

tongues a-wagging

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by Anonymous

Summary

Barstool Sports Canada reports that Montreal Metros captain Shane Hollander has started learning Russian from new teammate and Russian rookie Sergei Dovonchezky.

Ilya has some thoughts. None of them are particularly kind.

Notes

this started as writing warm-up, but suddenly i had 5k and most of a fic. part two coming asap [edit to add irl got me good during writing hours recently] so i promise you can get invested in this wip and experience no emotional damages!!

this takes place in march of 2017 (but loosely) and is set in a timeline where shane won't get hit by marleau in the boston/montreal game

very important note for this is: i do not speak russian and as such i am drawing so much of this from different reddit subthreads and also am applying the stamp of 'well maybe this random russian hockey palyer would do this even if it's not usually how these things work' to this piece of fiction because i needed these things to work this way for this story but i hope my lack of knowledge is not so painfully obvious that it ruins the fic!

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

- Translation into Русский available: [tongues a-wagging](#) ● [поползли слухи \(или: уроки русского\)](#) by [PANDAR](#)
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Chapter 1

The San Francisco Sea Lions play in Montreal at the end of March, and Hayden tears his fucking shoulder checking one of their kids into the net. Shane watches the replay on the jumbotron after Hayden's been ushered off the ice and back to medical. It's a total freak accident on both their parts, Hayden covering the Sea Lion's D-Man and the kid small enough that he just sort of gets underfoot by accident.

It's a toss-up of who looks more distressed in the aftermath, the rookie or Hayden, but at least the kid's got nothing but a bloody nose from the whole thing. It'd suck to add child abuse to Hayden's list of current concerns, Shane thinks.

He's put on IR for the rest of the season, obviously. It sucks, but they've only got two more games in the regular season, and then hopefully one of those legendary play-off runs that end with a Cup, the kind that Shane's only experienced twice before.

If it had to happen, at least it happened so close to the summer, is all Shane's saying, though he's definitely not stupid enough to say this to Hayden's face.

"Fucking sea lions," he says instead when he visits him in the hospital the next day. It's gonna be a surgery, apparently, but a minor one. Hayden's not too worried about it, but maybe that's because they've kept him pumped full of drugs since he was admitted last night, and plus Jackie's worried enough about it for all three of them.

"She's just worried that if I'm laid up in bed all summer, I'll lose my manly physique," Hayden tells him in an undertone when Jackie's outside the room talking with his doctor.

"Yeah, that'd be my top concern too," Shane says. "Not, like, having to survive the whole summer of taking care of four kids and a kid husband all by myself."

"Jacks won't be by herself," Hayden replies, taking a sip of his juice box. "She'll have you around, won't she, bud?"

"Ha ha," Shane says. "Here, I got you this." He reaches into the bag at his feet and pulls out a sea lion plush to set on the tray in front of Hayden. He'd driven up to Quebec City for it and paid the thirty-five dollar aquarium entry fee just so he could go to the gift store and buy it. "For next time you wanna rough up a sea lion. This one has a softer head, I think."

"*Fucking* sea lions," Hayden groans with relish, the moment he sees it. He grabs it anyway and tucks it into the crook of his arm. "You know the rookie came here with his mom? To apologize to *me*?"

"With his mom, wow," Shane says, and he's grinning. It's okay though, because Hayden's also grinning, eyes wide and a bit dopey, which might just be the drugs. "Did she have to drive him here, do you think?"

"Like what do I even do with that?" Hayden's complaining. The sea lion plush looks pretty sad about that, but maybe it's just the embroidery stitching of its mouth. "It's like—if Rozanov sent me a get well soon card, you know?"

Shane chokes on his next inhale. “Uh,” he says. “Yeah. Totally.”

“I bet he laughed about it,” Hayden’s eyes unfocus, lips turning down into a scowl.

“No, pretty sure the rookie was crying,” Shane tells him. “Think you were his first NHL casualty. Like, on a technicality. Even though you nailed him.”

“No, not Junior,” Hayden says. “*Rozanov*.” He spits Rozanov’s name like a curse word, which is, at least, par for the course with Hayden. “I bet he heard about it and he laughed from wherever he is.”

