand around him, cum splattering on his belly as Ilya held the punishing pace, wanting to see him pliant. He only slowed when Shane’s face tensed, too sensitive. He kissed the red bite marks on Shane’s neck, jaw, mouth until he stilled, still hard inside him.

“Oh my fucking God,” Shane gripped Ilya’s sweaty back, his fingers digging in hard. “Jesus, fuck.”

“Ilya,” Ilya teased, and Shane smacked him, huffing a laugh. “I thought you had finally learned my name.”

“You don’t need your ego stroked.”

Ilya nuzzled the space behind his ear. "Not my ego, no."

"Gimme a minute," Shane muttered, his eyes half closing.

Ilya didn't care if it took Shane a minute, an hour, to recover. He stayed like this, thrumming like a taint rope, but he never wanted to still. He would wait a fucking eternity for Shane.

Luckily, he didn't have to. This time Shane rolled them over, Ilya's head almost hanging off the end. He laughed, thankful he had invested in a bed that was large and sturdy enough for two athletic hockey players.

Shane glared, though his flushed face wasn't very intimidating. Instead, he squeezed his inner muscles around Ilya's cock, this time having the desired intention of making Ilya gasp.

"You can come again?" Ilya asked in disbelief as Shane slowly started to grind against him, his own cock softening. Ilya kept one hand on his hip while the other smeared the cooling cum on Shane's stomach. He laid his palm flat, feeling Shane's abdomen muscles tense, and then slid down.

Shane smacked his hand away.

"No," Shane snorted, as if Ilya were stupid. "Not so soon. I'm not a machine. But you're close, right?"

Ilya nodded, his mouth going dry as Shane squeezed again, deliberately. There was a wicked glint in Shane's eyes, no longer lost in hazy pleasure as he worked Ilya over with a maddeningly steady rhythm.

"My turn to make you lose it," Shane growled, moving faster, grinding down with a newfound purpose, as he kept Ilya captivated with his gaze. Ilya felt helpless as Shane fucked down as if he had something to prove.

Fuck, Shane seemed to have another level of strength, moving as if it were effortless to take Ilya cock with this relentless movement. It was hypnotic, the way he held Ilya's hands on his hips, using nothing but his thighs and core to drive Ilya fucking insane.

Ilya couldn't escape, couldn't do anything against this onslaught. He was just forced to endure as Shane patiently drew him back to the edge with his body until he was begging to be flung off.

The intensity on Shane's face rivalled that of him on the ice. Ilya had seen it before, the determined expression paired with giddiness.

Ilya wasn't sure he was ever going to be able to have a face off with again Shane without getting hard.

The tight, clenching heat of Shane's body was a vice, milking him for all he was worth, dragging him closer and closer with an expertise that bordered on cruel. His fingers dug in Shane's gyrating hips as he tried, and failed, to ground himself against the overwhelming tide of pleasure.

His eyes fluttered shut as the pleasure crested, his spine bowing off the bed as he spilled into the condom with a shattered cry of Shane's name.

A slow, self-satisfied grin spread across Shane's face as he continued, riding out the waves of Ilya's orgasm. With every shudder that wracked Ilya's body, Shane clenched down, intentionally prolonging the pleasure until Ilya was left utterly spent, aching and boneless in the best possible way.

Shane leaned down, bracing Ilya's head between his forearms, kissing him slow and deep so he could thoroughly destroy him.

When they finally broke apart, Ilya was panting, his chest heaving. "Fuck, Hollander," he breathed, his gaze fixed on Shane. He couldn't stop staring at Shane, his tousled hair, the crinkles around his eyes from his triumphant smile, the faint sheen of sweat on his brow. Ilya touched his cheek, brushing those fucking cute freckles with his thumb. "I will not survive the week."

"You'd better," Shane lowered down so he could rest chest to chest with Ilya, the heavy, broad and muscular weight of him like a blanket that Ilya wanted to pull over his head and stay under forever. "I've got more things to try. And we have time now."

There was something deeper when Shane said that, almost like it was a question. Ilya kissed him again, and they lazily made out until the tacky feeling of lube made Shane fidget.

They showered together, just kissing and groping as Ilya took the time to really explore Shane's body like he had always wanted.

Afterwards, Shane called his parents while Ilya flipped pancakes, the disgusting protein ones that Ilya had originally shoved to the back of the cupboard and Shane had unearthed

"Yeah, he's okay," Shane said into the phone, leaning shirtless on the counter and watching Ilya flip the first pancake with unnecessary force. "Doesn't look that bad. You know how the flu is though, it can change fast. I'll still stay the week."

A pause. Ilya glanced over at him, eyebrows raised, and Shane rolled his eyes.

"Yes, dad. You were right. Customs didn't care. The ice packs worked."

Ilya snorted softly, as he moved to put on coffee. Shane took over watching the pancakes, poking them with the spatula even though they weren't close to being ready.

"Can you forward me the Reebok notes?" Shane continued. "I'll look at them here. I think as long as there aren't any more weird... feet poses, it should be okay."

Another pause. "Yeah. I'm going to do all the physio this morning. There's a gym here... I think."

Ilya pointed down toward the hallway like it was obvious. Shane made a face—it wasn't like Ilya had given him a tour.

“I talked to Theriault, and he was understanding,” Shane stabbed one of the pancakes aggressively. “The team’s in New York on Friday,” he added. “I might fly down just to sit in the box. It depends.”

Ilya took the spatula out of Shane’s hand, raising a questioning eyebrow. Shane shrugged, and rolled his eyes at something his parents said.

“Yes, Jesus, mom. I’ll tell him. Talk to you later. Love you. Bye.”

He hung up and set his phone down. For a moment, he just stood there, watching Ilya move around the kitchen. Ilya glanced over at him.

“You are very bad at taking a vacation,” Ilya said.

“This wasn’t supposed to be a vacation,” Shane replied. “I’m healing, and you were supposed to be sick.”

The faded bruises on his chest made Ilya swallow hard—it was true. Shane was legitimately still on rest. Ilya was the lazy one.

“Mom and dad say hi, by the way.”

It felt like an unexpected blow to the chest, the casual way, Shane just said that. Ilya had to blink for a moment and catch his breath.

“Everything okay?” Shane was frowning. Ilya shook his head.

“Yes,” he stomped it down hard, closing that door of pain and hope before it could open. “So, Reebok asks for weird poses? What’s your rating on WikiFeet?”

“Shut up!”

Ilya placed the plate of pancakes on the kitchen island and pulled Shane into a squirming embrace. It didn’t matter they had spent the morning entangled; he couldn’t get close enough.

“I’m the injured I’m here,” Shane glowered and Ilya immediately softened his hands.

“Lucky for you then,” Ilya pressed him against his body, putting his mouth by Shane’s ear. “I can be your nurse.”

It dragged a groan from Shane, who then shoved him away. “I’m not eating cold pancakes.”

Ilya smirked as they sat down to eat, their elbows close enough to touch.

He managed to choke down the chalky pancakes when they were smothered in syrup. After, he showed Shane the gym, which was just an extra bedroom with workout mats, a treadmill and some weights. There was a gym in the building, and an extensive one in the Bear’s practice area, but it was convenient to have something to use when he couldn’t sleep late at night.

He lingered while Shane started his stretches, pretending to be helpful until Shane shot him a look and told him, pointedly, to get out before he got chewed out for being a distraction.

So, Ilya left and turned on his game system.

A while later, Shane emerged, loose and relaxed, towel slung over his shoulder. Ilya paused the game, hesitating.

“Do you play?”

Shane blinked. “What?”

Ilya gestured at the console. “Video games. Do you play?”

“Oh,” Shane said, then shrugged. “Yeah. A bit. In the off season mostly.”

Ilya handed him a controller.

Unsurprisingly, Shane was infuriatingly good. He was focused, methodical, and seemed to get energized when Ilya talked shit. Ilya took immediate offense and made it his mission to beat him.

“That was lucky,” Ilya scoffed. “Don’t get used to it.”

Shane combo’d him into the ground.

“...Okay,” Ilya muttered. “I was going slow because I’m a nice guy, but now I won’t be so gentle.”

“Oh, that was you being gentle?” Shane grinned. “Aw. Cute. I thought you just sucked.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed as he shifted on the couch to get ready for the next round. “You’re boring, Hollander. Same moves all the time. Like a fucking cheater.”

“Funny,” Shane said mildly, KO’ing him again. “It’s the same moves, but you keep losing to them.”

Ilya stared at the screen. “One more.”

Shane snorted. “The real losers are those that can’t admit defeat.”

“Shut up,” Ilya snapped. “One more, and we make it interesting.”

Shane leaned back, grinning ear-to-ear. It was fucking endearing how cute it was, how open and playful he could be when the stakes were just the two of them. Ilya felt a rush of heat go through him.

“Winner gets one fantasy,” Ilya said, smirking now. “No questions asked.”

“I didn’t know you liked getting your ass beat so bad,” Shane said, huffing a laugh, cheeks flushing pink.

“If you are too chicken...”

“Deal,” Shane’s voice wasn’t hesitant as the countdown started.

“Careful. You look eager to lose.”

“Try me, Rozanov,” Shane said calmly. Their characters leapt for each other on the screen.

The game started fast. Ilya rushed, spamming attacks, but Shane had perfectly timed counters, making Ilya stumble repeatedly.

“Shit, fuck you,” Ilya swore as Shane seemed to be one step ahead of him. “You fucking know this game.”

“I might have played a couple times,” Shane said innocently, dodging the flurry of punches Ilya threw at him and delivered a critical uppercut. “A week. At Hayden’s. For the last three years.”

“*Pizdets*,” Ilya growled, his hands tightening on the controller as he tried to will his character to stand up.

It didn’t matter. Shane delivered the killing blow, and Ilya’s character exploded in a geyser of blood.

Shane raised his arms in victory as Ilya slammed the controller on the couch and sulked.

“That was fucking cheating.”

“Some of us are just talented,” Shane leaned back on the couch, looking relaxed.

“Fuck you.”

“Maybe,” Shane grinned as he ran his eyes up and down Ilya’s body. “Maybe not. I haven’t decided.”

Ilya’s mouth went dry as Shane shifted closer.

“Hm, no questions asked, right?” Shane tilted Ilya’s chin towards him, and Ilya felt his breath quickened. “I haven’t really had a chance to try a lot of things. I could make you do something really weird.”

Shane could put a dog collar on him, and Ilya would woof.

Sometimes it scared Ilya how tightly wound he was around this man’s finger.

Their lips were an inch apart when Ilya’s phone started to ring. Ilya was ready to ignore it, but Shane pulled back. “You should get it.”

“No,” Ilya leaned forward but Shane had already sat back. “Is not important.”

“It might be,” Shane said, patting his cheek. He stood, heading to the kitchen. “Answer it while I think about my victory.”

Ilya dug his phone out of his pocket. His stomach sank when he saw Morozov flash across the screen.

“Hello,” he answered in Russian as Shane watched curiously as he grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge.

“Ah, so you haven’t forgotten how to speak Russian. I was worried.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m letting you know that we expect you early for the practice.”

Ilya rubbed his eyes. “It’s an optional practice.”

“Boston lost 6-1 last night,” Morozov said as if Ilya hadn’t been there in the box, flinching at each missed pass. “The management team would like the option to win next time. And, the team needs their captain.”

“I will be there. Early. Anything else?”

“I spoke with your father. He says you are finally looking to settle down.”

“No,” Ilya said firmly. “He was confused.”

There was a tense silence. Ilya knew as much as Morozov that his father often got ‘confused’. It was getting harder for Morozov to play that card when he wasn’t sure how reliable his leverage was.

“Maybe so. But I’ve already reached out to some friends. You’re a catch, Rozanov, and these are nice girls. Even a guy like you would be lucky to meet such a princess.”

Ilya felt disgusted. With the state of the economy in Russia now, it probably wouldn’t be hard to find a nice woman, smart and beautiful and willing to leave for the promise of a better life. Every summer he went back, another family member reached out: a business went under, or someone was sick, out of work or starting school. Sometimes it felt like his salary was the only thing keeping the country afloat.

He had used hockey to get out from under the thumb as best he could. He wouldn’t blame someone for exploiting the marriage route, though it was more dangerous. But marrying him would only be helpful if he kept playing. He had been working on obtaining a green card for several years, but with Moronov’s ‘help’ there had been delays. Earning an Olympic medal would have sped up his case for an EB-1 visa, proving him an outstanding asset to America rather than merely a great one.

But Ilya didn’t like to think about that.

He was sure the red tape surrounding his green card would be miraculously cut if he just gave Moronov a little bit of power and married whatever poor girl he had found.

Ilya glanced over as Shane sat back down, handing him the other water.

“I’m not looking for a princess,” Ilya said, crinkled the plastic. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

He ended the call and dropped his phone aggressively on the couch.

“Was it your family?” Shane cracked open his water.

“No.” The transition back to English was difficult for some reason. “One of the Bear’s coaches. He is Russian.”

“It must be nice to speak with him in Russian, right? Like, easier?”

Ilya snorted. “Yes, he is delightful.” He glanced over apologetically. “I have to go to practice.”

“Oh,” Shane’s face fell slightly. “Well, that makes sense if you’re not actually sick.”

“I’m sorry,” he squeezed Shane’s knee. “I will be back in a few hours. And I will bring food home, okay?”

“Okay, cool.” Shane fiddled with the bottle of water. “Hey, so, is it okay to ask why you’re sitting out of games? If you’re not sick—“

Ilya stood up. “It is just some roster balancing bullshit,” he cut Shane off. “Don’t worry about it.”

Shane’s eyes made his neck itch as they tracked him to the bedroom. He changed quickly, and grabbed his practice gear. Shane was still sitting on the couch when he came out, flipping through the channels. Ilya paused, a stab of guilt hitting him.

“You will be okay alone?”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Yes. I’m going to stay here, catch up on some emails and... whatever this is.”

The TV had landed on some reality show of scantily clad models in a hot tub.

Impulsively, Ilya stepped closer, and Shane looked up.

Ilya hadn’t been imagining it; there was a tightness to Shane’s shoulder, a tension in his face. The guilt gnawed harder.

He tilted Shane’s chin up, kissing him, parting his lips easily. Shane, as always, seemed to melt into Ilya’s hands. When Ilya pulled back, the tension was gone.

“Think about what you want to do to me when I get back,” he said. Shane nodded briefly, his chin still in Ilya's fingers. Ilya kissed him again, and then a third time, and then had to step back and will his dick to calm down.

“See you later,” his voice was rougher than he intended as he turned and forced himself to walk out the door.

Practice was a blur. Ilya ran through the routine of it without thinking. The coaches went over every failure like they were personal flaws and exalted only the very best plays. It was a strategy, one that had been working for most of the season.

Between drills, Ilya spent his time going player to player, checking in after the humiliation rounds from the coach, making them feel like they mattered. Making them feel like part of the team—if you failed, we failed, but if you succeed we all win.

When he was younger, seeing the look of frustration and pessimism turn into fuel had been gratifying. After all, he had believed it.

And now it was his job, how he had set himself apart from the rest. He had to keep it up.

LeClaire was watching him as he clapped one of the fourth line defenseman on the back. He looked satisfied, so Ilya let out a sigh of relief.

They drilled for an hour longer than usual, but the team willingly pushed through. Tomorrow was technically a rest day, and their next game was at home again so the coaches weren't afraid to push everyone. By the time Ilya was in his meetings with the assistant coaches, it was getting dark outside.

Between meetings, he ducked into the hallway and grabbed his phone. There were a few unread messages from Shane, mostly about how bored he was or pictures of weird things he had found in the apartment. Ilya couldn't stop the smile from his face.

He went to tap a reply, but looked up quickly when he heard footsteps. It was too late to wipe the stupid grin off his face.

Morozov and Ryan Price were a strange pair: both tall and broad and intimidating, but where Morozov always looked square for a fight, Price looked like he wanted to be anywhere else.

“Staying out of trouble,” Morozov said in Russian and clapped Ilya on the shoulder like they were old friends. In English, he turned to Price, “Your captain is quite the ladies man. If you ask, maybe he'll give you some pointers.”

Price looked extremely uncomfortable, and Ilya rolled his eyes, stuffing his phone in his pocket. “Can we make this quick? I want to leave before six.”

Morozov studied him for a moment. “See? Hot date.”

“Yes,” Ilya said shortly and went into the meeting room.

As defense coach, Morozov often met individually with players to go over specific skills and strategies. Usually, Ilya wouldn't be in these kinds of meetings but Price had only been traded in November, so had only played a handful of games with the Bears, thanks to the Olympic break. He was here to support the advice Morozov give, and Ilya was pretty sure this was part of the punishment he was serving for being a fuck up lately.

Morozov hooked his iPad to the screen in the room and went through every play Price had been on, picking apart where Morozov thought he had messed up, frame by frame.

It was hard to tell if the criticism was getting to Price. On top of being stoic, he had a thick beard that masked a lot of his expression. Ilya tried his best to read his demeanour while Morozov dug in, but it was hard to tell. He did diligently take notes, though he offered few responses.

The lack of feedback was irritating Morozov, which make Ilya like Price even more. Finally, Morozov had talking himself out with ten minute still left in the scheduled time.

"How are you settling in?" Morozov said, not wanting to give up his captive audience. "Boston's a great city."

"Yeah," Price grunted. Ilya could see Moronov's eye twitch. "It's interesting."

"Making friends?" Moronov continued. "It's good to have a social life to keep you sane."

Price nodded, his face even harder to read. Ilya fucking loved this guy.

"If you're having trouble, Rozanov and I know the best places, right, Ilya?" Morozov grinned, nudging Ilya. "Best vodka and girls. We can take you out, find you someone fun."

"No, thanks."

That pissed Morozov off more. "Well, if you change your mind, just ask."

He turned to Ilya, his hand resting on his shoulder, making Ilya's skin crawl. In Russian, he said, "LeClaire heard from the Nomads that this beefhead has been asking for more time on the ice as defense. We signed him to fight. Do whatever it takes to get that through his thick skull." He said this all with a friendly smile, nodding to Price.

"Fuck off," Ilya replied in Russian as well. "I'm not your fucking puppet. If LeClaire wants me to convince this guy to fight, he has to tell me himself."

The grip tightened slightly. "If I say it, LeClaire said it."

"You don't hold my contract," Ilya stood firm.

Price was glancing at the door, clearly wondering if he could escape, so Morozov patted Ilya on the shoulder as he stood up to leave.

"I don't hold your contract, but I might as well. When I was asking around for daughters, your name came up in some interesting circles. I'm not sure you want LeClaire knowing

about the friends you made in Montreal.”

Ilya's blood froze.

What did Morozov know? About Shane? About Medvedevy? About the bribes he had spent, or the texts?

How the fuck did he know? Ilya had avoided all of Morozov's circles, so he had no idea if Morozov was telling the truth or throwing darts blindly.

It didn't matter, because from the triumphant look on his face, Morozov knew he had hit a target.

“Good talking with you, Price,” Morozov said in English and left with a smirk that Ilya wanted to punch off his face.

Even though Price looked like he wanted to bolt, he paused.

“Uh, you okay?”

Ilya must look fucking awful if Price of all people was worried about him.

“Yes,” he tried to push everything back. “Just some old gossip from back home.”

“Do you... want to talk about it?” Price sounded like someone was pulling out his remaining teeth.

Ilya did not want to talk about it. He decidedly never wanted to talk again. He wanted to go home and bury himself in Shane's arms, but to do so he would have to tell Shane what was wrong, about what he had done to save Shane's life, and how he had learned how to do it—things he had told no one.

He would have to look at the guilt and maybe disgust on Shane's face, neither of which he was strong enough to endure.

So, no. He didn't want to talk.

He wanted to get fucking drunk.

He looked at Price. “Do you like alcohol?”

Price looked apprehensive. “I'm not really interested in picking up girls.”

“Me neither,” Ilya said bitterly. “But I am going to get fucked up. You in?”

“If I say no, are you going anyway?”

Ilya nodded, and Price sighed. “Sure.”

Chapter End Notes

Ryan Price enters the chat 🤖

Chapter 5: Shane

Chapter Notes

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

The first hour alone in Ilya's penthouse was strange.

Even though he had been here for almost half a day, Shane still felt like he was an intruder.

He stayed on the couch, scrolling through the emails his mom had forwarded him and half-watching a vapid reality show about... hot people? He wasn't entirely sure what the point was.

But eventually, he grew restless. When he was at home in Ottawa, at least one of his parents had been around, and they were good at filling the boredom that came when hockey was on hold. When he was in Montreal, he had books or his own things to keep him occupied.

Being here, without his stuff, he felt disoriented.

He considered using Ilya's gym again, then dismissed it. He had already put in a decent workout, and, while he had mostly healed, he didn't want to push himself too hard.

So he did the breakfast dishes by hand, even though there was a dishwasher. He wiped down the stove and the counters carefully and thoroughly.

That must have wasted a good hour.

When he checked the clock, only twenty minutes had passed.

It would have been weird not to look around, right? Ilya had left him here; he must have expected it. As long as he didn't open any drawers or locked rooms.

The bookshelf was mostly empty with just a few Russian magazines and books Shane couldn't read. He wandered back to the bedroom and straightened it up, then decided the sheets probably needed washing. They were sweaty and covered in other substances.

It took some poking around to find the washer and detergent tucked into a hallway closet. Once the machine was running, he sat back down on the couch; the apartment settled quiet again.

Now he could relax.

An hour and a half down.

Several more to go.

He turned the TV back on and flipped through channels until he found TSN. They were replaying Boston's game from the night before, so Shane settled in.

The Bears weren't terrible without Rozanov. That was the frustrating part. The speed was still there; the talent was still there. On paper, they should've been fine.

They just... weren't.

If the team were an engine, Ilya was the ignition.

Shane had read enough about leadership in sports to recognize the pattern of skilled players who didn't know how to commit to a play. They needed someone to take the risks so that they could execute.

It was why Ilya was the first player people looked for. He took the hits, cut through plays, dragged defenders into penalties, and everyone else adjusted around him without ever stopping to think about it.

As his rival, it was infuriating to watch.

As his... whatever... it was hot.

Watching them play without Rozanov was like watching a headless fish. Shane winced as they missed passes, misread plays, and tripped over each other. They were in a solid spot for the playoffs, but it was shockingly clear it was because of one man.

The Voyageurs were playing New York in Montreal today, and then in New York in two days. He had told the management team he was in Boston for a family event, and they had asked him to "strongly consider" attending the game on Friday for morale. Hearing it phrased that way made his stomach clench.

They were vying for a wildcard slot this year, something that had been hard-earned through development and trades over the last few years, so Shane knew his absence didn't mean as much as Ilya's did. As long as Shane joined back to finish out the season and start fresh in the fall, he felt confident in his team. If he joined back next week, even for a conditioning period, he could still play for almost a month and a half, longer if they got the wildcard.

At any other time in his life, Shane would already be there. He would play today, lingering soreness or not.

Shane wasn't a people person; he knew that. But the one place crowds never bothered him was on the ice.

There was something about the noise—the cheers and the boos, the certainty that he was so fucking good at what he did people paid to watch it.

Anyone could.

The thought slid sideways before he could stop it.

It was like there was a humming in his ears.

He should be out there. He should be—

A shiver ran down his spine as the commentary snapped back into focus, the end-of-game buzzer sounding.

Shane frowned, his heart beating wildly. The replay had been midway through the second period. It felt like he had blinked and the game was over. He shifted, realizing he was covered in a cold sweat and his hands were shaking.

Fuck.

He forced himself to stand up and walked to the kitchen, even though his knees were feeling like rubber.

What the hell was that?

He grabbed an energy drink from Ilya's fridge and cracked it open. He knew they were bad for him, but his hands were still unsteady and his heart was racing, so maybe his blood sugar was low. That made sense. He took a long pull, then another.

Or maybe it was some lingering symptom from the concussion. They had told him to keep track of anything out of the ordinary, but it had been two weeks since he last had a headache.

He shivered again, his clothes uncomfortably damp.

He swapped the sheets into the dryer and loaded the washer with his clothes, then hesitated before adding a few of Ilya's from the hamper. It felt oddly domestic to sprinkle detergent over their clothes, mingled together in the washer. Domestic and terrifying, if he was being honest.

His skin was still clammy, so he took another quick shower. He breathed slowly until the heat worked its way back into his hands. By the time he shut it off, the shaking had eased.

He had a sudden urge to text Ilya, which wasn't new. But that he could now, without being weird, made his heart beat faster. Most of their texts were plans to hook up and some dirty suggestions Ilya sprinkled throughout the year. Since the Centaurs game, they had texted more, but mostly letting Ilya know he had gotten home safe, quick updates, and that one hot exchange.

They didn't really talk. Not like Shane did with Hayden, or JJ, or his parents. What did Ilya even like?

If the media could be trusted, Ilya liked girls, cars and clubs. Shane couldn't speak reliably on any of those things.

He knew Ilya liked *him*.

His stomach fluttered. Maybe Hayden was right. Maybe Shane had a crush. His desire to talk with Ilya intensified.

He couldn't send Ilya a photo of himself. It would be damning if someone found a shirtless photo of Shane on Ilya's phone. Instead, Shane did something scarier.

Shane: how's practice?

He winced. That was boring. And stupid. It's not like Ilya could reply—he was at fucking practice. Shit. Did Shane make it awkward?

He tapped out another message.

Shane: I did some laundry. Hope that's okay.

Fuck, that was even worse.

What if it wasn't okay? What if Ilya had some kind of special laundry process and Shane had put Gucci sweatpants in regular detergent, ruining them forever?

Shane: not, like, a lot of laundry

Shane: you're not messy or anything

Shane: It wasn't a criticism on your laundry habits

Shane: you've got good taste in detergent

He stared at the screen in horror.

Why the fuck was he so bad at this?

Maybe he should just send a dick pic. At least he knew Ilya would like that.

Luckily, a buzz broke his spiralling thoughts, though not from Ilya.

Hayden: hey bud, the boys found your replacement

Shane couldn't help but snort at the picture of his stall in the locker room, piled with a couple dozen cans of ginger ale shaped like a person and dressed in his helmet, jersey, and skates.

Shane: fuck off

Hayden: his name is captain shaninger hollandale

Shane: I hate you

Hayden: the guys keep drinking him, which is making it weird

Shane: yeah thats what makes it weird

Hayden: 🍷🍷

Hayden: are you coming down from Ottawa for the game? You can crash in my guest room

Shane paused, took a deep breath, and snapped a photo of the Boston port from Ilya's window.

Hayden: hole

Hayden: ly

Hayden: fuck

Hayden: please tell me you arent mid pork

Shane: 🙄

Shane: Boston has practice. I'm just alone here

Hayden: damn thats kinda cozy dude

Hayden: what's his place like

Hayden: is the bears playbook somewhere

Hayden: are you a double agent now

His stomach twisted into a knot.

Shane: that would be cheating

Hayden: fuck youre right

Hayden: arg

Hayden: why are you so noble

Shane: one of us has to teach your kids morals

Hayden: I saw he was a healthy scratch last night

Hayden: are you that good??

Shane: wouldn't you like to know

Shane: no, I don't really know why hes scratched

That was safe enough. Shane genuinely didn't know, so it wasn't like he was giving anything away.

Hayden: look at this

They spent the next few minutes with Hayden sending Shane videos from the morning skate, spotting where someone was lacking or picking up the slack. Hayden left with a laundry list

of tips and strategies to tell the guys, and Shane felt slightly better for not being on the ice with them.

He glanced at the clock and smiled. That took the better part of the afternoon. The sky was darkening, and that meant Ilya would be back soon.

There still wasn't a reply to his text. That worried him, but not as much as it would've earlier. He felt calmer now, grounded because the team was going into their game prepared.

And if Ilya found his texts weird, well, Shane was going to be ready. He could convince him that Shane was worth it.

Sexually.

He had won the game that morning, and now the nerves were back. They were different this time. He didn't feel anxious; he felt impatient.

There was still half an hour until puck drop, so Shane did the only thing that made sense: figuring out how not to be a complete idiot in bed when he had to be in charge.

At seven, Shane got worried. He grabbed a couple of protein bars and settled down to watch the Montreal game.

Shane: hey, are you still grabbing food?

Shane: sorry about the laundry

At eight, his hands were shaking. Montreal was 2-2, but he had barely watched.

Shane: did something happen at practice?

Shane: long meetings?

At nine, he had fully abandoned the TV. He had muted it because the commentary was getting on his nerves. He paced in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, trying to work off the mounting panic.

Shane: Ilya this isnt funny

Shane: did something happen?

Shane: should I be calling the police?

Shane: just fucking answer

Shane: Ilya

Shit.

Fuck.

White blurred at the edges of his vision. Shane sank to his knees, pressing his face into the couch.

Was this what Ilya had felt like when Shane had been missing? How the hell had he held himself together? Shane felt as if he were dying. His heart was pounding in his ears. Ilya must be dead somewhere. Or hurt. Or... ignoring Shane.

No, that didn't seem likely.

If he was, Shane was going to fucking kill him. But he had to find him first.

Why the fuck didn't Ilya have a tracker on his phone?

Should he call the police?

No, that hadn't been helpful in Montreal. And Shane didn't even really know anything bad had happened. Ilya might not be missing.

Maybe he had just been injured in practice. Hit his head. Had his throat slit open on a skate.

Shane vowed he was going to force Ilya to wear a neck guard, even if it didn't look cool.

He was vaguely aware of the pain in his head as he clutched his hair.

Shane, he told himself firmly. Get a fucking grip. Take a breath. You. Aren't. Helping.

He knew Drapeau used to play U18 with one of the Bears; maybe he had the phone number of someone. He glanced up at the TV. Drapeau was literally throwing himself on a puck right now. Fuck.

He googled the Bears team, hoping a name would stand out. Someone. Anyone.

His phone buzzed, making Shane fumble and drop it. It slid under the couch, but not before he saw, ***Incoming call: Lily.***

The gap between the couch and the floor was too narrow for his hand, so Shane lifted it, barely noting the weight.

One missed call

Before he could do anything, a text came in.

Lily: Hi Jane, this is Ryan Price. I'm with Ilya at a bar, and he's ready to go home.

Lily: Could you tell me his address?

Shane wiped the tears from his eyes. First was the wave of relief. He was thankful he was already kneeling by the couch because his knees felt weak.

Then, blinding anger. He was *what*?

Shane: Hi Ryan. Is he okay?

Lily: Yes, but he might need to sleep it off tomorrow.

His face felt wet again, and he angrily wiped it with his sleeve.

Shane dropped a pin on the map, turned the phone over, and took a shaky, long breath.

The reply was fast.

Lily: Okay. Five minutes away.

Five minutes. Five minutes until Shane could wrap his hands around Ilya's beautiful neck and strangle him for making him fucking worry.

Shane paced by the door, running his hands through his hair. His mind was too crowded, which is why these two thoughts didn't stand out to him until he heard the elevator move.

One: Ryan Price didn't know that Jane was actually Shane Hollander, secret gay lover of Ilya Rozanov.

Two: Ryan Price was the NHL's most dangerous enforcer, infamous for laying guys flat with a single punch.

The doors opened.

There was Ryan, taking up most of the doorway, his shoulders broad and imposing, outweighing Shane by at least seventy pounds of solid muscle.

Dangling on his right arm was Ilya, so drunk he could barely stand, hazel eyes red-rimmed and half closed.

Shane froze, eyes locked on Ilya. Relief hit him like a punch to the chest. He was here. He was *okay*. His knees threatened to buckle.

"You fucking idiot," Shane muttered under his breath, stepping forward before he could stop himself. "You stupid bastard."

Finally, he glanced up at Ryan, who hadn't moved out of the elevator. Shane had only ever noticed Ryan when he was bearing down on him or one of his teammates, eyes locked and lethal in a way that made Shane skate for his life.

Now, though, all he saw was complete shock. It would be funny, in any other context, to see such a giant beast of a man look like a surprised chipmunk. Shane took another step; Ryan instinctively pulled Ilya back as if he was worried about what Shane might do.

"You might as well come in," Shane said warily. "Or the elevator is going to beep."

Ryan cautiously stepped into the penthouse. Although Ilya was walking, Shane was pretty sure he would be flat on the floor without Ryan holding him up.

“You can put him on the couch,” Shane turned and went to the kitchen area, his hands shaking. He just needed a minute to let his body recover.

The good news was, it didn’t look like Ryan was going to beat the shit out of him. The bad news is that he still couldn’t think of a good reason Shane was in Ilya’s home, texting him like a worried girlfriend.

There was a thump and a groan as Ryan must have put Ilya down on the couch. Shane grabbed a glass and filled it with water. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he turned around and Ryan filled the space between the counter and the kitchen island.

“He’s kind of out of it,” Ryan said. “Kept on saying he was Russian and alcohol didn’t affect him, but...” Ryan shrugged.

“Yeah,” Shane hated how his voice shook. “Well. I’ll tell him how dumb that is when he’s sober enough to hear it.”

“Right.”

“Yeah.”

If the ground would just please open up and swallow him, Shane would be grateful.

“Thanks for—”

“I’m gay.”

Shane blinked at Ryan’s admission. His heart felt like it was pounding in his ears, so maybe he misheard.

“What?”

Ryan’s shoulders slumped. “I’m gay.”

“Oh.” Maybe Shane was having a stroke. That would also be a welcome act of God.

“Just so you know,” Ryan was looking at the ceiling, clearly wanting to be anywhere but here. “I’m not going to tell anyone.”

His blood felt like a waterfall rushing out of his head. He had to put a hand on the counter. “It’s not what you think.”

Ryan shrugged again. “I really don’t want to know.”

Shane swallowed. “Okay.”

“I’m going to go,” Ryan jerked his head towards the elevator.

“Right,” Shane walked Ryan to the door. Ryan stepped onto the elevator, but hesitated for a second.

“Really?” Ryan finally said. “Rozanov?” Shane froze. If he weren’t living in some kind of nightmare, he’d swear that Ryan was judging him. “I thought you two hated each other.”

“Yeah,” Shane wanted to cry. “Sometimes.”

The elevator doors closed, leaving Shane alone in the dim entrance way.

He heard a groan behind him and laughed, almost hysterically. Well, not alone.

Ilya was half out of his winter coat on the couch. Shane let him struggle a bit more, residual anger still burning at making him worry. But Ilya looked too pathetic, and Shane couldn't tell if the redness around his eyes was from alcohol or if Ilya had been crying.

Shane stepped forward and pushed Ilya up, unzipping the rest of the way and helping him clumsily take it off. Next was his scarf, then Shane knelt to untie his wet boots. He wrestled one off and looked up to where Ilya was watching him, pupils dilated.

“Sorry,” Ilya’s voice was so fucking sad, the last of Shane’s anger evaporated.

“It’s okay,” Shane set the boot down and worked on the other one. “We can talk about it tomorrow, okay?”

“*Ya vso isportila. Kak vseгда, vso isportila.*” Shane put the second boot to the side. He would deal with them later. For now, he rested his hands on Ilya’s knees, pushing them apart so he could wrap his arms around Ilya’s body and pull his loose body into a tight hug. He felt Ilya give a shuddering breath against his neck.

“I’ve got you,” he let Ilya rest against him for a moment before standing, pulling Ilya to his feet. Ilya swayed, practically dead weight. Shane’s ribs twinged, but he ignored it as he helped Ilya stumble into the bedroom.

He had to help Ilya sit up on the bed, though he weaved dangerously. Shane quickly pulled his sweater over his head while he was still upright, then helped him lie down so he didn’t hurt his neck. Ilya whimpered a bit as Shane pulled down his sweatpants next, leaving him in just his briefs.

“*Tebe ne sleduyet obo mne zabotit'sya,*” Ilya muttered. “*Ya dolzhna o tebe zabotit'sya.*”

Not for the first time, Shane wished he had been more serious about studying Russian.

“Look, it doesn’t matter. Just get under the covers. Do you feel sick?”

“*Vseгда,*” Ilya flailed, trying to shift so he could get under the duvet. He was shivering, so Shane helped tuck him in. “*Kazhduyu minutu, chto tebya net ryadom so mnoy.*”

Shane sighed and wrestled the blankets until Ilya was the right way on the bed and warm.

“Do you need a bucket? Are you going to throw up?”

Ilya's eyes were so glassy and mournful as he looked up at Shane. He couldn't help but brush Ilya's curls back from his forehead, keeping his hand cradling Ilya's head.

"Maybe," Ilya muttered, his accent thick.

Shane nodded and leaned in, kissing his sweaty cheek. "Don't move. I'll get you some water and painkillers."

"Russians... don't get hangover."

Shane looked at him, then rolled his eyes. "Tell me that tomorrow, champ."

Ilya didn't move as Shane searched the cupboards for painkillers and set them and his glass of water by Ilya's head. He found a plastic trash can and placed it on that side of the bed, too.

He hesitated, hovering in the doorway. He didn't want to leave Ilya alone, but he wasn't sure he was supposed to sleep there. They had only really shared a bed twice, and he didn't want to impose.

"Hollander," Ilya cracked open one eye. "Come."

Shane sighed and switched off the lights. The room was lit up by the lights from the port outside the window. He stripped down, putting on flannel pants before he got into the bed on the other side and tentatively wrapped his arms around Ilya from behind. Instantly, he felt Ilya relax, and Shane gripped harder.

"You're such a stupid idiot," Shane whispered into his shoulder blades, hating the way his eyes itched. "You knew how much that hurt, and you made me fucking worry. Fuck you. I would tear up Boston for you. I'd call your dad and use, fucking, Google or something and battle mafia, and fight Ryan Price, and dive into the fucking Charles River in February. I'd do it, you asshole, okay? I do it, because..." The last words he wanted to say choked him for just a moment.

He took a ragged breath. "Because I think I fucking love you."

There. He said it. He exhaled shakily. He had said it, so it was real.

Time stretched for a minute, and Ilya didn't move. Shane shifted to lean over him. Ilya let out a soft snore.

"Fucking asshole," Shane sighed.

Chapter End Notes

I'm thinking the next chapter is an interlude with Ryan somehow babysitting Ilya at the bar.

Chapter 6: Ilya

Chapter Notes

Okay, the Ryan Price interlude might be a bonus at the end.

I really tried with the Russian here, folks. Hopefully it's a touch better than just Google translate!

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

Ilya had been hungover twice in his life. Once was when he was fourteen and tagged along to a party with Andrei in Moscow. He had woken up in the dirt, in the garden of their house, exactly where Andrei had left him. He had puked all over the flowerbed in full view of the neighbours, which led to the longest lecture he had ever gotten about how real men could hold themselves together and embarrassing the family name.

The second time, he had been 18 in Boston. He had been stupid and excited to finally be away from his asshole family and be in America on his own terms.

He'd been billeted with a retired Bears winger who had a daughter a few years older than him. She was home for Thanksgiving, and Ilya had thought she was funny, smart and had dark hair and freckles, which was enough for Ilya to be interested.

She'd convinced him to come out with some of her old high school friends, who thought it was hilarious to see how far they could push the Russian kid.

He remembered being tipsy when he made out with her in a bar bathroom that smelled like beer and disinfectant. He remembered being drunk when he stumbled down to the river with the group, laughing too loud, her arm slung around his shoulders.

He remembered kneeling on the concrete, throwing up into the Charles while someone patted his back and laughed, "Welcome to America, kid."

They had taken him back to the house, where Ilya had been given a lecture about underage drinking, morals, and American values. The next day, Morozov helped him find his first apartment while he wore sunglasses and nursed a massive headache.

Now, the third time he woke up hungover was to the smell of coffee and the muffled sound of his TV through the cracked bedroom door.

His body felt as sore as a strenuous post-game, and he felt like someone had stuffed his mouth with foul-tasting cotton. He opened his eyes; the curtains were closed, and the only light was coming from the door. His head felt as though there was a bomb ticking somewhere behind his eyes.

He shifted, realising he had gotten undressed at some point. There was a half-empty glass of water by the bed with a bottle of painkillers.

Fuck. Had he brought someone home from the bar?

If he was going to hook up, he rarely got this drunk. He hoped he had passed out quickly, and that the photos weren't too scandalous.

It was agony to sit up, and his hand shook as he took a drink to clear the taste from his mouth. He couldn't help but let out a moan as he sat back against the headboard.

The sound of the TV paused, and he heard footsteps. He braced himself: girls who got comfortable quickly were the worst to kick out.

The door opened, and Shane Hollander poked his head in. Ilya's heart skipped a beat as relief flickered across Shane's face before settling into something tight.

"You're awake, finally," Shane said, pushing the door so he could lean on the frame.

"Yes," Ilya felt stupid, as he now remembered his fake flu lie that had dragged Shane down from Ottawa. "Did I—"

"Get so drunk Ryan Price had to carry you home?" Shane quipped. "Yes."

Ilya paled. "Price?"

"Do you want more water?" Shane came into the room. Ilya flinched as Shane reached for his glass.