Shane shifts in the hospital seat, feeling the back of his neck heating up. His phone is burning a hole in the pocket of his joggers. The last thing Ilya had texted had been, in fact, a string of laughing emojis and a link to an article about Hayden Pike eating net after trying to beat up a child, but he’d at least waited to make sure that the injury wasn’t serious before he texted.

Shane’s not going to say this though. He wouldn’t want to kick Hayden when he’s down—sea lion plush aside.

“Hey,” Hayden says suddenly, an accusatory note in his voice that makes Shane freeze. Can Hayden read thoughts now? Did Hayden just hear that? Was Shane talking out loud by mistake? Hayden raises a threatening finger. “Hey, you gotta promise me, Hollander. Whoever they call up from the Suburbs, you better not like them more than me. I’m coming back, okay?”

“Yeah, sure, man,” Shane tells him, heart rate slowing back to its normal crawl. Fuck. How can it feel like a close call when he’s just being stupidly paranoid over nothing? He clears his throat and stands up, rubbing his hands along the tops of his thighs and tucking them into his pockets. “Can I at least win a Cup with your replacement or do you think that’ll get in the way of your mental journey towards recovery?”

Hayden hums, tilting his head back and forth. Yeah, the drugs have definitely kicked in. “You can win one cup with him,” he tells him magnanimously. “But I better still be your favorite player in the league when I get back on the ice next season.”

“Hah,” Shane says. His phone is burning against his leg again. There goes his heart rate, ticking up. At least Hayden’s attached to the heart monitor and not him, so no one else notices the change. “No promises, dude.”

Montreal’s second-tier professional ice hockey team, the one that plays in the AHL, is officially called the Montreal Magnitudes, which everyone agrees is a stupid team name so everyone just calls it the Suburbs instead. Shane isn’t sure that’s much better, but it’s not exactly official or anything. It’s apt, at least, for the team that’s on the permanent peripherals of the Montreal Metros.

It works like this. When a Metro player gets injured, the coaches put their heads together and select a player from the ‘Burbs to move up to the major leagues for a handful of games. They’re always workshopping their shortlists, trying to find the best second-string guy, the one who clicks with the team, who won’t need a month’s worth of practices before he’s connecting on passes and sending pucks into the net like he’s been playing in the MLH for ages.

It’s a tall order, and Shane can’t imagine the pressure those guys feel when they get the call. The dream’s probably never felt closer: score enough points, perform well enough, maybe you get to

stay at the MLH level. Maybe the guy you're covering for has to go on LTIR, maybe you get sent back down but the coaches ask for your contract next season anyway because you've managed to wow them with your chemistry, your talent, your hockey IQ. Maybe the guys on the 'Burbs gather around their TVs and their phones and their iPads every game day and pray that a Metros player gets crushed into the boards or shatters his ankle on a bad turn or goes shoulder first into the net cause some eighteen year old kid popped up underneath his arm like the second-coming of Christ himself. Maybe every 'Burb player sleeps with his phone on high volume, in case the next time it happens, it's *his* turn.

Which is all to say that when Shane gets to practice the morning after he leaves Jackie to handle her drug-upped husband and Shane's best friend, he's only a little surprised to find that he's the second person in the locker room. That hasn't happened in years, but he thinks—if it were him, called up and given one opportunity to finally catch the dream he's been chasing for years, he'd probably *sleep* at the rink.

It's only a little awkward because the assistant's cleaned out Hayden's locker for the call-up, and it's right next to Shane's. So even though the room is quiet and deserted, Shane has to sidle up next to the guy and put his stuff down beside him like they've known each other for years.

"Hey, I'm Shane," he greets, sliding his equipment bag off his shoulder and sitting down on the bench. He feels a bit like he's just entered the restroom and decided to use the urinal directly next to someone else, but then—he's the fucking team captain. He's got nothing to be embarrassed about. This is *his* locker room.

The guy looks sideways at him, hands pausing on the laces of his skates. From this close, it's impossible to miss just how big the guy is, shoulders broad and packed with muscle under his practice jersey. And, yeah, some of that's the pads he's already put on, but definitely not all of it. His head is square and made up of sharp lines, eyes and nose and lips all vying for room on his face.

His smile is as pockmarked as his forehead and hairline; Shane counts three missing teeth before he speaks. "Yes, Mr. Hollander, I know this." He sticks his hand out. "Sergei Dovonchezky. From the Magnitude. Is great opportunity to be here. I am very happy to play."

"Oh," Shane says, which isn't what he means to say at all. "You're Russian."

Dovonchezky cocks his head, heavy eyebrows slanting across his face. "Sh," he says, and his tongue pokes out between one of the gaps in his teeth. "Is secret I am trying to keep. I am, how you say, beneath the covers."

Shane lets out a startled laugh, and Dovonchezky grins like he's just been given a special prize.

He's young, Shane realizes. Not rookie young, but definitely a few years younger than Shane. He looks like he can't be older than twenty, maybe twenty-one. It's like someone stretched him out, height and breadth wise, gave him the proportions of a man, but forgot to age his face too.

"No, uh, sorry, I just meant—"

There's not really a good way to finish that sentence, because the truth is too incriminating to say. It also makes Shane feel stupid just to think even in the privacy of his own head.

It's not like Ilya Rozanov's the only Russian in the league. Far from it, really. There's a bunch of Russians in the league actually. Enough that they apparently have their own group chat, though Shane isn't sure if he should believe Ilya when he says that or not. It's always a toss-up with Ilya, especially when they're speaking over FaceTime and Shane can't get a read on his face in person.

So Ilya's not the only Russian Shane's ever met on the ice, and it's not like Ilya's got some kind of claim over the entirety of the Russian language or the country itself or speaking Russian-accented English or saying, *how you say*.

It's just that Shane can't even walk by a flower shop without thinking about whatever the last thing *Lily* texted him was, so he's sort of hopelessly obsessed with Ilya Rozanov at this point. Of course Shane's thrown off to see another Russian. Of course Shane's immediately thinking about his Russian.

Or, not his Russian.

Just the Russian he knows. Intimately.

Beneath the covers, one could say.

"It's undercover," Shane tells Dovonchezky before he wonders if correcting his English is rude. It never is with Ilya, but that's Ilya. That's different. Ilya's always different. "Er, sorry. I didn't mean—your English is very good."

Dovonchezky's chest puffs out, and he grins down at Shane like he's never been bothered by anything at all in his life. "Is kind of you to say," he replies. "More kinder if you say in front of my team. There is bet in Magnitude locker room about if I can learn better English this season than Matty. Tremblay," he adds when Shane just blinks at him. "Our goalie. He is from Quebec, very north. He already knows English, but he talks like he forget this."

"Might not be the Quebec thing," Shane points out. "Might just be the goalie thing."

Dovonchezky barks out a laughter that sounds like a goal horn, and Shane finds himself smiling back at him like it's easy. It's never been easy before, and that takes him by surprise.

For all he contributes to the locker room dynamic as the guy they chose to wear the C, for all he gives pretty decent hype speeches and fairly inspirational *we'll get 'em next time* pep talks after losses, he's never been able to follow along, beat for beat, with the guys when they're talking shit before practice or after games. That's just not a muscle he knows how to stretch. If it weren't for Hayden and Ilya, he'd be pretty sure that he was born without it completely.

"If you want to get on the ice now, I could use a bit of help setting up some of the cones for practice," Shane says, yanking his bag closer to him so he can start pulling out his gear. "The team's not going to get here for another thirty, but no reason we can't warm up the ice for them, yeah?"

"Oh," Dovonchezky says, and when Shane shoots him a sideways look, he looks deeply awed. Like he's just been handed something very precious. Like his dream's never been closer to his grasping hands. "Yes, I would like that very much, Mr. Hollander."

Shane winces, automatic. "Really," he says. "Just call me Shane."

Dovonchezky's nose wrinkles. "Is not a good hockey name," he informs him. "You do not have nickname, Mr. Hollander?"

Shane blinks. "Uh," he says.

The first name that pops into his head is, of course, *Jane*. Which isn't something he'd confess on pain of death, like. Not even to his *mom*.

Then, just as unhelpfully, Shane's mind conjures up a sense memory of Ilya's sparkling eyes and red-wet mouth pressing into his sternum as he whispers filth in Russian just barely loud enough to reach his ears.

For the longest time, he'd been sure Ilya was calling him something dirty and degrading in moments like that, something like *desperate slut* or *easy whore* or something even worse.

Then, a week ago, after an X-rated Skype call between them the night before Ilya was set to fly back to the States, he'd paid enough attention to Ilya's words to memorize the rough consonants of them—just enough to look the more frequent offenders up on Google after they'd hung up.