Shane paused, frowning with his hand hovering before he dropped it down awkwardly.

"Coffee? I made breakfast."

"Breakfast?" Ilya echoed again.

"Yeah," Shane crossed his arms. "I mean, it's almost noon, so maybe it's more like lunch."

"Fuck." Ilya pressed his hands over his eyes, but it didn't stop the throbbing. "Morning meeting."

"Yeah, Price told them you were sick."

Ilya wished Shane would just leave and let him rot. He waited for him to leave, or yell, or something, but after a long moment, nothing happened. He cautiously lowered his hands.

Shane was frowning, and he sat on the bed. "And, I mean, he wasn't lying. You look like shit."

Ilya's stomach turned with a wave of nausea. "Go away, Hollander. I will sleep."

"Ilya—"

Ilya must have looked green because Shane grabbed a trash can by the bed and held it under Ilya's mouth just in time.

His body seized up, and Shane moved to brace him as he puked until there was nothing left, and it felt like he had pulled a muscle somewhere in his torso.

Shane held Ilya's head steady as he set the trash can down. Ilya didn't resist, feeling as useless as a slab of meat as Shane wiped his mouth with something and got him lying down on his side.

"Don't go anywhere, okay?" Shane said unnecessarily.

Going anywhere was at the bottom of Ilya's list. He wanted to go nowhere, to nothingness. To just hit the pause button until the aching emptiness was gone.

This was what he was trying to avoid.

He had only realized he *wanted* this—whatever *this* was—when Shane had disappeared. The thought of living in a world where Shane wasn't was so unimaginable, so horrible. And then once Shane had been back, had said those things to him. He had...hoped.

He had barely had Shane, and now he had already lost him.

It was a familiar pain that cut the emptiness, and Ilya squeezed his eyes closed, begging for the darkness to take him back.

The universe had other plans, though, as the door opened and a heavy weight settled on the bed again.

"Come on," Shane's voice was unbearably and undeservingly soft as he brushed Ilya's curls, stiff with sweat, off his face. "More water, okay?"

Shane coaxed Ilya to sit up again, but he held the glass himself as he slowly drank. He couldn't meet Shane's eyes, couldn't bear to see the disgust or pity. He didn't know which was worse.

He drank a third of it before he put it down, his stomach rolling. "Enough."

Shane shifted on the bed to face Ilya better, and Ilya turned his head away. "Can you manage a shower? I think you'll feel better."

A shower would feel good. He was covered in clammy sweat, but nothing in him had any desire to stand up.

"Ilya."

"Hollander."

He had to do it. He had to see it. The moment Shane finally realized how pathetic and small he was. He cherished all the memories he had of Shane, from the cute outrage when Ilya had

first called him pretty, to the blue-tinged lips as Ilya carried him into CHUM's emergency department.

He took a deep breath and looked at Shane.

Ilya quickly tried to memorize everything. He was wearing one of Ilya's hoodies, too big on his more lithe frame. His hair was flat over his forehead, sticking up at the back where it had dried weirdly. His freckles stood out on his skin this close, and he pursed his lips as if he were thinking hard.

The last thing Ilya did was to meet his eyes, which were scrutinizing him back.

"Come on," Shane put a hand on Ilya's shoulder and pulled him further up. "I'll help you if you fall."

"Hollander—"

"Will you stop calling me that?" Shane finally snapped.

Ilya lowered his eyes again. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize for that." Shane seemed determined to force Ilya out of bed, because he stood, pulling at Ilya until his feet were planted on the ground, blankets sliding down around his knees. "Apologize for fucking scaring me last night. I thought you were dead."

That made Ilya wince. He hadn't even thought about Shane worrying for him.

Shane pulled on his forearms until he was standing, swaying on his feet. The trash can was wet and clean by the bed, and Ilya felt awful.

"Apologize to Ryan Price. I think he's traumatized from seeing me here. Fuck, *I'm* traumatized by that."

Every muscle felt tight, as if he had done a couple dozen sprints, but as Shane gently pulled him towards the ensuite, they loosened.

His throat felt too tight to talk—Shane was right. He should grovel right now.

He leaned on the sink as Shane got the shower going, then stripped out of Ilya's hoodie. Even dizzy and nauseous from the rising heat, Ilya soaked in the flex of Shane's shoulders as he folded it and put it on the counter behind Ilya.

"Do you want to be naked?" Shane asked with a bizarre tone of normalcy. "Do you want me to be naked?"

"Always," Ilya couldn't help himself, and felt immediately guilty afterwards. He had no right to see Shane naked when he had fucked up so badly.

Shane just rolled his eyes and got them both fully undressed before bringing Ilya into his thankfully walk-in shower.

The combination of hot water was both a blessing and a curse. The filth and stickiness of last night washed off him, opening his lungs to breathe deep. Unfortunately, his stomach revolted and, before he could stop himself, he dry-heaved, barely grabbing the slippery wall for balance.

Shane held him steady as he bent over, the water running down the back of his neck, through his hair, and over his eyes and mouth.

“I don’t think there’s anything left to come up.” Shane’s hand rubbed his back soothingly until Ilya could stand straight again.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Shane agreed and reached for a bottle of shampoo. His hands massaged Ilya’s hair, sweeping it out of his eyes. Ilya looked at him again, aghast at the careful concentration Shane had as he tried to keep the soap from getting on Ilya's face.

“Why are you doing this?” Ilya blurted out.

Shane paused and looked at him as if he were stupid. “What do you mean?”

“I lie to you, I leave you alone, I go out drinking and get sick on you,” Ilya swallowed hard to keep the headache at bay. “Why are you taking care of me? You should be angry.”

His hands had stopped, but he slowly started up again. “I am angry, Ilya,” he said, his voice controlled and tight. “I’m so fucking angry. I thought I was going to have a heart attack last night.”

There it was, Ilya thought, self-satisfied and relieved. There was an ember under the ashes, ready to jump to an inferno when Ilya poked it.

But although his voice and eyes were tight with anger, Shane’s hands stayed soft as he leaned Ilya's head back in the spray to rinse.

“We are going to have words when you feel better,” Shane warned, and reached for the conditioner.

“Don’t — “ Ilya tried to find the words. “Don’t lie to me. Just get it over with.”

Shane shifted so Ilya was out of the spray and could rest his forehead in the crook of Shane’s neck. This time, the head massage went down his neck and his shoulders, pressing on tight and sore muscles. Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane’s wet, naked body and leaned.

“Idiot,” Shane sighed and held him.

Ilya felt numb as Shane finished their shower quickly. Once they were out, teeth brushed, and dressed in clean clothes, Shane led him to the couch and made him lie down, tugging a blanket over him and putting the trash can nearby. He set the water on the coffee table with a decisive sound.

“I’m going to wash the sheets again, okay? Just try to drink more water and aim for the trash can if you can.”

Ilya nodded wordlessly as Shane turned the sound on the TV again. It was some sitcom with blonde actresses complaining about their lives. Ilya closed his eyes, letting the fake laugh track wash over him.

There was a lot of movement around the apartment as Shane seemed to know where everything was, putting laundry on, opening the fridge, cooking.

He snapped awake at the sound of a plate being put down in front of him.

“Move over,” Shane helped him sit up, even though he was feeling more human now.

Shae had brought some toast and a banana, and replaced the untouched glass of water with a sports drink. Shane sat down next to him with a sigh.

“Eat something? If you can?”

His stomach felt slightly better, but eating was far down on the list of things he wanted to do. Still, Shane had gone through this effort, so he reached for the toast.

“So, how are you feeling?”

Ilya snorted humourlessly. “Alive.”

“That’s an improvement, right?”

“Sure,” Ilya brought the toast to his lips and took a tentative bite.

Shane reached for the remote and turned off the TV. The silence settled like an icy chill in the room, and Ilya tugged the blanket around his shoulders to keep it from falling.

“Can you talk to me now?” The hard edge was back in Shane’s voice. Ilya took another bite of toast, chewing slowly. “Fine. I’ll go first. What the hell, Ilya?”

Ilya swallowed, looking straight ahead. “What? I go out and drink sometimes. Is normal.”

“Like hell you do, at least not during the season,” Shane glared at him.

“How do you know this?” Ilya snapped back and put the toast down.

“I think people would talk if the Bears captain was blackout drunk before a game,” Shane said darkly. “Especially if it was all the fucking time.”

Ilya ran his hands over his face. “I’m not playing now, so what does it matter?”

“You’re pissed about being scratched?” Shane scoffed. “I don’t fucking believe that for a second.”

“You don’t know me, Hollander.”

“You’re right, *Rozanov*,” Shane shot back. “We’ve done a lot of fucking around and not a lot of getting to know you, but... I thought...”

“What?” Ilya said bitterly. “I told you it would not work.”

“No, you said we *can’t*, which is pretty fucking different than it won’t work.”

“Ah, now you are making fun of my English.”

“Fuck you,” Shane was breathing hard. “It might have just been sex before, but—you saved my life, Ilya. I’m not going to forget that.”

“I don’t want payment,” Ilya said flatly.

“Stop trying to twist my words.” Shane looked like he wanted to throttle him. “I know what I know, and that’s this: you could have just walked away in Montreal, when it looked like I stood you up. It was a casual hookup, and we both have careers to lose if this thing gets out. No one would have even known. It would have been *smart* for you to walk away. But you *didn’t*.”

“I couldn’t,” Ilya corrected him. “There was no choice.”

“Why?” Shane pushed.

“Why what?” Ilya closed his eyes. “So many whys.”

A hand on Ilya’s chin turned his head, and he opened his eyes to look at Shane’s. “Any why, Ilya.”

Ilya raised a hand to cover Shane’s, but couldn’t bring himself to take the hand away.

“When I thought you were... gone. I couldn’t.” Words were hard to get out, and he looked at Shane helplessly. Shane started back, and Ilya could see his mind working hard.

“I have an idea.” He let go of Ilya’s face and reached for his phone. When he passed it to Ilya, it was already open to a translator app. “It might be stupid, but—”

Ilya shook his head and spoke; the flat electric voice underlaid the choked words.

“*Kogda ya uvidel krov', ya podumal, chto ty mertv.* – When I saw the blood, I thought you were dead.”

“*Ya dumal, chto naydu tvoye telo gde-nibud. Chto prosto pridu slishkom pozdno.* — I thought I would find your body somewhere. That I was simply too late.”

“*I ya dumal o mire bez tebya.* – And I thought about the world without you.”

“*Mne khotelos' umeret'.* – I wanted to die.”

“*Eto ispugalo menya.* – That frightened me.”

“Potomu chto ya nikogo tak sil'no ne lyubil so vremeni moyey materi. – Because I hadn't loved anyone this much since my mother.”

“Posle neye mir stal kholodnym. Pustym. – After her, the world became cold. Empty.”

“Ty sdelał yego terpilimym. – You made it bearable.”

“Yesli by tebya tozhe ne stalo... ya by ne vyderzhal. – If you were gone too... I wouldn't survive it.”

“Dazhe yesli tebya zdes' net, ya znayu — ty gde-to yest'. – Even if you're not here, I know—you're somewhere.”

“Zlish'sya. Skuchno. Zhiv. – Angry. Bored. Alive.”

“Mne etogo dostatochno. – That is enough for me.”

“Dazhe yesli ty menya nenavidish'. – Even if you hate me.”

There. It was done. Ilya felt his whole body collapse in on itself, as if there was no more tension to keep it upright. He handed the phone back to Shane without looking at him and bowed forward, resting his head in his hands.

A hand rested on the back of his neck, fingers tightening just enough to let Ilya know their intention before they pulled him in. Ilya went willingly, shifting closer and pressing his face into the warm hollow of Shane's collarbone as Shane leaned back to make room for him, arms coming around Ilya's shoulders and back, settling them into place. It was almost frightening how easily they fit together and how natural it felt.

They stayed like that for longer than Ilya could count, leaning on Shane while he breathed in his scent. He tried to memorize it: the heat, the steady rise and fall of Shane's chest, the quiet certainty of his arms.

Eventually, Shane spoke into the silence, his voice low and close.

“I don't hate you.”

“You're angry with me,” Ilya said, the words slipping out before he could stop them, unsure why he felt the need to argue the point at all.

“Yeah,” Shane said, a little rougher. “Because I care about you.” He pressed a kiss to the crown of Ilya's head. “Asshole.”

Ilya focused on the rise and fall of Shane's breathing, pressing his thumb into his bicep. He could finally sleep like this, he thought. A real sleep.

“I don't want you to think—” Shane stopped, and Ilya felt his breath hitch. “You missed my big emotional speech last night.”

Ilya turned his head to look up. “You made a speech?”

“I don’t really remember it.”

“Tell me.”

Shane sighed. “There was something about fighting Ryan Price and jumping in the Charles River, but basically... I feel the same.”

He knew Shane must feel how fast his heart was beating. “Same what?”

“Same... love. I love you.”

Ilya looked at him in disbelief. “What?”

“I mean, if being so fucking infuriated with someone I want to throw them down and kiss them but also, like, fight them is love, then yeah. I was terrified last night, Ilya, when you weren’t answering your phone.”

“I’m sorry.” Ilya pressed a dry kiss to Shane’s neck.

Shane pulled him up so their faces were an inch apart. Ilya kissed the side of Shane’s mouth, then the other, then captured his lips with a groan. He stroked his thumb over Shane’s jaw, and Shane opened, their tongues sliding together. There was an urgency as they kissed, but Ilya didn’t feel the need to build any heat.

This was comforting, and he lost himself in it.

When they finally broke apart, Shane stayed close, forehead pressed to Ilya’s, like he was giving him time to pull away if he needed to.

Ilya didn’t.

He kissed Shane again, slower this time, all softness and warmth, tracing the shape of him. Shane made a quiet sound in his throat and curled an arm around Ilya’s back, anchoring him there.

When they finally broke apart, Ilya stayed tucked against him, breathing him in.

“Sleep?” he asked, barely audible.

Shane’s answer was to shift them both down against the pillows pulling the blanket over them, then splaying one hand warm and steady between Ilya’s shoulders.

Ilya fell asleep with his face pressed into Shane’s chest, the tension bleeding out of him in slow increments, like a muscle finally unclenching.

They talked!!

Chapter 7: Shane

Chapter Notes

I swear, I've plotted it out but I don't want to commit to final chapter numbers. Anyway, enjoy! <3

Shane was pretty sure they had reached their quota for emotional devastation for the day, so when they woke up on the couch with sore necks and grumbling stomachs, he decided now wasn't the time to ask Ilya why he had been so drunk.

Instead, Ilya ordered takeout from a nearby Greek place that had options Shane wanted, and they stuffed themselves while playing Madden because they were equally terrible at it.

Boston was playing at home today, but Ilya had only told Shane that the management team had already told him to stay home if he was contagious. Shane wasn't sure how much he trusted Ilya about that, but he wasn't going to push. Not today.

Ilya looked a lot better than the hungover wreck he had been that morning, but he seemed content to sprawl for most of the afternoon. Shane, who usually thrived on having a scheduled day, had to adjust. Before dinner, Ilya sighed at Shane's fidgeting and suggested a workout to sweat the rest of the alcohol out of his system. Shane was grateful enough to have somewhere for his energy to go that he didn't argue about pseudoscience. They stuck to something short and brisk, and Shane hadn't realized how much fun it would be to work out with Ilya next to him, matching rep for rep.

Fun and fucking hot.

The mirrored closet in the converted bedroom allowed Shane to watch Ilya's split squats from two angles, even while he was running on the treadmill. Shane was glad his face was flushed from running as he watched the perfect round curve of Ilya's ass flexing with each downward move. Ilya also wore a loose tank top with low-cut sides, so Shane could switch between drooling over his ass and his arms.

When he glanced at the mirror to see Ilya's chest, Ilya caught his eyes in the mirror and winked. Shane nearly tripped, fumbling with the controls as he slowed the treadmill to a stop before he actually fell.

"Finished?" Ilya asked innocently. "Too tired?"

"No," Shane grabbed his water bottle, trying to slow his pulse by sheer will. "Just warming up."

Ilya raised an eyebrow and finished his set while Shane wiped his sweaty face. After racking the weights, he grabbed a weighted medicine ball and pointed to the open space on the mat. "Sit. Let's do something together."

"Is this your idea of a date, Rozanov?" Shane grinned but sat. Ilya sat facing him, placing one foot between Shane's legs. "Awe."

"If this were a date, we would be naked," Ilya smirked.

Shane let his eyes drift to Ilya's thick thighs, bared by the stylishly high-cut workout shorts. If he concentrated, he could make out the outline of Ilya's dick.

Ilya coughed and Shane looked up, glaring at the shit-eating grin on Ilya's face. "Fifteen passes. Okay for your ribs, Mister Week-to-Week?"

"Fine by me, Mister Puked-in-the-Shower," Shane shot back as Ilya passed him the ball.

He lay flat, tapping the ball behind his head. Ilya pressed his calves against Shane's, the scratchy rub making him half-hard as he sat up in tandem. Their faces were too close, breath mingling. Ilya grinned and took the ball from Shane, and they dropped into another sit-up.

Shane wasn't about to slow down when he could tell Ilya was pushing him. His ribs burned, sweat dripped into his eyes, and by the last rep he could hear Ilya grunting and struggling through it, feeling the tension in his legs.

When they finished, they both lay flat on the mat, staring at the ceiling, abs on fire, neither of them moving to create space.

"Jesus Christ," Shane finally sat up slowly.

Ilya was watching him with half-closed eyes, his arms above his head. He locked eyes with Shane and pulled his shirt up to wipe at his sweaty face, and Shane stared at the dark line of chest hair over hard abs, at the deep V-cut of his hips disappearing beneath the waistband.

Ilya took the foot already between Shane's legs and pressed the sole of his shoe on one of Shane's thighs, forcing him to open his hips. Shane's breath wasn't slowing down. One side of Ilya's lips curled up as he placed the shoe right over Shane's rapidly hardening cock, making Shane grip the mat as a pulse of pleasure wracked through him.

"Fuck," Shane's voice was shaky as Ilya gently increased the pressure. Shane's hips rocked up against his foot, a humiliating desire to just start rutting against him making Shane blush. What kind of pervert was he, getting off to humping Ilya's fucking shoe.

He opened his eyes, which he hadn't realized he had shut, to give Ilya a piece of his mind, but all thoughts left as the heated expression on Ilya's face.

"You like that, sweetheart?" Ilya's voice was deep, making Shane shiver. Ilya propped himself up on his elbows to get a better view as he teased Shane, rocking his foot back and forth.

“N-no,” Shane stammered, the most obvious lie he had ever told. His mind was racing at the sudden overwhelming need to come, and the bolt of shock at the pet name. “It’s your fucking shoe—that’s disgusting.”

Ilya snorted. “It is clean, and your dick thinks otherwise.”

It was a black and white Adidas gym shoe that Ilya probably had only ever worn in this room, so it was annoyingly pristine. Shane could easily move back, but he tentatively pushed up, biting his lip as it felt like all the blood in his body heated.

“So fucking eager,” Ilya chuckled as he watched, fascinated. Shane tried to ignore him, ignore himself and the way he hated and loved how all his nerves felt lit up as he rubbed against Ilya’s sole.

He couldn’t believe he was doing this, sitting in Ilya Rozanov’s fucking penthouse, getting off to his foot.

Was this normal? Was this what people did when they finally found someone they actually enjoyed having sex with?

The question short-circuited as Ilya teased him.

“Look at yourself,” Ilya’s voice cut through his spiral. He glanced at the mirrored closet and gave an embarrassed whimper. He looked thoroughly *debauched*. His face and neck were red, and his hips shuddered as he realized how slutty he was, gyrating like a fucking feral animal.

It was so fucking weird.

Ilya’s foot pressed harder, and Shane moaned.

“Don’t stop,” Ilya tsked, as if he were reprimanding him for doing something naughty. “Keep moving, get yourself off.”

It was painfully humiliating how little Ilya needed to convince him to start again, moving in earnest as he watched himself. He flicked his eyes at Ilya. Ilya seemed to be entirely focused on Shane, flexing his foot with a dark look in his eyes.

His hips moved faster, the weirdness giving way to how fucking good to felt, the new sensations of thrusting up. It was a frustrating build-up, enough pressure to feel good but not enough to come.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya was palming himself as Shane just gave in, the friction, the taboo of doing something so filthy, knowing that Ilya liked him like this, liked him when he was this fucking weird and needy. “Yes, sweetheart, fuck yourself like that—”

He was so fucking close, so hard he was going to come in his pants like an overeager puppy. Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore and gripped the top of Ilya’s Adidas so he could push harder—

—Shane had to tie the black and white Adidas shoes tight because they were a size too big. He tried not to think about whose shoes these were before, but they were grimy, like they had spent a lot of time on the filthy warehouse floor—

Shane cried out as he came, pulsing inside his shorts as he held Ilya tight against him. His ears were ringing, a pit opening in his stomach as he felt both sick and empty, as he shook with residual pleasure. He dimly heard Ilya chuckle, and he released his foot as if it were burning.

“That was so fucking hot, Hollander,” Ilya practically growled as he shifted, crawling up between Shane’s legs and pushing him flat on his back.

Shane hadn’t caught his breath when Ilya kissed him, and he whined, not in pleasure but anxiously as his breathing quickened. He felt as though he was too small, too trapped, and his lungs refused to believe they were getting enough air as he started to hyperventilate.

“Shane—”

—there was pressure on him, a dim feeling of being held amidst the ice eating through him. The only part burning was his lungs, as they felt flat and useless in his chest, feeling too wet to drag in air.

“Don’t you fucking drown, Hollander!”--

“--can you hear me? Shane,” Ilya’s voice was a thin layer of calm over panic as Shane blinked and sucked in another half breath of air. Warm air.

Warm arms around him.

Soft ground under him, not frigid river water.

The smell of rubber, iron, and sweat.

He saw himself in the mirror, bent over with one leg cramped under him, only Ilya’s arms holding him from behind keeping him from face-planting.

Another breath, this one larger and slower. Ilya’s hand was over his heart and he groped for it, holding the back of it against his palm as he struggled to anchor himself.

“Sweetheart,” Ilya seemed to understand he was back as his tone shifted, softer and urgent. “Are you okay? Can you breathe slower?”

Shane nodded and slowed his next inhale. This time it felt normal. He exhaled, and it felt normal, too.

“Good,” Ilya took a deep breath too. He could feel it against the back of his neck.

His shirt was thoroughly soaked, far more than from a light workout, and felt cold and sticky on him. His cum was cool and uncomfortable in his pants as well, and he suddenly felt like ants were crawling over his skin.

Shane pushed out of Ilya's arms, scrambling to his feet on shaky knees, turning so he didn't have to look at himself. Ilya had tightened his grip at first, but let him go and stood with his hands hovering a few inches away as if he just wanted to hold him again.

He took another breath to prove to himself that he could. "I'm going to... shower." Shane turned for the bedroom door, and this time Ilya didn't stop himself from reaching out for him. Shane had to suppress the urge to sidestep.

"Shower? Shane, what happened?" Ilya's eyes were wider than usual, worried. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, I just—Too much, you know? I just need to take a break. I'll—"

"No, this is the second time this happened," Ilya said firmly. "Talk."

Shane glared and wrenched his arm out of Ilya's grip. "I'm fine. I just need a shower and a minute to think, fuck."

Ilya didn't give up and followed on Shane's heels as he headed for the master bedroom.

"Stop," Shane snapped. "I said I need a minute."

"No," Ilya shot back, voice too sharp. "You almost passed out, and you won't tell me why. You are scaring me."

Shane spun on him. "I didn't *almost*—"

"Don't lie to me," Ilya cut him off, pleading. "It was like—you were not there."

Shane was panicking again; his chest felt too tight. He dropped into a crouch, putting his head between his knees like he had done when he was a child and things were too overwhelming. He felt Ilya crouch next to him, a hand on Shane's shoulder. Shane shivered as he struggled to control his breathing.

"It will be okay," Ilya said soothingly.

Shane focused on the ground, saw Ilya's shoes, and closed his eyes as a fresh wave of anxiety snatched any calm he had garnered.

"Can you take off your shoes?" he choked out. He felt the rubbing on his back stop, confused, but Ilya did what Shane asked. He heard the thump as Ilya tossed the shoes in the hall.

"Okay, they're gone."

Shane opened his eyes as Ilya knelt down again. He wiped at his eyes, frustrated to feel that they were wet again. This time when Ilya touched him, it didn't freak him out.

"I don't know why this keeps happening."

“What?” Ilya asked patiently. “What’s happening?”

Shane didn’t know how to articulate it. He sighed and sat on the ground to steady himself. Ilya sat too, waiting.

“They gave me Adidas,” he said. “In the warehouse, when I was... you know.” He sucked in a breath, trying to push the memory of that dark, cold building to the edge of his thoughts. “I just remember thinking they should have been Reeboks.”

Shane couldn’t look at him, but he heard Ilya’s sharp inhale. “Shane.”

“It’s stupid,” Shane added quickly, voice rough. “It’s just a fucking shoe.”

“It is not stupid,” Ilya’s voice was hard. He reached out and grabbed Shane’s hands from where they were painfully digging into his knees. Shane finally risked glancing up, meeting Ilya’s gaze.

“I should have been faster,” Ilya said quietly, voice weighted with something heavier than regret.

“*That’s* stupid,” Shane scowled. “You had no way of knowing where I was. I mean, the odds of you just... knowing some Russian guy in Montreal who could tell you he’d heard a rumour...” His voice faltered, trailing off as he took in the look on Ilya’s face. “What?” he asked, a small edge of defensiveness creeping in. “Isn’t that what you told the police?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, his grip tightening slightly, as if anchoring himself as much as Shane. “Is what I told them.”

“But that’s not what happened.” It wasn’t a question. Shane focused on Ilya’s look of growing unease. His hands tightened when Ilya shifted to pull back. “Ilya.”

“I told them the truth,” Ilya said quickly. “I just, maybe... didn’t tell them things they do not need to know.”

Shane’s brow furrowed. “What does *that* mean?”

“It means...” Ilya trailed off, then his shoulders slumped. “I asked my brother for some help.”

That didn’t tell Shane much, not really. When the media first pitted them against each other in the World Juniors, he had, naturally, Googled everything he could about Ilya Rozanov. He couldn’t help himself. He knew about all the goals, highlights and mentions in the English press because he was studying the competition. It had been his *job*.

He hadn’t tried to find anything personal, nothing about Ilya’s family or life in Moscow, because it hadn’t mattered. After they met and hooked up for the first time, he had been paranoid about someone seeing him looking at Ilya too closely, so he had avoided anything with Rozanov’s name unless it had to do with hockey.

But now they were together, maybe, Shane felt ashamed that he knew so little.

“I didn’t know you had a brother.”

Ilya snorted. “I wish I didn’t. He’s... an asshole. But he is also a policeman, in Russia. And he told me who to ask.”

That clarified nothing for Shane. “And that’s... bad?”

“It is not... easy,” Ilya said. “The information he had was probably very dangerous to give, and it did not come without a price.”

“A price. Like, money?”

Ilya hesitated just long enough for Shane to think of a million different nightmare scenarios. Ilya must have seen him quietly freaking out because his fingers flexed once in Shane’s hands.

“Yes, money,” he said. “I paid him, and the man he sent me to.”

“How much?” Shane asked, already bracing himself.

Ilya grimaced. “Sixty thousand. To my brother. And thirty to the other man.”

For a second, Shane genuinely thought he’d misheard him.

“—You sent *ninety thousand dollars*?” His voice cracked up an octave despite himself. “Ilya, what the fuck?”

Ilya stiffened. “It was necessary.”

“You can’t just drop *ninety thousand dollars* on bribes!” Shane hissed.

Ilya shrugged one shoulder. “It is not so much money.”

It wasn’t, really, not when they made the money that they did. But that wasn’t the point.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Or the police?”

Ilya scoffed. “In Russia, the police do not help you unless you help them. I thought in Canada they would be better, but they did not even look for you. I trusted the police for one day. That was enough.”

“And me?”

Ilya was quiet for a moment. “It does not matter.”

“It fucking does,” Shane wished he could reach into Ilya’s brain and just deposit his thoughts and feelings so Ilya would know what Shane was thinking. It was so hard to convey how angry, frustrated, and worried he was.

Ilya finally looked up, his eyes aching bright. “I did not want you to look at me like I had done something... wrong.”

Shane's first instinct was to argue with him. If the positions were reversed, Shane would have paid double, triple, or emptied out his bank accounts if it had meant saving Ilya from some kind of mortal danger. But arguing wasn't helpful, not when Ilya looked like he was going to be stubborn.

"I don't understand," Shane fought the urge to demand all the answers. He had to coax out one at a time. "How could it be wrong?"

"It is not just the money," Ilya let go of one of Shane's hands and wiped at his eye. Shane shifted closer so their knees touched. Ilya didn't pull away, but he didn't lean in either.

"My brother," he finally said, looking at his hands. "He was always good at knowing who to ask. He was a very fun guy, when I was a child. Always had friends and parties and girls. He was the better son."

Shane wanted to interject, but stayed quiet.

"He became a police officer, like my father. My father was very well-respected in Russia. He *is* respected, but now... Anyway, my father was very good at solving difficult problems. He worked with people, sometimes good, sometimes bad."

"What does that mean?" Shane rubbed his thumb over Ilya's wrists, trying to comfort him but he didn't know how well he was doing.

"Criminals, sometimes. He would meet with them, ask them questions, or other things. He would bring my brother, Andrei to listen and learn, I think, and me to... I don't know. Show he was a family man? An excuse?"

"How old were you?"

"I don't know. Since I can remember. Sometimes it was at a park or a party. Sometimes at the arena. I would train or play a practice game against someone, and he would be in the back rooms doing... whatever. When I was young, it was okay. I was a happy kid, and it felt like a game. But when I got older... I think he wanted me to be like Andrei. But I was too soft. Lazy."

"You're not lazy or soft."

"I tried to listen and learn, like Andrei," Ilya wiped at his face again. "But I was too... scared. And then, I was too good at hockey. When the recruiter offered me a contract here, of course I took it. I thought I could run away."

Shane sat with that for a moment, absorbing the information. He had always assumed that Ilya had come from some kind of crazy Russian hockey family to be as good as he was. He had read about insane regiments Russian athletes did: training from very young ages, running drills in snowy mountains, and abusive coaching. Ilya had bucked a lot of the stereotypes of harsh, iron-faced Russians that he had usually pictured, but Shane realised he hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about why, or any of those assumptions could even be true.

Ilya was reaching to wipe his face again, and Shane couldn't stop his urge to take him in his arms. He got on his knees, straddling Ilya's lap as Ilya seemed to collapse into him. He was still sweaty, cold, and gross, but Ilya didn't seem to care as he buried his hot face in Shane's neck.

As he held Ilya, he could feel him relaxing, not crying outright but squeezing Shane like he was afraid someone was going to take him away. Shane could feel his heart breaking, but also like the cracks were letting Ilya's words bleed into him.

"I mean, that's not a bad thing," Shane said finally. "I'm glad you're here."

Ilya huffed. "Me too." He leaned back, and Shane reluctantly let him go. He gave another hollow laugh. "I have told no one before, I think."

"It sounds... complicated," Shane said.

Ilya nodded, his gaze distant, but he ran his hand up and down Shane's arms seemingly subconsciously. "Yes. Sometimes it feels easy. Like, of course, I come here and I live a good life with money and hockey. But I feel guilty, too."

"Guilty? For what, exactly?"

Ilya sighed. "I don't know. For everything. For leaving, for not... being like them. My father is a hard man, but I don't know if he was like that before, or, maybe, if he had a chance, maybe he would be different. And my brother..." Ilya sighed. "He did not have hockey. He had only his job and my father. When I see him, I feel scared that maybe that is me, in a different life."

Shane swallowed, his throat tight. "You can't compare yourself to some imaginary situation."

Ilya's mouth twitched. "Maybe. But I do anyway."

Shane rested his head on Ilya's, thinking hard. "So, you didn't tell me because you didn't want to tell me about your brother."

"A little, yes," Ilya sighed. "But I think mostly I don't like thinking about 'what if' at all."

That Shane could relate to. "I think... we've got to start talking about the things we don't want to."

"Like panic attacks during sex?" Ilya raised an eyebrow, and Shane winced.

"It's not, like, sex-related," he cringed.

"They didn't... when you were kidnapped." Shane appreciated Ilya kept his voice soft even though he could feel how tense his body became. Shane quickly shook his head.

"No, that wasn't what it was about," he brushed Ilya's hair back to see his face better. "I don't think they really care about me hurting me or scaring me at all. It was some kind of betting thing. Someone in Russia had a lot of money against Canada getting the gold, so they thought

the best way to fix the game was for me to just be gone for a while. But then the police figured the guy in the warehouse,” Shane couldn’t bring himself to say the name, “he probably had money on Canada. And when he saw I couldn’t play... they think he just wanted to paint the headlines with some freak accident and throw off the books.”

Shane’s voice had gone flat by the end as he felt like he was repeating what the final police report had been. He stopped there, shivering as he tried to force back the memory. Ilya pressed their foreheads together for a moment, and Shane took a deep breath.

“They thought,” Ilya finally said, his body comforting but his voice tight, “that the safest way to win their money was to murder you.”

Shane huffed out something that might pass for a laugh. “Yeah. I mean, I’m used to being a commodity or persona or something for the fans, but I guess I forgot that, you know. Anyone is sitting in those seats. And not everyone loves hockey as much as I do, I guess.”

“I don’t think anyone loves hockey as much as you do,” Ilya said, his grip tightening around Shane.

Shane actually let out a laugh, though it felt too loud. “Anyway, sometimes I think I just remember things. Like a flashback, maybe. It’s weird, like, sometimes it’s a word or a thing. I don’t really know.”

“Have you talked to your doctors?”

Shane shook his head. “I was hoping it would just... go away.”

“*Kotyónok*,” Ilya sounded as if he were scolding him. “Shane, that is stupid.”

“Yeah, I know that,” he bristled. “You know what’s also stupid? Spending *ninety thousand dollars* to save my life and not telling me.”

Ilya groaned. “So. We are both stupid. We are even, yes?”

“Maybe,” Shane shifted and grimaced. “But we aren’t done.”

“Great,” Ilya sounded like he was anything but. “Shower, now?”

“Oh my God, yes,” Shane stood uncomfortably, the drying stickiness in his pants making everything pull painfully in his briefs.

Chapter 8: Ilya

There was a piece of paper taped to Ilya's fridge with a tally for "Jane" and "Lily". He stared at it, frowning. Jane already had two marks.

"What is this?" he asked Shane, who was sitting at the kitchen island, a smoothie in front of him, texting his parents.

"It's a tracking chart," Shane said without looking up.

"Yes, I can see. Why are you winning?"

Shane rolled his eyes. "I figured that, because we're both kind of shit at being kind of a—a *thing*, that it would motivate us to reward ourselves."

Ilya stared at him for a moment. "You want to, what, win MVP for dating?"

"It's not like that," Shane flushed. "It's just, like, a way to keep track of when we... you know."

"Fuck?"

"No!" Shane glared. "Do nice things for each other!"

"How come you already have two points?" Ilya pointed accusingly at the paper. "I don't even know the rules!"

"I made you breakfast," Shane pointed at the second, untouched smoothie on the counter. His face belied his embarrassment, even though he was trying his best to be casual. "And I gave you a blowjob this morning."

Ilya couldn't with this man. It was like every fucking earnest thing this man did filled his heart, and it was going to burst at any second.

"Oh, where is my hand job point?"

"Add it," Shane rolled his eyes. Ilya picked up a marker and quickly made his point double the size of Shane's.

"Oh, come on," Shane sighed as Ilya went around the island and pressed up behind Shane before he could try to change it. "You're being immature."

"If I was immature, I would complain about your gross smoothie," Ilya said. "You should have made me *syrniki*."

Ilya kissed the back of his neck before licking a stripe over his ear, making Shane shove him.

"*Si*—what?"

“Is like a pancake,” he buried his face in Shane’s collar, breathing in the clean, almost sweet scent of his neck. “All good Russian wives make it.”

“I’m not your *wife*, Rozanov,” Shane’s voice was breathy as Ilya slipped his hands under his shirt and across his stomach.

“No,” he murmured and slid his hand down Shane’s waistband. “Not wife.”

“Jesus Christ,” Shane moaned as Ilya nibbled on his skin, pressing against Shane’s back.

“I want another point.”

“Fuck off,” Shane dropped his phone on the counter as Ilya wrapped his hand around his cock.

It was quick work to spin Shane around and take him in his mouth, getting him off quickly. Ilya loved the way Shane swore when he had him like this, too fast to get in his head and already on edge from that morning.

He swallowed Shane’s release, then kissed him while Shane was dazed with traces still in his mouth.

“Reply to your mother,” Ilya teased as Shane’s phone buzzed, and patted his cheek before sauntering over to give himself another point.

As Ilya got dressed for the morning skate, he couldn’t help but think about what Shane had said. A *thing*. When they ‘*you know*’.

Ilya had never dated someone seriously, and he had never felt the need to label it. He had sex with women who weren't looking to settle down. Some were regular forms of release and companionship; others were spur-of-the-moment hookups. He had hookups with men, usually nameless, dark and dangerous.

He had approached Shane all those years ago thinking that this would be his only chance to have a regular man in rotation because Shane had almost as much to lose as Ilya.

They had a *thing* up until a week ago, but it was very different from this *thing* now.

Now he knew Shane loved him back. He didn’t want it to be just a *thing*.

He pulled up to the Bears’ practice rink earlier than he needed to be. To avoid LeClaire, he headed to the gym, popped on his headphones, and started his warmup.

He couldn’t deny that things felt different. He felt lighter today, lighter than he had in months, years maybe. The thought that Shane was at his place, sitting on his couch and eating his food, still lodged warm and insistent in his chest, filling space that had been hollow for so long Ilya hadn’t realised it was there anymore. He knew it would not last. Shane still had Montreal to lead for the rest of the season, and Ilya wasn’t stupid enough to get in between Shane and hockey, but it was something. It was real, and it was his, at least for now.

He jumped when a large hand clapped his shoulder, heart kicking hard enough that it took him a second to remember where he was.

“What made you so happy?” Ilya slowed the bike and tugged one side of his headphones down. If Marleau was here, it meant the rest of the team was filtering in.

“Tomorrow is Vegas,” Ilya grinned. “You know how much I love beating those fuckers.”

“Oh, you’re actually playing tomorrow?” Marleau’s tone was teasing. “Did LeClaire get you a private chef, or are you going to keep trusting whatever back-alley seafood place that’s been trying to kill you since January?”

Ilya grimaced. He knew he had been playing like shit and, while he didn’t care so much about the media tearing him down, this was his team.

“You are a comedian now, yes?” Ilya scoffed. “I can tell because your power plays have been a joke.”

“Fuck you, Rozanov,” Marleau laughed.

The rest of the team trickled in, most greeting Ilya with a chirp or a shove or some kind of ritualized insult, and he took it in stride. It wasn’t until Ryan Price quietly started loading weights at the bench that something in Ilya’s chest tightened, the lightness he’d been carrying all morning dimming just a little.

Price finished his warm up and stepped to the racks. Ilya wiped down his machine and approached him, squaring his shoulders.

“You need spotter, yes?” Ilya smiled as Price stiffened slightly.

Ilya saw him glance around to where everyone else was absorbed in their routines, earbuds in. “Sure,” Price finally said and laid back on the bench.

Ilya whistled, impressed, as the man casually bench-pressed almost 200lbs. For most players, workouts weren’t about lifting or building muscle like this. For guys like Price, who punched people for a living, this was just for maintenance. Ilya loved a good scrum, but he couldn’t imagine enjoying the sheer brutality of bloodying someone just because it was asked of him.

In Russia, it would have been men like Price and Morozov that Ilya would have feared the most, if he had ever been outed. They were devoted to the system, loyal to the room, and ruthless when it paid. Their personal feelings wouldn’t have entered into it. They would have done what they were told, and if Ilya had stayed, he would have had to learn how not to draw attention to himself.

But this wasn’t Russia, and now Ilya knew Price was gay.

He didn’t know if that made Price more or less dangerous. Either they were both holding the same secret with the power to ruin them, or they were something closer to allies. Ilya hoped for the latter, despite all his life expecting the former.

Ilya remembered the bar. Mostly he remembered talking too much. Too much about *Jane*.

If it had been anyone else, he could have ruined everything for himself, for Shane. Instead, Price had gotten him home, kept his mouth shut, and stood there awkwardly afterward like secrecy had never been a question.

It left Ilya angry with himself for being careless, and strangely, uncomfortably grateful.

Ilya watched as Price did his reps, focused. Under all that hair, Price was a handsome guy, and with all those muscles glistening with sweat, Ilya could see the appeal.

Price grunted after a particularly hard lift, Ilya glanced away. Finished, he set the bar back and sat up, wiping his face.

“Thanks,” Price muttered, shifting uncomfortably.

Glancing around to confirm that everyone else was still busy, Ilya said, “I should be the one thanking you. For two nights ago. I am... not proud about it.”

“It’s nothing,” Price said quickly. “We all have bad days.”

“And thank you for... Jane,” his voice dropped, and Price stood up. “She’s a very private person.”

Price stood a little too fast, the bench creaking as he moved. “Right. Sure.” He shifted his weight, as if he were deciding whether to leave, then paused. “Look. It’s not my business, but can I say something?”

Ilya blinked in surprise, but nodded.

“You said a lot of stuff about, uh, Jane, and Montreal, and—” Price scrubbed a hand over his face. “If any of it’s *true*, you should probably think about seeing someone. Like. A professional.”

For a moment, Ilya was confused. He had talked about Montreal — did Price mean about the hookups or had Ilya spilled more secrets?

“Professional?” Ilya said cautiously. “What do you mean?”

Price sighed. “I mean, like, a therapist or something.”

Something cold slid through Ilya’s chest, panic sharp and immediate, followed by a surge of revulsion that caught him off guard. He glanced around again, suddenly acutely aware of how exposed he felt.

“I’m not—is not a problem, for me.”

Price seemed to know he was lying, and Ilya shoved aside his goodwill towards him.

“It’s not that big a deal,” Price sighed. “Plenty of guys talk to someone. Should talk to someone.”

“Ah, well, I’m fine.” Ilya crossed his arms to hide his shaking hands. “I am not plenty of guys, alright?”

Price shrugged one shoulder. “Right.”

“Whatever I said—I was drunk,” Ilya's heart was racing. “People say stupid things. It is not all true.”

Price looked unconvinced. “Whatever, Rozanov. I don’t want to get involved.”

Ilya turned to leave.

“But, uh, maybe—“ Price rubbed his eyes, tired. “If what you said actually happened to Jane, then maybe pass my advice to her, okay?”

The ice was still empty when Ilya changed. He grabbed his stick and scattered a couple of pucks down the ice. He warmed up his shoulders as he pushed them towards the goal.

A therapist? It wasn’t as if he hadn’t thought about it. Sometimes. After a shitty loss that fell on his shoulders, or during the summers when he had to listen to his father and brother and family members every day in person instead of filtered through a phone and time distance.

He picked up one puck and started down the ice, aiming for the right corner. The shot went wide, hitting the bar. Ilya swooped around, tension climbing up his spine.

But he had never seriously considered it. Because it would prove that something was wrong. Something was... broken. That his mother had been—

Another ugly sound as it hit the outside, hard enough to round off the boards. Ilya pumped his legs, cutting a sharp turn for another try, jaw clenched.

Shane, though. That made sense. What had happened to Shane was—

He barely even got close this time; the puck sailed uselessly into the seats. Ilya felt fury spike hot and fast in his chest. These were worse than rookie mistakes. He had to get his head straight.

It had been bad. Shane wasn't okay; Ilya could see it. Had seen the way his eyes went distant, his body frozen and scared in a way that made Ilya’s hands itch to do something. If Price had said Ilya would need to present Shane with the still-beating heart of everyone who wronged him to rid Shane of that trauma, Ilya would have figured it out.

This time, the puck found the net, thank fucking *God*, because now he could hear voices echoing down the tunnel as the rest of the team made their way onto the ice.

Shane should see someone, a *professional*, as Price had worded it. Ilya would make sure of it.

Clearheaded, he greeted the first guys as they stepped onto the ice. “You fuckers are late! I already scored a goal on your net! Don’t worry, I was gentle.”

“Get fucked, Rozanov!”

“On an *empty* net, asshole!”

“Glad you’re back, Roz! Don’t puke on the ice.”

It felt *good* to be back; chirping and playing with his team. He led them through their warm-up circle, splitting off into drills as LeClaire and the assistant coaches showed up. He kept his distance from Morozov without making it obvious, tracking him from the corner of his eye.

Morozov didn’t seem to notice, or maybe he didn’t care. Maybe he was tired of fucking with Ilya and had moved on to something else. Ilya wasn’t sure he trusted that logic.

Maybe he didn’t know as much as Ilya had initially thought. Morozov was slimy and patriotic in ways that made Ilya grimace, but he wasn’t stupid, and he wasn’t a criminal, that Ilya knew of. Boston wasn’t known for its Russian underground, and Ilya didn’t want to poke the bear, so to speak. There was no way Morozov knew anything specific.

Probably.

Fuck.

LeClaire at least seemed satisfied with Ilya’s performance. The rink buzzed with energy, and as Ilya raced alongside his line mates, everything finally clicked, the way it was supposed to.

When they were back in the locker room, Shane had texted him.

The first message was a picture of the tracking chart with Shane's hand flipping it off, and a third point in Shane’s row.

The second was of a frying pan with a thick, half burned half runny pancake.

Jane: do you know how many grocery stores I had to call about cheese?

Jane: I think I deserve two points for dealing with Russian grandmothers trying to give me cooking advice

The balloon that had been his heart all day seemed to burst. An overwhelming, selfish need to see Shane and eat his burnt pancakes rushed over him.

“Jesus, Roz,” St Vincent nudged him. “What the fuck happened? You look like someone is planning an orgy for your birthday. Am I invited?”

“Shut your stupid face,” Ilya didn’t let the words stop him from smiling. “My orgy is for winners only. Maybe score a goal and you will get an invitation.”

Ilya: no, only one point. I will show you nine points when I get home 🍆💦🍑

Jane: gross 🤢

Ilya's good mood carried him to his meetings with the coaches. Things were all optimistic. The Bears had all but clinched their spot in the playoffs, despite a short skid everyone blamed on the Olympic break. The coaches were leaning on the team's confidence, and Ilya fed off the energy, loud and eager and sharp in a way he hadn't felt in weeks.

That was good because it helped keep his buoyant mood intact when he went to his final meeting with LeClaire.

He closed the door when LeClaire shut off his monitor and sat down. Although he knew he might get scolded for skipping the game yesterday, he felt strong. He could handle some hits right now.

LeClaire didn't look irritated, though with him it was sometimes hard to tell.

"You look well," he said dryly. "Recovered from yesterday?"

"I think just more dangerous fish," Ilya rubbed the back of his head, a rueful smile. "I thought Boston had better seafood, but no more sushi for me until we win the Cup."

"That had better be a promise," LeClaire sighed, though the corner of his mouth twitched.

They ran through the usual business about minutes, matchups, potential line tweaks, and wrapped up earlier than usual. As Ilya talked through his thoughts on moving back to the first line, LeClaire listened without interrupting, his eyes thoughtful.

"And you think you'd be ready for first-line minutes next week?"

"Yes," Ilya nodded without hesitation. "I feel better. Everything is... take care of."

"I'm glad to hear it," he leaned back in his chair. "You've given a lot to the team to get us so far."

Ilya nodded. "I feel very grateful. Boston has been very good to me."

There was a long, drawn-out pause as LeClaire seemed to study him, a mild look on his face. LeClaire said slowly, "Rozanov, I know I wasn't here when they drafted you. But I've been around long enough to know what it's like for a young kid to come over from overseas and be dropped straight into this league."

Ilya felt sweat bead on the back of his neck.

"It's a machine that can really tear people up," LeClaire continued. "It rewards what it wants and punishes what it doesn't, sometimes without warning. And that kind of pressure can push people into... seeking the wrong people."

"It was difficult," Ilya said carefully. "Being so young. But I think I found good people on the team."

LeClaire nodded gravely. “And I think you’ve handled yourself well, recent times aside. The room respects you. The city loves you.”

It felt like the words should be praise, but Ilya’s stomach was dropping. “I love them very much, too.”

LeClaire learned forward. “All I’m saying is that things move fast sometimes, whether or not they should. When people decide who you are, it’s hard to change their minds.”

Ilya’s stomach tightened. He shouldn’t have written Morozov off. “If I have done something—”

“No,” LeClaire waved his hand. “You’ve been an exceptional team player, Rozanov. But, you’ve been here long enough that I just wanted to impart some wisdom. That there are things out of your control, and mine, for that matter. You can’t get hung up on it, okay?”

It was a lot of cryptic language, and Ilya had a headache as his brain felt like it was working overtime. “I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to, alright?” LeClaire said. “Just know that I like what you bring to the team. I want you to play your best hockey. Whatever, wherever that ends up being.”

Wherever?

He nodded, feeling numb. “I will.”

LeClaire studied him a moment longer, then nodded once, sharp and final. “Good. That’s all.”

Ilya stepped into the penthouse to Shane in glasses, barefoot and writing in a notebook on the couch. He glanced up when Ilya put down his bag, and Ilya briefly forgot the unsettling conversation he had with LeClaire.

“Hey,” Shane glanced up. “How was practice?”

“Good,” Ilya had the sudden urge to be touching Shane. He gave in, sitting next to him and closing his notebook, putting it aside. “You wear glasses? Why don’t I know this?”

“It’s just for reading,” Shane said defensively as he let Ilya push him down. Ilya could feel Shane’s breath hitch and his eyes light up as Ilya pressed him down. Ilya desperately clung to how warm that made him as he kissed Shane’s neck. “Fuck—”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed. He kissed Shane urgently, one hand on his jaw as he opened him up with his tongue, hot and wet. He could feel Shane hardening against his hip.

“Are you always this horny after a workout?” Shane gasped as Ilya pushed his shirt up, leaning down to bite at his chest.

Ilya chuckled. "Maybe. Aren't you? Doesn't hockey make you hard?"

He could see the blush across Shane's face and pulled his shirt all the way off, knocking his glasses askew. This was what he wanted. He hadn't realised until just this moment. Shane here, close to his heart. Everything else was chased away.

He plucked Shane's glasses off so he could kiss him again, frantically trying to drive everything else away with the heat of this.

Ilya had never been this hot and heavy about anyone, not when he was drunk or high, not even when he hadn't gotten laid in a while. It didn't fucking matter with Shane. He would do anything to be touching him, to be tasting him, to be anywhere near him, and it should have scared him, but it didn't. It just made everywhere else feel distant and dark, and all he wanted was Shane in focus now.

They were moving against each other so hard Ilya wasn't sure they were going to make it out of their pants, but Shane had some kind of inhuman self-restraint because he pushed Ilya away. "Wait, wait!"

Ilya groaned, dropping his head to Shane's chest as he tried to gather himself. "What?"

"I—I spent the day thinking."

Ilya frowned. "Why?"

"Because," Shane tried to scowl, but his eyes unfocused as Ilya closed his lips around his nipple. "Stop distracting me," he half-scolded. "I am trying to say, I thought of what I wanted."

"Hm?" Ilya nuzzled the skin around Shane's chest, enjoying the taste of skin and heat as he tried his best to short-circuit Shane's brain. "My dick in your ass? Not surprising."

Shane shuddered and gripped Ilya's hair, pulling him off. Ilya couldn't stop his pout. He wanted to kiss him again until Shane couldn't help himself and then fuck him until he made that face of such fucking wonderment and surprise that Ilya could make him feel so good.

"Go, sit over there," Shane pointed to one of the matching armchairs Ilya never used. Ilya frowned and gripped Shane tighter.

"What? Why? Is so far."

"That's the idea," Shane glared. "I can't fucking *think* when you're touching me."

"Is a bad thing?" Ilya asked innocently and turned his head to nip at Shane's wrist.

"Jesus," Shane's eyes fluttered for a moment before Ilya saw him steel his resolve. "Go!"

Ilya groaned and sat up, feeling like his body was made of cement as he begrudgingly sank into the chair. He could see how hard Shane was, and palmed himself through his pants, smirking as Shane's eyes looked at him as well.

“Is this what you wanted?” Ilya teased.

“Fuck you.” It was Shane’s automatic response when he was uncomfortable with something, so Ilya slowed down a bit, his eyes tracking.

Shane was flushed down his chest, sitting up now with his shoulders drawn in. He wouldn’t look at Ilya as he threaded his hands through his hair in a comforting loop. He was nervous, Ilya realised, the awareness blooming something strangely tender in a way he didn’t expect.

“Okay,” Ilya rested his head in one hand, the other still idly rubbing his dick over the top of his pants. His gaze never left Shane. “Tell me, Shane Hollander. What is your fantasy?”

Shane glanced at him, heated and angry, as if it were Ilya’s fault he was so flustered.

“You can’t laugh at me,” Shane said, and his words seemed to be edged with a challenge.

Ilya almost laughed, but caught himself. “I won’t laugh.”

“I want... you to watch.”

Ilya’s dick twitched, but he kept his face schooled. “Watch what?”

“Me,” Shane said, too fast. “Just — me.”

“Touching yourself?”

“Yes.” Shane’s shoulders loosened, relief plain.

“You liked the phone sex,” Ilya smirked. “Knowing that I am watching you.” His voice dipped. “Naughty boy.”

Shane either ignored the bait or he was too nervous to notice. His eyes dark, he reached for his pants, hooking his thumbs in the waistband until Ilya stopped him.

“Not yet,” Ilya said. “Slow. I want to see.”

Ilya saw a small shudder as Shane obeyed. He shifted to get more comfortable before he eased his pants down in small, careful increments, so Ilya could see his hip bones, the trail of his pubic hair. Ilya’s attention sharpened, heat coiling low in his stomach.

“You too,” Shane said, his voice tight.

“Oh, I thought I was only spectator,” Ilya said innocently. Shane swallowed hard, then nodded. Fuck, Ilya couldn’t stop looking at the way Shane’s eyes kept flickering to him, like he was waiting for permission, or praise. He loved watching him struggle, but wanted more for him to succeed.

“Is this a fan experience?” Ilya teased. “One night with Montreal’s Shane Hollander?”

“You said you wouldn’t make fun of me,” Shane said, and he stopped suddenly, arms crossed defensively. Ilya realized too late that he had become distracted, too caught up in himself. Something was going on. He forced his libido to calm down.

“No, I said I would not laugh,” Ilya corrected. “I would never laugh about that.”

His words didn’t help; Shane had stiffened up, and not in a good way, his fingers drumming on his arms.

Ilya tried to steer the conversation back. “You want me to watch, yes?”

Shane could not get redder. “Yeah. I know, it’s fucking weird, nevermind—”

“Is not weird,” Ilya cut Shane off before he could talk himself out of it. “I want to watch. Why does it feel weird to you?”

Shane took a deep breath. “Because—like, you know,” he took a deep breath. “Why would you watch when you can just... fuck?”

Ilya felt the familiar, unsettling realization that for all their history, Ilya didn’t really know what Shane *knew*.

“Have you never watched a girl?” he asked.

There was a mild look of reproach before Shane cleared his throat. “Uh, you mean, like porn?”

“Maybe,” Ilya said patiently. “Have you?”

“Uh, maybe on a road trip,” Shane admitted. “Some guys put it on in their rooms. It always got kind of weird though, so I usually left.”

Ilya tilted his head curiously. “You don’t watch porn?”

“No!” Shane said adamantly. “I mean, not on purpose.”

Ilya’s mouth curved, fond and incredulous. *What a fucking guy.* “What about guys? Gay porn?”

Shane studied the lamp next to the couch like it held all the answers in life. “Uh, a bit. But, it’s kind of weird. Like, a bit over the top, maybe. And, I don’t know. It always felt like... they’re showing off or something.”

“That is sometimes the point,” Ilya said dryly.

“Yeah, sure,” Shane glared. “But, I don’t know. It just felt so... obvious. Fake or something. It never felt like... what we do.”

There were times over the past several years that Ilya got irrationally angry at how much Shane had gotten under his skin; like a knife that could only dig deeper. He had thought it

had finally pierced him through, and that he was done falling in love with Shane.

Until the guy said things like that.

Shane stared at him, doubt creeping over his face, and Ilya quickly squashed it.

“And now, you wish, what?” Ilya said carefully. “That you can do a better job? Better than the video?”

“No. Maybe. I mean, yeah.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “You want me to get my camera?”

“No!” Shane said vehemently. “I definitely don’t want to be on video. If anyone else, you know, other than you, saw... Fuck. I’d die.”

“I deleted the one you sent me,” Ilya said, and Shane’s eyes snapped to him.

“You did?” His voice hitched.

“It was hot,” Ilya replied. “I jerked off to it a few times, but you said my name so,” he shrugged. “I didn’t want to risk it.”

Relief washed over Shane’s face so quickly it almost hurt to see, tangled up with something like embarrassment. “Thank you.”

“It is not a problem,” Ilya said quietly. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Shane,” his voice was soft and careful. “Why are you saying this? Why do you want me to watch you?”

Shane blinked, his face still pink and his eyes darting like he couldn’t find a place to settle. “I don’t know. It’s stupid.”

“Shhh,” Ilya stood and went back over, sitting on the coffee table and reaching out to take one of Shane’s hands in his. It felt unbearable to be far away from him when he looked so panicked, but he knew if he tried touching him more, he wouldn’t be able to stop trying to make that distressed pinch on Shane’s face go away. He needed to hear what Shane was saying as much as it seemed Shane needed to say it. “There is no stupid, okay? You can tell me. I won’t make fun.”

“I used to like... being watched, on the ice.” Shane breathed out hard. “It just felt good. Not, like a sex thing. I guess... an ego thing, maybe?”

Ilya rubbed the back of Shane’s hands with his thumbs. “Yes, it feels good when they cheer. Better when they boo.” Ilya was relieved when Shane finally cracked a smile. “You said ‘used to’. You don’t like it any more?”

The smile disappeared, and Shane tried to withdraw his hands, but Ilya held firm. “It feels complicated now. Now that... I’m not sure who’s watching.” He let out a rough laugh. “I

think it's the reason I... lied. About my headaches. To make the medical team keep me on IR."

Ilya had suspected that Shane was lying about the headaches, but he wasn't going to call him out on it. Not when Ilya still had things he was protecting.

Shane finally filled the quiet with a humourless laugh. "I just can't think about getting back on the ice without thinking about the fact that guy is out there somewhere."

Ilya raised Shane's hands up to kiss them while he absorbed what Shane had said. He wanted to go back to Montreal, find that guy in the warehouse, and throw him into the St Lawrence. He wanted to find everyone who dared lay eyes on Shane Hollander with ill-intent and make them suffer. He wanted to take away the dejected look on Shane's face as he sat there, take the sadness into his own body because Ilya was the one with the holes in his soul to sink it into.

But he could do none of those things.

Instead, he gave in and shifted closer, getting to his knees so he could pull Shane into his arms. "Why do you want me to watch, *kotyónok*?" he asked again.

Shane sighed. "Well, at first I thought it would be hot, but now I think I might be a bit too fucked up for it."

Ilya snorted as Shane leaned back. "You are not fucked up."

"I'm a little fucked up," Shane smiled ruefully. Ilya craved suddenly to have Shane close, so he kissed him. His lips started soft, but Shane opened easily to him, his hands curling in Ilya's shirt. He pulled him into a firm kiss with an urgency that felt like an apology. Ilya pushed back, refusing to let Shane attempt penance where none was needed. He poured his own fervour into the kiss until Shane finally broke it off, and both of them breathed heavier.

"We can wait," Ilya rested his forehead on Shane's. He held Shane's sides firmly, trying to give reassurance. "Because watching you fuck yourself will be hot. When you are ready." he gave a gentler squeeze. "Is not your fault, okay?"

"Okay," Shane said, but his voice broke, and Ilya was sure that Shane still didn't believe him. Shane pulled back more and tried to smile.

He was doing what Ilya had now seen him do countless times now, sidestepping for space. Ilya let him, understanding the need and just pathetically grateful he wasn't running away. "I learned how to make your stupid pancakes."

"Oh yes," Ilya smiled, indulgent. "I saw. You learned how to burn them."

"Fuck off."

"I love you too," he grinned, and that seemed to finally bring a real, bashful smile to Shane's face.

The rest of the evening shifted to something quieter as Shane showed him the original Russian recipe and the shitty translation he had found. He forced Ilya to help him with the pronunciation of the words, making him explain the conjugations until Ilya couldn't help but press along his back, peppering his neck with kisses.

After they had eaten the semi-burned, mostly raw *syrniki* and were cleaning the pans that couldn't go into the dishwasher, the tension had eased into something easier and ordinary. Ilya felt relaxed, grateful that the day had come back down to this.

Shane turned to him suddenly.

"You know... we've never said it but... we're dating now, right?"

Ilya paused, his hands plunged into soapy water. "Yes?"

"Boyfriends?"

Ilya grinned, the last vestiges of worry he had forgotten about finally washed away for the night. "Yes."

Shane grinned and marked another tally on the scoresheet under 'Jane', doubling his lead over 'Lily'.

"You fucking cheater!" Ilya sputtered, then shoved his soapy hands up Shane's shirt until he gave up, laughter filling the penthouse.

Chapter 9: Shane

Chapter Notes

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

It was still strange to wake up with a Russian hockey player-sized blanket burrito-ed around him. Shane usually got overheated, but for now the novelty of having his *boyfriend* (Shane's stomach still fluttered at the thought) was still high. It didn't matter that he woke up sweaty and almost glued together. That's what showers were for. And showers were ten times more fun when they were shared.

There was something about being on his knees in the shower, Ilya's hand in his wet hair as he sucked his cock, the taste of skin, smell of soap, and echoing moans that couldn't be replicated anywhere else.

"Fuck," Ilya was bracing himself with one hand while the other gripped, not forcing but guiding where he wanted Shane the most. "Too good."

Shane pulled off, paying attention to the head and gently squeezing his balls, something he learned Ilya liked. He let his cock rest on his tongue for a minute before saying, "How do you want—?"

Ilya's hazel eyes were blown wide, his mouth gaping as if he was trying to register Shane's words. Finally, he said, "On your face."

That sent a shiver down Shane's spine as his hand sped up on his own cock. He closed his lips around him, keeping it shallow this time as he let go of his balls, instead gripping the length that wasn't in his mouth.

Ilya was telegraphing everything; his thighs tensed, his breath shifting to a deep growl as his cock twitched, so close to coming already. Shane felt a huge sense of pride and embarrassing satisfaction as he felt it happening, timing it perfectly to pull off.

Ropes of warm release landed on his face and neck. He had to close his eyes, but he could feel it still leaking over his hand as he kept up the pressure and pace until Ilya sagged against the wall.

"Enough," Ilya's voice was tight as Shane couldn't resist licking the tip, capturing the last of him on his tongue while Ilya moaned and pushed him away.

He must look absolutely wrecked, because when he looked up, Ilya had the most twisted expression of lust and shock, and it was enough to do Shane in. Shane came with a cry, his own come landing on the floor of the shower. He rested his forehead on Ilya's hip as he came back to himself, panting.

Ilya hauled him to his feet, kissing him even though Shane knew he was fucking gross. He pushed Ilya away with a grimace. "I'm covered in your... stuff, Ilya."

“Good,” Ilya just grinned and kissed him again. Soon, though, the feeling became too much, and Ilya helped him wash his face and hair again. He towed him off, stealing kisses where he could land them as Shane shoved him away, not wanting him to go but loving how Ilya fought to be near him.

It always shocked Shane what he wanted to do with Ilya, both the specifics and the intensity. It had never been like this with girlfriends or the few random times he had taken someone home.

This was... better.

They had a quick breakfast as the reality of the day set in.

“Do you have to leave so early?” Ilya muttered into his hair as Shane washed his mug. “Or at all? Maybe you can call and say no, you actually forgot how to skate. You must take intense lessons from a famous Russian superstar.”

Shane snorted. “You’ll be playing a game at the same fucking time as mine. You won’t even miss me. And I promised I’d go. I have a responsibility.”

Ilya sighed heavily, as if Shane were denying him a puppy, not just going to New York for the day to sit in the box with the Voyagers. “Fine. But you will come back tonight, yes?”

“Already booked the flight, you big baby,” Shane turned, letting Ilya bracket him against the counter. He brushed a still-drying curl out of his face. “I’m going to have to go back to Montreal eventually.”

“Hm,” Ilya stared at his lips before dragging his eyes up to meet Shane’s. “But during playoffs. You will come and stay with me again, yes? Support your super hot boyfriend.”

Shane’s stomach twisted again at the word. “Hey, if we win tonight, we could still get that wildcard spot.”

“Maybe,” Ilya leaned in to give a light kiss. “But there is no great hotshot Shane Hollander. I think they will lose.”

“Wow,” Shane frowned. “You could be a little supportive yourself.”

“Sorry,” Ilya shrugged. “But it is true. You have good guys, but without *you*, the slim chance becomes none.”

Shane hated that he was probably right. It made him feel even worse about the last month and a half.

He went to step out of Ilya’s arms, but Ilya tightened the embrace. “Next year will be better. New draft picks, maybe some trades. There are good forwards in juniors. Nothing like us, but you could raise a little baby Hollander.”

It was true, though Montreal hadn’t secured the best spot for draft picks this year. They had been projected to make the playoffs, so they had gone all out, doing well until Shane’s

‘accident’. It was too late to tank in the rankings to be first in line for the top draft picks.

There was still time before the trade deadline, though, and Shane knew their defence was deep enough they could make some room, trading some talented guys who wanted more ice time for more forwards. Having a more solid line would build on what Shane had already been working towards. It would suck to lose teammates, but that was part of the life they had signed up for.

He took only his backpack with a few necessities. It was a short flight to New York, and he was only going to be joining the morning skate, then sit in the box for the game before flying back. It had been a week since his last check-in with the medical team, and he was dreading seeing them again on the road, even though he knew it had to be done.

Ilya was diabolical and leaning shirtless in the entrance while Shane tied his shoes. He knew what he was doing, tempting Shane to just email a resignation letter so he could tumble back into bed with him.

But Shane was stronger than that.

Probably.

He zipped up his winter jacket like armour as Ilya grabbed his belt loops and pulled him into the vee of his hips.

“You text me when you land?” Ilya's voice was thick. Shane felt the same. Leaving for even a day was too long.

“Yes,” he kissed Ilya, his hands memorizing the hard planes of his chest and arms. “I’ll be back later.”

“I will wait,” Ilya’s eyes were half closed as they roamed over his face. “To celebrate my victory,” he grinned.

Shane snorted. If Ilya won, it would actually screw Montreal in the standings. He needed Boston to lose to make a Montreal win more impactful in their division. But despite that, he loved to see Ilya win.

Well, not against him.

They kissed again, slowly, and Shane’s jacket felt too hot. It was Ilya who had to break it this time.

“You will talk to the doctors, yes?”

Shane nodded. “No headaches or vertigo. So... I think they’ll want me back on the ice for the next game.”

“You tell them to fuck off,” Ilya squeezed Shane’s hips. “If you are not ready, okay?”

Shane nodded. “Right, okay. I’ll tell them it’s your medical opinion. Ilya Rozanov doesn't want me to play. No ulterior motive.”

“You think I cannot beat you fairly,” Ilya snorted. “Cute.”

The kiss was more of a battle this time, and Shane could feel himself losing.

“I have to go,” he said against Ilya's lips.

“So go.” He felt Ilya grin. “I am not stopping you.”

“You’re such an asshole,” Shane groaned and forced himself to step back, avoiding looking at Ilya leaning against the wall, lips red and swollen.

He grabbed his bag and took a deep breath to calm down.

“You will tell them about the... flashbacks?” Ilya asked carefully. Shane glanced at him. Ilya was a dangerous combination of sexual attraction and careful intent; if it were anyone else, anyone who hadn’t cried in his arms or made him pancakes or fished him out of a fucking river, Shane would question his motives.

“Yes,” he said with finality. “And I’ll talk to them about a therapist, okay?”

Ilya seemed to relax a fraction. “Okay.”

“I love you,” Shane said, feeling heat across his face at the words. But it was worth it to see Ilya's alluring eyes soften.

“I love you too. Now go so you can come back sooner.”

Shane rolled his eyes but put on his baseball cap and stepped onto the elevator.

It was hard to leave, as if he were tearing himself off of something to do so. He knew he should find the sun on his face and the chill in the air refreshing, but he wanted nothing more than to go back and be smothered a bit more.

Shane: I’m going to turn my tracker on

Shane: on the way to the airport

Mom: thank you

Mom: they’re starting Gill Watson tonight

Shane: do you know why? I thought he was injured

Mom: I heard it was just a groin sprain. But that means he’ll be cautious. You can exploit that.

Dad: how’s Ilya? Did you tell him we tried those cheese pancakes yesterday?

Shane: he said they looked better than mine 🙄

Dad: I'll show you how to make them when you get back.

*Dad: I've picked up a new Russian cookbook he should look at when you two are here.
When is he visiting?*

Mom: yes, actually, I want to talk to him about some things

Mom: BMV is looking for a new brand ambassador in the states

Shane paid the cab and headed into the terminal while he fielded his parents' questions. It fills him with both relief and trepidation.

Selfishly, he wanted Ilya to himself for a little while longer. But the thought of going home without him, pretending like he didn't exist like they had for years—Shane didn't want to go back to that.

When he landed and hailed a cab, he texted Hayden.

Shane: 30 mins out

Hayden: sweet

Hayden: hey, you playing today?

Shane: no, why?

Hayden: they have your gear

A pit formed in his stomach.

Shane: maybe it's just in case

Shane: Dallas in two days and then two more road games

Shane: maybe they're hopeful

Hayden: how are the headaches? Still bad? We miss you man!

Guilt rose like an ugly beast. Now that he had told the truth to one person, the thought of keeping up the lie felt exponentially worse. Especially to Hayden, who had proven time and time again their friendship was bigger than hockey.

Shane: I feel great

Shane: actually

Shane: can we talk? After morning skate?

Hayden: yeah man! Is everything okay? Rozanov isn't giving you trouble is he?

Hayden: I've been training

Hayden: weights

Hayden: I can take him

Shane: no that's fine

Shane: something else

Hayden: okay be mysterious

Hayden: if I can guess you owe me

Shane: fine, but if you lose you owe me

Shane met up with the team in gear. The warm-up shirt was already out and, for once, Shane was itching to get back on the ice. It felt like second skin, strapping on the pads and lacing up his skates. He walked down the visitors' tunnel to where the guys were already doing warm-ups feeling like he was in a different passage of time.

The ice smelled right — and wrong. For half a second, his body didn't know the difference between this and the giant slabs in the river. But he blinked, and the bright lights chased away the blurry shadows that invaded his vision.

Even though the smell carried the same sharp bite, it wasn't the same beast; he told himself.

He stepped out, his blade moving as if on butter.

Shane was sure this was the longest stretch of his life he had gone without skating. He felt like he was flying and, for the first time in weeks, the weight on his chest fell away.

A cheer broke out, followed by a round of stick taps as the guys moved to give him a space in the circle. JJ barrelled into him in a hug, nearly taking his skates off the ice.

“Captiane!” JJ said, knocking Shane's helmet with affectionate force as he finally set him down. “Are you ready to lead the warm-up? None of us can get it right.”

“I mean, it's all written in the binders.” He'd spent last year building it with the sports science team, coaches, and players, targeting weaknesses, strengthening systems, team building — until he noticed the teasing tone. He rolled his eyes. “Yours is probably more exciting.”

“We love your boring warm-ups, Holly,” Drapeau shouted from across the circle.

A chorus of agreement rose immediately, half-laughing, half-mocking, and Shane's grin spread before he could stop it. Something in his chest loosened, warm and unexpected.

Finally, things didn't feel like he was stumbling through the dark.

It felt as if he were already home.

Shane felt sore and tired but invigorated when they finally wrapped up. Before he could follow Hayden, Coach Theriault held him back.

“You looked great on the warm-ups,” Theriault looked almost happy, an expression Shane hadn’t seen since he had been drafted.

“I don’t know about great.” Shane was more winded than usual, but he quickly tried to slow his breathing and straighten his posture. “But it felt good to be back.”

“You’re moving well. No hesitation.”

Shane didn’t answer. He saw Hayden pausing at the tunnel and waved him off. “I’m glad you think so, Coach. I’m meeting with medical—”

Theriault leaned in a fraction, voice dropping into something quieter. “Good enough to start tonight, right?”

Shane’s throat tightened. “Coach—”

“We need you. The team needs you.”

It wasn’t said like a request.

Shane gripped his stick hard, feeling the tape rub against his palm. “I’m not cleared.”

“Any headaches? Vertigo?”

“No, but—”

“Then the medical team will clear you,” Theriault said, with no room for argument. “Tonight is a make or break game. If we win, we still have a shot.”

Shane blinked, his heart racing. He had thought he had more time, maybe a few more practices with the team, or sitting in the box to get used to the crowd again.

“Like I said, you moved well,” Theriault continued as if Shane wasn’t freaking out next to him. “You’re skating, turning, stopping. You took contact no problem. I don’t see the issue.”

“That’s not the point,” Shane’s heart was already racing.

Theriault’s face shifted to impatience. “Then what’s the point?”

“It’s not just the physical,” Shane stumbled over his words. He had practiced them for the medical team, not for an interrogation on the ice with his coach staring him down. “There’s some, uh, I was having trouble sleeping, and sometimes the memories of what happened—”

Theriault sighed, long and heavy, and Shane felt all of twelve again. “Hollander.”

That was the tone. *Man up.*

Shane felt heat crawl up his neck.

“I understand,” Theriault said, his voice a little softer, “that you’ve been through... something difficult. But you’re letting it get to your head. You’ve coached guys through tough times. You know what to do.”

Shane had spoken to guys who had lost confidence or were going through things like a death or a bad breakup. He told them what every captain said: Show up anyway. The guys need you. If you’ve been hit, hit back.

He wasn’t sure that was going to work here.

“I get... panicked,” he forced out. “Sometimes it’s like – I’m not here anymore. I’m remembering something and I can’t—I can’t shut it off. I think about it and...”

Theriault sighed again. “You know hockey is a mental game just as much as a physical one. If you’re focused on the game, you shouldn’t be thinking about something else. That’s your problem, Hollander. You’re thinking too much.”

Shane’s jaw clenched. “That’s not what this is.”

“Shane,” Theriault said, using his first name. “You’re the captain of this team. Do you know what it looks like if you sit out again? The media has already gone crazy with the snowboarding story. If you sit out any longer because of, what? Some anxiety? We can get you some pills for that. Talk with a doctor, if that’s what you want. But you’re telling me *that’s* what’s stopping you from playing?”

It sounded pathetic, hearing it like that.

His hands were still gripping his stick so tightly that his knuckles ached.

Theriault was right, wasn’t he? It’s not like he had broken something like his spine. It’s not as if the physical wounds hadn’t healed in just a few weeks.

He had always over-thought things as a kid. He would get freaked out, spiral, or talk himself out of things. His parents had been worried about him, until they realized hockey had helped. He didn’t have time to think about things for more than a split second. You didn’t have time to imagine the worst-case scenarios. You just put the puck in the net and followed the rules.

Theriault was probably right. And practice had felt great, as if nothing had happened. Maybe hockey was the thing he needed to get out of his head again.

Hockey was easy; it made sense.

Hockey had always been the thing that made him feel normal.

And practice had felt good. Better than good. He hadn’t thought about wearing a bag over his head and being helpless while a guy shot a few inches from his head. He hadn’t been thinking about a cot in a medical bay, wondering if he was going to die. He had just been fucking skating and putting pucks in nets.

He lifted his head, trying to square his shoulders and steady himself,

“Yeah,” Shane’s voice was rough but controlled. “You’re right. If you need me tonight, I’m here.”

Theriault’s expression eased immediately, satisfied, and gave him a gruff backslap. “Good to hear it. Now, go get the official clearance on the physical side, and we’ll deal with the other stuff if we need to another day.”

Lunch turned into an early dinner with Hayden as Shane stopped by the medical rooms the visiting team used. He was already on week-to-week, so the travelling medical team was happy to clear him after a few cognitive and mobility tests.

After they had signed his forms, Shane had stood in the doorway and thought about the speech he had practiced on the airplane and with Ilya, about needing more time and maybe seeing a therapist who specialized in trauma.

But they looked busy and excited to clear him, so he had just thanked them and scurried out of the room.

He and Hayden opted for the hotel restaurant and got a booth near the back. Because it was game day, they were both eating light, and the hotel knew how to cater to athletes.

“You look great, man,” Hayden said once the waitress left, leaning forward as if he had been holding it in all day. “Like, actually better. Fucking glowing. Rozanov didn’t get you in the family way, right?”

Shane snorted. “I thought you were reading good articles, Hayds.”

“I knew getting laid made you play better. If I knew getting gay laid would make you like this—”

“I was *always* getting gay laid,” Shane covered his face, thankful for the privacy of the booth.

“Okay, gay *love making* laid, then.”

“Can we please stop talking about it?”

Hayden threw up his hands in defeat. “Okay, how about the thing you wanted to tell me?”

Shane looked at his glass of water, taking a sip to calm his breath. Why did it feel like he’d had this conversation before? He had been so sure when he had left Boston today, and he knew Hayden, of all people, would listen to him.

But...

What if Theriault was right? What if this was nothing, and he was just going to worry Hayden for nothing? “It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit,” Hayden raised his eyebrow. “Shane, don’t do this to me again, buddy.”

Shane swallowed.

It wasn't like he was hiding it, like before. Ilya knew. And he would tell Hayden if it got worse.

"Just tell me. Look, we worked through Rozanov; we can work through this."

Shane opened his mouth to reply when there was a slight cough. They both glanced up at a waitress, pink in the face, holding their meals.

"Oh, thanks," Shane moved his glass as Hayden pinched his nose in frustration. She left quickly as Hayden glared daggers at her. He must have really pissed him off; Hayden was usually friendly and open with waitstaff.

"Shane—"

"I'm starting tonight."

Hayden blinked, surprise on his face. "The docs cleared you? Even with the headaches?"

Shane nodded. "Yeah. I was... kind of exaggerating about that."

"Yeah, no shit."

Shane stabbed the chicken in front of him with a fork, then sighed and met Hayden's eyes. "There were headaches, but also, like some... anxiety attacks. I didn't want to get on the ice and freak out in front of the cameras, alright?"

"Dude, really? I mean, understandable. I've had a few of those this last month."

Shane dropped his fork. "You have?"

Hayden scoffed at his reaction. "Of course! It was fucking traumatic."

"You didn't... seem like it." Shane felt something in his chest loosen.

"Yeah, well," Hayden shrugged and stabbed a piece of broccoli. "I talked to Jackie. She got me talking to a dude. I've only gone, like, twice, but it was nice to just tell someone."

Shane let out a breath that sounded like a laugh, but didn't feel like one.

Hayden chewed, then pointed his fork at Shane. "Also, you're allowed to freak out. Like, you know that, right? You're not a hockey robot god of whatever it is the media says."

Shane's throat tightened. He knew Hayden was right. He knew it in his mind.

Hayden's eyes narrowed, as if he could see right through him. "So," he said finally. "You're having anxiety attacks. Is it, like, really bad?"

Shane's ears burned. "Yeah. I mean, once I get on the ice I'll feel better."

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, it’s mostly under control now,” Shane said, as if he were trying to convince himself. “Talking about it helps. And it’s just in my head, right? So, I should be good. You’re good.”

Hayden snorted. “I mean, it’s kind of in your head. Like, my dude told me my trauma is in my brain or whatever, but also, it’s your nervous system, so it affects, like, gut and hands and legs.”

“Oh,” Shane frowned. “Is that how it works?”

Hayden sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Look, I’m an expert, but...” He glanced up. “Sometimes I’ll just be in traffic waiting for the light, and I can’t breathe. Or I’ll hear something and my heart starts going.”

Shane’s grip tightened on his fork. “Because of me.”

“Okay, no pity parties,” Hayden said quickly. “I’d do it again and more, Shane. What’s a little trauma bonding between line mates?”

The restaurant felt as if the sound was muffled, and Shane couldn’t think of anything he wanted to do less than eat. Hayden looked at him, his brow furrowed.

“Is that what it’s like for you?” he asked.

Kind of.

Not really.

It wasn’t just a panic for him. He could *feel* the ice, the river. Hear the voices. Taste the fucking McDonald’s french fries from the floor of the car—

He thought about telling Hayden what he had practiced. *It’s like I’m not even here anymore.*

But his voice wouldn’t work. Instead, Shane looked up, levelling out his expression. “Yeah, pretty much. And, I mean, I think I’m more nervous in Montreal because those guys are... still out there. Even though the police said not to worry, it’s hard.”

“Well, we’re not in Montreal. If you want to try playing, now’s the time. But if you feel even a bit off, you let Coach know, okay?”

Shane nodded. “Deal.”

“Good.” Hayden leaned back. “Now eat, or you’re going to pass out on the ice from hunger, and *that’s* going to be embarrassing.”

Shane huffed a laugh, and the knot in his chest loosened another inch.

Media was unavoidable, so Shane steeled himself for the questions outside the visitor’s locker room.

“What does it mean to be back in the lineup at this point in the season?”