And then he hadn't known what to do with the information that instead of *cock-hungry slut* or something, Ilya's been running his mouth and calling him *kitten* in the heat of the moment.

He still doesn't, if he's being honest.

But that's not exactly something he's going to tell Dovonchezky either. Or anyone. Like, ever.

So he shrugs. "Not really," he says, trying to make his shoulders relax, like he's not thinking about another Russian player taking him apart piece by piece and calling him sweet words while making him come on his cock. He clears his throat and busies himself with untying his shoes. "Sometimes the guys call me captain. Like, when they remember."

"That is very sad," Dovonchezky tells him, sounding solemn. "Little names are very important. Like, you see, my sister in Russia calls me Seryozha because I am very tall now but always her little brother. And here, my boys call me Chex-Mix, which is worse than Seryozha, but is something. Is delicious food. I will find you delicious food, Captain."

"You really don't have to," Shane says. He isn't sure he can take being called, like, *Hollandaise* or something. He thinks Ilya would laugh about it forever.

Which would suck as much as it would maybe be alright.

It's been six days since Ilya arrived back in the States after his father's funeral, and there's another week before Boston comes to Montreal for their last game of the regular season. They've been texting constantly since January, since the All-Stars Weekend that Shane's taken to calling their turning point in his head. He can't think of a better name for it. For that night when Ilya found him on the beach, when he walked into Ilya's hotel room in Tampa and left a few hours later with the bone-deep certainty that he was in love with Ilya Rozanov.

Their turning point. Shane's, at least.

So it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to have Ilya Rozanov laugh at him, not anymore. Shane sort of loves the sound of his laugh these days. It's really stupid and all kinds of pathetic, but

it's the truth.

Like he knows Shane's thoughts have strayed to him, Shane's phone vibrates in his pocket. It could be his mother. Or Hayden. Or Jackie. Or JJ. Or anyone else.

But it could be Ilya, and so his heart picks up its pace the way it always does when his lock screen lights up with a notification from *Lily*.

His fingers itch to check immediately, but that's rude and Shane's been raised better than that. So instead, he carefully works his shoe off his foot and reaches out to tap Dovonchezky on the shoulder. "You can workshop it then," he says. "Let me get changed and I'll be out on the ice in a second, *Chex-Mix*."

Dovonchezky's grin is bright and boyish. There's not a single shadow on his face. "Yes, Captain," he tells him, leaning back into his stall to grab his helmet from his bag. He pauses, gets a sly look on his face that just looks out of place on the guy. "In Russia, maybe it is *Shanya*. If you like."

Shane blinks. At least it's not *Hollandaise*.

Or *kotik*.

"Sure," Shane shrugs. And then, because he's been burned before, he asks, "What's that mean? Like, in Russian?"

"Is nothing," Dovonchezky says. "Is just Russian little name. For friends and teammates and annoying sisters to use."

"I'm an only child," Shane says blankly, and Dovonchezky just grins at him, gap-toothed and young and hopeful. Dream so close to his fingers. His first practice in the MLH, and he beat Shane to the locker room. Fuck, he can call Shane whatever he wants if he's as good on the ice as he is eager to be there.

Shane nods him off and then waits until the Russian's safely out of the room before he tugs his phone out of his pocket.

It *is* a text from Ilya, which does nothing to calm Shane's heartrate. It's nothing important, just Ilya wondering how much bad luck it would be to skip growing the playoff beard this year. Apparently, it's a pain to groom, and Ilya's very confident that the Raiders will make it all the way, which would be almost four whole months from now. Four whole months of keeping his beard presentable.

Shane pauses, thinks about it. His playoff beard is infamously patchy and horrible and can hardly be called a beard at all, which everyone loves to remind him about. Give the chance, he'd skip the humiliation ritual of growing it in a heartbeat if he thought his team would let him get away with it.

But...

He sends two thumbs down emojis to Ilya, because he has very strong feelings about seeing Ilya grow out his facial hair—all of which consist mostly of fantasies about how the short hairs would feel running over the insides of his thighs and along the sensitive skin of his throat.

After a moment with no forthcoming reply from Ilya, he puts his phone down on the bench next to him so he can start changing out of his sweats and into his gear.