“Did you feel you owed it to the team to return as soon as possible?”

“Can you clear up what actually happened with the snowboarding incident?”

“There are rumours that the pressure of the Olympics got to you, and you’ve been exaggerating your injuries because you’re cracking in the run to the playoffs. Have you lost your edge, and how do you respond?”

Shane kept his voice steady, trying to give them polite answers: It was great to be back on the ice; he was proud of the way his teammates stepped up in his absence and gave it their all; it was just an unfortunate accident on a family holiday.

The last one was from an aggressive man who kept jabbing his mic over everyone else’s. Shane thought about ignoring it, but he had been messaging his management in case things got ugly.

“My recovery took as long as it needed to,” he singled out the man with a glare. “The Cup is always the goal. Whatever it takes, I’ll be where I need to be to get there. Thank you.”

The UBS Arena roared to life with each shift. Shane could feel it in his body; the vibrations of the crowd blocking out any other details. The lights blocked any shadows from his mind.

The more time he spent out there, the stronger he felt. He was *alive*, and he was where he belonged.

He won the first face-off and the second. He was rusty and had to come off the ice more often than he cared to admit. But each time he flung himself off the boards in a spring, flying up and down the ice with his legs and lungs burning, the sting only made him grin.

The game was fast and relentless, and they were down by three points in the second period. It didn’t matter, though: a breakaway brought him down the ice, and he snapped the puck, needling it over the New York goalie’s shoulder for their first point. It didn’t matter that the crowd booed as his teammates swarmed him.

Ilya was right. Boos felt like cheers sometimes.

How had he been afraid of this?

For the first time in months, the icy dread that had gripped him in his darker moments seemed like a distant memory, a shadow shrinking beneath the floodlights. The ice was his again, and he had no intention of giving it up.

They closed the gap, getting into overtime by the skin of their teeth. The last few minutes were a blur. Shane felt like he was out of gas, but there was no way he was going to stop the momentum. Every pass and check and scramble for the puck felt like life or death.

It was the final minute when New York finally had enough. Shane had his back turned, shoving a guy out of the crease, when their rookie flicked it past Drapeau. The horn sounded,

signalling their loss.

It always took a minute for the adrenaline to run its course, and Shane stared at the board in disbelief. The numbers didn't lie, though, and he felt his stomach drop: they weren't going to the playoffs this year.

Shane turned to skate next to Drapeau, who was always the slowest in his goalie pads. His eyes were glassy with rage, and it looked like he was ready to throw his stick at some fans flipping him off by the boards. Shane grabbed his helmet, bringing his face close.

"Hey," Shane said steadily. "Look, you did everything right, okay?"

Drapeau looked at him hard, frustration across his face as if he didn't believe losing and doing a good job could both be true. Shane grinned. "I know, no playoffs, but next year, man. We're going to be back and fuck them up."

The thought of violence seemed to perk Drapeau up. "*Au moins... we got our capitaine back, hein?*"

Shane pushed his helmet affectionately as they got off the ice.

He had time to shower quickly, but then he had to be out the door to catch his flight back to Boston.

The Bears had won easily, with Ilya back at the helm. It both irritated and warmed Shane as he watched a highlight of Ilya tossing pucks to a line of kids holding posters. His stomach hurt with disappointment, but he couldn't stop himself from smiling.

Next year, that would be him.

He landed at midnight and caught a cab to Ilya apartment, feeling like it was routine. His parents had already texted him words of encouragement, and Shane had already booked his flight to Dallas. He might be in Boston tonight, but he had already decided he was going to ride out the rest of the season with his team.

It was time to mourn a bit, and then move on.

He felt lighter as he punched in the code to the apartment. It felt like the right decision to play.

Ilya was waiting on the couch, the TV playing highlights from the Montreal-New York game. Despite his cockiness that morning, Shane saw the way Ilya's eyes tracked him, as if he were trying to judge his mood.

Shane flopped down next to him.

"I'm sorry," Ilya said quietly.

"I'm not," Shane rubbed his face. "It wasn't meant to be this year. This year..." He exhaled, a humourless laugh catching in his throat.. "This year is already pretty full."

“It’s only February,” Ilya said, a hint of warmth entering his voice as Shane rolled his eyes.
“What do you need, *lyubimyy*?”

Shane looked at him for a moment, grateful. Just so fucking grateful that one day in Regina he had braved the cold to talk to this scary-looking Russian kid smoking where he wasn’t supposed to.

He sat up and swung his leg over Ilya to settle in his lap. He took Ilya’s face in his hands and kissed him deeply, thumbs stroking his cheekbones and the hint of stubble, trying to breathe in tandem with him.

Shane wanted to be here, wanting this so much that hockey faded into the background.

There was the feeling on the ice, where everything was simple unless it wasn’t.

And then there was this, where everything was complicated, except Shane knew one thing with absolute certainty. He was never going to lose if Ilya was in his life.

He pulled back, not far, resting his forehead on Ilya’s.

“I want to celebrate,” Shane murmured. “My hot boyfriend is going to be in the fucking playoffs.”

They woke to a cellphone ringing too early.

Boston and Montreal were travelling today, Ilya to Minnesota and Shane to Dallas. They had stayed up late, not expecting to have to leave until the afternoon, so Shane tried to bury his head under his pillow.

Ilya cursed as he fumbled on the table on his side of the bed. Shane could hear him stumbling out of the bedroom, speaking Russian.

Shane cracked his eyes open long enough to take in Ilya’s glorious, naked ass as he walked away.

He had about thirty seconds of dozing before his own phone rang.

Shane frowned, squinting at the screen.

Incoming call: Farrah.

There were also a dozen text messages from his parents, Hayden, JJ and other members of his team.

His blood felt frozen as he answered the call and sat up in bed.

“Farrah?”

“Shane, I’m so sorry.”

“What happened?” He pulled the blanket up higher, needing a layer of something on it. “Is the team okay?”

“Everyone is fine,” she said soothingly. “No one is hurt or dead. I got a call from Montreal today.”

Ilya walked back into the room, joggers pulled on now and his curls a mess as he paced the room, speaking in rapid Russian.

“Farrah,” Shane was torn between getting up to what had Ilya looking like he wanted to tear the apartment apart and trying to understand what the fuck Farrah was saying. “Just tell me.”

There was a long pause, like Farrah was struggling to find the words.

“You’re being traded,” she said finally.

Shane felt like his heart was beating in his ears. The words didn’t feel real.

“To Boston.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh no!

Chapter 10: Shane/Ilya

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: My grasp of hockey drama is basic. I think maybe this is semi-realistic (at least, I think it's good enough for a fanfiction), but let's all just have a good time (so at least someone is).

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 10

Farrah explained it to him while he sat on the floor of Ilya's bedroom, head in hands and a cold towel on his neck.

Ottawa was always infamously trying to get some star power and leadership. It had become a running joke how many draft picks they'd throw at anyone willing to move to the most boring city in the league, with the worst team.

At least, it had been a joke until there had been buzz that someone was finally taking them up on the offer a couple of weeks ago

No one had suspected it had been *Boston* and that the trade would be for *Ilya Rozanov*.

"I could have seen it being possible if Boston wasn't poised to win this year," Farrah's voice came through the speaker on the phone. Shane felt Ilya's hands on his shoulders, the soothing rubbing keeping him somewhat grounded. *"And, honestly, if your name hadn't come up, I doubt this would have happened. I don't know what Rozanov did to instigate this—maybe he asked? Or maybe he stepped on someone's toes."*

"I don't think he would have asked," Shane said, his voice cracking. He coughed to clear it. "But I don't understand. Why did my name come up? I've never asked for a trade."

There was a long pause. *"I don't know, and trust me, I'm not going to let this go until I do. There was no indication that they were unhappy with you, Shane, I promise. This is completely out of the blue."*

"I gave them everything," Shane rubbed his hand over his face. "Do you think — I've been on IR for so long, but I started last night. Can they just... punish me for being injured?"

"Unfortunately, as long as they disclose to the other team your official medical status, they can trade you, even on IR. But, I'm sure the League is going to look into it."

“And what did they get for me?” Shane’s voice was bitter. Ilya kissed his shoulder, and Shane realized he was being fucking selfish. He reached back to take one of Ilya’s hands in his.

“Looks like a lot of draft picks, good draft picks. If I had to guess, Montreal decided once the Cup was out of the picture, they might as well try to bring in more young blood. Their development program has proven to be good—they’ve moved up in the ranking shockingly fast since you were drafted. This is part of their long-term rebuild plan.”

“Yes, the development program I helped make,” Shane felt anger burning in him. “Sorry, Farrah. I know this isn’t your fault.”

“I know this is a shock. I’m not afraid to let them know you’re upset. But look at it this way. You’re on a playoff team this year. It could be worse.”

Shane knew she was right. He could have been traded to Ottawa.

He turned to look at where Ilya was staring blank-faced at the wall.

“It looks like Boston isn’t picky about who their forward power is. I suspect that when they heard Montreal was looking to move you, they brought in Ottawa for this three-way trade. It’s historic, if I’m being honest. Be prepared for the media storm. I’ll work on some press notes for you.”

“I really don’t want to talk to the press.”

“You might not get a choice on this one, but I’ll try my best to field you some softballs. Once there’s a standard response they’ll get tired of you.”

“What do I need to do now? I mean, all my things are at the barn, my apartment....”

“I’ll make sure Boston takes care of it,” she sounded determined. “They want you, they have to pay for you, okay? But you need to be in Minnesota tonight for their game. They’re expecting you to start.”

Shane knew in theory that it could happen that fast. He just never expected to have to deal with it.

“What about Rozanov?”

Ilya finally blinked and looked at him.

“I suspect he’s going to get the same kind of management. He was playing yesterday, so Ottawa might want him on the ice today for their game tomorrow. But that’s not your problem. And I’ll make sure whatever statement we make decouples you from his situation, okay? There are going to be a lot of narratives going on, and we want to protect yours.”

The fans were going to *hate* him. It was like he was ousting their captain. Or maybe they would hate Ilya if they actually thought Ilya had asked to leave.

“Can you work with his team?” Shane asked. He squeezed Ilya's hand. “I want to make sure he’s protected too.”

“*Sure,*” Farrah sounded surprised, but she was ever the professional. “*I’ll reach out to them. Hopefully, they don’t want drama, but it depends on what he did. Either way, you’re my client, Shane. I’ll do what needs to be done.*”

“Thanks, Farrah.”

“*Do you need help coordinating with Boston for travel? I can get their team to—*”

“No, it won’t be a problem.”

They finished their call, and Shane hung up the phone. He and Ilya sat in a heavy silence.

Finally, Ilya broke it. “What the fuck.”

Shane nodded, closing his eyes. “What did your team say?”

Ilya shrugged, staring at the wall again. “They tell me Ottawa has wanted me for a while, and it was a good trade. Ottawa has the cap. They keep me captain, first line. Bonus. They sent me a flight too, and a hotel.”

“Are you going to go?”

Ilya looked at him incredulously. “Do I have a choice?”

Shane shook his head, feeling stupid. “No, yeah, of course.”

“If I don’t play, I don’t have a visa,” Ilya said seriously. Shane frowned at that— he hadn’t really thought about it. Of course, Ilya's situation was more precarious. If Shane decided to quit, he would head back to his parents' place. He had more than enough to retire, and he was still in good health. It would suck, but it wouldn’t be...

“You don’t want to go back to Russia?”

Ilya shook his head. “I told you about my brother, my father. I don’t want to go and... deal with them.”

“Maybe...” Shane tried to think of something to say. “Maybe this isn’t so bad. Ottawa is... I mean...”

Ilya snorted. “Ah, yes. Is what I always wanted.”

“At least we won’t be too far apart,” Shane leaned back on the bed. “Same as Montreal and Boston, basically.”

“Basically,” Ilya echoed, his voice tight.

When Shane reached for him again, Ilya pulled away and stood up. “I should read my email. My agent said Ottawa sent the contract.”

“Ilya—”

“I’m fine,” he said, looking down at Shane, and his expression softened. “I am... shocked. But I will be okay.”

Shane nodded and let him leave.

This was the fucking risk he had taken, signing on to this kind of life. He had poured his life into Montreal since he had been a kid. His mother and grandparents had taken him to games, falling in love with the roar of the crowd, the fervor of the fans. He lived and breathed the Voyageurs, and he had naively thought that the loyalty went both ways.

When he had signed his contract after his rookie year, they’d offered a non-trade clause and he had turned it down, because he had been so confident and blind in his devotion. He had thought it had meant something, proving that he trusted the team to always do right by him.

God. How fucking naive had he been?

He should feel lucky. It wasn’t everyday someone got traded to a Cup contender team out of the blue, but it didn’t feel like a gift. It felt like cheating.

His stomach rolled with anger, dread and fear all at once, until he didn’t know what the fuck to feel. He could already imagine the headlines Farrah had warned him about – a traitor, who wimped out on the Olympics and jumped ship as soon as Montreal started to sink..

And the worst thing wasn’t feeling like Montreal betrayed it. It was that Boston had thrown Ilya away.

He stood and went into the living area where Ilya had pulled out a laptop and was scrolling through a document with a blank expression.

“Ilya?”

He looked up, his eyes flat. “Yes, *malysh*?”

“Are you okay?”

Ilya looked back at the screen. “Yes. Maybe.”

Shane sat next to him on the couch, facing him, and gently closed the laptop. Ilya let him, and Shane hated how compliant Ilya was.

“We’re going to get through this,” Shane said. “Okay.”

Ilya shrugged a shoulder, and Shane could see the facade crack, just a little. He pulled Ilya into a tight hug, a fierce protective surge coming out of him. Ilya sighed and sagged, like he had been waiting for something to lean on.

“You’re going to go to Ottawa,” Shane said, burying his face in Ilya’s wild bedhead. “My parents are going to help you find a place. And you’re going to be a fucking superstar, okay? Boston sucked before you got there, and now look at them. They owe you everything, and they’re going to regret it when you face them down in the playoffs one day.”

There was a long stretch of time where Ilya just let Shane hold him. Then, quietly, he said, “*Ya tebya ne dostoin.*”

“They’re idiots for letting you go,” Shane said, muffled against his hair. Ilya gave a dry laugh, but it didn’t reach his face.

“*Chto sdelano — to sdelano*,” Ilya said with finality. “What is done, is done.” He pulled back and looked at Shane, his eyes only a little red. “You will stay here, yes?”

“Well, for now,” Shane said, confused.

Ilya shook his head. “This is the best place. Close to the airport, close to the rink. Good security.”

“Ilya, I can’t put your address down as my address,” Shane said, trying to rub away the tension between Ilya’s brows, trying to erase it with his thumb. “Boston will get me a hotel and then, maybe—”

“Yes, but you will stay here for real, right?” Ilya cut in, his voice tightening. “Please?”

“Well, I’ll be going to Minnesota tonight,” Shane said, and Ilya rolled his eyes. Shane quickly backtracked. “But I’ll come back here, if it makes you feel better.”

“Yes,” Ilya exhaled, his shoulders relaxing a fraction. “It makes me feel better,” he admitted, quieter. “Knowing you are somewhere... safe.”

Shane felt like smacking himself and the too-familiar twist of guilt. He had been thinking about the trade, the Cup, the media and the shitshow that was going to erupt from it; his own anger and fear. He forgot for a second that everything was always going to be fucking tainted by that day, and what had happened to him. To them.

“I can show you the tracking app,” Shane offered. “The one my parents use, so they can see where I am.”

The relief on Ilya’s face was immediate, and Shane felt even stupider for not offering it sooner. “It is, um, what is the word – *shifrovaniye*,” Ilya pulled up the translation. “Encryption.”

Shane nodded. “Yes, of course. My dad says this is the one diplomats use, so it’s pretty high end.”

They set the app up on Ilya’s phone, then spent the next hour in a whirlwind, packing and answering texts that came in too fast to keep up from their respective agents and team representatives.

The Bears had been confused that Shane was already in Boston but had adapted quickly. He could catch the team's flight in an hour. Ilya had slightly more time, though Ottawa had been eager for him to get in that evening.

He tried to pretend it was a normal game day, albeit he would never run this late. Montreal was shipping his gear to Minnesota, and Boston assured him everything else was in order: all they needed was him. He hadn't brought a suit with him, and he and Ilya were too different to share clothes easily. The rep reassured him he wouldn't be fined this time, so Shane did his best to cobble together a business casual outfit.

"You look fine," Ilya said as Shane cursed for the fifth time at his reflection in the mirror.

"This is my first impression," Shane pulled the wrinkled sweater over his head and tossed it in the corner. He took the polo Ilya offered him. It was tight on Ilya but on Shane it fit slightly loose. "I'm going to look like I don't care."

"You will be fine, *malysh*." Shane knew Ilya was trying to help so he stopped himself from snapping. "LeClaire is serious but not unreasonable man. The team will only care that you are Shane Hollander."

"Fuck." Shane tried not to think about that. He knew how his teammates talked about Ilya, as if he were a cheating pest who deserved every penalty or check. Only an unsportsmanlike fine kept them from doing things like decorating the locker room floor with an 81 jersey or putting his picture in the centre of their dartboard. "They're going to fucking mutiny."

Shane pulled the polo off, and put his head in his hands. He had ten seconds to freak out, then he had to go.

Ilya stood in front of him and rubbed his shoulders. Shane calmed slightly "No, sweetheart. They will be shocked, but they are smart. They want the best, and if not me, you are a good second choice."

"Fuck you," Shane glared, but it worked. He straightened up and grabbed the last shirt in the pile. "Fine, okay. We can do this."

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Maybe not that one."

Shane glanced down at the Voyageurs crewneck and groaned.

Once Shane was out of the door, Ilya watched on the tracking app as he got into the cab and started towards the airport.

Then, he sat on the floor, numb.

“It’s a good deal,” his agent, Nate Shevchenko had told him that morning. “Things are not great around you right now, Ilya. I’ve been hearing things. And Ottawa is what you want right now, out of the spotlight.”

“What do you mean?” Ilya had asked, pulling on clothes. “What is everyone saying about me?”

“The Olympics are still a sore subject,” Nate had sighed. “And the Bears have been complaining lately. Whatever you got tangled in last month made some ripples. You really haven’t made my job easy.”

Ilya’s father had originally signed him with a larger Russian agency when Ilya had been eighteen, but after his rookie contract ended, he had quietly switched to Nate, a smaller agent based out of LA that a few of the lower-profile Russian players in the States used. Nate had surprisingly been reluctant to sign Ilya, a big star, and had warned him that Nate didn’t have the pull or capacity most big NHL stars needed. Ilya had still insisted – he hadn’t been here for the money, and at the time he was doing everything to get out from under Morozov and his father’s thumb. Even a small bit of control over his life had felt like a victory.

“Just tell me what they said.”

“It’s a good deal. Ottawa will take your contract, Boston will take Hollanders, and Montreal gets a bunch of good draft picks. And, like I said, outside of the rink, there has been... talk.”

Ilya didn’t want to know what that meant. “Can we meet?”

“Yes, I’ll fly up to Ottawa tonight to help with the transition,” Nate sighed heavily. “Flying to Ottawa in February. I knew taking you on was a bad idea.”

Now Ilya sat on the floor of his penthouse, trying not to regret his life choices. Maybe if he had just given in, given Morozov some control, he wouldn’t be here.

His phone buzzed with the flight confirmation, and he peeled himself off the floor. He drove to the airport, leaving his Mercedes in long-term parking. He left it unlocked, hiding the keys and texting Shane the instructions on how to find them.

Because Ilya wasn’t going to a game, he didn’t care about dressing in a suit, instead opting for something low-profile. With the trade announcement going out this morning, he didn’t want to draw attention to himself. He wasn’t sure how successful he was, but at least no one stopped him and the flight itself was uneventful.

Like the last flight he had taken, he used his time wisely: flattering the flight attendants so they didn’t ask questions about how many shots they were serving him. By the time he landed, he didn’t feel less numb, but he felt more capable of dealing with it.

There was a very excited Centaur’s rep at the airport waiting for him.

“Mr. Rozanov, my name is Sam Nguyen,” she stood at about his shoulder, dressed in a very professional suit. She stuck out her hand. “Director of Team Operations. I can’t begin to tell

you how excited we are to have you here.”

Ilya looked at her for a second, frozen at her overt friendliness. He took her hand slowly, letting himself smile slightly. “Yes.”

He didn’t mean to be rude, but he had no idea why this tiny woman looked like she was about to burst.

“We’ve got a hotel booked near the rink, nice place,” she reached for his bags and Ilya was too startled to stop her as she shouldered one of his heavy duffles.

“Uh,” he tried to take it from her, but just ended up following her brisk pace, pulling his wheeled suitcase behind them. “I can carry it.”

“No, it’s totally fine,” she said, her voice strained. “The car is right out front.”

Sure enough, a dark SUV was parked by the doors that she steered them to. It was frigid in Ottawa, even compared to Boston, but Ilya didn’t flinch. He did manage to help her shoulder his bags into the trunk. She ran to open his door, nearly slipping on the ice.

The driver turned to greet him as Sam jogged to the other side of the car. Once they were on the road, Sam pulled out a folder with a schedule. “So, we’re hoping you can meet with the management team right now before it gets too late, then morning skate with the team. We have a home game against Tampa tomorrow, which we would love for you to join, but if you’re still getting your legs, then we have our last road trip to Vancouver, Winnipeg, Calgary – a good way to get to know the Canadian teams,” she chuckled and took a breath.

Ilya stared at her for a moment. “Okay.”

“I mean, you don’t have to decide now. Obviously, you know where we are in the standings, so there’s not much pressure this season. We just want to make sure you’re comfortable and get used to the city. There’s a lot of big changes, for you and the team, so we anticipate a bit of a rough patch. So, are you okay to meet the management team now, or would you like to rest at the hotel first?”

He caught about every third word, but he was pretty sure he got the gist. “Management is okay.”

“Great,” she chirped. “We’ve catered a late lunch, I hope you’re good with burgers. I didn’t see any allergies or intolerances from the medical records, but if you have any preferences, you can let me know and I’ll make sure to note it in your records. Uh, I noticed you didn’t bring much, so I’m happy to take you shopping or show you some places you can go to get anything you might be missing. We can help you work with a moving company once we’ve found you a place. I heard you have a fairly extensive car collection – if you want to import them I can find an import company that could help us with –”

Ilya just let her talk for the rest of the car ride, adding his contributions of “okay”, “yes”, “no”, and “I don’t know”.

If she smelled the alcohol on him she didn't comment.

He hadn't expected to see the Canadian Tire Centre again this soon. He tried not to think about the last time, sitting with Shane in the back of Shane's parents' car. He had felt ready to fall about then, and then Shane had held him together.

As the winter landscape passed by, he checked the tracking app. Shane's marker was just leaving the airport in Minneapolis. He wondered who he had sat next to.

He had texted Marleau in between helping Shane pack and pick an outfit.

Marleau: This is fucking bullshit.

Marleau: Did Hollander catch the GM cheating on his wife or something?

Ilya: no

Ilya: he is probably shocked too

Ilya: he is Mr Montreal. Trading him is bullshit

Marleau: Well, you're fucking Prince of Boston, Roz

That had made Ilya smile faintly. Boston loved him – but not like Montreal loved Shane.

Ilya: doesn't matter why. It is done

Ilya: the important thing is the Cup. And you need Hollander if not me

Marleau: it's your fucking Cup

Ilya: no, it is our Cup. And now Hollander is part of the team.

Ilya: don't fuck it up because you are jealous

Ilya: we fuck up the other team, not our teammates

Marleau: fuck

Marleau: fine

Marleau: but all bets are off if he comes in like he owns the place

Ilya had tried to think of Shane in the Bear's locker room on his first day. He would probably be awkward as hell on the plane, trying to be the polite good Canadian boy. He'd try to say something but be too blunt, or make a joke that no one understood. Then, he would stand there stiff and silent and everyone would interpret it as attitude, because no one ever assumed Shane was nervous.

His stomach had turned thinking about it.

Marleau: but all bets are off if he comes in like he owns the place

Ilya stared at the words until they had been blurry. Shane wasn't a prima donna, but he was proud, and stubborn, and the kind of person who would rather swallow his own tongue than admit he was uncomfortable.

Shane had been freaking out over what to wear for fuck's sake.

Ilya had taken a few moments to answer.

Ilya: Hollander isn't like that

Ilya: He is

He deleted the text. It wasn't Marleau's fault that he didn't know Shane. Fuck, Ilya had no idea why he was so confident *he* knew Shane. They had hooked up, sure, but this last week had solidified for Ilya that he didn't need to know the details; he wanted a lifetime to learn the details.

But now he knew the important things. How Shane looked when he slept. How he kissed Ilya's forehead when he thought Ilya was sad. How he made a fucking reward chart for their feelings, and terrible *syrniki*. How he got nervous when he thought he was disappointing someone. How he loved so earnestly without needing a reason why.

None of them knew him. None of them knew what it took for Shane to keep himself together on a normal day, never mind after being ripped out of Montreal and thrown into a new city like a piece of luggage.

He wasn't angry at Marleau, but he was angry at something.

Ilya finally sent:

Ilya: he is not diva

Ilya: he is just awkward

Ilya: do not be asshole to him

The reply had come fast.

Marleau: Funny. What, is he your boyfriend or something?

He had known Marleau didn't mean anything by it. It was just something that was said in locker rooms, and he had almost typed something he regretted. Instead, he had taken a breath and answered with his head.

Ilya: he is a good player and you need him if you don't have me

Ilya: unless you become superstar overnight

Marleau: fine, I'll play nice

Marleau: but if we win, this victory is yours too

Now, sitting in the back of the SUV with Sam Nguyen talking about different neighbourhoods, he sent another text.

Ilya: watch out for him

Ilya: please

There was a long few minutes before he saw the three dots.

Price: sure

The Canadian Tire Centre wasn't any more glamorous in the home team rooms. The driver would take his bags to the hotel, so Sam guided him through the arena with seemingly even more energy than before. She seemed to know everyone by name, and they all wanted to stop and greet him.

It was bizarre and on any other day he would have preened at the attention, but he was tired, heartbroken and drunk, so he wasn't sure he was making a good impression.

Sam steered him toward the offices. "We've asked the media not to wait around today," she said. "No promises, but, you know, we tried."

Ilya nodded. "Okay."

The elevator ride was quiet. Sam shifted her folder against her chest and glanced at him.

"You doing okay?" she asked, looking at him with a furrowed brow.

Ilya stared at the numbers above the door as they climbed, thinking about Shane in a cab, Shane in an airport, Shane going somewhere else because of him.

"Yes," he said.

The meeting room was bright and filled with what seemed like the entire management team and a few of the players. Ilya managed to plaster a more pleasant look on his face as he went around, greeting and shaking hands. The names were all a blur, so he hoped they were all in Sam's folder.

There were a few who stood out. Mike Donovan, the head coach, gave Ilya a quick nod and a half-smile, like he was tolerating the theatrics but not impressed. Victor Lomax, one of the alternate captains, was a slow and lumbering veteran in his mid-thirties with greying brown hair on his temple and beard. He shook Ilya's hand a bit too long, but seemed more interested in the catered lunch. Ilya had skated circles around him before, and he remembered calling him an elephant on broken skates once. Out of everyone, Zane Boodram, the rookie, stood out the most. Bood, as he was called, seemed to carry the room despite being the youngest, with a few tattoos on his arms, with a laugh that was inescapable.

Bood sought him out, grinning, and shook his hand like they were already old friends.

“Welcome to the team,” Bood said, voice warm. “I can’t say I thought I would ever be on the same team as Ilya Rozanov.”

Ilya couldn’t help but smile a little. “Is that good or bad?”

“Good, I hope!” Bood laughed.

Ilya studied him for a moment, half-expecting a hidden jab about Boston. Ilya certainly would have, if the situation was reversed. But there wasn’t one, and Ilya was surprised to realize that the Centaur’s team wasn’t sizing him up. They were... welcoming him.

That made Ilya uneasy in a different way.

After, they showed him the locker room, his stall which already had a makeshift nameplate and some equipment tailored to his preferences. Dale, the equipment manager, told him his stuff from Boston was being overnighted and would be ready for morning skate.

He got a tour of the stadium which was undergoing remodeling, so they had to walk about draped construction zones. Bood came with them this time, chatting with Sam in Ilya’s silence. It was clear someone was putting a lot of work in this place, and if Ilya wasn’t so tired, he would have been more impressed.

As they kept showing him the new yoga room, he struggled to keep the polite nodding. He could feel his English slipping the more tired he got, the words blurring together until he was only catching the important parts. He shouldn’t have had so much to drink.

Bood gave him a side look, and Ilya was grateful when he mentioned to Sam, who had not slowed down since she had picked him up, that it was getting late. She finally seemed to notice the time, and wrapped up the tour.

She drove him down the street to the hotel, which was nice but boring. His bags were already in the room, and Sam spent ten minutes outlining the schedule, nearby restaurants, and not one, but three folders containing everything he might need. When he finally shut the door, cutting off her cheerful goodbye, he was ready to collapse.

He made it to the bed and laid down, his face in the starched pillow, and let out a groan.

What a fucking day.

He pulled out his phone and checked the tracking app. Shane was at Xcel Energy Centre, and he turned on the TV.

There was a sudden wave of jealousy as he tuned in, ten minutes into the first period.

Boston was up two goal already.

“-- and of course, the biggest news of the night is number 24, Hollander, playing for the first time on a team that has infamously been enemy number one for the former Voyageur.

However; it seems like the only thing Hollander hated was former captain, Ilya Rozanov, because he has already had two assists –”

Ilya grabbed some bottles from the mini fridge and settled on the bed.

“-- Nomads give up the puck on a stumble –”

“-- St Vincent winning the face-off –”

“-- Hollander with a breakaway and, yes! Score! A classic side fake for the newest Bear, a signature move Boston is probably ecstatic to be on the other side of!”

Ilya's chest tightened as they showed the replay. It was beautiful, the kind of move that infuriated Ilya as much as it made him hot. And now, there was a moment of relief when he saw Shane's wide grin, the way he celebrated with Marleau and Bergy, swept up in the team's victory hug. It seems his worries about Shane fitting in were premature.

He clutched an empty minibottle as Shane flew by the bench, fist bumping his teammates as it didn't seem to matter to the Nomads that the opposite team scored – they were all excited for Hollander's first goal on his new team.

The relief simmered away, leaving a hollow ache. It hurt as much as it reassured him, knowing that Shane was going to be okay. It didn't make watching the team without him any easier.

He downed another bottle, not even tasting it. The mix of pride and pain sat heavy in his chest. Shane was okay. By all accounts, Ilya was going to be fine. That should be enough.

He turned off the game and finished the mini bottles until the room spun and he could finally sleep.

Chapter End Notes

For real, they were just going to switch teams for Ultimate Angst, but then I had a shower thought and here we are.

Chapter 11: Ilya/Shane

Chapter Notes

Did my dnd session get cancelled today? yes. Did you (and me) all benefit from the extra time? Also yes.

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

Ilya met with Nate for breakfast at the hotel. His manager had gotten in late enough last night that he had just gotten a room instead of waking Ilya. Nate Shevchenko was somewhere in his fifties, a balding, second-generation American who complained a lot for the amount of money Ilya was paying him. His Russian was blunt and not perfect because he had been raised on the West Coast, so their conversations were usually mixed with English and strange Russian phrases. Ilya preferred it a little muddled because it made it harder for Nate to lie.

“Okay, so,” Nate rubbed his hands together as he opened the contract between their plates. Today, he was making a big effort in Russian. “The Centaurs really wanted you, so honestly, it’s a good deal, like I said. Moving allowance. Captaincy, because, you know, they’ve only had alternates. That was an easy one.”

Ilya looked at the documents carefully. He had a bit of a headache, but the coffee was enough to banish it. Everything did look normal, though he didn’t trust his language skills for something like this. He had to trust Nate’s judgement.

He passed them back to Nate who was digging into his breakfast enthusiastically.

“You said that there had been some ‘talk’,” Ilya leaned back, crossing his arms. “What did you mean by that? You couldn’t do it over email?”

Nate finished up his bite, casually wiping his face with a napkin before he spoke again. “Yes. Well, you know how it is.”

Ilya did not know how it was, but he wouldn’t be surprised. There were reasons his brother had sent the information about his Russian contacts in the way that he did: it felt there were always new forms of technology, the wildest things that belonged in science fiction, just popping up in everyday life. Ilya wasn’t sure how much he bought into things like phone tapping and email monitoring, but Nate seemed too paranoid to just ignore it.

Ilya sighed. “Tell me. What’s going on?”

“Your old buddy Morozov is a pain,” Nate sighed. “He’s always trying to dig dirt up on you, more than just the girls and bars, which, for the record, I don’t think you’ll find the same variety here in Ottawa. But you keep a pretty clean record.”

Ilya nodded. It was purposeful. He liked danger and the adrenaline, which had led to more risky behaviour in his youth. But he wasn't dumb. He followed the laws in America: no illegal drugs, no gambling, no fights off the ice. He never had any desire to sleep with someone who was not sober, consenting and enthusiastic, or abuse his power and reputation as a professional hockey player to get sex. All his cars and high end purchases were through professional dealers. He even properly declared all the cash he was sending home on his taxes.

The riskiest thing he had done was, well, Shane. And it wasn't illegal to sleep with a man in America. If they were found out he wouldn't be automatically deported. It wasn't to say it wasn't dangerous, but if things came out, he could do damage control.

In theory, anyway.

Nate continued. "It was about a week ago, I think, that he started poking around with some groups in Boston. Dating groups, for Russians. Not always the most ethical ones. Apparently he got a bit loud in a bar complaining about you and your little mini vacation in Montreal in January."

That made Ilya stiffen. Nate had stepped in to smooth things over with the team when Ilya had overstayed in Canada. Ilya hadn't told him the real reason, just that a friend was in the hospital. Nate didn't ask any more questions and had convinced the Bears to walk back a suspension. Ilya remembered yelling at Nate over the phone at the CHUM hospital in Montreal, which wasn't a proud moment for him. But if Nate had taken it personally, he had never said.

"My father has this idea that getting married will settle me down," Ilya said stonily. "He'll forget it in a bit, but it's... inconvenient that he brought in Morozov. For the record, I'm not interested in marrying whatever Russian girl he's trying to find."

"Inconvenient is an understatement," Nate snorted. He casually glanced around the mostly empty hotel. There were only two other people at the breakfast bar and they were absorbed in their phones across the room, and the bored chef at the omelet station. "But I mean, yeah. I assumed it wasn't your idea. After all," he lowered his voice. "I know your taste runs a bit more... Canadian."

A bolt of fear raced through him. Ilya had to stop himself from grabbing Nate's collar and demanding to know what the hell he was talking about – what the hell he knew. His face must have given him away, because Nate rolled his eyes.

"Calm down. No one is listening. Unless the omelet guy is a spy."

"You don't know what you think you know," Ilya said darkly.

"If what I think I know is that you play for more than one team, and specifically you play ball with a certain hockey legend who scored two goals and an assist with your old team last night, then I think I know correctly."

"How did you find out about—"

“I suspected,” Nate cut him off before he could say Shane’s name, which even someone not able to understand Russian would pick up. “I’ve gotten pretty good at figuring some things out. I’ve represented a lot of Russians, not just hockey. Most of them are coming to America for one reason or another. I knew he was at that hospital at the same time your ‘friend’ was too. And, I mean, I grew up down the street from West Hollywood. At that point you just put the pieces together.”

“Have you—”

“I’ve told no one,” Nate said. “I’ve got no interest in outing someone, and even less losing a client with a paycheque as big as yours,” he said then sighed. “I’ve got a few emergency plans in case something comes out unexpectedly, but we can talk about them later.”

Ilya sat back in his chair feeling lightheaded. “And Morozov doesn’t suspect.”

“Not a clue,” Nate snorted. “That guy’s a moron. He’s on the end of a lot of puppet strings and he doesn’t even know it. When he dropped your name and Montreal and the timeline though, it tugged on one of those strings. I assume you know the name Medvedev?”

Ilya leaned forward to shush him, but Nate just raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t worry, he’s not interested in you. From what I hear, he’s kind of impressed. The Montreal guys screwed up his plan and you embarrassed the hell out of them.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel reassured?” Ilya felt his palms sweat.

“Well, it means you’ve only got one group angry with you and the other on your side. I don’t have so much of a read on the Montrealers, but it’s always good for the Russians to owe you one.”

“I don’t want any favours owed to me!” Ilya’s voice was too harsh and one of the people glanced up at them in concern. Ilya took a deep breath. “Why haven’t you told me any of this sooner? I’m right in Montreal’s backyard.”

Nate gave him an incredulous look. “How about, thanks, Nate, for figuring this all out in just a few days? Wow, Nate, you’re really putting yourself out there for me, gathering intel on two *different* mafia groups without even the mention of a bonus.” He rubbed his eyes. “Look, the other thing I heard, and this is all gossip, is that the Montrealers had their hands in the trade.”

“*What?*”

Nate threw up his hands. “You didn’t hear it from me! But once your boy was playing again and Morozov let out that he was getting the Bears’ GM to look at trading you next season, some things changed hands, some decisions were made – a rush job, in my opinion, if it’s true. They would have had a much better time snatching you if it had been a straight trade to Montreal.”

Ilya had spent the last twenty-four hours thinking the trade to Ottawa was the worst thing that could happen in his career. He hadn't stopped to think Ottawa was the better choice. He ran his hands over his face, the scratch of his stubble grounding him.

"What do I do?"

"Same thing you always do," Nate said firmly. "Keep your nose clean. Play good hockey. Sneak around with your Canadian friend. And don't go into any dark alleys."

"That doesn't seem like enough."

"It's enough for now. The Montreal gang would be crazy to try and mess with you, especially here. There's too much media from the trade, they'd have to work with a lot of their own rivals to even set foot in Ottawa, and no one wants to go against the Russian, especially right now."

It irritated Ilya that Nate didn't seem more worked up over this. "I want to be traded as far away from Montreal as possible now."

"You'll be a free agent in four years," Nate pointed out. "But Ottawa was ecstatic to acquire you. They're going to be tough to convince to move you."

"You say I have a reputation. Maybe I make them want to trade me."

"Sure," Nate said slowly. "If you want to tank your career. You've already got a few strikes against you, so you'd need a team more desperate than Ottawa to take you. If not, they could find you in non-compliance with your contract, and with your salary, they'd be motivated to try and fire you outright. And with citizenship as goal, you've got at least four years—"

"Wait, I thought, the EB-1 visa—"

"It's different in Canada," Nate continued. "Faster, way simpler, but the clock restarts. The Centaurs will for sure be on board for trying to fast track your PR. Then, it's just fulfilling the in-country residency requirement and you could do citizenship by 2018. Coincidentally, at the same time you become a free agent."

Ilya's headache was returning, and he rubbed his temples. Fuck. He just wanted to—

He just wanted to go home, and he wasn't sure where that was. The most at home he had felt was the past week, with Shane, locked in the penthouse like a little contained ecosystem.

Why was it so hard to just have that?

"Ilya," Nate's voice was slightly softer, and Ilya opened his eyes, hardening his expression. "I really think you're fine here, for now. We'll work on citizenship. And I'll keep an ear to the ground about the Montreal group. Believe it or not, this isn't the worst situation I've seen."

"Really?" Ilya raised an eyebrow.

“Get me drunk and ask about the Minnesota case in the 80s,” Nate wrinkled his nose. “Now say, thank you Nate for solving all my problems, and get to practice.”

When Ilya went to the rink for morning skate, he felt his body was on one track and his mind was on another.

Sam was there to greet him and show him around, and Bood and Lomax were his unofficial guides during practice. It was odd being in a Centaurs practice jersey, but Ilya was too distracted to care about it.

There was a camera crew hovering on the ice taking footage and one of the interns asked him some questions about how he felt about the move and Ottawa. Ilya gave some answers, but he couldn't remember most of them. Hopefully something sounded funny.

Practice was terrible. Donovan was barely on the ice and the assistant coaches, as much as they were trying, only focused on their own groups. In Boston, LeClaire had always been out there, almost invisible until he swooped in to tie things together. It was easy to see that being last place for so long had worn these guys out, many of them close to retirement.

It was annoying, and Ilya found himself snapping out of his funk only when Lomax softballed a pass to a defenseman who let it die between his skates.

He stared down the defenseman until the guy glowered back.

“Are you tired?” Ilya asked, loud enough that the nearest guys turned their heads.

“What?” the defenseman, Mallory, seemed taken back.

“I asked if you were tired,” Ilya spoke slowly as if he were explaining it to a child. “Because you skate like my ninety-year-old *babushka*.”

There were a few chuckles as the back of Mallory's neck turned red. Bood slid to a stop near Ilya and muttered, “Roz—”

“No,” Ilya cut him off, his chest feeling hot. “Try it again,” he told Lomax. Lomax glanced between the two, and passed another puck to Mallory. This time, he moved faster, but it was still half a stride behind and was dumped into the corner.

“Again,” he called to Lomax as he moved, taking up more space as more guys started to sneak glances over.

Mallory moved faster this time, but it was still sluggish, as if he were testing Ilya to call him out.

Ilya chased him down. He wasn't even trying to be an asshole, but it was like taking candy from a baby. He got his stick under Mallory's and popped the puck out. He went hard at the net, whipping it to the back before the goalie even braced himself.

His heart was pumping, but from the anger or speed, he wasn't sure.

Everyone on the rink had slowed down now.

“You play like that all the time?” Ilya turned to where Mallory was glaring at him. “No wonder Ottawa always felt like vacation.”

“It’s fucking practice,” Mallory bit out.

He thought of Boston where practices were brutal even when they were winning, even though they were securely in a playoff spot. It wasn’t even about winning, at the end of the day. It was about driving yourself higher until you scratched that itch of *what if*. And, at this level, they were the fucking measuring bar, constantly move who was the ‘best’ further and further up the mountain.

Ilya suddenly missed Shane so much his breath hitched. Fuck.

“It is not *just* fucking practice.”

Mallory scoffed, and Ilya felt something in him snap.

“You think because your team is so bad you can, what, take a fucking nap?” Ilya spat at the guy’s feet. “You think losing is an excuse to be lazy? I don’t know if you lose because you have no talent or because you just don’t give a shit. You should be fucking embarrassed. Every pass, every second on the ice is a fight, and if you can’t handle that, don’t waste my fucking time.”

“That’s enough, Rozanov,” Lomax finally cut in, getting between Ilya and Mallory who had been starting to circle each other. “It’s your first day, don’t go making too many friends.”

“He’s right, though.” Ilya turned, surprised, to where Bood was watching, his mouth a hard line. “We are playing like we don’t care.”

“There’s no point in ending the season injured,” Lomax frowned. “We’ll regroup in training.”

Ilya shook his head. “No, there is a point. People pay to sit in those fucking seats. How many kids wear your number? They don’t cheer for a win, they cheer for your heart. You skate like that, you might as well spit in their faces.”

Mallory shifted uncomfortably, and the ice had gone dead silent. Donovan was still behind the bench, watching a little stunned.

Ilya glanced between Lomax, Bood and Mallory, not bothering to hide his disgust.

“Roz...” Lomax tried again, but Ilya cut him off.

“No, I’m fucking serious,” Ilya snapped, and raised his voice to carry across the ice. “I don’t care if it is practice — you are wearing something people care about. You earn their respect or you are not playing hockey, you are just moving around on skates and getting paid too much money.”

It was a long stretch of silence before Mallory finally broke it.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Rozanov, *fine*. Lommie, pass me the puck.”

This drill went better. Mallory had height and weight on Ilya, so it took Ilya getting Mallory on the boards before Mallory shot it between Ilya’s blades back to Lomax who carried it to the net.

There was a hum on the ice as they went back to their practices, and Ilya took a moment to grab his water and cool off, trying to stop his hands from shaking. Bood slid next to him, a grin tugging on his face.

“Man,” the kid looked at him with shining brown eyes. “You’re fucking trouble, Roz.”

“Only the good kind,” Ilya winked. Four years with this fucking team. He supposed he could pass the time by raising his own rookie. “Come, show me what you’ve got.”

He had gone back to the hotel between morning skate and the game to shower, sleep off the remains of his hangover, and obsessively watch Shane on the tracking app. There were a few emails and messages that he either ignored or just answered quickly to keep Shane and his old teammates from worrying.

When Ilya stepped onto the ice for the warm-up before the game, he still felt trepidation. The guys were too quiet in the locker room, tiptoeing around him in a way that made him want to shout. His gear had arrived, so at least that was familiar, though the Centaurs home jersey felt too new.

He was not going to get a fucking tattoo for this logo.

He was glad to see the tension in the room translated to energy in the rink. He knew it was going to take a while to settle into the new routine, but only Bood was brave enough to pass him pucks.

Early fans were already gathering by the glass, waving posters and making noise. Ilya was used to the antics of Boston kids, who had no trouble demanding attention, clambering over each other for a spot on the boards, and making outlandish signs to try and attract their favourite player’s attention. Ilya was usually all for it, learning family friendly chirps early on, though Boston parents didn’t really seem to count swearing as inappropriate.

These kids were so calm in comparison, and there were so few of them. He watched as the favourites, Lomax and Hendricks, a short Ottawa-born winger who Ilya had learned owned a burger joint downtown, spent most of practice doing flybys and tossing pucks for candy. Several of the guys had families, and Ilya watched them making faces to their kids instead of concentrating.

He had already done one harsh blow out today, and he was more worried about looking like an asshole to the fans than the team, so he quietly ignored it. He focused on his routine, trying to center himself, until a couple standing alone and off to the side caught his attention.

Yuna and David Hollander waved when Ilya noticed them, and he tripped, falling flat on his backside.

Mallory skidded to a stop and helped him up. “Oh, did we forget to tell you that ice is slippery?” he said and Ilya would have flipped him off if he didn’t have the gloves on.

“Fuck off.”

He slowly skated over to them, his ass smarting from the fall, and glancing around nervously even though nobody was watching.

“Ilya!” Shane’s mother seemed excited to see him, and Shane’s father was beaming. “How are you settling in? Do you need anything?”

“Mrs. Hollander,” Ilya said, feeling awkward. “Uh, what are you... doing here?”

“We came to see you!” Mr. Hollander said with a smile. “It’s your first game as a Centaur.”

“We wanted you to feel supported,” Mrs. Hollander added.

“Did Shane ask you—”

“Oh, God no,” Mrs. Hollander laughed. “He’d be so embarrassed. No, we were just worried about you.”

Ilya felt like he had tripped again.

“I’m not sure we should be talking,” Ilya glanced around again, looking for the media or other fans, but the arena was still empty. “We can’t— in public—”

“Of course!” Mrs. Hollander nodded. “Don’t worry, we thought of that. We’re here with a group from work – mostly Boston fans who wanted to see you play. Totally neutral.”

“We always get invited to hockey stuff,” Mr. Hollander added. “Yuna is better than any broadcaster, and Shane can usually get us free hats.”

Was that something Ilya was supposed to do? Maybe Sam could help with it.

Ilya forced a crooked smile, trying to seem calm. “Uh... thank you for coming. I, uh... didn’t expect—” He cleared his throat. “It is nice to see you.”

“We don’t want to distract you,” Mr. Hollander smiled. “Just pretend we aren’t here, okay? We can catch up another day.”

“You call us, though, if you need anything,” Mrs. Hollander said. “I have some thoughts on apartments.”

The game went... terribly.

Ilya couldn't say he was surprised.

If it were Boston and they walked away from a 7-1 loss, someone would be having a temper tantrum in the locker room. Today, that someone was him. He slammed his gloves down, cursing under his breath as he shoved his helmet onto the bench. He stripped down to his shorts, overheated in his frustration and dripped in sweat from the exertion.

It wasn't hard to assign blame: sloppy turnovers in the defensive zone, missed passes that should have been muscle memory, and only 16 shots on net the whole fucking game, half of them his and the other half rebounds. By the second period, he had just been in damage control mode, trying not to let the fans see his anger at the dumpster fire in front of them.

Their only goal had been an accidental kick-in by Tampa's rookie during third period – fucking embarrassing. He could practically hear the headlines writing themselves.

No one would meet his eye as he sat on the bench, elbows on his knees.

Lomax slumped next to him, silent for a moment. "Look," he said carefully. "Nobody expected to win today."

Ilya glared at him. "I was chasing pucks that should have been covered," he glared at Mallory, who avoided his gaze. "And passing to a guy who can't fucking move his feet," he directed that at Lomax.

Bood leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching quietly. "You're—uh—you're really mad."

"Yes," Ilya said, letting out a bitter laugh. "People deserve better than this *garbage*."

I deserve better than this garbage.

He rubbed his eyes in frustration, trying to shove down the hollowness in his stomach. It wasn't just frustration or anger. It was something heavier, emptier, something that had nothing to do with Tampa, or the scoreboard or the team. Usually, when he felt like this, he could drown it in hockey, or in sex, or both. But now it was hockey dragging him down, and the only person he wanted to have sex with was in Las Vegas, at a club the Bears frequented if the app was accurate.

If he was being honest, he didn't even need the sex. He just wanted Shane. His fingers hovered over the messaging app, but closed it. It was too hard to explain, and he didn't want to add to what Shane was probably going through.

But he didn't know how to fucking fix himself alone anymore.

Bood cleared his throat. "Uh... look. A bunch of us are heading to Monks. You should come, drown your sorrows. Try some of the local brew."

Ilya let out another hollow laugh. "Yes, drowning in beer sounds good."

The Plunge was loud and hot. It obviously wasn't Shane's first time in Las Vegas, but JJ tended to pick places that were more like lounges than night clubs when Shane opted to go out. They weren't playing until tomorrow, so the majority of the team was here, dancing. He nursed a rye and ginger between Marleau and Price, scrunched up in one of the few booths.

Yesterday against the Nomads in Minnesota had gone... well. Surprisingly well.

The media had been a nightmare, of course. It didn't help that they kept fucking bringing up his quote from his last game with Montreal.

"You said: 'The Cup is always the goal. Whatever it takes, I'll be where I need to be to get there.' Were you already in talks with Boston then?"

Shane cringed and pushed the memory away. He took another sip and focused on the burn. Price was drumming his fingers on his thigh beside him, and Marleau was chatting up a woman who had initially recognised Shane, so it was very awkward.

Shane didn't know why he agreed to come out. Well, he did.

Bonding with a new team took time. He had done it from the other side often enough, making sure a new guy didn't end up eating dinner alone in a hotel for the first week. JJ usually handled the social calendar, but Shane made himself show up, because the last thing he wanted was for whoever it was to think his captain was a freak.

But now he was still the captain, and he couldn't fucking give himself his own leadership speech to motivate himself out of this. He was also the new guy, which he quickly learned he was terrible at when all his attempts at jokes fell flat and he was turned backwards during all the team rituals. And, apparently, Ilya had been Boston's JJ.

Of course he had been.

Ilya wouldn't be sitting here, awkwardly nursing a boring drink in the corner, watching the clock and hoping curfew came faster.

He glanced around, as if thinking about him would make Ilya manifest.

If he were here, he would drag Shane out to the dance floor, just his hands on Shane's body enough to help him relax. He would make fun of Shane's boring shirt that he had bought at the mall because the trip to Minnesota was actually a seven-day road trip to the West Coast and Shane wasn't nearly prepared enough. They would be celebrating the win over the Nomads, with Ilya probably teasing him about being into bears now, which would be funny and embarrassing.

No, he wouldn't, Shane felt the warmth fade a bit. If Ilya were here they'd be pretending to hate each other on opposite sides of the club.

He pulled out his phone, opening his chat to Lily.

Shane: hey. Saw the game—

Shane deleted it quickly. He didn't want to rub the loss in, not when Shane had won so easily yesterday.

Shane: hey. How are you?

Neutral. Safe. But so fucking boring.

He almost deleted it, then stopped. If Ilya was into him, he was going to have to accept the boring. He hit send.

Price was sipping his beer and watching him with narrowed eyes. Shane tucked his phone under his arm. "What?"

"Lily?" he guessed, and Shane felt his face flush.

"Uh, yeah. She... worries."

Marleau turned his arm around the woman now. "You got a girl, Lando?"

Shane wasn't sure he liked this nickname, but he was trying to not ruffle any feathers. The team had been surprisingly welcoming, if confused about how to treat him. They were friendly, but it felt like someone higher up had told them to play nice with the new kid.

"Uh, yeah," Shane decided this was a good narrative. A girlfriend in Canada. Jesus, that was pretty fucking cliché.

"Got a picture?"

"Hey!" the woman pinched his chest. "You're already looking at other women."

"No, Lisa—"

"It's Lana."

"Fuck—" The woman — Lana, apparently — stormed off, taking an apologetic Marleau with her.

Shane and Price watched them go, sitting in silence for a substantial amount of time, not looking at each other. Price drained his drink, then sighed.

"Look. I'm getting out of here. Are you coming?"

"Back to the hotel?" Shane perked up.

“We can swing by and drop you off,” Price said. “But I was going to go to a different kind of bar.”

It occurred suddenly to Shane that Ryan Price was the first gay person he had spent any amount of time around. He had Ilya, of course, but Ilya infamously liked women as well as Shane (and presumably one other man, Shane buried that jealousy down). It wasn't that he was opposed to having gay friends, he just didn't have many friends at all, besides his teammates. The odds of finding a gay friend was low. If Shane was being honest, which the rye was bringing out in him tonight, he would probably have fled. Not because he was homophobic, but because he had always been too afraid to look too deeply into his one and only gay relationship with Ilya.

But now. He had a boyfriend. He was getting ‘gay *lovemaking* laid’ as Hayden had put it.

He should probably meet more gay people.

“Hollander?” Price was shifting uncomfortably. “If you want to stay, that’s fine too—”

“No, I’ll come with you.” Shane downed his drink with a wince. “To the other bar.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I... want to. If that’s okay.”

“Sure.”

Las Vegas was warm, so they were walking when Shane’s phone finally buzzed.

Lily: what a fucking day. Where are you?

Shane: With price. We’re... going to a gay bar I think

Shane: Not to find someone

Shane: at least not me

Shane: maybe I’m a wing man?

Lily: oh

Lily: are you having fun?

Shane thought about it as they stood at a crosswalk.

Shane: not really.

Shane: but I’m trying my best

Lily: same

Lily: I miss you

Shane: I miss you too

Shane: I'll be home by curfew.

Lily: call me

Lily: I want to see your face

Shane: it would be 3am Ottawa time

Lily: I will set alarm

Shane wanted to scold him and tell him to sleep, but he was feeling sad and selfish and a bit tipsy. He hated West Coast road trips because the jet lag fucked with his sleep schedule. Three in the morning for Ilya would feel like the same for Shane in any case. He would have stayed up far later to see Ilya if their roles were reversed.

Shane: okay

Shane: i love you

Lily: I love you too

The words on the screen felt so small.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the whole complexity of the situation is coming through without being too expositiony. Good night guys!

Chapter 12: Shane

Chapter Notes

A bit shorter than usj, but I've been staring at it so long it had to go out and breathe on it's own.

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

New Pin from Lily

Shane opened the maps app on his phone, angling the screen away from the guy next to him. He had to shake his head to keep the sweat on his brow from dripping on the screen.

It had been a brutal two periods against the Vancouver Hawks. They seemed to have built their team out of giant lumberjacks who knew more about hacking and slashing than moving a puck. Shane also wondered if the refs had been paid off or there was a serious shortage of optometrists in Vancouver, because there had only been four penalty minutes in the entire game, and half the Bears were nursing injuries.

On top of it all, road trips were always tough, and Shane felt like he hadn't slept in a week. He didn't know if it was because he'd gotten used to being comfortable in Ilya's massive bed, or because of the lack of conditioning time since coming back. Usually, he would have expected less ice time, but the Bears seemed content to play him over twenty minutes a game, and he was reluctant to make demands in his first week. This was where he had been playing before, and he knew they must expect that they traded for the player he was.

Of course, they'd traded Ilya Rozanov for Shane Hollander – superstar for superstar. Shane and Ilya had been battling the spotlight since he was a teenager, even before he'd ever met him. He had learned the litany of comparisons: numbers, projections, and opinions from people who'd never even watched him play. But it had always been them head-to-head as rivals, not equals.

And now this experiment was happening right there in the locker room, in the ice time, in every glance from the fans. As much as the team wanted him to be, Shane wasn't Ilya. No one could be. And maybe, no matter how hard he worked, he was still going to disappoint them just by being himself.

At least his exhaustion didn't seem to affect his points. After a stellar debut with the Bears in Minnesota, he had two assists and the overtime game-winning goal in Las Vegas. Tonight, they were up 4-2 despite the shady plays and illegal hits, and Shane had already scored once. The Boston media, which had been tearing him to shreds as Montreal's sellout, had already started to change their narrative.

The fans were a different story, and they weren't restricted to PG words like sellout.

The Cens must have landed while Shane was playing. Ilya had sent him the location of a hotel in North Vancouver. The hotel was too far away to be the one the team was using.

Shane: I can't wait to see you

Lily: 

Lily: I'm not waiting

Lily: (sent picture)

Shane slammed his phone down. Most of the Bears were locked into their own pre-period rituals: blocking out the world with music, taping up bruises, trading jokes with friends. At the sudden noise, most of them jumped and stared at him warily.

Fuck. Exactly the opposite reaction he'd been going for.

"You okay, Hollander?" the guy next to him asked and Shane nodded.

"Yeah, just... dropped my phone."

There was an awkward beat as everyone went back to what they were doing, and Shane felt like kicking himself. It was clear the team was trying to include him, like a big brother taking their nerdy sibling out, and Shane always managed to make it weird.

It wasn't as if he hadn't felt out of place in Montreal, too. At first, he'd been the too-serious rookie who didn't know how to flirt with girls, or when to shut up about goalie stats. He'd spent those first few months convinced everyone thought he was an alien. And, to be honest, he didn't exactly blame them.

But Montreal had gotten used to him, or maybe he had gotten used to them. Either way, they had grown together like two trees with their trunks intertwined. He could stop constantly pretending to pay attention to everything when he realized they didn't actually care if he laughed at every single stupid joke, as long as he wasn't an asshole about it. And he'd learned to like them, too, because even if some of them acted like idiots, doing parkour in the hallways or smoking weed on road trips, they still trained like professionals and had his back when he needed them.

He'd learned all that once in Montreal. Hopefully, it will be easier this time in Boston.

Still, it felt fucking exhausting.

"Okay boys, let's go make some birds cry!" Marleau rallied as the clock ticked down. They suited up and headed out to finish the game.

If the first two rounds were a boxing match, the third period was a bloodbath. Vancouver came out like they'd made a pact with a demon in the locker room because they were hard and fast and targeted — for Shane.

A sneaky trip sent him sprawling, the puck slipping past him. He barely ducked a high stick aimed for his head during a scramble in the crease. Tempers were up. Shane was grateful that, despite the awkward tension in the locker room, the Bears took it personally when one of theirs was attacked.

But the situation finally escalated with a tied score and five minutes left on the clock when a Hawk's Swedish defenseman boarded Shane, lifting him off his skates with a hit to the numbers on his back.

He slammed, face first on the edge of the hard boards, the lights dimming for a second as everything felt numb, the ice a cold, wet—

*— snow-soaked bag over his head made everything dark, each breath tasted like dirt.
The trunk slammed shut, making the car—*

—rattle as fans screamed, pounding on the glass above him. Shane blinked dazed as he heard shouting, and then blades surrounded his face. He curled instinctively, gasping as chemicaled ice mixed with the—

— the copper taste of blood in his mouth. He saw the flash of a knife as Scarface held him down and La Bouche went for his arms, shouting —

“— Jesus Christ, stay the fuck down, man!” The deep French of La Bouche and St Vincent blurred as Shane fought against whoever was holding him to the crease in the boards. There was a brawl around them, shouting and whistles, muffled by the protective stance over him. “Price is taking care of it!”

Vincent yanked on his jersey and—

—his shoulder felt wrenched behind him as he heard duct tape rip. His watch was ripped off as they bound his hands and he was —

— pulled forward a few feet away, the lights coming back as he emerged from the pile up of Bears and Hawks.

He gasped, his body feeling distant, every sensation feeling like it was muted by a dozen layers of cotton. He was sliding on one knee, so he put his foot behind to help propel forward as—

—thick rock salt cut up his one barefoot Ilya half dragging him along the rocky pavement of the port.

““I count three, we go.”

“M'kay.”

He tried to get—

— to his feet, tripping because the balance of the ground kept slipping away from him, the skates feeling unwieldy. St Vincent and one of the medics were telling him to stay down. He

glanced at the ice seeing—

— blood splattered over the snowy parking lot and his shoes, the gunshot echo feeling endless. Scarface looked at him, his teeth turned red as he gargled out, “Blyad—”

“—he’s not making sense, but he didn’t hit his head,” Vincent moved aside as another medic took his place. They reached for him and their—

—hands grabbing him, lifting him over to a cold nothingness that felt like he was flying
—

“—Shane? It’s Dr Emily, do you remember me? We met yesterday to go over your medicinal records. I’m going to put this on your face to stop the bleeding—“

—the antiseptic smell and too hard rubber of the bed was overwhelming as latex-gloved hands poked his bruised ribs, bending his strained joints.

“Stop! Stop, okay,” he snapped and shoved the hands away and—“

— the medic instantly lifted their hands off as Shane doubled over on the ice, swallowing hard to keep from throwing up.

The stretcher arrived, as Shane, feeling like he was swimming upriver, finally felt himself breaking the surface. The giant slabs of ice colliding in his mind solidified into the rink’s surface. His hand, gloves lost somewhere, pressed down into a groove, the cold bracing and finally gaining traction on reality.

He was dripping sweat but shivered violently.

The fight was breaking up, Price had laid out the Swede while some of the other Bears were still mid throw down. The stripes seemed to be everywhere but at least Shane was out of the fray.

The fans were still loud, the cacophony a constant, dim white noise. Shane looked — Dr Emily had her hands raised nonthreateningly, the other medic holding her kit. Vincent was several feet back and Shane could see blood on his white jersey.

He kept his eyes open, afraid that if he blinked he would be gone under the surface again.

“Shane,” Dr Emily was steady and soothing. “How are we doing?”

“I’m fine,” he gasped. “I’m good. I’m... bleeding?”

“Yes, you’ve got a nasty cut on your nose. Can I take a look?”

Shane nodded and she moved slowly. Her gloved hands were cold and firm but gently as she pressed gauze on his face. It didn’t hurt too bad, so Shane was pretty sure his nose wasn’t broken.

“We’re going to need you off the ice. Can you do it, or should we use the stretcher?”

“I can skate. I can keep playing.”

“Absolutely not,” one of the refs slid close enough to assess. “No bleeding on the ice, you know that Hollander.”

“Right,” Shane said, embarrassed. “Vincent, your jersey— sorry about that—“

“It’s fine, Lando,” St Vincent was looking at him strangely. “I’ll get my spare. Go get stitched up.”

“Yeah.” Dr Emily helped him to his skates and the crowd cheered. It wasn’t necessary — he was barely hurt. He waved to the fans without looking, embarrassed again because he should have seen that guy coming. He didn’t take the medics steadying support as he headed to the tunnel.

Each step felt heavier than it should. Everything was too quiet, echoing and one of the lights flickered overhead, making him flinch.

No. He’s in the tunnel of Vancouver’s shitty visitor’s room, not the warehouse.

He was okay. Everything was okay.

Dr Emily and the team were behind him, talking. He ignored them, focusing on his breathing and slowing down his heartbeat, which was thumping hard enough to feel in his teeth. I’m okay. I’m here. I’m fine. It’s over.

Fuck.

Ilya was going to fucking kill him.

Shane knocked on the door of the room number Ilya had texted. There was a long moment, then the sound of shuffling before the door opened. Ilya’s grin dropped as Shane smiled sheepishly.

“Hey,” he said, stepping on quickly. Even though the hall was empty, he didn’t want to take a chance. “Sorry, I’m early.”

“Sorry?” Ilya said incredulously as he gently held Shane’s face still to examine it. There was a white bandage over the bridge of his nose and some bruising to one cheek but Shane really didn’t think it was that bad. “What happened?”

“Number 36,” Shane let Ilya examine him, closing his eyes to savour the large, warm hands on his inflamed face. “If you guys could beat them tomorrow, I’d find it very hot.”

“Can I kiss you?” Ilya’s eyes were furrowed. “Where are you hurt?”

“Just my face, and yes. I’ll be upset if you don’t,” Shane shot back. Ilya tilted his head, touching their lips together so tenderly Shane thought he was going to melt.

“Malysh,” Ilya kissed his jaw, then down his neck. “I told them to look after you.”

Shane didn’t know how he ever went more than six months at time without Ilya touch, because he had been dying the last few days without it. He unzipped his hoodie as Ilya went for his jeans, when his words registered.

“You what?” He gasped as Ilya’s large hand was now on his dick, and he felt a thousand times hotter.

“I told them they need you. You are their superstar now,” Ilya said against his neck.

Shane kicked off his shoes, sweater gone and jeans falling as Ilya backed him up until his knees hit the bed. He dropped, accidentally kicking Ilya’s thigh as he struggled to get the pants off. Ilya let go of his dick to help, and then Shane was naked flat on his back as Ilya pushed him back even more, covering him with his body.

“Fuck,” he whined as Ilya’s mapped his chest with his mouth, seeking out the bruises in particular. “Jesus, is that why they’re being so weird?”

Ilya grunted, not answering as he knelt on the floor, nuzzling the crease of his hip. His stubble was scratching his thighs, and Shane wanted more. Ilya’s hands gripped the back of Shane’s knees, encouraging him to lift them up until he could run his tongue along Shane’s hole.

Shane let out an embarrassing whine as he grabbed his own legs, thankful he had spent a lot of time in the shower after the game, as Ilya proceeded to reduce him to a series of curses, threats, and half-formed sobs.

His tongue alternated broad, flat strokes and probing, which made all the blood in Shane’s body rush to his cock, painting stripes on his stomach.

“Fuck me,” he whined, hating how needy he sounded. “Please, Ilya—“

He felt fingers alongside Ilya’s mouth, shallowly getting him ready, though he felt as open as a fucking book right now. From this angle he could only see the crown of Ilya’s head and his broad shoulders, holding him still and folded in half as he squirmed under the sensations.

There was no question where he was right now, as Ilya’s fingers, slick with lube, went deeper and Shane was fucking ready.

“Enough, please,” he begged pathetically. “Ilya, just fuck me.”

Ilya pulled back, his expression intense but unfocused, looking at Shane as if he were drinking him in. “On your knees.”

He flipped over, ignoring the twinges from the hits he had taken, bracing his forehead on his hands to keep from burying his still injured face in the bedspread like he wanted.

There was the sound of a condom wrapper, then Ilya's hand was on his hip and his cock was at his entrance. Shane hissed at the initial burn, welcoming it as it brought everything into sharper focus, like a lens.

He could hear Ilya muttering something in Russian, and he imagined it was Ilya telling him he loved him, that he missed him, that this slutty version of Shane was perfect for him.

It didn't take long for Ilya's hips to meet his ass as Shane felt full, connected beyond anything, and he was begging Ilya to move.

"Please," he gripped the bedcover, pushed back. "I want to feel it."

"Fuck," Ilya put one foot on the bed, both hands holding Shane tight. "Hard, sweetheart, yes?"

"Yes," Shane closed his eyes as Ilya started, slow at first until he was confident then faster, harder, until the obscene sound of skin slapping and Shane's moaning filled the room.

Every sensation was grounded, from the stretch of his ass to the grip on his hip, and the bracing burn of his elbows on the rough spread. He didn't need to think right now, didn't need to worry about being lost as Ilya groaned and muttered half-Russian, half-English platitudes.

He reached down to grab his own cock, jerking fast because he could feel Ilya already losing it, chasing his orgasm like he couldn't stop himself.

"*Mne tak khorosho s toboy*, so fucking good, Hollander—" Ilya's rhythm faltered and Shane gave in to his own hand, turning his head to the unbruised side as he came, messy, over the bed, over his knuckles, unable to keep himself braced anymore.

"*Tol'ko moy*, Shane!" He couldn't tell when Ilya's orgasm started because it seemed to last forever. Shane kept stroking himself through it, until Ilya leaned over him, his sweaty chest sticking as he kissed the back of his neck, teeth catching in delicious, sharp nips.

Shane couldn't take it anymore and spread his knees until his belly was flat on the bed, his nose stinging as he wrinkled it, hating the cooling wet spot under him.

"You're heavy," he complained, and Ilya finally leveraged himself up, holding the condom as he pulled out, making Shane shiver. He left for a moment, and Shane rolled over. He watched his half-closed eyes as Ilya came back, naked, his cock still half-hard, with a wet cloth.

Shane let himself be lazy as Ilya cleaned them up gently, before he dropped the towel on the floor and crawled up the bed to put his head on Shane's chest.

"Jesus," Shane huffed a laugh. "I needed that."

Ilya made an affirmative sound, his arm sling over Shane's stomach. "You have big bruise on your back."

"Oh," Shane shifted, feeling the pull of sore muscles. "Yeah, he got me right in the numbers. Price got a four-minute penalty."

"And 36?"

"Nothing," Shane ran his hands through Ilya's curls. He had always wanted to do that whenever they met in hotel rooms like this. But he was usually too worried about staying long, high-strung even after being thoroughly fucked. It felt nice to be so relaxed.

"Maybe I will join Price tomorrow," Ilya's voice was muffled as he turned his face towards Shane, breathing in his sweaty skin.

"You're not a defenseman," Shane snorted. "No matter how macho you think you are. Leave the fighting to the professionals."

"I am professional," Ilya scoffed, but the way he was holding Shane belied any aggressiveness. "Professional lover."

"Now you sound like a sex worker."

He could feel Ilya almost pouting. "It is hard to be clever in English when I come so hard."

"Good," Shane chuckled. He threaded his hands through Ilya's hair more. "What were you saying? In Russian, I mean."

"Hm?" Ilya sounded half asleep. "Usual things."

"Teach me?"

Ilya turned his head, shifting so he could look at Shane. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Anything."

"*Ya tak tebya khochu*," Ilya said with a hint of a smile.

"Ya-tak te-byuh kho-choo," Shane repeated, and Ilya snorted.

"I like this game," he said fondly. "*Mne tebya ne khvataet*."

"Myeh tebya nyeh kvaah-tie-ekt," Shane grinned, not caring that Ilya was laughing at him. "What did I say?"

"I miss you'," Ilya's eyes softened. Then, he grinned and all but purred, "*stan' na koleni*. But that one is for me."

"Stan nya ko-lay-ni," Shane said stubbornly.

Ilya twisted, playfully straddling Shane and biting at his neck, the earlier sleepiness chased away, apparently. “If you insist,” he slid down the bed, getting on his knees again.

Much later, after a more leisurely round two, Shane found himself still awake. He was sitting up on the headboard, Ilya sprawled next to him. Shane had turned down the brightness of his screen to keep from waking him.

Farrah had sent over some updates about the trade. She had gotten a larger moving allowance, but Shane didn’t know how to tell her he already kind of had a place to live. The second part of her email made him nervous. Shane normally steered clear of any news or press about himself unless it was curated by his mom or Farrah, and he had managed to stay out of the press room so far with the Bears, but he was certain that was going to come to a head soon.

She had sent him a list of articles that made his stomach twist: *Boston’s Questionable Swap: Can Hollander live up to the hype; Hollander’s First Week: Matching Stats Against Rozanov; Rozanov vs. Hollander: And Social Media Is Already Choosing Sides.*

He made the mistake of clicking some of them, wincing as they did breakdowns of his career against Ilya’s. He had stopped paying attention to the details years ago, preferring to focus on how Rozanov had driven him to being his best simply by sheer annoyance. The articles out of Boston were especially critical of every mistake or flaw Shane had committed over the years, some of which he had forgotten. He was grateful it had been away games: he felt like going back to Boston at the end of the week was going to be his crucifixion.

Farrah had also diligently included her report from Ilya’s manager. As expected, she didn’t have many details, mostly that Rozanov was still adjusting. He glanced down at the sleeping man and wondered how well it was going. The coverage for Ilya was also all over the place, lauding him as a saviour one minute, pitying him the next.

It was a harsh reminder that the world was watching both of them.

He tried not to think about that.

Hayden had messaged him earlier that day, keeping to neutral topics about the kids, the weather – nothing about how Shane knew his old teammates were probably divided over the trade. They had to know that he hadn’t wanted it. He had bled Voyageur red and blue since day one. But, after almost a week, only Hayden was messaging him. The rest of his message threads had been read by his teammates, but unanswered.

He really needed to sleep. His face was throbbing.

He carefully tried to slip out of bed to get his painkillers, but Ilya's hand tightened around his waist. The last thing he wanted to do was wake him: Ilya looked almost as pale and exhausted as him. But, he needed those painkillers, and Ilya wasn't a heavy sleeper.

"What is it, love?" Ilya's voice was thick with sleep. Shane would never get over these fucking pet names.

"My pills," he whispered. "I'm sorry, go back to sleep."

Ilya let him up but didn't fully close his eyes until Shane was back in bed, under the covers again, medicated. He pulled Shane possessively against him, spooning him with grumpy, grabby hands. "Is for... flashbacks, yes?"

Shane thought about lying.

"No, it's for my face," Shane said, grateful he was looking at the hotel wall. "I'll swell up like a balloon if I don't take them."

Ilya nodded, and Shane felt him slipping back to sleep before he shifted, struggling to get back awake. "Is Boston... good with you? With... mental health."

"I don't know," Shane said evasively. "They're your team."

Ilya's arms tightened. "What you mean? Did you tell them? Montreal... did they tell?"

Shane lay very still and quiet for a moment, resentful that he couldn't even dissociate when he wanted to. Montreal definitely told Boston the whole story, didn't they? They had to have. Right?

"Shane?"

"I haven't... exactly... said anything."

That was enough to spur Ilya all the way to wakefulness. He reached over Shane and turned on the bedside lamp, blinding Shane for a moment. Ilya hovered over him, confusion on his face as Shane wished the pillows would smother him.

"What do you mean? You didn't tell?"

"There wasn't... time, really," Shane felt pinned by Ilya's eyes, only a foot between their faces. There was nowhere to hide. "Well, there was. And I tried. But Theriault, he made the point that maybe I just have to concentrate on something else, because it's all in my head—"

"Shane," it was the first time Shane had heard Ilya actually angry. "Fuck that bastard."

"I know," Shane looked away. "I know, okay? I tried to push through and—" he hated how his eyes stung.

"There is no *push through*, *moy lyubimyy*," Ilya gripped his arms firmly. "There is doctors and medicine and time, remember?"

“I know that!” Shane felt angry at himself, at his own fucking brain. “I just wish it were easier.”

“I wish that too,” Ilya’s voice bled out some of the harshness. The firm grip softened to grounding. “But it is not too late, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane blinked hard. “Okay, okay.”

“I can go with you.”

Shane snorted. “You really can’t. Not unless you’re ready to just announce everything about... us.”

There was a look in Ilya’s eyes that made Shane’s breath hitch. But then it faded, and Ilya sighed. “You’re right.”

This time it was Shane reaching for Ilya’s, his hands resting on his back and trying to comfort him but feeling like he was failing miserably. “Maybe I can go with my parents,” he tried not to grimace. “Though I’d have to tell them first. Fuck, that’s going to be a weird conversation.”

“I can go with you for that,” Ilya offered. Shane nodded, looked up into his eyes, hoping he didn’t come off as pathetic as he felt.

“Would you?”

“Yes,” Ilya kissed him, his lips parting Shane’s. Shane let himself fall for a moment, letting himself forget for a brief moment that something existed outside of them. “Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for stick with me and my weird little story! I definitely appreciate every single kudos, bookmark and comment. It's just so delightful that other people care enough about this brainworm to want to let me know things like their favourite parts or what they predict is going to happen. I don't think I've ever posted a story with so many regulars who are just so delightful and engaging. Trust me when I say all your comments make me kick my little heels in delight :) I promise, I have an end in mind... and it's coming.

Chapter 13: Ilya

It's not that Ottawa got better. It was that Ilya got... used to it.

It had been a major shift from winning two out of every three games to consistently being shut out and shot down.

He had no idea when Ottawa had become a graveyard of NHL careers, but that's what it felt like. Except for a few bright lights like Bood or some mid-career guys who seemed to genuinely enjoy the game, it would have been a graveyard of a different sort.

It didn't help that he was still in the hotel overlooking Costco in Kanata, not even Ottawa proper.

The Hollanders had invited him out for dinner a couple of times, which had been touching but also horribly awkward. Ever since he and Shane had sat down for a three-way video call to talk about the whole truth.

There hadn't been much Ilya could do besides resist the urge to pace as Shane haltingly told them about how things hadn't been quite right for a while. Shane had been in Ilya's apartment in Boston, Ilya had been in a hotel in Edmonton, and Shane's parents were endearingly supportive in Ottawa.

They had both teared up, even Shane's father. Ilya was both glad and hated that they had to do this remotely on shitty hotel wifi.

Shane was sitting at Ilya's dining table. He could see the kitchen in the background, and the tally sheet just out of focus on the fridge.

"I wasn't trying to hide anything," Shane was staring off-screen, his hand half covering his mouth when he spoke, as if he were trying to shove the words back in. *"It was just... gradual. And I can't really predict when it's going to happen."*

"Sweetheart," Shane's mother looked like she wanted to reach through the screen. Shane's father had taken her hand, and Ilya could see him squeeze it. *"I'm glad you're saying something now."*

"Did you want to come home?" Mr Hollander said. *"Dr Sachdeva already knows your case; it would be easy to get him on board."*

Ilya, Shane and Mrs Hollander all shook their heads — it was already such a break from the norm for Shane to have had the time off he did, something Ilya suspected only happened because of the Olympics. Boston would never send him back to Ottawa for treatment when it existed locally, not when there was a chance Shane could play. And Ilya had seen clips of Shane play, as painful as it was to watch his old team, and he knew from that focused joy that Shane wouldn't want to sit out for much longer anyway.

"I'll probably talk to someone here, but..." this was where Shane had looked lost, so Ilya unmuted.

"I would like to go with Shane, to speak with the Bears' medical team, but it would be strange," he said. Mr and Mrs Hollander stilled a little — Ilya hadn't spoken since the initial greetings, because Shane had wanted to try handling things himself. "We were thinking maybe one of you can go to Boston. With Shane, as support."

Shane let out a dark chuckle. *"I know, I'm twenty-four, I shouldn't still need my parents at my doctor's appointments—"*

The Hollanders barely needed to exchange glances. *"I'll come down,"* Shane's mother said quickly. *"I've got a quiet few weeks, and no one should have to navigate the American healthcare system for the first time alone."*

Shane looked like he was going to cry. Before Ilya could thank them, Shane's father jumped in. *"I'll be around to help you apartment hunt, Ilya."*

This time it was Ilya caught off guard. "Uh, what?"

"Yuna's already been calling around a bit, but she's a bit too practical, I think, for a young man's taste."

"David!"

"All your friends are in Alta Vista. Maybe Rozanov wants a bit more of a nightlife, that's all I'm saying."

"We live in Alta Vista!"

"Rozanov and I can do some exploring," he patted his wife's hand.

"You don't need to—"

"Better dad than mom," Shane laughed. Ilya was relieved to see him smile, even through the grainy screen. *"He'll sneak you to all the whiskey bars between showings."*

This time it was Ilya who had to cover his mouth to hide a grin as the Hollander family dissolved into the most domestic squabble he had ever witnessed.

It was a sobering contrast to Ilya's recent conversations with his own father.

He had been in Ottawa for two weeks before he had gotten a phone call.

Practice had been going better, even though there were only a few weeks left in the regular season. There hadn't been a big enough gap for Ilya to fly back to Boston to pack his things, so he was still living out of suitcases and shopping mall purchases, driving a car rented by the Centaurs. Despite looking at a few places, Ilya was also still in the hotel.

Ilya had been in the locker room, just changing into his shorts for the weight room when his phone buzzed.

Incoming call: Papa

He glanced around but the guys were either already gone or not paying attention. There were no other Russian players in Ottawa at the moment, so Ilya picked up, keeping his face stone.

“Hello,” Ilya sat in his stall, bracing himself.

There was a long silence. *“When you first said you wanted to go to America to play hockey, I thought it was a terrible idea. It’s too far from home, too lonely for a scared little boy. But you at least made a name for yourself, representing Russia and supporting your family.”*

There was a long pause. Ilya let himself sit with it, comforted that the yelling hadn’t started yet. Maybe this time he could just stay in purgatory.

“*And now?*” his father asked.

Ilya swallowed. “Now what?”

“*Now you are traded,*” his father said. “*To Ottawa.*”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “It wasn’t my decision.”

“*No, but this is what happens when you are a disgrace to your team and cause trouble. Or when you let a Ukrainian manage you. Do you think he’s loyal to you? Men like him care about what they can get, and nothing more.*”

Nate Shevchenko had a bundle of dangerous secrets on Ilya right now. If he wanted to, he could destroy Ilya’s career with a phone call, and his life, as a queer Russian man, with a second. But somehow, Ilya wasn’t that worried.

“*You should have stayed in Russia,*” his father said. “*You would have failed but at least you would have been a man.*”

“If I had stayed in Russia,” Ilya said, before he could stop himself, “I’d be like you.”

He wasn’t sure what possessed him to say it. Three months ago, he would have listened stoically, nodding. Fuck, maybe even agreeing. But now...