He only checks the message thread twice in between getting his pads on and yanking his jersey over his head.

It's ridiculous, the way being in love with Ilya Rozanov has reduced him to a middle schooler with a crush. After every practice, and even during intermissions of actual games, Shane's checking his phone to see if he has a text waiting.

And every time he does, it's like he's just gotten a shock to the heart with a pair of charged defibrillator pads, even if all Ilya's texted is something small and stupid. Like a smiley face or a meme or a random thought that's entered his mind. It's just—after so many years of having Ilya's body, of kissing him and fucking him and sharing late nights and shadows with him, Shane's unused to how it feels to see the rest of Ilya. To see *Ilya*.

He likes it. Every small piece of him he gets, everything he's learned about him since the All-Star Weekend in Tampa. His knees feel all bruised from how quickly and totally he's tumbled into loving Ilya Rozanov.

Eight years of fucking him beforehand, aside.

In the Metros' locker room, Shane sits down on the bench to force his skates on. He checks his phone again—no text, which is only a very small let-down. Ilya is probably on his way to his own practice with the Raiders. And if he's not, it's not as if Shane's left much of an opening for conversation anyway.

Two thumbs down? That's only a little better than just leaving him on *read*.

He pauses with his right skate half-on, half-off and rereads Ilya's last message, running his hand over his cheek. His face feels warm. He must look like an idiot, sitting alone in his locker and blushing.

Like a damn middle schooler with a fucking crush.

He wants to say something about how much he likes Ilya's playoff beard, but it's not that easy. On one hand, he actually really hates Ilya's playoff beard, because if Ilya's growing out his beard then that means the Metros will probably have to face the Raiders, and that's always a tough series of games. Especially considering that they're both too competitive to allow sex during the playoffs, so all of the on-ice tension has nowhere to go for *months* afterwards.

On the other hand, he really likes Ilya's playoff beard because Ilya Rozanov is maybe the most handsome man Shane's ever laid eyes on, and he could get a buzz-cut for the playoffs or a mohawk or one of those triangle-shaped goatees that only ever look weird and greasy, and Shane would still love it.

So for obvious reasons, Shane's not really going to text him that either. He knows, logically, that he has to do something about his growing feelings for Ilya now that he's admitted them to himself. But he also knows he's not going to do anything over *text*.

He's been thinking, you know. Maybe after the season is over. Whichever way the playoffs end, whenever they end, maybe Ilya can come with Shane to his cottage for a few weeks. He thinks that

would be...nice. He thinks it would be really, really nice.

And then he could tell him. About his feelings. And they could—

Shane doesn't know. His imagination has only ever gotten him so far. He can picture Ilya in his cottage, wrapped up in one of the throw blankets that Shane's grandmother crocheted and then ran out of space for in her own house. He can picture Ilya out on the dock, shirtless with the soles of his feet just kissing the top of the water. He can picture them together in his bedroom, between the sage green sheets and with the light from the windows spilling over their naked skin.

He just can't picture what Ilya would say, if Shane ruined everything by asking for more.

His knee bounces. Still no text. Not even a bubble.

Shane bites his lip and looks around the empty locker room for inspiration. His eyes fall on Dovonchezky's bag, stuffed into Hayden's empty locker.

Jane:

Hey, I have a quick Russian question for you.

He barely has to wait a second before a bubble appears. He doesn't even have to wait five before Ilya's replied. That eases something in his chest that he didn't even realize had felt tight.

Lily:

You have asked the right person, I am expert in Russian.

Jane:

What does Shanya mean? Like in Russian.

Lily:

Hm

What is context? Do you spell right?

Jane:

I think so

Just like it's not like something dirty or anything right

Someone said it to me

He said it was like a Russian little name? For me

Just wanna make sure i shouldn't be making him do bag skates or anything.

Like it's not vulgar or something.

Shane raises his thumbnail to his mouth and bites at the edge of it as he watches Ilya type, delete, type something else. The bubble disappears completely for a moment. Then it returns.

Lily:

haha what

who is saying this to you

Shane frowns. Before he can respond, Ilya's already texting again. Once, twice, three times in a row.

Lily:

no i am serious who is saying this to you

hollander

hollander

shane.

"Is that the call-up from the 'Burbs on the ice already, Cap?" JJ asks, blowing into the locker room with a bang of the door that's loud enough to startle Shane into fumbling his phone. "Eager beaver, huh?"