“*You forget who made it possible for you to be where you are,*” his father snapped. “*Ungrateful brat.*”

“I’m sorry, Papa, I have to get to practice with my shit team,” he bit out. “My love to Polina.”

He ended the call and took a deep, shuddering breath.

“You okay, Rozanov?” Lomax was across the room, tying his shoes. “Something happen back home, man?”

Ilya thought about it for a moment. Then, he said, “No. Not back home.”

He glanced up, a hint of a smile. “You are lifting today, yes? Are you sure your old bones are strong enough? Should I get – what do you call it here – Voltaren? Costco is next door.”

“Fuck you, buddy.” Lomax rolled his eyes, but clapped him on the back as they headed to the gym.

Ottawa continued to lose but at least they were losing with some heart now. It wasn’t much, but it was making the owners and GM happy. Ilya had never seen so little progress and received so much praise.

It was also, for lack of a better term, a *sleepy* town. Boston had been his first taste of a North American city as a place to live, and it had been fast and kind of mean. He had liked it, knowing that the city had teeth to bite back with. It had also been obnoxiously *Boston*: flashy, smug and proud of itself, including its sports culture. Every screen had someone playing and at least two people were at odds, even if they were cheering for the same team.

If Boston had been a pressure keg, Ottawa was like the relief valve.

He was starting to understand the Centaurs’ lackadaisical attitude. He didn’t agree with it, but the longer he stayed, the more it made a strange kind of sense. Sam Nyugen made sure everything was to his liking. Bood, Lomax, and the other vets went to Monk’s after wins and losses like it didn’t matter either way. Even the fans who approached him on the street for a signature did it politely, like they didn’t want to bother him.

Ilya wondered if he liked the pace, or if it scared him.

Even the media had been softballing him, despite Sam’s fretting and repeated apologies for exposing him to their questions. It wasn’t until a home game with Carolina a few days before the end of the season that they finally caught him off guard

Ilya stood in front of the microphones in the media room, arms crossed as he tried to not think about the planned FaceTime call he had planned with Shane. The games felt like formalities, but Ilya was glad the team had finally decided to treat them not as a whole game, but as a chance to focus on their skills, practice plays in real time.

Did they lose 6-2? Yes. But Mallory was sharp on the blue line, moving the puck out of their zone better than he had all season, and Bood finally won a handful of key faceoffs, the kind that set up a play. And everyone had started to turn towards Ilya to lead the plays, and he was starting to finally feel settled.

The press were mostly cycling through the usual questions – “*How’s Ottawa?*” “*How does it affect your game seeing the Bears win last night?*” – so Ilya was caught off guard when one of the younger publications shoved closer.

“So, Ilya,” the man, probably younger than Ilya pressed forward, speaking with a light French accent, “we hear you’ve been spending time with Hollander’s parents off the ice. What’s that about?”

Ilya froze for a moment. He had been around the city with Shane's father, who, as Shane promised, seemed to know the most random side alley bars in Ottawa. He hadn't thought much of it. Shane's parents weren't in the spotlight, David even less so than Yuna, and it felt like a strange sort of violation for them to be mentioned here, as if stars were colliding.

Sam was whispering to their communication team quietly, but Ilya didn't want to let this question dangle into assumptions.

"This trade is an... adjustment," Ilya said carefully. "Hollander is a stand up guy, very Canadian," he said, having learned that the Canadian media loved it when their favourite things were acknowledged. "He has, of course, reached out to help me in his hometown."

There was a ripple of whispers and pens as the room seemed to spring to life with the hint of gossip.

"I just mean... it seems unusual, spending so much time with the parents of a guy you famously called a," the guy flipped through his notes, "'boring, third string goalie' last year."

"Yes, third string, very sad," Ilya said dryly, lifting an eyebrow as there were a few chuckles. Then, he added more seriously, with a good natured smile, "Hollander is a good sportsman who loves his hometown, simple enough."

The room buzzed softly, pens scratching, reporters leaning forward for more.

The French reporter pressed, "So, it's just... good sportsmanship?"

"Yes. And I will repay him next year, when I bring the Cup to his favourite city," he winked.

That seemed to settle the room with a good chuckle, and Ilya's shoulders relaxed a little. He tracked the French reporter for a moment, taking note of his outlet before they wrapped up questions and he was able to escape.

Nate was in town again, though he had chosen to stay in the city core. Ilya drove his rental car downtown to a quieter diner Nate had picked out with private booths, where Nate could supplement any Russian he didn't know with English.

"Nice cover," Nate had said in Russian, when Ilya slid in. "Canadians love it when you pile them with compliments."

"Hey, you're talking about my potential people," Ilya said and ordered a craft brew. He was getting fond of them. "Okay, why are you here? You must really like me for you to be this far north. Or hate yourself. Or be earning a shit ton of money."

Over the last few weeks, he had spent more time talking with Nate than ever before, and he was starting to enjoy annoying the guy.

"A little of everything," Nate said easily. "Except the liking part. You're still on my shitlist for being a pain in my ass. So much paperwork."

Ilya stole some of his fries, and Nate glowered. “I talked with the Bears about fast-tracking your PR. They’re all for it, but you know how these things are. We’re looking at eighteen months to two years on your work visa before it goes through.”

That wasn’t the news Ilya wanted to hear. He stole more fries and Nate smacked his hand away. “Come on, rich guy, order your own.”

“Okay, so there is no option... no one who could help?” Ilya ate his stolen fries hopefully.

Despite how boring and quiet and cold Ottawa had been, Ilya had felt a driving uneasiness. Before, when he had been working with the Bears’s legal team to try and get his EB-1 visa and green card pushed through, he had felt it less urgent. After all, he hadn’t had that much to lose, and he had taken comfort that every other Russian player before him had also faced the bogdown of paperwork.

“If you’re talking money, no,” Nate rolled his eyes. “And trying to bribe the IRCC isn’t going to help you.”

“It seemed to be the strategy with the guys Morozov kept suggesting for the Americans,” Ilya shot back.

“And where did that leave you? High and dry,” Nate quipped back. “I mean, if you’re really serious there’s one way to shave maybe a year off until you can get your PR, but I’m not sure you’re going to go for it.”

Ilya raised his eyebrow. “You’re talking about marriage. I don’t know any Canadian women for that to work.”

“Gay marriage has been legal in every province since 2004,” Nate said calmly, but Ilya felt a jolt of fear rush through him at the word.

“Not an option. We have no interest in going public, you know that.”

Nate finished his fries now that Ilya had soured at stealing them. “Marriages are public record in the States, but in Canada they’re not. I mean, it’s not perfect, but, what is it they say? *Kto ne hodit v les, ne boytsya volkov.*”

“*Kto v les neh khodit, tot volkov ne boitsya,*” Ilya laughed and corrected him.

If you’re afraid of wolves, stay out of the forest.

His father had often said it to Ilya when he was teenager, like it was some kind of lesson. But the only thing Ilya learned from him was that you didn’t need to go into the forest to find the wolves.

He liked his mother’s version. He remembered her at his childhood hockey games, when he was the youngest on the team, playing with boys who should have moved on but liked being the biggest too much. She would wipe his nose and kiss his cheek, much to his seven-year-old chagrin.

“Kto v les neh khodit, tot volkov ne boitsya,” she would smile. *“No ty ne boysya — ty u menya medvezhonok.”*

Don't be afraid — because you're my little bear.

“I will talk with Sh— with him,” Ilya said.

“I mean, no rush,” Nate shrugged. “It would speed up your PR only. But once you get PR, you'd be less vulnerable and not tied to your visa anymore. You'd have to seriously fuck up to get deported.”

But Ilya didn't bring it up to Shane, though. Not yet.

His chats with him were less frequent than he liked, and it was getting harder for Ilya to watch the pressure mounting on Shane.

Yuna Hollander had spent a week with Shane in Boston, approaching the Boston medical team with Shane's agent, Farrah, his lawyer and an NDA. As they had with Montreal, Ilya was left out of the story, but Ilya wondered if the Boston medical team had put the pieces of the puzzle together like Nate had.

The NDA had also plainly laid out that Shane didn't want the coaching staff involved; and, if unavoidable, only LeClaire. Morozov was a defense coach and Shane wasn't Russian, so there wasn't any reason for him to take a special interest in Shane, but Ilya didn't want to take any chances.

From what Shane had told him, Boston had been shocked but less dickish than Theriault. At least, no one had suggested for Shane to just power through. The public story was still the lingering snowboarding injury that cut Shane's ice time drastically. In private, Shane had started speaking to a specialist.

Ilya had never been more relieved than when Yuna had told him. That relief was short-lived when he hopped on a call with Shane after his first session. Shane had looked tired and drained. He was in Boston and they weren't scheduled to play today, which Ilya was suddenly grateful for.

“How was it?” Ilya set his iPad on the desk, balanced on the Bible to keep from having to hunch to get into frame. “Terrible?”

“Yes,” Shane wasn't looking at him, and his hair looked like a lawnmower had gone through it. *“I mean, they warned me it was going to feel worse before it got better but—”* he sighed and finally dragged his eyes to meet Ilya's through the screen. *“Better now that you're here.”*

Ilya's heart leapt. He knew what Shane meant. As tired and bedraggled as he looked, Ilya felt like the temperature of the hotel room warmed just by picking up FaceTime.

“Mnye tak zhal, lyubimyy,” Ilya said. “I'm sorry.”

Shane shrugged one shoulder. *“It's nothing you did.”*

“Still, I wish... I wish things were different,” Ilya rested his cheek on one hand and just drank in Shane’s face, memorizing every inch. “I wish I was there.”

“Me too,” Shane sighed. *“But, we can’t change it. So, distract me. What did you want to talk about?”*

Marry me.

The words almost left his mouth, and he sat up, shocked at how powerfully he wanted to say them.

“Ottawa is boring,” he said instead, grateful to see Shane rolling his eyes, relaxing. “I think your dad has shown me every bar already.”

“There’s more than bars, Ilya.”

“Yes. Museums. Government. So exciting.”

“I meant in life! Tell you you have a hobby or something.”

Ilya laughed. “A hobby? Says Mr Hockey?”

Shane’s eyes danced as he laughed. *“Don’t tease me. I’m using all my hockey IQ to keep up with your fucking legacy. If I have to hear one more guy say, ‘that’s not how Rozanov did it,’ I’m going to lose it.”*

“I could buy another car,” Ilya mused. “I am still driving the shitty rental.”

“Something good on snow,” Shane said quickly.

“The Porsche would be good,” Ilya perked up. “Four wheel drive.”

“God, only you would think Porsche and snow would be a good mix,” Shane sighed. *“What colour would you get it in?”*

“No, I already have one. It is in the garage,” Ilya grinned. “It is same colour as your dildo.”

Shane flushed red so fast, Ilya almost doubled over laughing. *“Jerk,”* Shane finally huffed. *“I should take a point away from the chart.”*

“No! I’ll be good,” Ilya whined, his fingers itching.

“I highly doubt that,” Shane said dryly. He leaned towards the screen. *“When can we meet? For, like, a long time? Not just on a screen?”*

“Centauris are playing Montreal tomorrow,” Ilya said. “Then we are done for the year.”

Shane nodded. *“I’ve been put on IR for the first bracket. The doctors want me to dedicate some time to the therapist.”*

“What did LeClaire say to that?”

“He was pissed,” Shane admitted. “But the docs are on my side at least. The team is... I don’t know. They’re quiet.”

“Maybe it is good to take a break.”

“Yeah,” Shane sighed. “I just feel... like I’m letting them down.”

“You didn’t ask for this, love.”

“I know,” he said ruefully. “I think I just need some space. Time, Doctors.”

“Good advice,” Ilya teased.

“How about this? I drive your Porsche to Montreal. We meet up at my apartment after your game. And then, we can head up north. I’ve got this place that’s been under construction all year, it should be at least liveable now. We can just hole up there for a week, maybe two. Just... relax.”

“Your apartment in Montreal?” Ilya asked incredulously. “It looked like a murder house.”

“No! My real apartment. I can give you the code.”

His real apartment. Ilya tried to imagine it. He had seen his childhood bedroom, his parents house – now he was going to see Shane’s life outside of all of that. He couldn’t stop grinning. “Okay.”

Ilya would be lying if he said the game against Montreal wasn’t personal. He had heard that the Ottawa-Montreal games were always a bit heated because they were neighbours, but Ottawa hadn’t been a threat in a while. However, as the last game of the year, and the energy that was usually carried in the Centre Bell, the stands were packed.

Nate had told Ilya to lay low, offering to hire a discreet security team, especially when he heard Ilya was planning on spending the night. Ilya turned him down, though. He had no intentions of going out – bus to rink, rink to cab, cab to Shane’s apartment, and then locking himself in for the night.

But he was in the rink now, thousands of eyes on him, and he had never felt so powerful. These people had fucked Shane over, and he was ready to fuck them up.

He spotted Hayden circling near the midline during warm up. He frowned – Shane had said Hayden, of all the Voyageurs, had been loyally standing by him. Ilya skated slowly, his hackles raised.

“Rozanov,” Hayden said casually. “Good to see you.”

“Pike. Still helping Montreal stab their star players in the back?” Ilya said, and Hayden flexed his hands on his stick.

“Fuck you, Rozanov,” Pike said, but there was less heat than usual.

“You are not my type,” Ilya said. “I prefer someone who can skate.”

That seemed to light more of the old antagonism, and Pike spat on the ice. “Bring it, asshole!”

“Don’t worry,” Ilya said, as he headed back to his team. “I will be gentle.”

Ilya didn’t need to be gentle. Playing against Montreal had always been the highlight of Ilya’s year, both because of the clandestine meetings with Shane, and because playing Montreal always meant playing him, too.

Without their Canadian phenom, it was as if someone had reached in and taken out Montreal’s backbone.

The first period started out slow, with the Montreal lines feeling underpowered. Ilya had noticed that the Ottawa players tended to be cautious in the beginning, but today they picked up steam early, gaining confidence when the pucks seemed to just find their way onto their sticks. More than half the game was spent in the O-zone, which was a miracle for them. Bood scored at the ten minute mark, then again three minutes later.

Ilya grabbed Bood in a hug as the buzzer sounded, the rookie practically jumping into his arms. “Did you see that? Fucking beautiful!”

The threat of having a rookie score a hat trick seemed to light a fire under Montreal, and they had to fight to maintain their two-point lead – and fight they did.

Montreal tied in the second period, and Ilya could see the optimism wane. Hendricks scored again, lifting the Ottawa fans to their feet, but the victory was soured moments later when Dagenais, the large Haitian-Canadian defenseman sent him flying like he weighed nothing. He was back on his feet, but favouring his left side.

However, to Ilya’s surprise, he didn’t limp off down the tunnel. They had a moment on the bench, and Ilya glanced over during a puck stop.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Hendricks tried stretching to the left and winced. “Well, not really.” Hendricks exhaled through his teeth. “But, you know. This is my last game, I think.”

Ilya wasn’t surprised. Hendricks was thirty-five, at the prime of his career over ten years ago. The Ottawa fans were loyal to a vet like him, and half the jerseys Ilya saw were for him. But instead of leaning back, Hendricks glanced over, heavy brow set like he’d decided something.

“We’re going to make it a good one, right?”

Ilya clapped him on the back, harder than necessary.

“I had my doubts about you, man,” Hendricks grinned, a wide gap on the left side of his mouth where he had lost teeth years ago. “But I kind of think you’re the best thing to have happened to this team in a while.”

The second period ended with a tied score of 3-3 after a scramble in the crease, but in the locker room the adrenaline was still buzzing in everyone’s blood as they talked about the plays they had made, ignoring the bruises and pain. Hendricks was in the corner showing Bood a new angle with his stick, and Lomax and Mallory were sharing the iPad, planning something.

For the first time since starting on this team, Ilya thought, maybe, he could do this.

“Okay, listen up!” he stood, and the room quieted. He could see the clock above the tunnel, less than a minute to the third period. “It is last game of 2014. Against the worst fucking team in the league,” Ilya said, because he had made no secret how much he hated Montreal for making this trade happen.

“Do you want to leave the season as the losers of Ontario?”

“Fuck no!” Lomax grinned.

“Do you want to make Montreal fucking cry for their baguettes?”

“Fuck yeah!” Mallory and another freckled defenseman called from the far side of the room.

“They are tired. They are slow. And they traded their fucking superstar like greedy assholes.” Ilya locked eyes one-by-one, seeing something he hadn’t seen in a long time – passion.

“We go out there and show them how fucking stupid they were to underestimate you.”

Me, he added silently.

“We will go out there, and fucking *punish* them.”

For me, he thought again. *And for Shane.*

The alarm set and the guys shot out of the tunnel fired up.

Montreal had not been prepared. Ottawa scored twice in the first half, bringing the score to 5-3, but an unlucky broken stick and breakaway let two more goals in. There was a minute left on the clock, and Ilya could practically see the steam rising from how hard they were pushing themselves.

Ilya won a faceoff in their D-zone, and Hendricks took possession, darting down the ice while Bood fanned out to the left. Ilya saw Dagenais half a stride from Hendricks before Mallory came out of nowhere and checked Dagenais hard. Twenty seconds left, Hendricks passed to Ilya when he got tangled in a three-on-one and Ilya tried to sink it, but Drapeau managed to get his stick up.

Stupid fucker, Ilya thought about how un-fucking-helpful the guy had been during his two am call.

He fought for the puck on the wall, desperately trying not to think about the clock ticking down. Finally, he kicked it back, hoping that someone was there.

Hendricks swooped in, taking it back to the net, but Ilya could already see the Montreal defense finally awake and ready to intercept. Until Hendricks deked left and shot. Ilya almost swore as it went wide, but then he realised Hendrick's plan.

Like a surgeon, Bood tipped it in.

The horn went off, deafening on top of the blood pounding in his head as Hendricks and Bood threw themselves against the boards in victory. Ilya skated over, joining the team as they dogpiled the veteran and rookie.

He picked up one of the hats along the way, holding it up triumphantly as their song blared in the background.

It felt better than a Cup

An hour later, they were out of media, out of their gear and celebrating like they were in the juniors. Bood was wearing a pile of hats, and they were trying to perch more on top and Bood chugged a beer. Hendricks was consoling a line of the older guys who were embracing him like he was a war hero. Ilya was swept up in the excitement, though once he made it to his stall, the first thing he did was pick up his phone.

He was already mentally picturing it. He would be in Shane's apartment, which was probably some boring shade of grey with practical sheets and photos of his family. Shane would try to give him some boring tour, and Ilya would kiss him until he melted, which usually took half a second. He could already feel the weight of Shane's body against his, the only thing he needed to make this day perfect.

Ilya leaned back against his stall and let the noise wash over him.

He didn't even feel the victory with pride or relief. He felt a raw, almost violent satisfaction of watching Montreal lose without Shane on the ice.

Served them fucking right.

Lomax burst back into the room, Sam Nyugen looking half amused, half horrified at Bood who was still wearing his tower of hats and clutching three pucks to his bare chest like someone was going to take them away.

"We are in Montreal," Lomax declared, like that explained everything. "We are going out, boys! Real city. Real clubs. Real alcohol."

Ilya laughed as these grown men cheered like teenagers on their first away game, but they had a lot to celebrate. He couldn't blame them.

He checked his phone, hoping to see a text from Shane congratulating him with something flirty. Filthy maybe. But there was still nothing.

Ilya tucked his phone away. He could join them, for a bit. By the time the team reached the hotel Sam had gotten for them, the team had already toasted Hendricks three times and Sam had called around for a VIP lounge nearby. They split into their rooms to change, and Ilya was grateful to have his own as Captain, even though he wasn't planning on sleeping here tonight.

He was loosening his tie, thinking about the clothes he had packed that he could wear to a club, when his phone lit up.

Incoming Call: Jane

He picked up immediately. "Are you on your way?"

He wanted Shane there like he was a missing limb – he wanted Shane at the club, dancing with him, showing him off to the guys, letting Shane reveal in the slaughter of Montreal like he deserved. He wanted him under him in this hotel room, gasping his name.

Marrying him.

"Ilya," Shane's voice was a soothing balm on the adrenaline. *"That was a fucking amazing game."*

"I scored no points, love," Ilya laughed, eating up the praise anyway.

"I've lost against you enough to know when Rozanov has his finger on the button," Shane chuckled, then his voice sobered. *"I have bad news."*

Ilya's high almost instantly vanished. His mind dove downward. An accident. Something had happened to Shane. Shane's parents. The apartment had burned down, leaving Shane homeless. Morozov had gotten his filthy claws into something.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice tight.

"LeClaire held us hostage for some pre-playoff bonding session," Shane's voice sounded apologetic, but all Ilya felt was a wave of relief. *"I just got out. I can't make it down until tomorrow night,"*

"Is okay," Ilya swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat.

"I can leave early tomorrow. It's five hours to Montreal, then two more to the place up north. Why don't you go ahead without me and open the cottage? The builders left the key under the mat. Go enjoy the peace and quiet for a few hours. I'll grab groceries, get there in the afternoon. And then..."

"You trust me alone in your cottage?" Ilya grinned.

"Should I not?" Shane's voice dropped a little. *"Are you planning on defiling it?"*

“Maybe,” Ilya’s world narrowed to the voice on the other end of the call. He felt reckless, like anything was possible. “Maybe you find me naked and hard in your bed. Is that too dirty?”

“*Fuck,*” Shane said, his voice shaky. “*Don’t make me start driving now. I’m exhausted, I’ll crash.*”

“Don’t,” Ilya said quickly. “Okay, *moy khoroshiy*, I will go and... open your cottage.”

“*You’re a fucking menace,*” Shane groaned. “*I fucking hate you.*”

“I love you.”

“*I love you too. And... thank you. For Montreal. For... everything.*”

Ilya ended the call feeling bittersweet, but shook it off. It was one more day. Then, a lifetime.

Chapter 14: Shane/Ilya

Chapter Notes

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

Shane hated that he loved driving Ilya's fucking red Porsche. He had never cared about cars beyond making sure they were safe and comfortable. But it was like eating fast food for his whole life and then suddenly being served a seven-course gourmet meal.

He felt... kind of cool.

He had filled the trunk with some of Ilya's things that he had wanted, mostly clothes and shoes. Shane had been up most of the night after LeClaire's aggressive team bonding time. It was the first time Boston was in the playoffs in nearly a decade, and they seemed paranoid to do everything right. Shane wondered if LeClaire was feeling a bit anxious about Ilya being traded. Shane was meshing well in his place, and he hadn't had any other incidents on the ice, but it was clear the management team wasn't excited about his time off the ice. They were following Shane's therapist's instructions to the letter though, so that was something.

It wasn't until he pulled up at the border that he realised he was driving Ilya Rozanov's car without any legal paperwork. Luckily, the guards at Highspring Port crossing were Voyageur fans and spent so long talking about how bullshit the trade had been they hadn't asked for anything beyond his driver's license. Shane may have also signed a few pucks.

It was comforting to see the change in signs: kilometers instead of miles, French aggressively in your face, and a Tim Hortons at every intersection. He had spent a lot of his life travelling in the States and hadn't expected to miss anything from Canada, but there was something about being forced to move that made him more nostalgic for home.

His therapist called it reactance: that his loss of autonomy was making him feel the change more acutely. His dad had said it was called being homesick. Shane thought it was probably a mix of both.

The never-ending construction around Montreal slowed him down a bit, but soon enough he was pulling into the parking garage of his apartment building. He felt embarrassed as he left the car, a few people gaping at it. It was nice when he was driving, but when people saw his face it felt too ostentatious.

He tried to imagine Ilya driving it. His large hands gripping the steering wheel, forearms flexing as he shifted gears. The way he would smile, cocky, at Shane while the engine purred.

Shane hurried into his apartment.

He hadn't been home for a significant length of time in over three months, and he didn't intend to be here long. He packed a bag as quickly as he could, pausing only to grab the large box of condoms and lube hidden in the deep recesses of his bathroom.

He had bought them what felt like a lifetime ago, intending to eventually stash them at the investment property.

Clothes, snacks, some extra blankets, pillows, sheets — he knew the cottage had furniture, but it wasn't going to be furnished. It ended up taking a few trips until he had packed the Porsche full with the practical things, leaving room for groceries.

He also showered because he didn't want to have to take a break for anything when he finally saw Ilya. The last time their schedules had aligned was in Vancouver and it felt like ages ago.

As he showered, he couldn't help but remember all the other times — on his knees, Ilya on *his* knees, pressed face first against the slick tile, trusting Ilya to keep their balance. His hands ghosted over himself, between his ass, thinking a bit too much about how much he wished Ilya was here, right now.

Fuck. It had been way too long since he had had sex. It was like the week he had been at Ilya's apartment together with him had rewired his brain. He used to go months without thinking about it, and now he could barely turn the corner without something reminding him of Ilya and getting himself half hard. He had never jerked off so much.

They had tried video sex, but the most Shane could handle was voice or text, which he was admittedly bad at. Ilya had no such problem, so Shane had enjoyed watching Ilya jerk off over FaceTime for the last month. But each time, he ended up feeling horribly guilty because every time he tried to turn the camera on himself, he froze up.

It didn't matter what he did: turning off his screen so he couldn't see himself, cut off his face, pre-record, it felt like there was a permanent 'off' switch. The thought of someone seeing it—

Ilya promised it didn't bother him, but it didn't stop Shane from wishing he could just be normal.

The best he could do was hold the phone close as Ilya told him what to do and he panted and groaned into the microphone.

Being creative had meant he had learned more about what he liked. His new favourite thing to do was to sit and squirm with a plug in while he didn't jerk off, listening to Ilya describe what he was going to do to Shane the next time they were together.

The longest he had lasted was ten minutes before he begged Ilya to let him take it out and fuck himself with something else.

He thought, for a wild minute... How long could one safely have a plug in?

No. That was stupid. Reckless.

Ilya would kill him if he wrecked his Porsche because he was driving with a buttplug.

Maybe next time. When he had a chance to Google it.

His cock had thickened, but he forced himself to ignore it. He was already taking too much time, and he had a few more stops along the way.

He texted his parents as he left to let them know he was on his way.

Mom: Don't forget toilet paper

Shane: I'm a grown adult

He went back up and grabbed the toilet paper, shoving it in the well of the front seat.

Mom: We won't be up until next week. Are you two going to be okay until then?

Shane: Yes.

Shane: Maybe text before you come

Mom: It's not like we're going to show up in the middle of the night

Shane: Mom

Mom: Fine! We'll give you a five minute warning

Dad: Maybe twenty

He made a quick pitstop to Hayden's house in the suburbs of Montreal. He didn't know why he felt so nervous as he walked up the steps like he had a thousand times before. Jackie answered with one girl on her hip. He was pretty sure it was Jade because she was dressed in green.

"Shane!" She hugged him with her free arm, and then passed him the baby. "Hold her a sec? She's been throwing up like crazy, so I've just got so much laundry on the run."

Shane instinctively held the baby at arm's length at the mention of vomit but told himself that was stupid. Jade and Ruby had both thrown up on him before, and he had survived. He had clothes in the car he could change into, and he could handle a bit of grossness for a baby.

He followed her into the house as Probably-Jade stared at him with a very accusatory expression.

"What?" he asked the baby as she judged him. "I was invited."

She didn't seem to believe him, and her lip wobbled.

"Fuck."

"Hey!" Hayden thumped down the stairs. "Don't let Jackie catch you fucking swearing around them, she thinks it's going to sink into the folds of their brain or something."

"Oh, sorry," Shane said. He looked desperately between the baby and Hayden. "Uh, I think she's going to—"

“Throw up?”

“Cry.”

“Right.” Hayden took the baby before she could let loose. “Yeah, Jade’s a bit sensitive around strangers – not that you’re a stranger, it’s just been a while since you’ve been around.”

“Yeah,” Shane wished he could shrink, because he felt about two feet tall.

“Ruby’s a lot more chill with people, let me go get her.”

“No, you don’t have to–” Shane sighed as Hayden disappeared upstairs, hurrying as though he couldn’t wait to get away.

Jackie came back in, a basket in her hands. “Oh, did you lose my baby?”

“No, your husband stole her, and, uh, fled.”

She nodded as if that made sense. “Come on, let’s sit down.”

“I can’t stay long,” Shane said as he followed her into the kitchen. She put a can of ginger ale in front of him and sat across from him at the table, folding towels as she spoke.

“Where are you headed?”

“Up north,” he fiddled with the can. He knew that Jackie knew, he had told Hayden he could tell her a while ago. But it was one thing knowing people knew, and another *knowing* the other people *knew*. “Uh, to meet Ilya.”

He saw her fumble, almost dropping a Snoopy towel in her hands. “Oh, uh, that’s nice.”

“Yeah,” Shane muttered. There was an awkward stretch and Shane wished Hayden would hurry up.

“It must be nice... getting some time away,” she finally said.

Shane nodded. “It’s been... a crazy few months.”

She nodded, and Shane suddenly heard a snuffle. He looked up, panicked as he realised she had started to cry. He half stood, ready to flee himself and find Hayden. Shane didn’t know how to deal with a crying Jackie, but maybe this was payback. “Uh–”

“Sorry!” she burst out and covered her face with the Snoopy towel. “I know you’ve been through a lot, and it’s totally weird of me to just be crying like an idiot over nothing.”

Shane glanced at the stairs, willing Hayden, Ruby, fucking *Jesus Christ himself* to walk down the stairs.

“It’s the hormones,” she said finally, drying her face.

“Oh,” Shane said confused. Then: “*Oh*. You’re–”

“Pregnant,” she nodded. “We weren’t trying but, I mean, you must know, with Ilya. The whole life-or-death sex – it can get pretty passionate.”

Shane felt horribly uncomfortable but sat back down. “Uh.”

“Sorry, this is going all wrong,” she took a few breaths. “I just really wanted to tell you how happy I am for you and Ilya, and that Hayden feels horrible for what Montreal did. He thinks it’s his fault somehow.”

“What?” Shane stared at her.

“If he had known what the team was going to do, he would have warned you. And, he’s been calling out all the guys who think you jumped ship. I know he doesn’t want to worry you, but it’s been hard. They used to come over all the time and now...” she looked like she was going to cry again but held it together.

“I didn’t... know,” Shane said, feeling like that was the most inadequate thing he could be saying.

“He’s stupid,” she chuckled darkly. “I don’t know what it is with men and not telling anyone how they are feeling.”

Shane nodded. He understood the feeling all too well. Sometimes it was less like not wanting to tell, and more not knowing what the fuck was going on in his brain. It was like having a book that held all the secrets to the world and how to respond to it, and not having the decoder ring. At least, that’s how his therapist had described it, and Shane couldn’t find a better metaphor.

“He’s going to ask for a trade,” she said. “It was too late this year, but maybe before the regular season.”

“He hasn’t said anything to me,” Shane was shocked. Hayden had always been a ride-or-die Montrealer, even though he was from Okanogan. Jackie had been born here, and he had always said he had married into the city for life. “Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I thought it would be hard, but, to be honest, nothing had been the same. It doesn’t feel like the same team. We’re both ready for a change. And the girls are so young, it would be easier to move now than in four years when they’re in school.”

Before Shane had to think of a response, Hayden was back, this time carrying a grumpier looking baby wearing pink.

“Here,” he dumped the baby, Ruby presumably, in Shane’s arms. “She won’t cry, probably.”

Jackie looked at him, exasperated. “I don’t think that’s what Shane wanted, Hayden.”

“What?”

She took Ruby from Shane and gave him a pointed look as she carried her away. Shane ran a hand through his hair, but forced himself to meet Hayden’s sheepish gaze.

“So she said—”

“Yeah.”

“And she—”

“ – cried? Yeah. Because—”

“ – she’s pregnant. That happens a lot.”

Hayden sat in Jackie’s seat with a sigh and absently took over the folding. “I just... wanted to say I’m sorry. If I had known I would have warned you.”

“How were you supposed to know?” Shane frowned. He grabbed some of the laundry and started folding too. “I didn’t even know and it was about me.”

“Did they say why?”

Shane focused on the Mickey towel, stained with spit up. “My mom’s working theory is that they didn’t want to deal with my... well, the PTSD.” It was hard to say it out loud, officially. “But because I didn’t actually tell the medical team yet, just coach, they wanted to move me off quickly. Plausible deniability or something.”

Hayden’s expression darkened, and he dropped the towel he was folding with a curse. “Fucking assholes.”

“Yeah,” Shane had been hearing the sentiment from his parents and Ilya, but it still felt validating to hear it from Hayden too. “They kind of suck.”

“Do you think Boston is looking for another forward? I’m cheap.”

Shane chuckled, trying to think about Hayden in Boston, going out to clubs with Marleau and the other guys their age. There were a few guys on the team with kids, but none of them had pictures in the stalls or talked as obsessively about their wives as Hayden did for Jackie. “Maybe. I heard Ottawa is looking.”

That made Hayden scoff. “Me on a team with Rozanov? Yeah fucking right.”

“I mean, it’s an option. Maybe,” Shane said. “It’s still close to Jackie’s family, and Ilya said they have a few guys up for retirement. Plus, big cap. Maybe you can get a raise.”

Hayden scoffed but at least looked thoughtful.

Shane stayed a bit longer than he expected, eating lunch when Jackie insisted. He felt lighter when he left, a container of cookies for Ilya added to the front seat. He made another two stops at the grocery store, filling the passenger seat to the brim with food, and the last one at the SAQ, spending at least ten minutes grilling the clerk on which vodkas were actually from Russia.

In the end, he was pretty sure the Porsche was overweight, and he was going to get an earful from Ilya about the suspension or something.

He didn't care. He just wanted to get to the cottage before dark.

Montreal faded in his rearview mirror, as did the anxiety he felt in the city went with it. It was hard to realise that the phase of his life was over. His first apartment. His first job, really. Endless hours training, sweating, cursing, healing, winning – all memories now.

He would still have to sell his place but maybe he was finally ready to move on.

As comfortable as the Porsche was, Shane wasn't looking forward to the last two-hour leg of the trip. The snow was mostly gone, but the more north he went the more dirty, half-melted icy piles he saw. The first rest stop he saw was closed, so he had to wait nervously until he came to another one. It didn't have the expensive stuff he was probably supposed to put in this car, but it would have to do.

Even though the days were getting longer, it was still twilight when he finally started to see the familiar signs.

He hadn't been up here since the summer when he had met with the construction company who were halfway through building. They had been recommended by the guys who were renovating his place in Montreal, and he had loved their design portfolio. The land he had bought was close enough to his parent's cottage that they could visit but far enough that they couldn't just walk over.

It shared a lake with several other cottages, but, if the photos the crew had been sending him over the years were any sign, it was set back enough behind a grove to be secluded.

He knew there were still pieces to be done – the dock hadn't been started, the indoor practice rink he wanted only had the exterior built, and some of the guest rooms were still bare. They had said the place was winterized and hooked up to the grid, and that the well had passed inspection, so it would be liveable.

As he turned down the private driveway, the last of the sunlight fading, he thought about Ilya, and hoped that he liked it.

He hadn't realised how worried he was about it until now. He had been staying at Ilya's place in Boston long enough to know that Ilya tended towards luxury and *ostentatiousness*. Shane hadn't spared any expense on the cottage, but it was more... woodsy. Small. He didn't have large gallery walls or white spaces. He had wanted something more natural, something that kind of reminded him of his parent's cottage and being in the woods, which had always been a quiet place for him as a kid.

He pictured soft woods, natural wood, mismatched stones – nothing like the sleek marble and cold edges of Ilya's place.

Well. Shane supposed it was more of the *boring* that Ilya was going to have to tolerate about him.

He took the curves of the driveway carefully. This part of the trail was narrower, and he winced as some overhanging branches scraped against the side of the car.

He stopped the car, turning it off. It was still light enough to see through the trail, which would only take a few minutes by walking to reach the cottage. He should leave the car here, and come back in the morning when they could cut the branches back.

It's not like anyone would be coming down the private driveway, after all, and he didn't want Ilya to actually hate him if he abused the car.

He grabbed the pack of toilet paper, zipped up his jacket and started down the winding driveway.

It was quiet.

His boots crunched on the snow, icy from the recent melt and refreeze that often happened this far north. He could see the tracks of Ilya's car, fresh, so he followed it carefully, not wanting to fall.

There was a break in the trees where he could see the cottage, so he paused, eager to see how it looked.

The pictures didn't do it justice. It was rough still, with equipment covered under tarps until the workers could come back in the spring and finish the outside. But it looked perfect so far, the windows catching the last of the sunset.

He paused.

Yes, it looked good... and yet there was something off.

The lights were off.

Shane frowned. They had assured him the power was working. Ilya hadn't texted him about any problems. He pulled out his phone. No, no new messages since the ones that morning when he had sent Ilya the pin and Ilya had made a dirty joke.

He stood a few more steps, wanting to round the bend so he could approach the cottage properly. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up, and he realised the quiet around him was eerie.

There was a large, older maple tree right at the turn, and Shane paused. Something wasn't right.

Yes. None of the lights were on, and the door was closed. There was an SUV, the rental that Ilya had talked about, parked in one of the spaces, cold and empty looking.

Shane jumped as a sharp sound cut across the cold air.

Shane flattened against the tree, his heart pounding. Carefully, he glanced around, looking further down the lakeshore.

The indoor practice rink was half-constructed. They had sent Shane pictures of the frame and exterior walls that had been erected before the winter got heavier. The windows were boarded up still, but he could swear he saw something.

There.

Movement in the frame where the door was yet to be installed. A light came on, like someone was waving a flashlight around, and Shane could hear a voice: muffled and indistinct. Angry.

Another sharp sound. It was definitely coming from the practice rink.

He carefully put down the toilet paper and pulled out his phone, fear locking his feet in place.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

Shane rattled off the directions to the cottage. “I think... I think someone broke in.”

“Are you safe where you are?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Are you alone? Was there anyone home?”

“Yes,” Shane’s voice shook. “There was someone home.”

“Okay, sir, I need you to get back and keep safe. The police have been dispatched.”

The voices rose, multiple. He heard another impact, and a pained, familiar voice.

Shane hung up the phone, and started to carefully make his way towards the rink.

There had been no reason to hold back – the season was over, the games were done, and the spotlight was off for the moment. All that was left were bruised bodies and the high of ending on a high note, which tended to make people stupid. Ilya wanted to just let loose, for once, and forget all the bad things that had happened.

Sam had secured a VIP lounge for the first stop. There had been bottle service, hot waitresses, and the bass was deep enough to make Ilya’s ribs vibrate. Hendrick kept ordering champagne for everyone, and Ilya slipped his card to the staff, because if they were doing a last hurray they were going to use the expensive stuff.

By the time they migrated to another nightclub, the herd had thinned out. Some of the guys begged off to sleep, heading back to the hotel. Some had found hot, giggling women who

were all too eager to spend a night with a pro athlete. But the rest stayed stubbornly together, not willing to let the high die.

Montreal was buzzing, even after midnight. The streets were filled with university students, tourists and locals. They found themselves bar hopping on Saint-Laurent Boulevard and Crescent St., weaving through cigarette smoke, French laughter and music spilling from the nearby restaurants, until they ended up in a basement club with strobe lights and glow sticks. Ilya lost track of what he was drinking – vodka, tequila, something neon.

He threw himself into the night, in the crowd, the beat and the sweat, like he had every summer in Moscow, ending up pressed shoulder-to-shoulder with sweaty dancers, the floor vibrating under his feet.

But, unlike Moscow, when he had a girl in his arms, her hands on his chest and hips, it made his skin crawl. He would detach them as gently as he could until they took the hint and moved on.

He went out back, taking a breather, when Lomax, of all people, joined him.

“You're not pulling tonight, Roz?” The man passed him a cigarette and Ilya took a grateful puff. “What, Montreal girls aren't hot enough?”

Ilya took another drag, savouring the calmness it brought. “I am taken.” The phrase brought a smile to his lips.

Lomax stared at him for a moment. “Wait – someone out there tamed the great Ilya Rozanov? Never thought we'd see the day. What does she have on you?”

“Is it so hard to believe it is love?” Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Kind of. You've got a reputation, man.”

“Well, sometimes reputations change.” Ilya wasn't bothered by his past. He had lived hard and fast, and now it didn't appeal to him anymore. He was done. He glanced at Lomax.

“Why? Are you looking for tips?”

Lomax held up his left hand and Ilya saw the wedding band. “Five years next month. Best fucking thing in my life.”

Ilya looked at the ring, quiet for a moment as he thought about the implications of that. Five years. His finger felt itchy and empty. He pulled out his phone and checked the tracking app, relaxing when he saw Jane in his Boston apartment.

“You going to bring her here?” Lomax blew out a ring of smoke.

“No,” Ilya said, trying to ignore the pain in his chest. “She works in Boston. Good job.”

“Tough man. Is that why you've been so cranky?”

Ilya laughed. “Yes. Maybe a little.”

“Well, cheer up. You headed out tomorrow to see her, right? I’m sure she’s going to be happy to celebrate closing the season, and you’ll get to make up for lost time.”

Ilya nodded, looking up and grinning, feeling happy for the moment. “Yes. No more lost time.”

They stumbled back to the hotel when the club finally closed. Ilya slept right to check out, and said his final goodbyes to the team at the bus. He would need to be back in Ottawa for player evaluations, management meetings, and a dozen other things that happened in the off season, but for now, they could all escape for a well deserved vacation.

Shane had sent him a pin to a place somewhere in the wilderness.

Ilya: so a murder house was not enough. Is this where you bury bodies of past lovers?

Jane: yes. All the other hot russian players i’ve been fucking are there

Ilya: i thought i was special

Jane: nope, just another in a long line of victims

Ilya: i will have to convince you to spare me

Jane: oh?

Ilya: i think you will keep me alive

Ilya: when you see what I can do with my tongue

Ilya: 🍆

Ilya liked to imagine Shane red-faced and fumbling when he pulled things like this. But mostly, all he could think about was fulfilling his promise.

He had stopped at the first gas station he came across. The further outside of the city he got, the more he realised how little he had seen outside of cities. It would suck to get this far, and be stuck on the side of the road. His reception was already going in and out the further away he got.

The weather was warm enough he could get away with just a light jacket, and he kept his sunglasses on, battling his hangover in the bright sun. He leaned on the car, breathing in the air, which just hit differently out here.

Another car, large and mud-covered with dark windows pulled in, and Ilya glanced over. A few men got out, dressed more for a wilderness trip in thick flannels and worn boots than Ilya was in his designer jacket and joggers. He nodded at them when they looked at him, but they spoke French amongst themselves, so Ilya turned back to his car.

He went in to pay the attendant inside the ancient-looking station, a sign for homemade jerky on the wall. He paid, grabbing some water in the hopes it would chase the last of the

hangover away, and some candy and jerky because he had skipped breakfast.

The attendant was a skinny, sullen looking man who didn't speak when Ilya tried to be friendly. Ilya felt better when he was back on the road.

If Ilya didn't trust Shane, he would think he was being led to his death. He paused at the final turn, a two-track dirt road through what looked like a snowy forest. The shade had prevented the snow from fully melting, and the tires of his rental SUV crunched over the layer of ice. It went on long enough that he worried he had gotten the directions wrong, but eventually he rounded a large tree and it opened to a slightly hilly clearing.

A house, made mostly with glass, wood and stone, was perched on the top of the slope. Ilya could see the glimmer of a lake beyond the trees at the bottom.

He stepped out, the air even crisper and heavy with the indescribable scent of greenery, snow, and wet earth. He breathed deep, letting it fill him up.

It was beautiful.

Something clicked into place, something he hadn't known he was looking for.

He took another moment to let it soak in, then headed for the front door. Shane had said the builders had left the keys under the mat, so he let himself in.

Even though it was clear from the supplies and equipment outside that there was still work to be done, the inside was bare but serviceable. The cabinet doors were open, and there was a fine layer of dust over everything. Ilya stepped in further: the couch in the sunken living room was still in plastic, and the other furnishings – lamps, carpets and other knickknacks – were still in boxes in the corner.

Ilya headed left to the bedroom he could see. It also had the basics, a bed, dresser, and side tables, but they were also wrapped in the plastic they had been delivered in. So much for his plan to be naked in bed when Shane arrived.

Still, Ilya was flexible. It didn't matter what it looked like now; he could see what it would look like in the future.

The future – with Shane.

His hand slipped into his pocket to check that the small box was still there.

Then, he checked the tracking app. Shane was at the border crossing, still hours out. Well, he couldn't be naked in bed, but he could at least get some things ready. He had never really gotten his hands dirty like this. It was always easier to have a delivery service set up or install things, but he actually had time here. And he wanted to make all these things theirs.

He headed back out to the SUV to grab his bag, his mind buzzing with a list of things to do.

As he went to open the back door, a sound from the trees made him start. He glanced, his hand on the car handle.

Something was glittering silver on the ground by the trees. At first, Ilya thought it was a piece of metal from the crew, but as he stepped closer, away from his car, he saw the shape more clearly.

It was a watch. A Rolex, he recognised, his mind connected instantly to the series of ads Shane had done last year for them. His breath hitched. There was no way Shane was here, he rationally knew. He had just fucking checked the app.

No fucking way, he tried to tell himself.

All the hair on his body stood on end.

Behind him he heard snow crunch, as if whoever was there didn't care to be sneaky anymore.

Fuck.

Ilya turned, half a second too late.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise!

It was so satisfying to see so many commenters on edge for the last two chapters :D

PSA: this story still has a HEA, so don't worry too bad about our boys. Remember, they still make it to the Olympics in 2026!

Chapter 15: Ilya/Shane

Chapter Notes

Dear police,

Please don't think too hard about my recent search history. It's all in the name of art.

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

Ilya was a big guy, not an enforcer, but he did his share of time in the penalty box when he needed to.

It didn't matter when there were two guys bigger than him and not restrained by the fact that they didn't have to pull punches. Ilya hated that he recognised them as the standoffish Canadians he had seen at the gas station.

Stupid – so fucking stupid. If he hadn't been so fucking distracted, he would have noticed something, he was sure of it.

Glupyy rebyonok.

Idiot child, he could hear his father's voice in his head.

He tried like mad for the first few seconds, hoping to make a break for the woods. But, they were too strong and fast. When a third guy stepped around the car, a hunting rifle resting casually on his shoulder, Ilya knew it was over.

The only way to survive was to go down now and hope he could run later. Still, he wasn't fucking polite about it, spitting and kicking as they restrained his arms tight behind his back. The ice and slick gravel under his boots were slick, and his heels skidded uselessly like he was fighting on glass.

“Uberite ot menya ruki, blyad’!” Ilya tried to kick out as they pulled the zip tie tight on his wrists. “Hands off, fucker!”

They didn't react beyond a grunt when Ilya planted a solid heel on a knee behind him. The guy with the gun was standing back, but Ilya spit at him. The spit landed short, and the guy didn't flinch.

“Coward!” Ilya shouted. “Fight me like a man.”

“Non merci,” the guy chuckled darkly. “I get paid to be smart. Unlike you,” his voice was lightly accented French. “Not very clever to slip your leash, Rozanov.”

“Ssykun,” Ilya growled. “*Ya vam eto ne zabudu.*”

You’re a little shit and I’m going to remember everything you do, Ilya vowed. Every fucking face, every word he said.

“I’m shaking in my boots,” the guy rolled his eyes. “Tell me, is there anyone else coming?”

“Go *fuck* yourself.”

The man ignored him. “*Amenez-le dans la remise, faites en sorte qu’il reste tranquille. Récupérez son téléphone, Hollander a peut-être donné son heure d’arrivée.*”

Ilya’s heart tightened at Shane’s name, like the guy had reached in and squeezed it tight.

“*On dirait qu’il va mordre...*” one of the guys said in Ilya’s ear. Ilya struggled for a moment, but the guy’s fingers were digging into muscle like he was testing how much pressure it would take to make something tear.

“*Baillonne-le pour l’instant. J’essaierai de lui parler plus tard. Mais s’il pose trop de problèmes, casse-lui la mâchoire,*” the guy with the gun looked at Ilya on the last sentence. “You won’t cause trouble, *ponyal?*”

“I will be the *worst* trouble of your life,” Ilya growled, and the guy sighed like Ilya was a chore he was already bored of.

Ilya made himself dead weight as the two guys hauled him down the slope towards the half finished building near the water. His boots scraped uselessly, leaving trenches in the snow and mud.

The guy had said Hollander – they knew about Shane. He tried to wreck his brain. How had they known? They hadn’t said anything about coming to the cottage, except to Shane’s parents. He had told his team and Nate he was going to Boston – it wasn’t a lie, he was planning on heading down there eventually. But really, none of that mattered now. He hadn’t paid attention, and now he was paying for it.

One of the guys slipped on the ice, and Ilya took the opportunity to knock the other guy off balance, taking all three of them down on the slick stone near a steep drop into the lake. The water was dark and glassy with a film of ice in some spots. It would be suicide to jump into the lake without his hands free, so he pulled on the zip ties, crying out as the plastic didn’t give an inch and bit into the meaty flesh of his thumbs like a saw.

Red Flannel jumped on him, pinning him to his stomach. He caught sight of his phone and the small black ring box sliding free.

“*Prenez son cell, vite!*”

Ilya saw Blue Flannel reach for it and, without a second thought, Ilya kicked hard, sending both objects into the lake.

For a second, they landed on the thin ice several feet out before breaking through the thin surface, vanishing into the dark water.

Blue Flannel cursed and started kicking Ilya hard in the stomach.

Ilya grunted and bore it. That phone had Shane's tracker app on it, protected only by his thumbprint. There was no fucking way he would let that information get into their hands. Dead or alive.

Pain bloomed in his stomach as he tried to curl up and protect himself, but he still refused to make a sound. Blue Flannel stopped, finally breathing hard.

"Putain, c'est quoi ce bordel?"

It felt like his organs had been shoved into themselves. Nausea curled in his stomach, making each breath an effort. A dull ache around his ribs turned into a stab with each shift of his body.

Blue Flannel hauled Ilya to his knees, and Ilya's abdomen tightened, a thin sheen of sweat breaking out despite the cold. Blue Flannel shouted back: *"Crisse, y'a pitché son cell dans l'lac!"*

Ilya knelt there dazed, trying not to puke up the terrible beef jerky as Red Flannel gripped him by the collar.

"Maîtrisez-le. Maintenant." Ilya could hear the fury in the leader's voice and felt a sliver of satisfaction. Good. Angry men made mistakes.

The half-finished building was large but just barebones. There were a few support beams and they shoved him down against one. They were either stupid or confident in their abilities because they didn't tie up beyond his arms. The wood was raw, but his jacket protected him from the splitters.

Ilya estimated there was about twenty feet between him and the entrance way. Then it was a dash to the tree line. Maybe five or ten minutes to the public road, where traffic was rare and help was going to be thin.

Shit fuck.

He turned to the two guys standing by the entranceway, talking in hushed voices.

"Oi. Fuckers," Ilya settled against the beam, trying to get comfortable but his whole body tensed with pain. He gave up, hunching over and tasting blood and bile in his mouth. "What they pay you? I pay more."

"Peux-tu croire ce trou d'cul-là?" Blue Flannel laughed.

"You want cash? *Argent?*" he said the French word he had seen around Ottawa. "I am rich."

Red Flannel shrugged. *"Y paraît qu'il a lâché trente mille à un certain Garmanov."*

“C’tu sérieux, là?”

Ilya felt a cold fury in his chest. Garmanov, the fucking bastard he had met in the hospital, who had given him the contact information and had told him about the Port. He had paid that guy to get the fuck out of Montreal. He had even felt bad for him, and the sob story about his sister. He had left his name out of the fucking police report. He thought he had been doing the right thing, like a fucking idiot.

Don’t trust weak men, his father had told him. Their loyalty is to their next master.

“Mais, si on accepte ce paiement maintenant, on se tire dans le pied pour les prochains contrats,” Red Flannel said.

Ilya didn’t know what they were talking about, but they ignored him. Even though they hadn’t tied him up, they stayed several feet back so there was no chance of Ilya taking them by surprise.

Well. That sucked.

His hands throbbed and he tried to shift to relieve pressure on them, but all it did was make him bite back a groan.

Okay. The money hadn’t worked. Plan B.

Ilya looked around again. This shed was being used for storage, so the back end was filled with plywood, sacks, and other tarp-covered objects. The hard dirt beneath was still somewhat frozen. The only light came from the entrance way and the thin coverings where the windows would go. He didn’t see any lights along the ceiling, which meant they would need to move him when it got dark.

If they planned on having him live that long. The fact they hadn’t outright killed him yet didn’t comfort him. It just meant they had plans, and that made Ilya more nervous.

Nate had said he was safe in Ottawa because the Montreal group didn’t want to encroach on another territories. When he was in Montreal, he had stuck close to his plan, though he was realising it probably hadn’t been a good idea to go out and get drunk with the team. Being in a group of large, professional hockey players had probably kept him safe in the city.

But someone must have seen him. They had probably jumped on his trail when he had left the city. He wondered if there would be a tracking device on his SUV. He hadn’t seen any cars following him on the dirt roads, so they must have followed him from a distance.

He wasn’t confused about the why, though. He was the guy who had embarrassed them, or at least their boss, by swooping in and fucking up their plans. Did they assume he was part of the Medvedevy’s crew and that’s why they hadn’t killed him yet? Was he ransom? Bait? A toy for revenge?

No, from what he knew there wasn’t room for petty revenge or hurt feelings at this level of criminal organization. Violence was strategic. It didn’t mean this guy wasn’t a psychopath

and enjoyed what he could do when he was unleashed.

The Flannel Assholes weren't paying too much attention to him, so he felt the ground around him. The support beam was still rough, and after some patient searching, he found a nail that hadn't been fully hammered in. Quietly, he started to rub the zip tie restraints on the edge of the nailhead.

He didn't get much time at it before the guy with the gun returned. The Flannels straightened up. He passed one of them the gun as he strode toward Ilya with a purpose.

"If it's money you need, I can--"

The guy ignored him as he grabbed Ilya by the arm and hauled him to his feet. Off-balance, Ilya had to fight to not be dragged as the guy threw him on a pile of tarp-covered lumber, hissing as the guy gripped him under the jaw, pressing him back painfully on the hard surface. He couldn't stop the cry of pain as his stomach felt like it was tearing inside.

The tarp smelled like pine and gasoline, which Ilya focused on when the guy gripped his face too tight for a cruel second.

He was tall, as tall as Ilya, and wiry. His grip was like iron and the elbow he dug into Ilya's ribcage was sharp. This was a guy who was strong, and confident in it. But this sudden manhandling was a display of power more than strength, and Ilya hated the way it was fucking working. It was humiliating, being handled like a fuck doll, and he knew if he fought back things would be worse.

If it had just been him, he might have risked it all. But Shane was coming.

He had to survive until then.

"What do you know about Medvedevy's movement in Montreal?" The guy's tone was almost conversational, which was terrifying. Ilya glanced at the Flannels, who were looking away.

"I know nothing," Ilya said, his voice strained as the guy held him so only his toes were on the ground. His shoulders burned, his wrist and body screamed. The zip tie was like a knife now, and he knew he must be bleeding.

"You know nothing, but you managed to somehow put your foot in the middle of a complicated pissing contest."

Ilya kept quiet. Sometimes it was better to let idiots talk.

"Why did you interfere with Hollander?"

Ilya refused to speak. He could see the man's mouth twitch in annoyance, like Ilya was wasting his time.

"What does Medvedevy really want with him?"

The twitch turned into a look of disgust. He released Ilya's face, letting him take a deep breath, before he shoved him to the ground. Ilya twisted to take the impact on his shoulder. The guy took a cheap shot at his back as Ilya curled, trying to protect his stomach. The kick landed on his ribs in a narrow, stupid flash of white pain.

He barked orders at the Flannels, who dragged him back over to the pole. This time, Blue Flannel held him while Red Flannel pulled out a hunting knife. They cut off his jacket and sweater, not worried about leaving him with nicks and cuts. He was left in his white tank top, shivering. Then they pulled out a roll of duct tape, securing him to the pole.

Ilya flexed, testing out the durability, but they knew what they were doing.

The leader stepped up to him, flashing white teeth that Ilya wished he could headbutt him right out of his skull. The smile didn't reach his eyes.

"The way I see it, there are two reasons you would be at Hollander's cottage. Either you are meeting him here for a hand off, or there's already something here Medvedevy wants."

Ilya clamped his lips shut. They didn't know Shane was on his way; any twitch would give him away.

"Or," he tilted his head and chuckled. "A third option: You're fucking. Which would be hilarious. Rivals with benefits? Jesus. They could make a movie about that. It wouldn't have a happy ending."

Don't react, Ilya. Don't move a fucking muscle.

"So which is it? Should we be expecting another guest? Or are you going to be a good boy and show me what you're here to pick up?"

What the fuck could he do? Admit that Shane was on the road right now, headed into his worst fucking nightmare. Lie, and try to show them something? Once they had what they wanted, they would probably shoot him and dump him in the lake. If they thought he was lying, they would probably also shoot him and dump him in the lake.

Maybe if they did that, they'd just leave. Shane would come to an empty cottage, maybe know what happened, maybe not, depending on the clean up job.

But they wouldn't ever leave Shane alone, and then Ilya wouldn't be around to protect him.

He had to keep them interested. Angry. Off their game. But not so angry they gave up on him completely.

Thank fuck he had prepared his whole life to be this kind of pest.

"Oh, so scary," Ilya said. "Did your mother not tell you that you are good boy enough times? Because she told me. Many times. Loudly."

The guy chuckled for a moment. Then, he hit Ilya with the hardest punch he had ever taken in his life.

“You’re a little shit,” the guy said, his voice low and amused. Ilya spit blood and a tooth on the ground. He was pretty sure it was one of his fake ones. “Good. This might be more fun than I thought.”

He turned to the Flannels, who were watching a few feet back. “*Attachez-lui les jambes. Bandez-lui les yeux. S’il bouge ou fait le malin, faites-le souffrir. Je fouille le chalet. Et gardez un œil sur Hollander.*”

After he left, the two goons gagged him, tied his legs, and covered his eyes with a greasy rag. Ilya tried to not react. He knew it was a psychological thing – the darkness was always scarier. It would take more than a little darkness to scare him though. They could shatter his legs, break his jaw or gouge out his eyes. Nothing was scarier than the thought of Shane in his place instead, he thought resolute.

The thought of Shane walking in right now, seeing Ilya as some kind of fucking bait, made his chest tightened and hurt harder than any punch.

It didn’t take long before he was shivering, the sweat and adrenaline wearing off. The cabin wasn’t insulated, and now the splinters from the raw wood were digging into his arms and shoulders.

He could feel bruises more acutely across his stomach and ribs. They were deep aches that burned with each shallow breath, and a persistent, dull gnawing in his side where the Flannels’ boots had landed. His abdomen tightened with nausea; he hadn’t realized how badly he’d been kicked until the pain throbbed in waves, settling into a low, internal heat that no amount of shivering could dissipate.

He tried to flex his fingers but numbness shot up his arms. His legs were pins and needles, feeling useless and foreign the longer he had to stand here.

His body had never been the thing to let him down before, but it was getting clearer that something was seriously wrong. He never felt more helpless.

Ilya was glad for the dirty rag so the goons couldn’t see the shameful tears pricking in his eyes.

God. He had fucked things up, hadn’t he?

He could smell cigarettes in the air, acridic and tempting. He could also hear the crack of a can, crinkle of plastic, footfalls and French conversation as the Flannels seemed to have settled into guard duty.

Should he try to talk to them more? More money?

He didn’t know how long he had to stand there, his skin prickling into numbness. He couldn’t rest in this position, so he had to just endure the pain in his arms and shoulders, the soreness in his jaw and clench of his stomach. The cold felt like wolves gnawing on his bones, and after some time his teeth finally stopped chattering. Each breath felt heavier.

The faint light that permeated the blindfold was fading. It felt like the darkness was thickening, oppressive and claustrophobic, just as they intended it to be.

Hours must have been passing.

He could feel his mind slipping. One second he wanted time to stop, to stay in this liminal space where Shane was safe. The next he wished for something – anything – to just fucking happen.

For Shane to get here, to cut him down, hug him and tell him everything was going to be okay.

For that guy to come back and just shoot him.

He could almost feel it. Phantom hands in his hair, brushing his curls aside and muttering sweet words that he didn't need to understand to feel.

He wasn't going to survive this, Ilya realised. He was actually going to fucking die.

Nate had his will. He wanted Shane to keep the apartment. Maybe David Hollander would like one of his cars.

He thought about his mother, wondering if she was waiting for him. The part of Ilya that stubbornly wanted to live was getting colder. He tried to tense his toes, trying to stay away, but it felt like each breath was bringing a wave of nausea that he couldn't ignore.

Maybe, just for a second... he could sleep.

The slow, meandering thoughts broke when there was a sudden flurry of sound. He could hear the scrape of boots on the floor and shuffle, and then the third voice of the man coming back, and he didn't sound happy.

He felt the man's presence stop a few feet in front of him. Ilya didn't move.

"So. I found nothing."

Good. Or was that bad? Ilya wasn't sure anymore.

"Which means Hollander is on his way."

Relief hit so hard it almost made Ilya sob before he remembered that he didn't want Shane anywhere near here.

A hand roughly pulled the gag from his mouth and Ilya tried to wet his lips. It felt like sandpaper.

"When is he coming?"

Ilya's breath hitched, feeling ragged. A cold sweat ran down his spine. Soon. It would be soon.

“You could end this. Tell me Medvedevy’s plan. Is there a coup coming? Who’s pocket is he in?”

He had no fucking idea, but his throat was too dry and tacky with blood to form an answer. Even swallowing felt like fire. He wanted to beg for just a moment to lie down.

“Tell me,” the man’s voice was constrained. “I’ve heard of your family, Rozanov. Cowards who roll over back in the Motherland for the right price. What’s yours?”

Ilya’s limbs felt fused, as if his joints had forgotten how to bend. Could he really end this? Could he talk his way out of this?

You are lazy. A coward who runs from his problems. His father’s voice was always angry in his head. *When will you grow up and be a fucking man?*

The warm feeling when his mom pinched his cheeks and kissed his head. *Don’t worry, my little bear. You are strong in your own way.*

His jaw ached as he moved it. Each breath he tried made hot pain radiate from his lower back, and he felt like he was swaying, only the restraints keeping him from wobbling to the ground.

“Get. Fucked.” The words hurt him more than the guy.

The smell of tobacco and burned flesh hit him just before a flash of burning pain in his shoulder, making him hiss.

“Funny.”

The punch was also a relief. Maybe he would fall unconscious and finally end this.

“To be honest, I don’t want to deal with Hollander,” the guy leaned in, his hot breath burning as it washed over Ilya’s face. “From what I hear, he’s a whiny brat. Whatever part he plays, he’s just the payday, isn’t he? Not important, not like you. I want you to live, Ilya. Just tell me what I want to know, and it is that easy.”

Ilya took another breath, his chest feeling like it was too crowded for as much air as he needed.

“Okay, okay, I tell you,” Ilya rasped. He felt the man lean in closer. Ilya panted, feeling faint. “Maybe my English is bad, so you don’t understand. The plan is... for your mom... to get. *Fucked.*”

He didn’t even feel the next punch.

Even though Shane had grown up spending summers in this area at his parents' cottage and had never seen a bear, he had insisted on the build including emergency stashes of bear mace.

It had been a bit paranoid. Even his mom had teased him about it. But sometimes Shane's brain went on a journey and the result was that he absolutely couldn't relax until he had a few sealed boxes with high grade bear mace around his property.

He had made sure they were stocked for the construction crew (*"Just in case,"* he had grumbled when his parents laughed at him. *"You're going to be sorry for making fun of me if a bear shows up and this saves someone's life."*)

There was one such case around the back of the practice rink and Shane eased it open, grabbing the can with shaking fingers, tucking it into his jacket pocket.

The walls were thin, uninsulated plywood covered with water resistant plastic, so the sound carried.

They were speaking French. He could make out two with heavy Quebecois accents, even stronger than what he normally heard in Montreal. The other one was closer to what Shane spoke — government French that people learned in school. JJ had always made fun of him for sounding snooty, but the fans in Montreal had found it "cute".

"Wow, that was quick," one of the Quebecois speakers said, flat toned.

"You went too hard on him," the other sighed. "I told you he was looking pale."

"Cut him down," the Ottawa accent said, his voice tight with anger. "If I had known Dante was going to hire meatheads, I wouldn't have wasted my time on him."

"Well, we're still getting paid, right?"

"Dante wanted answers, and he's not going to be happy Rozanov can't answer them anymore. You're going to have to have kid gloves for Hollander."

"If he shows up."

"Just deal with this mess, then go back to the truck. If Hollander is on his way, I want to be forewarned."

Shane pressed against the pile of boards he was hidden against and held his breath as he heard the crunch of footsteps stepping outside, headed towards the cottage.

"Why the fuck else would Rozanov be here, dumbass," one of the Quebecois speakers scoffed at his friend. "Do you really believe those guys are friends that just hang out in the woods?"

"Maybe they're both into hunting or something."

"Just cut him down, okay?"

There were ripping and grunting sounds as if they were lifting something heavy.

“Hey, I think he’s still breathing.”

“Fuck. Do we wait?”

“Cyrille will probably kill us if we don’t get back on the road and scout for Hollander.”

“This is going to be messy.”

“Get one of the tarps from the truck.”

“We can’t use one of these?”

“No, idiot. Have you never seen a fucking crime show? We have to clean up after, and they’ll notice a fucking missing tarp.

“Well, you get it. I don’t want to walk all the way back to the road.”

“Fuck you. We’ll both go and warm up a little in the truck. He’s not moving any time soon.”

This time the footsteps were closer, as the two men circled around the practice rink, headed to the woods, their flashlight bobbing.

Shane didn’t know who he was praying too as they passed by, not ten feet from where he was hiding. He prayed they didn’t see his footsteps in the snow, but it was dark and they seemed distracted, complaining about how cold it still was.

He waited as long as he dared, watching their flashlight get further and further away before he detached from his hiding spot and headed to the entrance. He paused: the lights in the cottage were on and he could see the guy, Cyrille, through the large glass windows, his back turned toward Shane as he poured a glass of water from the sink.

A surge of anger shot through him.

How fucking dare this guy waltz in like he owned the place?

Shane shoved that aside — the important part was he wasn’t looking, so Shane slipped in to the practice rink, his heart pounding until it hurt.

The room was nearly pitch black, but Shane’s eyes had already adjusted to the dark so he could make out the shape on the ground right away.

Ilya was lying face down in the dirt, stripped to his tank top. His skin was pale, his lips blueish. There was blood splattered on the white shirt, more around his lower back where an industrial strength zip tie bound his forearms together.

For a moment, Shane thought the guys were wrong, that Ilya was already dead.

His heart restarted, jackhammering at twice the speed as he swallowed bile. He forced himself to move closer. He crouched, trying to listen for any footsteps approaching but it was hard to focus on anything else.

Ilya's skin was as cold as it looked. Shane pressed a hand to his cheek, then hovered his palm over Ilya's mouth, trying not to cry at the blooming bruise across his cheek.

Small, but it was there. An exhale on his fingers.

Shane shrugged off his puffer jacket and covered Ilya.

"Ilya," he whispered, touching his hair gently. "You've got to wake up, okay. Please."

"Ty pravda zdes'?"

"We have to go, sweetheart," he muttered, hoping the pet name would jog something. "Can you open your eyes? For me?"

Ilya groaned but obeyed, opening them a sliver. "Shane," he breathed out, reverent but too raw and wet to be comforting. "You're here."

"We've got to go," Shane said. "Can you stand?"

He watched as the hazy look in Ilya's eyes turned to panic. "You must go."

"*We* must go," Shane corrected. He tried to find a place on Ilya's body to touch that didn't make him wince and failed. His hands were still painfully restrained. "Wait — let me find a knife or something."

Something was a dusty first aid kit with a sharp pair of scissors. Ilya sobbed when Shane cut through the plastic ties, deep lacerations almost making him throw up.

He helped Ilya put on the jacket properly, then helped him to his feet. Ilya swayed dangerously, and Shane ducked under his arm.

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered as he wrapped an arm around the barrel of Ilya's chest and shoulders, taking most of his weight. "Let's go."

Shane didn't want to risk going out the front, so he helped Ilya hobble to one of the window frames covered in plastic. He cut through it with the scissors and then helped Ilya climb through. From here, they were out of sight of the cottage, and on the edge of the lake.

He thought briefly of making it back to the Porsche but abandoned the idea. If the Quebecois guys were on the road, he and Ilya weren't about to escape their notice in a bright red sports car.

The best idea he could come up with was to make it to the next cottage along the lake, or at least as far as they could in that direction. When they were safe he could call 911 again. Hopefully they were on their way.

The evening was only creeping in darker and colder as Shane tried to keep them on the rocky parts so they didn't leave footprints. If Ilya was bleeding, the jacket was absorbing it.

But each step seemed to take a lot out of Ilya, and his breathing was becoming more and more worrisome.

"Just a little further, baby," he coaxed as he struggled to maintain their balance on an icy patch. "A few more steps."

Ilya was muttering in Russian, until finally he said brokenly, "Please, stop."

"Okay, okay," Shane half carried him to a small copse of reedy trees and let him sink to the ground. "Just for a minute, okay?"

Ilya huddled on the ground. His face was paler, and Shane didn't think it was entirely because the moonlight was just bad for his complexion. "Promise me — you will leave, okay. Go safe."

"I'm not promising shit," Shane growled. "If you die, I die, Ilya. Maybe not today, but slowly. Alone. For the rest of my fucking life."

"Ty... luchsheye v moyey zhizni."

Shane kissed his bloody mouth. "Come on. We're almost there."

Almost was another few tense minutes in the dark, Shane with renewed vigour. This cottage was older and stood dark and empty. It was much too early for people to have opened their cottages yet; the majority, including Shane's parents, would come up on the long weekend in May.

Shane bypassed the front door and went for the garage entrance. As he suspected, this was unlocked. He shouldered it open. The inside was dusty and still cold, but it was better than being exposed.

Once Ilya was settled on a soft but dusty bundle of camping equipment, Shane checked the connecting door to the house, which was locked.

Taking a deep breath, Shane pulled out his phone.

"911, what's your emergency?"

Shane rattled off his address again. "I called about an intruder earlier."

"Yes, I just heard from the officers. They spoke with the homeowner and everything was fine."

"Fine?" Shane hissed. "I'm the homeowner! Whoever they spoke to is the fucking bad guy."

"Sir, you're going to have to calm down. Where are you now?"

Shane listed the neighbours address as best he could remember. He looked over to where Ilya had closed his eyes. He stood still and for a panicked minute he thought the worst.

“Ilya,” he crouched down and — thank fucking God — Ilya opened his eyes. Shane brought the phone to his mouth again. “We need an ambulance too — someone’s been—“

Shane heard tire tracks outside and nearly dropped the phone.

He had locked the garage door, right?

Silently, he crouched and moved towards the garage door, turning the lock as a flashlight beam flashed outside.

“Sir?”

Shane hung up the phone, but it was too late. The beam shone through the grimy window, over his head. He looked back at Ilya — from this distance he looked like another pile of discarded junk. Good.

He jumped as the handle jiggled.

Fuck.

Fuck.

With trembling hands he opened the recording app on his phone and placed it on a tool shelf over his head. If he was going to die, he wanted there to be a fucking witness.

It was one of the goons outside the door, and he shouted over his shoulder: “Fine, check the boat house, just fucking hurry up.”

Shane scrambled back as a heavy crack on the door nearly broke through the lock. He grabbed the first thing he could find, a fucking ancient hockey stick of all fucking ironic things, and turned to face the door, as the second kick splintered it open.

Chapter End Notes

I know.

I'm sorry!

But this is already the longest chapter yet! I had to cut it off somewhere!

Chapter 16: Shane/Ilya

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 16

When Shane first started skating, his parents had quickly praised his so-called *hockey IQ*. As lifelong hockey fanatics, they had been ecstatic. That, plus Shane's obvious enjoyment of the game, had led them to take his hockey seriously enough to find the best youth teams, just in case. It didn't take long for scouts and coaches to pick up on how good Shane was at visualizing the game, anticipating plays and pivoting when things changed drastically, whether it was because of an unexpected assist, or a disaster springing out of nowhere.

It was as natural as breathing, and he had been shocked when he realised that other people just didn't see things the way he did.

If he wasn't being paid millions of dollars with tens of thousands of people validating him, he might have thought he was a freak. But, since he had first heard the term as a kid, he had always (secretly) thought of this *hockey IQ* as his superpower.

The door splintered at the lock on the second kick, breaking inward with a bang. Shane narrowed his focus, the darkness hindering but not disabling him because of the moonlight outside, highlight the figure in the door. The guy was tall, maybe a few inches taller than Shane, with a thick beard, blue flannel and heavy workboots. But the most important thing was the hunting rifle in his hand.

Shane swung, the blade of the stick slipping between the guy's elbow and chest. He yanked – a very illegal hook – and the gun clattered to the ground.

“*Chalisse!*” the man swore, but Shane was already ahead of him.

He shoved the stick forward again, between his calves, and twisted, catching his ankle and sending him to the ground.

Shane dropped the stick and grabbed the barrel of the gun off the floor, pulling it towards himself with steady hands.

He had never held a gun before, but he didn't let that stop him. He turned it around, aiming it at the guy on the ground.

“Get the fuck out of here,” he growled in French, shocking himself with how unflinching his voice was.

The guy looked at him with outrage and fear on his face. Somehow, Shane felt as confident as he did on the ice.

This was just another shootout, staring down the goalie with intent.

And he wasn't afraid anymore, because he knew what to do. He was going to win, in every possible scenario.

The guy must have seen the deadly resolve on Shane's face, because he crawled back, getting to his feet with his hands up.

"*Tabarnak*, fucking fine, asshole." He spat on the ground, and Shane didn't flinch. Instead, he took a step forward, and the guy took two back.

"Give me your keys," Shane said. "Slowly," he added when the guy reached into his blue flannel. He listened, dragging out a set of car keys.

"Toss them on the ground."

The guy pulled a sour face and did what Shane asked. The keys were loud as they hit the cement.

"Now, leave."

"Fuck you!" the guy said, but backed away. Shane held the gun steady on him, advancing to the broken doorway, watching as he finally turned and jogged down the hill to the lake.

The second he was gone, all the bravado left him, and his knees nearly buckled.

Shane had no idea if there was a safety mechanism on the gun or if it was on, so he held it pointed at the ground. He grabbed the keys.

"Ilya, we have to go," he knelt next to him, slipping his arm under Ilya's shoulder again as he helped him stand up.

"That was hot," Ilya rasped. Shane would have rolled his eyes if he weren't so terrified.

"I have no idea how to actually use this thing," he confessed as they limped out of the garage.

The truck was parked badly in the driveway, and Shane had to help Ilya to the far side. It was one of those asshole, jumbo trucks with a steep climb into the cabin, so it took some effort to get Ilya into the passenger seat. By the time he was settled, Ilya was sweating and pale.

Shane rounded the front of the truck, nearly slipping on a patch of ice.

The quickest way to town would be to go past the cottage, but there was no way he was going to risk getting that close. He could go east and around the lake, he decided, opening the small backseat and shoving the gun in so that if it misfired it wouldn't hit either of them.

He opened the driver's door, keys in hand. If he did that, then the highway looped back south and—

He hit the side of the truck face first. He felt the impact on his shoulder before the sound of the gunshot behind him.

“Shane!” Ilya’s warning was too late.

He fell to his knees, the shattered glass from the backseat window cutting into his palms, before turning, pressing his back against the truck as the two figures advanced on them.

“Tu penses tu qu’on niaise?” the Quebecois goon was pissed.

Do you think we’re fucking around?

The words rang in his head, and it felt like gravity had shifted the earth on its axis. He struggled to push through it. He could hear them, but it felt like—

—Shane pressed against the wheel of the car, shaking: he thought he had been fucking shot—

And he *had* been shot. He could feel the pain radiating hotly now from his shoulder. It fucking *hurt*, but he knew it wasn’t the scariest thing right now.

The gun, pointed at his face, was.

The guy in the red jacket was focused on Shane, his eyes cold.

“I’m gonna smash your pretty fucking face in and make your Russian boyfriend watch!” the guy in the blue jacket shouted with more confidence than he had shown running away.

But it was like Shane’s fear transformed into molten steel.

Yeah, that Russian *was* his fucking boyfriend, and if they thought he was just going to lie here while they threatened his life, well - *fuck* them.

His mind was racing, but he felt calm because time seemed to slow down at the same time.

If he moved towards the truck, then Ilya would be behind him, in the path of a stray shot.

The keys were still in the hand he was holding to his shoulder.

He could throw the keys into the truck and run. He was fast. The fastest in the league. All he had to do was outrun a fucking bullet.

Shane's hand found the step on the truck, door open above his head, and he ignored the sound of the man readying his gun again.

He wasn’t afraid.

They could shoot him.

They could kidnap him.

They could drag him in front of that creep Dante in the warehouse again.

They could toss him in the fucking lake.

He didn't care. It would be worth it. He was going to save Ilya, and everything beyond that was a price he was willing to pay.

But, before he could stand, he heard Ilya's voice above him, changing the entire play.

"Stan' na koleni!"

In another world, Ilya had said that with a dirty grin, slinking down the bed to his knees.

But here and now—

Shane dropped to his knees as Ilya instructed, covering his face with his sweater.

The air turned suddenly, sharp and burning.

Despite protecting his face, Shane's eyes still watered, and the back of his throat felt like he had swallowed a jar of chilis as the cloud of bear mace wafted over his head.

"Ça rentre dans l'nez!"

"Maudit cave!"

Ilya chucked the used can out of the truck, coughing himself as he retreated back to the passenger side of the truckbed. Shane didn't waste another second. He hauled himself up, still covering his face as best he could until he could close the door.

He ignored the sheering, ripping pain in his arm as he shoved the blood-covered keys in the ignition, and the truck roared to life.

"Seatbelt!" he barked at Ilya as he threw the truck in reverse, gunning back until he could wrestle the truck the right way, and then slammed on the gas.

Ilya was cackling next to him, interspersed with horrible, shallow coughing fits. Shane clung to it – as long as he was laughing, he wasn't dead – and focused on getting the fuck out of there.

He turned away from the cottage, pushing as fast as he dared on the snowy dirt road.

He glanced over to where Ilya was pressed against the far door, his eyes red from the spray but alive.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Shane blinked, trying to get the stinging tears out of them so he could see better. "Jesus *fucking* Christ, Ilya!"

"Ne khodi v les, yesli boish'sya medvedey." Ilya laughed.

"Don't fucking make me Google Translate right now, Rozanov. Are you dying? What does that mean?"

"Don't go into wood," he wheezed, "if you are afraid of bears."

Shane laughed, though he didn't know why. "Put on your fucking seatbelt."

Ilya couldn't take his eyes off Shane.

He had clumsily buckled himself in, but he was drawn to the man like a bee to a flower. He soaked in everything. The bridge of his nose, the angle of his jaw. The bloody cut on his forehead. The way his sweaty hair fell in eyes. His grip on the steering wheel, and the intense focus as he drove. The dark red on his shoulder.

It was like being a teenager again, when he had realized he liked the sharp, masculine cut on a chest as well as the beauty in a curve. They blended into the same thing: desire and lust.

But this was more.

"Fuck," Shane was patting his pockets. "I left my phone in the garage."

"I buy new one," Ilya felt his words melting together.

"No," Shane glanced at him, and Ilya felt a heat rush over him, despite how cold he felt, as if he stepped into the sun. Shane looked worried, and Ilya just wanted to reach out and make him feel better. "We need to get you to a hospital. Do you have your phone?"

"No," Ilya said. He reached out to lay his hand on Shane's. Shane's skin felt like fire. "In lake."

"Why the fuck is your phone in the lake?"

"Don't want to tracking you," Ilya muttered. His eyelids felt heavy.

"Okay," Shane looked anything but okay. "We'll get to town, and there'll be signs, right?"

"Yes, love."

"Keep your eyes open, Rozanov."

"Okay." It was dark already, he wanted to say. No need to close them.

"Ilya? *Ilya*?"

He tried to squeeze Shane's hand to reassure him; he never wanted to hear Shane upset, even when they played against each other. He hoped Hollander knew that.

Ilya would never want to be the source of his pain.

He tried to force his eyes open because they had somehow fallen shut.

He tried to move his mouth to form the words.

He tried...

He...

...

He felt like he was under that lake, moonlight casting a sallow guide through the paper-thin ice above him.

It felt like icy hands pushed him upwards, hot adrenaline flooded his veins, hijacking his body. It was the same sensation he had felt in Montreal, unlocking him from his paralyzing fear when Shane had been callously tossed in the icy river.

He tried to turn and see who it was, who he owed Shane's life to, but he was falling upwards too fast, the light too bright.

The ice shattered around him as he broke through, and the pain melted away.

When he woke, his eyes were dry and tacky.

Nothing was in focus through the sliver of sight he managed to get. Everything felt distant, as if his brain was wrapped in a fuzzy blanket and told his body to take the night off.

Low beeping grew faster as he managed to convince his eyes to open. There was a heart monitor by his head. He drifted his gaze further out. Someone was sleeping in a recliner chair behind it.

The room, a hospital room, was dark. He breathed in the oddly comforting smell of antiseptic and plastic.

He concentrated on the sleeping form. They were wrapped in a blue blanket, dark hair sticking up, a mess, a few months grown out past his stupid, midseason haircut.

He opened his mouth to speak, but, like his eyes, everything felt dry and glued together.

"Hey." He flinched, the voice coming from behind him.

Mrs. Hollander half stood from her own vigil on the other side of the bed. Ilya stared at her as she reached for a bottle of water. "How are you feeling?"

Ilya tried to speak again, but all that came out was a croak. She quickly broke the seal of the water and put in a straw, bending it so that he could drink.

Had she done this for Shane when he had woken up? Ilya hadn't been able to stay to see.

"Don't worry, he's okay." She set the bottle back down and pushed Ilya's hair out of his eyes, a familiar gesture. He realized this was what Shane was constantly doing to him, and it relaxed him instead of feeling intrusive. "How are you? Are the pain meds working?"

“Yes,” Ilya managed to speak now that he felt less parched.

“You had a big laceration on your spleen. They had to do surgery.”

“My... what?”

“Your spleen. It had a cut.” He stared blankly at her. She looked a little anxious. “Your spleen? It’s—“

“*Selezenki*,”

Ilya heard the heart monitor jump as he turned his head back toward Shane, who was unwrapping himself from the hospital blanket. “I looked it up last night, just in case.”

He would. Ilya imagined him listening to the Google Translate over and over.

“Spleen,” Ilya repeated and reached out. Other than a sling and a few butterfly stitches above his eyebrow, Shane looked fine. Tired, with dark circles under his eyes, but... fine.

Shane took Ilya’s hand and squeezed it. He felt so warm.

“I’m going to go... guard the door.” Shane’s mother gently patted his shoulder and left them alone.

Shane let go of his hand long enough to lower the side of the bed, clearly practiced at doing it one-handed, and sat by his hip.

“How are you feeling?” Ilya was pretty sure he would have to start getting used to that question.

“Good,” he smiled. “You are okay?”

“Good, he says,” Shane’s voice was tight. “You scared the fuck out of me.”

“Sorry,” Ilya placed his hand on Shane’s thigh, clumsy with the wires attached to it.

Shane leaned down and pressed a kiss to his cheek, his eyelids, his nose, and, finally, softly on his lips. He was so tender, and Ilya realized it was because his own face was sore and a bit swollen.

“You were shot,” Ilya tightened his fingers on Shane’s thigh.

“Only a little,” Shane said. “More of a graze, it turns out. It’ll probably just be a badass scar. You were bleeding internally.”

“Hmm,” Ilya wasn’t fully listening. He was too focused on how beautiful Shane’s freckles were and how they moved when he talked. He tried to reach up to catch them, but Shane intercepted his hand before he could poke Shane.

“You’re still on the good drugs,” Shane kissed his palm.

“Don’t let... IOC knows,” Ilya muttered.

“I think they’ll be fine with it,” Shane muttered as Ilya managed to cup his cheek, running his thumb over under his eye. “We’ve got to stop doing this.”

“Okay,” Ilya agreed.

Shane helped him shuffle until he could get in the bed, which wasn't designed for two six-foot plus muscular hockey players to be sharing it. His body ached, but the drugs kept it at bay as they adjusted. They ended up having to hold each other, and Shane let Ilya rest his head on his uninjured shoulder.

He wasn’t sure how long he dozed. He had never felt this comfortable, not that he remembered. People came in and out, but he didn’t do more than open and close his eyes, answering some basic questions if it was a nurse or doctor. Throughout it all, he was content to just be held.

It was definitely the drug that had brought his guard down. Definitely.

Eventually, he opened his eyes, and he was alone in the bed. This time, it felt like waking up, not drifting out of unconsciousness. Ilya realized they must have lowered the drugs. He shifted, and his body protested.

It was daytime, and he could see at least three sets of coats and bags slung around the room. A copy of the New Yorker was on the bedside, and a laptop open on a small table.

All three Hollanders were here, somewhere.

He raised his bed in slow increments before hitting the buzzer for a nurse.

It didn’t take long for someone to come and start checking his vitals and IV.

“Mr. Rozanov,” she smiled at him. “Good to see you up and alert. How are you feeling?”

That question again.

“I am okay,” he smiled. He could feel the space where his tooth had been knocked out.

“Better because I have such caring person here.”

“I was told you were a flirt,” she laughed. “Are you sure you’re not in pain?”

“No,” he shook his head and winced. “Who told you about me? I am just a charming person, I need to know who is spreading rumours.”

She showed him how to work his pain management, then said, “Your friend is talking with the police. I can let him know you’re awake. Do you think you’re okay to answer some questions? I can send them away if it’s too much.”

The thought sobered him. “Yes, I can talk to the police.”

She helped him sit up more, fussing with his pillows and bringing him a mirror. He looked like shit with a bruised jaw, black eye, and a gap where his semi-permanent tooth had been knocked out. His hair was flat, so he tried his best to push it back by the time Shane walked in with two plainclothes detectives.

It felt almost anticlimactic to have it laid out for him.

The ringleader was Cyrille Haberer, though his name was meaningless as he had a few different aliases. The detectives knew him as a problem solver for the Montreal families, someone who was still making a name for himself. They had arrested him at Shane's cottage without a lot of fanfare. The other two were locals, already on patrol for other crimes that Ilya didn't care about.

Shane had his good arm wrapped around himself as the two detectives spoke, probably already having heard this before. Ilya kept glancing at him as his face grew more and more stoic.

"They're all in custody now. We were able to capture a great deal of information from Paquette and Simard, thanks to your partner's audio recording."

Both he and Shane looked at each other sharply at the word partner.

"Is this—"

"We are—"

Ilya glanced at Shane to speak first.

"Is this going to be... public?" He asked. Ilya saw his white knuckled hand as it gripped his sling.

"No," the detective replied. "It would be better, in fact, if you didn't say anything about this to the press. The Montreal family were interested in you once because they thought you were an asset to the Medvedy family. If it gets out that you've been targeted twice— well, sharks circle blood on the water."

Shane visibly paled, and Ilya glared at the detectives. "Of course we will not tell anyone. But what about you? In Montreal, they said nothing would be trouble, and now look at this." He gestured to the room. "Will you do nothing again?"

"Trust us, Mr. Rozanov, we are taking this seriously."

"Not so seriously. Shane Hollander has been kidnapped twice this year, and it is March!" Ilya snapped. "Fucking national treasure, and you don't protect it?"

"Ilya," Shane took a step toward him.

"No, he's not wrong," the female detective sighed. "But there is very little we can do. You are both public figures. You have limited choices. We can push for a witness protection program, but I doubt there is anywhere you could go that someone wouldn't recognize you."

“It’s a strange circumstance,” the male detective said more gently. “But it’s almost better to be in the public eye. The organizations who are after you don’t want to be in the press.”

“So they kill us quietly and hide bodies,” Ilya said bitterly. “Yes, we know.”

“We’re not suggesting just sending you back to the wolves,” the woman said. “We can provide support.”

“What does that mean?” Shane finally spoke.

“Tracking devices, more presence around games and your neighbourhoods. We can liaise with Boston for Mr. Hollander. And it might be a good idea to look into private security.”

Shane pinched his nose with his uninjured hand. Ilya wished the two detectives would leave and take their complicated problem with them.

“I just wish it were easier,” Shane said, his voice tight with misery.

Ilya reached for Shane’s hand, ignoring the audience. They had clearly figured it out, or they were worse detectives than Ilya cared to have on his case.

“I wish that too.”

Shane hesitated, but finally took Ilya's hand, cautiously, as if he were worried someone was going to snatch it away. Ilya held tight, and he saw the tension around Shane's eyes relax a little

“But it is not,” Ilya said steadily. “And I am not giving up without a fight, Hollander. Is that not what you told me?”

Shane snorted. “I told you I’d fight you for giving up, didn’t I? What a bold line, huh?”

“And you said you would win,” Ilya ran his thumb over Shane’s knuckles, and Shane squeezed back. “We will win, okay?”

“Okay,” Shane said softly, and lifted Ilya's hand to his lips. "I love you."

Ilya's throat was too tight to respond, so he just held Shane's hand tightly and hoped the other man knew what he was trying to say.

Shane looked back to where the detectives were discreetly looking away. He straightened his shoulder, slipping into a mode that made Ilya confident enough to loosen his grip. “So. What were you saying about Boston?”

Ilya let Shane plan as he listened, content for the moment to relax in the knowledge he was safe, somehow, wildly, loved.

One more chapter and then epilogue.

Home stretch!

Chapter 17: Ilya/Shane

Chapter Notes

Hey all. Wow. It's not that this chapter took a long time to write, but there was a lot going on. Once I actually sat down, it did just come out.

This is the last chapter, though I will probably do an epilogue at some point. I feel I could keep going with this story forever, but I wanted to wrap it up so I could write something else. It definitely sparked a lot of ideas.

Also, I did edit the end of Chapter 16 to flow better. If you are coming straight to Chapter 17, feel free to read the last 200 words or so of Chapter 16 if you'd like. The changes don't affect your understanding of the story if you don't want to.

Quick trigger warning: There is a brief racial and misogynistic slur directed at Shane, but it is brief.

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

Chapter 17

When Ilya went to stay with the Hollanders to recover, Shane's dad – *David*, as he continually insisted Ilya call him – made him soup, *borscht* this time. Ilya had been discharged with orders to rest for the next two months, and no argument could be made that would let him recover in the hotel by the Costco.

The Hollanders' home was just as he remembered: well-off but in a way that felt comfortable, and filled with pictures of baby Shane, family vacations, and accolades from all three family members.

Shane had gone back to Boston with Mrs. Hollander – *Yuna*, she had stressed that when they had left. The Bears had made it through the first round by a hair, and the doctors were optimistic that his shoulder would heal and be fine in a week. Still, Ilya was glad Mrs. Hollander (*Yuna*) would be with him.

Ilya wished he could see LeClaire's expression if he tried the same passive aggressive shit with her. He didn't hate the man the way he hated Montreal's coach, but it was satisfying to know that incompetence, or maybe a lack of backbone, had consequences.

A historic three-way trade, engineered because he had shown a few weeks of vulnerability and trust in the slime weasel Morozov, had succeeded in destabilizing two franchises,

alienating both fanbases, and removing both Ilya and Shane from the majority of the postseason.

Brilliant fucking management.

After a few days of bedrest, Sam Nguyen, Director of Team Operations, picked him up from the Hollanders' address. Ilya still wasn't sure if it was unusual for the Director to be doing menial tasks like playing taxi driver, but Ottawa was a weird team. Ilya couldn't tell she was bursting to ask about *why* he was staying with Shane Hollander's parents, and only professionalism kept her from exploding with questions.

She didn't use a car service this time, just a nice-looking, practical SUV. Ilya moved gingerly as he sat in the front. He had been able to get his tooth repaired, but his jaw and eyes were still bruised, so he kept his sunglasses on despite the overcast day. He hoped they didn't have any media scheduled for today.

"So, um, how are you feeling, Mr. Rozanov?" she asked as they got on the road.

"Great," Ilya shifted. The incision on his stomach was still sensitive. "Ready for game."

"Oh, there's no game—" she paused as her brain caught up. "Oh, you're joking."

"Yes," Ilya smiled faintly. "I am funny man."

"I've heard that about you," she said, but there was a hesitancy in her voice. "So, you're settling in? Made... friends?"

He snorted. "Yes. I am friendly guy too."

She laughed nervously. It was probably cruel to make her sit in the uncomfortableness, but Ilya couldn't bring himself to put on an easy face right now. His body hurt. He didn't want to sit for hours in the boardroom going over stats and video and all the boring aspects of hockey. And, he missed Shane.

Usually at this time of year, the offices and barn were quiet, especially this far from a central location, like downtown Ottawa. A thirty minute commute to the area was one of the many things he had to get used to. However, instead of the minimal staff he had expected, quite a few more people milling around wearing plain black jackets and earpieces.

"Oh, here," Sam passed him a lanyard and ID card before they reached the front door. "We've implemented some new security measures."

Ilya felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle. He had told the Centaurs he had been in a car accident, a white lie, backed up because the rental they had given him had apparently been a casualty of the goons' rage. There was no reason to expect he was the reason for all this, but he couldn't shake the suspicion.

"Security measures?" Ilya echoed as they were stopped, and his ID was thoroughly checked and scanned. He had to take off his sunglasses, but neither Sam nor the staff say anything

about the bruising. “Is there a reason?” he asked, trying to stay calm as they got on the elevator to the offices.

“Oh, there haven’t been any threats or anything,” Sam’s voice was unconvincingly casual. “It’s just... the owners just want to make sure everyone here feels... safe.”

The doors opened to the boardroom floors, and when Ilya stepped into the largest one, which was more like a lecture room, he realised he was the last to arrive.

His entire body fought the urge to flee as the guys started cheering, big whoops and hollers. Sam stood behind him, and gently pushed him forward. He smiled tightly, feeling caught off guard. The Bears had been an expressive team, but this was... a lot. Especially for the first postseason meeting where they were going to go over how much they sucked.

He had expected an uncomfortable meeting with the head coach, Donavon, justifying how the hell he had been so injured at the start of the offseason after such a disastrous March and April. His contract had been bought for a reason, and he had fully expected to grovel and promise to attend practice through the pain.

Instead, they looked at him like he was a hero returning from war.

Bood clapped a hand on his shoulder, making him fight a wince. “Come on, Rozzie. No party starts until the Captain gets here.”

Someone had rustled up a cushion for his seat. “We gotta keep at least one part of our delicate leader healthy!” Mallory hollered from the back, but Ilya only relaxed a bit.

“Is true,” he said, his voice a little thick. “Without my face my ass must be protected.”

There was an echoing ruckus as the room seemed to click into place, the ice broken into good humour. Ilya settled into his seat with exaggerated care, causing more jeers and laughter, and it took Donavon turning on his mic for the room to settle down and focus them in.

The initial morning was dedicated to the boring part, sure, but it was necessary. Ilya stayed quiet for most of it, and was grateful that beyond the initial attention, everyone seemed to ease back. They also announced Hendricks’ retirement, which helped Ilya fade a bit more into the background as the exhaustion started to catch up to him. He sat through it, smiling and adding comments when needed, but his side was aching, and he was struggling to stay upright, cushioned seat or not.

Donavon was talking about logistics, when Ilya felt a tap on his shoulder. Sam crooked her finger, and he quietly got up to follow her out of the room.

“Sorry,” she said as she led him to another room. “You’re needed in a private meeting, and this seemed like a good chance.”

“Of course,” Ilya said, and resisted the urge to hunch over. It was too soon after surgery to do this much activity, but he pushed through. Only a few more hours and he could go back to the

Hollanders', take the painkillers that made him sleepy, eat whatever David wanted to try out of his Russian cookbook, and sleep on the couch.

The room she brought him too was dimly lit and he was grateful to see it had more comfortable chairs than the lecture room. Inside, he was surprised to see Nate and a serious looking woman with a pile of folders and binders in front of her. He was delighted to see, sleeping in Nate's arms, the fluffiest puppy he had ever seen in his life.

"Who is this beautiful baby?" Ilya forgot the pain and fatigue as he took the seat next to Nate. Sam sat opposite.

"Well, she'd probably prefer to be called Chief of Security, not baby," Nate said dryly, and Ilya rolled his eyes.

"Fuck off," he said in Russian. "You can't bring in a *dog* and expect me to care about another person I'm supposed to impress."

The woman cracked a smile and said, in lightly accented Russian, "He's right, Nate. I can't compete with a dog."

Ilya felt the back of his neck heat up. In English, he said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," she said back in English. "I also was very excited to meet the puppy. Daria Levedeva."

Ilya couldn't stop the grimace as he reached to shake her hand. He settled back, trying to catch his breath as casually as he could. He saw her exchange a glance with Nate.

"I did not know the Centaurs had more Russians," Ilya said, trying to keep the tension from his voice. She didn't seem like another power-hungry Morozov if she hadn't approached him in the two months since he had been here, but it felt unnerving to not know she was here.

Daria shrugged. "My parents moved to Toronto when I was a child, so my Russian is a bit rusty. Nate reached out and suggested we sit down and discuss some things."

Ilya had, of course, told the medical team about his injuries, but only the bare minimum. He glared at Nate, who was avoiding his eyes and cooing over the puppy. "Sure. What would we discuss?"

"Well," Daria opened one of the folders, and Ilya felt all the blood drain from his face as he saw the mug shots of Cyrille Haberer, Loic Paquette and Henri Simard staring back at him. "I thought we should discuss this first."

"Hold the puppy," Nate commanded, and shifted the bundle of fur into Ilya's hands. Ilya couldn't protest as the puppy, waking up a bit, squirmed. The distraction worked as he settled it down, the softness of its fur and liquid brown eyes offsetting the spike in adrenaline.

"I hate you," he said in a soft voice, directing the words at Nate. "I thought we were on the same page."

“I’ve got a vested interest in having living clients, so I certainly hope we’re on the same page,” Nate said dryly, and Sam snorted.

Ilya went back to ignoring him and scratched the puppy’s ears. “So you know?”

“Yes,” Daria said, glancing at Sam.

“The owners know, too,” Sam said. “They were a bit surprised when they got a call from CSIS asking about, uh, mob affiliations.”

Ilya felt everything was slipping away, and all he could do was pet this dog. He did so carefully, and smiled when it licked his fingers. “So. I am deported, yes?”

“What?” Sam interjected. “No? Right?”

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” Nate said quickly. “No one can deport you.”

He paid off a mobster. He lied to the police during Shane’s investigation. He hadn’t told the Bears or the Centaurs the truth about anything. He was tangled in an inevitable web, and the spider was coming to cut off his head. He knew how these things went. He continued to pet the dog.

“They were just gathering information,” Daria clarified. “One of the owners talked to a friend who knew someone in the RCMP and–”

“And there are no secrets anymore,” Ilya sighed. “So, again, how long until I am fired?”

“No one is getting fired,” Nate said firmly. “If they are, they’d have a lot of hell to pay for a breach of contract.”

Ilya glanced up and based on Sam’s worried frown and Daria’s mild expression, he believed Nate. For the moment.

“We are going to implement some changes, though,” Daria flipped open another binder. Ilya listened, a bit stunned, at the detailed plan she laid out: security teams during away games, new protocols for home games, a discreet allowance in his salary for any private security he wished to have in his home.

It was a dizzying conversation, and he was glad Nate was there to fire back any critiques or modifications. After the end of an hour, his exhaustion circled back, harder this time as the revelation that he really had no secrets, except maybe one now, was taking its toll.

Sam leaned across the table. “Do you want to go back to the hotel? Or, uh, your friend’s house? No one is expecting you to stay the full day.”

Ilya was tempted to say yes, but he shook his head. “No, I can stay.”

Nate glanced over and sighed. “Go home, Rozanov. I’ll call you tonight.”

“I thought I was *your* boss,” Ilya said without any fight. He went to pass the puppy back, but Nate shook his head.

“That’s your problem now.”

“What?” Ilya thought maybe he misheard.

“I have a good list of trainers in Ottawa,” Nate said, dismissing Ilya with a wave of his hand. “He’s going to be big, so get him into a class early.”

Ilya looked at Nate stunned, but the man just gave him a tired look. “Go, Rozanov. I’ll sort everything out and meet with you later.”

It was a strange experience, but one that Ilya was facing more and more as he was muscled out of the room by Sam’s small but effective guidance. He wanted to protest – insist that he could do it well enough on his own – but he was feeling very efficiently handled.

The drive back was almost as quiet as the initial one had been. The back of Sam’s car was laden with dog supplies from Nate, so all Ilya did was lightly doze. It wasn’t until they pulled up in front of the Hollander’s that he realised he hadn’t told Sam to bring him back here and not the hotel.

“Ilya,” she said as she turned off the car. “I know things have been rough lately.”

You’ve had a rough stretch.

Ilya suddenly couldn’t get LeClaire’s voice out of his head.

“Yes,” he said, relaxing his grip on the dog when he realised he was gripping too tight. “I’m not trying to cause trouble. As soon as I heal, I promise, things will change—”

“Ilya, with respect, none of this is your fault,” Sam said steadily.

With respect, captain, this is becoming a pattern.

“When I say the owners were startled, I meant they were *worried*.”

It’s a safety issue at this point.

“The new security protocols are hopefully enough, but if there is anything you need—”

I want to see that whatever you’re dealing with out of the barn stays out of the barn.

“—I want you to call me. Day or night. Okay? Or Daria, or Nate. Whoever it is. We take player safety seriously. Okay?”

The puppy licked his chin, squirming with impatience, but Ilya had to take the moment to compose himself.

“Thank you,” he said finally.

“Come on,” she said warmly. “Let’s get this stuff in. And, if I’m completely serious, I’m so excited to see *Shane Hollander’s* house. I used to bring my kids to see him play in the junior league. I know the trade must be hard, but they’re so excited to watch him in the playoffs. He’s kind of a legend, you know?”

At that, Ilya grinned and met her eyes. “Yes. I know.”

Game 4 was hell.

Well, almost hell.

Shane was pretty sure he had been through hell last month, dragging Ilya through the dark with the mob on their trail, but Game 4 with a 0-3 losing streak was close.

The team was good. They had all the parts, but Shane had played less than a dozen games on this team, and it was too much to be the glue that kept them together.

That’s what his therapist had said to him anyway. Shane wasn’t ready to believe it yet.

There had to be something he could do. Some words he could say to just get them over the mental blocks they had. He knew it was his fault (it wasn’t), that he just needed to remold himself into Ilya. He tried to imagine what Ilya would say.

Listen the fuck up!

Shane hung his head on the bench, sweat dripping into his eyes. He didn’t have that kind of presence. And it would sound so fucking disingenuous if he tried.

It also didn’t help that someone on the Nashville team had spent time studying Shane because they knew to go after his left knee and now his shoulder any chance they could. The Boston fans were not kind tonight – they were pissed at Shane for missing the first bracket, and booed every missed pass or lag in energy he had. Or maybe they were just used to booing him. Shane didn’t know how much was muscle memory.

Ryan Price was sitting next to him as they both caught their breath as the ice was cleared. It wasn’t like they were best friends, but as two outsiders, they had gravitated to each other without meaning to.

LeClaire and Morozov were behind them on the bench, arguing. Shane knew what it was about. Shane wasn’t as physical a player as Ilya: he relied on speed and reflexes to get into the O-zone whereas Ilya punched his way through. The team wasn’t used to playing so much defense for their centre, and it was showing with how much Shane was getting bowled over in the first two periods. It had been acceptable during the regular season.

In postseason, he was fucking everyone up.

Whatever argument LeClaire and Morozov had, ended, and LeClaire left to talk to the video coach. Morozov leaned over, his voice low and angry as he hid his mouth behind his hand.

“Hollander, get in Johansson's face,” he said, naming the rookie on Nashville’s team. The kid was outshooting everyone tonight, including Shane. He was small, wiry, and fucking annoying to chase. “Do whatever you have to.”

“Me?” Shane looked confused.

“No one is going to be guarding against you,” Morozov said quickly.

“You’re asking me to target the kid?” Shane gave him an incredulous look. When Ilya had briefed Shane about the Bears, he had told Shane to stay away from Morozov. There hadn’t been any reason for Shane to interact with him, and had managed to avoid any real conversations with the man. “I don’t play that kind of game.”

“I’m not asking you to hurt him, you pussy,” Morozov snarled, and Shane turned over his shoulder, glaring at him. “But if he hurts you, Price will get in there.”

Shane turned further around. The ice crew was nearly done now, and Shane turned to fully look at the man. “You want me to take a *dive*?”

“Just do your fucking job,” Morozov said. “You’re not paid to fucking think, you’re paid to do whatever the fuck I tell you or I can get your Chinese ass tossed out just as easily as I did Rozanov.”

It wasn’t the first time Shane had heard those insults, but it hurt as if it were a deep stroke – it always fucking did. He had to bite the inside of his cheek, hating that he biting back his own words because he knew they would be useless here.

Price was staring stonily ahead, his jaw tight. Shane wouldn’t say he knew Ryan that well. They got along because they both liked to be quiet. The only time he had seen the guy relax was the two times they had gone to a gay club together and Shane awkwardly watched Ryan across the bar pick a guy up while trying to avoid being hit on, but even then they hadn’t really talked.

Shane steeled himself. “Is that from LeClaire?”

“Do as you’re fucking told.” Morozov walked away, muttering under his breath.

There was a long silence as they readied themselves to get back on the ice. As Shane adjusted his gloves, Ryan finally said, “Do you want me to kill him?”

“Johansson?”

“Morozov.”

Shane snorted. “Maybe.”

“I can play defense, for once,” Ryan offered, a trace of bitterness in his voice. “Clear the way.”

Shane glanced at him quickly. “Not that we’re coming back from this, but yeah. Let’s try.”

They went into the third period losing already, so Morozov sent Ryan, who got such little ice time, out. Halfway through, Shane managed to snake the puck out from Johansson and – for a split second – he thought strategically about obeying.

It was a fucking stupid plan.

Hurting their rookie would do nothing but ruin Nashville’s chances in the semifinals, and the Bears would be out by then anyway. All it would be was a petty act of revenge, and it would leave a young guy hurt.

Shane sped down the ice, Ryan Price barrelling behind him.

True to his word, with Ryan scattering Nashville’s defensive line, it came down to the goalie. In a moment of panic, which was probably due to Price’s massive presence nearly in his face, Nashville’s goalie shifted left. Shane managed to slip a puck in the unprotected corner, not tying the game but putting them on the board.

Ryan and Marleau collided into him like a herd of elephants and Shane relished in the victory. He could see Morozov slamming a fist on the boards, and it felt even sweeter.

They still lost, of course, taking them out of the playoffs.

Shane felt drained after the game, bittersweet because mentally he was grateful to be done. Now he could go home and finally see Ilya. They could spend hours, days, weeks in bed, or fight over video games, or try cooking more meals. It was already established that they were friends, at least as far as Ottawa was concerned. They could go out, and it wouldn’t be so fucking weird.

It felt like years ago he had thought about Sochi, having Ilya show him around his home country. It wasn’t so much a fantasy anymore, though in this daydream he would be the one to show Ilya around. That was okay. He was flexible.

And maybe, during one sunset evening somewhere, he would get the courage to, maybe, gauge Ilya’s interest in–

But, as he looked around the locker room, every other face was devastated and exhausted. The weary happiness he felt faded into guilt.

LeClaire came in and gave a halfhearted speech about effort and leaving it on the ice, but the words were like a vacuum, sucking the last remaining energy in the room. Shane’s heart ached for a moment – this wasn’t his team, but these were Ilya’s teammates. And he couldn’t just leave them like this.

He took a deep breath and stood up. The room was so quiet, that’s all it took for every hollow eye to turn to him.

“Look,” Shane began, pushing this sweat-slick hair out of his eyes. “I know I’m not the guy you wanted in the locker room during the playoffs. I’m not the guy who got you this far, but I’m the guy you’ve got. We’ve all been playing like we expect Rozanov to walk through the door and take this C back, and it’s not fucking working.”

He took a deep breath to steady himself. “I spent my entire career hating the Bears, not just because of Rozanov, but because Boston’s always been a formidable team. You were playing for each other, for your city. Now?”

He glanced around the room and caught Morozov’s eye, cold and defiant. The air in the room had gone from dead to buzzing. Morozov’s face was turning red. The next words flowed easily, reckless because the way forward felt unlocked, finally.

“Morozov told me earlier that I’m not paid to think. That I’m paid to do whatever the fuck I’m told or else,” he let the words hang in the air, the implication as clear as he could toe the line.

Several of the guys shifted, and the whole defense line shot Morozov a dirty look. Marleau’s head snapped up, looking between Shane and the coaching team. “Rozanov isn’t exactly a guy who lets himself be played like a puppet,” Shane’s voice leveled out to something dangerous and calm. He saw a lot of nods now, the energy started to pressurize. “And neither are you guys.”

Mutters were growing, and he saw LeClaire looking hard at Morozov. “Rozanov said, we fuck up other teams,” Marleau said, his eyes burning as Morozov shifted uneasily. “Not our own fucking team.”

It wasn’t surprising to see Morozov stalk out the door. LeClaire watched him go, with a hard expression. Shane felt a grim sense of self satisfaction, but it would never be enough. He turned back to the team who looked on the edge of going after him.

“Next year, we’re going to have to face Rozanov, and Montreal,” he said, the name of the city tasting like venom. He knew his face must show his intensity at the last word, because the last players he knew still questioned his loyalty seemed to straighten up. “Trust me when I say there’s no lost love between me and the Metros. Next year, they think they’re going to get the cup. They think they can do it, but trust me when I say they’re going to have to climb over my dead body.”

For a second, the room was bated. Then, a voice cracked the silence.

“Fuck Montreal!”

Shane grinned as the team roared loud enough he knew the media team outside was going to be buzzing.

“Fuck Montreal!”

The high of the cheering carried Shane all the way back to Ilya’s penthouse, the words turning over and over in his head. The self-righteous certainty lasted until he stepped into the

elevator.

Did he go too far? Did he just ruin a man's life?

Fuck him, the other side of his brain crowed.

Ruin his fucking life. Let him rot. For what he did to Ilya. And for what he did to Shane.

The lights in the penthouse were already on, and Shane's hand went to his pepper spray.

He had half a second to pull it out as a small clicking sound raced towards him, and a small, black dog raced towards him. Shane still yelped and flung himself backwards as the puppy lunged for his ankles.

"*Mishka!*" a familiar voice made Shane's head jerk up, his heart in his throat.

Ilya looked disheveled with a red crease mark on his forehead as he padded barefoot and bare chested into the entrance way. The surgical scar on his stomach was all but healed, though Shane would never be able to look at it without remembering how it was earned. One day, Shane might not feel a protective urge well up in him. But today wasn't that day.

Ilya scooped up the puppy as it barked at Shane.

"Good boy," Ilya praised. "*Ty u menya takoy umnyy i smelyy medvezhonok.*"

"What the fuck—" Shane dropped his bag. He wanted to lunge at Ilya, press him against the wall like he had the last time they had been together in this apartment, but he paused as the puppy wiggled, teeth snapping. "How are you *here?*"

Ilya finished smooching the puppy before he put it down. He grinned. His bruises had also faded over the last few weeks. "I came to watch my hot boyfriend in the playoffs, but..." he trailed off hesitantly.

Shane knew he should feel worse about the loss, that Ilya knew how much Shane hated not winning and was being sensitive. Caring. A good boyfriend.

But Shane didn't fucking care – this wasn't his year for hockey. He had come to terms with that months ago.

No, this was his year for something better.

With the dog out of the way, he went with his instinct and pressed Ilya back against the wall.

"Oh, you want to be in charge?" Ilya grinned.

"No," Shane kissed him, pushing his tongue into Ilya's mouth as he cupped the back of Ilya's neck, his fingers threading through the curly hair. Ilya's hands gripped Shane's hips like they belonged to him, his thumbs digging in until he slid them over Shane's ass, squeezing. Shane groaned, tilting his hips forward, his cock half hard and pressed against Ilya's.

“Fuck, Ilya,” he felt like he was a rubber band stretched out, and his hands were trembling as he ran his hands over Ilya’s cheekbones, jaw. “I need– I need you to–”

“I know, sweetheart,” Ilya soothed, his hands pulling Shane in harder, grinding Shane against the crease of his hip. Shane felt dizzy, wild, like if he didn’t get naked and horizontal right now he was going to–

“Shit!” he yelped, as a sharp nip to his ankle nearly made him trip. The fluffy terror barked at Shane with an attitude that was bigger than it.

Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane’s waist, keeping him stable and pressed against Ilya’s warm skin. “Mishka,” he scolded without heat as the puppy barked again. “This is your other daddy. Be nice.”

“I thought you said you got a dog, not a bear cub,” Shane had to lift his foot out of nipping range again.

“He is teething,” Ilya said, the last word enunciated. “Once he knows you, he will not bite.”

Shane pressed his lips together, but let Ilya go as the man reached down to pick up the puppy, smothering it with kisses. Was it wrong to feel jealous of a dog?

“I will take him outside to the bathroom,” Ilya said, reaching for his hoodie and a leash hanging by the door. “Put your things away in the bedroom, okay?”

He told himself to calm the fuck down, he had handled weeks away from Ilya before, and they were about to get a long stretch together, longer than they had ever had before. He could survive ten minutes without–

The bedroom had been transformed.

Flickering candles on the side tables and dresser cast long shadows in the room, softening the white walls. Outside, the city lights twinkled, like little flames of their own right. He felt like his soul was outside his body, floating above him, watching in surreal vision as he turned and saw Ilya standing there, a small dark box in his hand.

“Hollander,” he was half smiling, the bruises all but faded in the candlelight. If Shane wasn’t standing so close he would have mistaken the expression for his usually assured cockiness. But, he saw the way Ilya held the box, his hand shaking a little. “I would get on my knees, but, you know,” he gestured to his side ruefully.

“Wait,” Shane choked out. He fumbled with the dresser drawer he had claimed. When he turned back, Ilya was watching with darkened eyes, his mouth half open in surprise as his chest rose and fell. “I can get on my knees–”

“No,” Ilya stepped forward and caught his hands before he could attempt it. “I don’t trust you when you have chance to suck dick.”

“Fuck you,” Shane’s voice was shaking as hard as Ilya’s hands.

“Marry me,” he said the words like they were a challenge.

“Asshole,” Shane felt his eyes stinging. “I was going to say it first this time.”

“Beat you,” Ilya grinned, but Shane was watching through a watery lens.

This time when they kissed, it felt sweet and hot, less coordinated. Shane felt like his body was numb until it wasn’t and his knees were hitting the bed.

There was something on the bed, petals or something romantic like that, but he didn’t care, not when Ilya’s hands were sweeping up his sides, dragging his shirt up and pebbling his skin in their wake. All he felt was the wet heat of Ilya’s mouth on his skin, chasing away any chill. Shane knew he was making some embarrassing sounds, but whatever he was doing seemed to be doing it for Ilya, because he worked on Shane’s pants next.

He knew why Ilya’s mouth couldn’t seem to leave his, because he felt the same compulsion, their frantic undressing interrupted because Shane couldn’t stop dragging his tongue across Ilya’s throat, or bite at his chest.

“Shane,” Ilya said with a tight voice. “If you don’t let me take your pants off—”

“Okay, fine,” Shane forcibly willed himself back, lifting his hips to help Ilya pull them off. “The candles!” he managed to wince before Ilya threw them across the room. Literally burning alive would ruin the mood.

In a very short time, they were both naked and Ilya was holding Shane’s knee in the crook of his elbow as his fingers opened him up, slowly yet with an urgency that Shane could feel in his bones.

“So fucking hot,” Ilya muttered against his neck. “Hollander—”

He ran his hands up Ilya’s stomach, feeling the muscles tense and quiver beneath his palms. He watched, his eyes hazy as Ilya leaned down, kissing him. His tongue moved with Shane’s as if they were dancing, hot and slick. Shane wrapped a hand around Ilya’s erection, his foreskin letting Shane stroke him easier, his thumb pressing right below the head. Ilya hissed in his mouth.

“Come on, Rozanov,” Shane panted. “Don’t tell me you aren’t going to last.”

“Oh, I will last,” Ilya shot back as he twisted his hand, and Shane felt an electric bolt down his spine. “You don’t watch porn so it is your stamina I worry about.”

“You’re such a fucking piece of—” his insult was cut off with a cry as Ilya rubbed against his prostate, the small bundle of nerves rendering him into a whimpering mess at the complete mercy of his body and Ilya’s skill. “Ahh—” he tried to speak, tried to tell Ilya to fuck him already, but the words were just out of reach.

“Hmm,” Ilya grinned, working him over so hard Shane was half convinced he was going to come without even touching his dick. “What is that?”

He must have had some breakthrough of mercy, because he eased off and Shane took a sobbing breath.

“Fuck me,” he glared, not entirely sure he was coherent. “Just want to feel you in me. Please don’t fucking make me wait.”

Ilya kissed him, a substitute for an apology, as he withdrew his fingers. Shane helped open the condom wrapper, squeezing cruelly as he rolled it on, and Ilya swatted the side of his hip.

Shane braced himself with his knee as Ilya shifted behind him, the slick head of his cock pressing against his entrance for a few beats before it started to breach him. He gripped the bedspread at the delicious burn that always happened. Ilya pulled out slightly, using shallow thrusts that were almost as bad as the teasing way he had used his fingers.

“Ilya,” his head was cushioned on Ilya’s arm and he bit it, the only outlet for his frustration.

“Naughty, *kotik*,” Ilya huffed, and Shane was vindictive enough to feel pleasure that his voice was strained.

“I know that one,” he took one hand from the bed and interlaced his fingers with Ilya’s hand over his head. “I’m not a fucking *kitten*.”

“But you are angry like a little kitten,” Ilya’s mouth was panting on the back of his neck. His other hand was holding Shane’s hip as he pushed harder, sinking deeper into Shane. He felt Ilya’s mouth on his shoulder, kissing the fresh scar there. His breath hitched.

“Want to see you,” Shane said, suddenly needing to be face to face. Ilya pulled out, the emptiness almost painful as they shifted, Ilya hovering over him as he drove inside again.

“Is okay?” Ilya brushed Shane’s hair back in an achingly sympathetic gesture.

“Yeah,” Shane wrapped his legs high around Ilya’s waist as he brought him down for another kiss. “Just... wanted to see your face.”

“It is handsome.”

“I can’t believe I fucking fell in love with a moron like you.”

Ilya smiled as he kissed him, his hips moving faster as Shane melted into the mattress. It didn’t take long before he was on the edge again, moaning shamelessly as Ilya braced on his knees. It took one desperate stroke for him to come all over himself, his body thrumming as he felt Ilya let loose, his chest flushed red as Shane panted, trying to recover.

They lay there, together, for what felt like forever. Shane didn’t want to give up this feeling, ever. He wondered if it were possible to just fall asleep like this, so he could just pretend this euphoria was his new baseline.

But the blissful aftermath was interrupted by a whine, and Ilya reluctantly pulled away. “Mishka,” he kissed Shane apologetically. “I put in the kennel. But he does need a walk.”

Shane nodded, too relaxed to complain. As Ilya took care of the condom, Shane groped around the bed. "Where are the ring boxes?"

"Fuck," Ilya helped him search until they found them both, discarded on the floor. They looked at them hesitantly - they were pretty much identical, and Shane was a bit embarrassed that he wasn't sure which one was which. He opened the first one and was grateful to see the band his mother had helped him pick out.

They traded boxes, and Shane took a minute to look at the golden band. Ilya lay next to him, doing the same.

"Does it fit?" Shane asked. "We had to guess at the size."

"We?" Ilya raised an eyebrow and slipped it on his right hand.

"Uh, my mom helped. We figured something simple was better, but if you want something less boring—"

"No," Ilya cut him off. "It is perfect."

Shane slipped his ring on his left hand. It felt unreal, as if it were something he was hallucinating, but he was very confident that he was present, at this moment.

"Do you think we are moving too fast?" Shane asked before he could stop himself.

"Enh," Ilya seemed hypnotized by his hand. "Maybe. But it is okay. We are like, what's the word? Prodigies of dating."

"Idiot," Shane snorted. The dog whined again, and Ilya rolled off the bed. While he got dressed and took the dog outside, Shane cleaned up in the bathroom, but couldn't bring himself to blow out all the candles yet.

He thought about texting his parents, but his hands stalled on the screen. It wasn't that he didn't want people to know, to show off his hot, talented boyfriend with a smug smile and a *he chose me* smirk.

But right now, at this moment, he just wanted it to be them. It was theirs.

Ilya came back in, stripping out of his hoodie and pants again as he put the puppy on the bed.

"Ilya," Shane protested as the dog climbed over him, licking his face. "Not on the bed."

"Just for a little while," Ilya laid down next to him, drawing the puppy's affections away from Shane. "He will go in kennel to sleep."

"Why do I feel like that's never happened?" Shane said with a frown that wouldn't stay on his face.

He was going to marry this man. This messy, cocky, guarded man who loved him enough to jump into an icy river, to be by his side, an equal no matter how high his ambition made him

climb. Who worried about him, fought with him, teased and tested him, and sometimes infuriated him.

How the fuck did he get so lucky?

“So,” Ilya said once the puppy was wrestled into submission, panting and still on his back as Ilya rubbed his belly. “How many boyfriend points do I get for surprise proposal?”

Fuck this guy, Shane thought fondly, and pulled him in for a long, deep kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Done! Done done done!

Unless I do the epilogue.

100K in almost two months. What a wild fucking ride.

Thank you all for sticking with me through my meandering little story, spelling mistakes and grammatical errors aside. I truly had no plan or ending while writing it, so I feel it dragged at some points, went off on others. I tried my best to wrangle it all together. If this were a book, I'd probably leave a lot of scenes on the editing floor.

Thanks, all! Your comments and energy truly kept me going to get this all out. I'm glad we all shared this experience together :)

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