"*Shit,*" Shane curses, barely stopping himself from clutching his phone to his chest like an old maid. Or like a guy looking at porn in the locker room. He isn't sure which one is worse, but JJ's staring at him with both eyebrows raised anyway. It makes him flush, and he tosses his phone away, back into his locker, *face down*.

Now JJ definitely thinks he's been looking at porn. Which is shit, but Shane can't think about that. He'd really rather JJ think *that* than think that Shane's been—sitting here, texting the enemy and blushing and kicking his feet while doing it.

"Uh, yeah," he says, clearing his throat and leaning down to tie up his skates. "Yeah, that's, uh. Sergei Dovonchezky from the Magnitude. He beat me here."

"Damn," JJ looks impressed for a moment before his eyes stray behind Shane's hip, where his phone has begun to rattle from the force of its buzzing ringer. Ilya is trying to call him. "You gonna get that, Captain?" he asks after ten seconds or ten years go by in awkward silence.

"Uh, no," Shane says. He can feel his face radiating heat, and it's just JJ, but Shane still sort of wants to die because there's no way he's playing this as cool as he needs to. But there's also no fucking world where he picks up his phone at the moment and answers Ilya's call. Ilya's fine. He was texting just a moment ago, so he's not in, like. A crisis or anything. He's fine. Shane will text him back after practice.

His phone stops buzzing; a moment later, it starts again.

Shane reaches behind himself blindly to grab his phone and power it off. He stuffs it into the bottom of his bag and stands up from the bench. "No phones during practice," he tells JJ, going for gruff and serious, like a Captain should sound. He must miss the mark by a mile though, because JJ's eyebrows haven't settled back down on his face. "I'm gonna go--help Chex-Mix with the cones."

"Chex-Mix?" JJ repeats, bewildered.

"Don't ask," Shane mutters. "Just--get the guys out on the ice as soon as they get in, alright? We gotta test the lines without Hayden."

So, really, Shane decides, striding out of the locker room with one skate still loose, the embarrassment burning in his chest is Hayden's fault. Hayden's and that fucking Sea Lion rookie's.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

okokok so you'll be happy to know that this is the second chapter of my two-chapter fic. however it is now a three-chapter fic. however this chapter is like 8k and all from ilya's pov

it's a little bit more angsty than anticipated when i started writing it tbh but i like how it turned out. i think some of my favorite stories that switch povs are where one character is having a bit of an oblivious 'i'm having a great time :) ' experience and the other character is like. bedraggled angst-ridden half-drowned cat about it all. and this chapter is ilya internally feeling very half-drowned kitten which is even funnier because next chapter is back to shane who's seeing him as like. caged and prowling (jealous) tiger about to pounce lmao. very unreliable narrator/how you feel is not how you're seen sorta circumstances

(ps im so happy to see all the love for dovonchezky/chexmix i love him sooo much it was so sad writing ilya being mean to him :(thats my special lil russian hockey player guy!! he is in the next chapter tho i can promise that! which, like. spoilers i guess lol ilya doesn't kill him this game)

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

“Yo, Rozy, look at this,” Marleau says, as soon as he walks into the gym. He’s brandishing his phone in one hand, a lime Gatorade clutched in the other, sweat-soaked towel slung over his neck. Ilya leans back on the bike, popping out his earbuds and freeing his hands from the handlebars so he can gesture imperiously for the phone. It must be very important if Marleau doesn’t even bother with all his usual pleasantries like *hello, good morning, you look like shit*.

“Montreal won their game against Seattle last night,” Marleau reports, as if Ilya doesn’t know that. As if Shane hadn’t texted him the smuggest string of emojis known to man in response to Ilya asking about the score during one of the breaks in his own game.

6-0, and Seattle’s supposed to be a Cup contender. It’s shameful. Maybe they’re just built different in the Western Conference.

“They been testing a new guy since Pike’s out,” Marleau’s saying, like Ilya doesn’t know this either. “Apparently, he’s good. He played on Hollander’s line for most of the third, they scored twice. Brutal, man.”

Ilya frowns and snatches the phone from Marleau’s hand. He’s heard about this from Shane too, information gathering disguised as competitive chirping. The call-up’s temporary, but the team likes him. Apparently. Usually this would be a point against him, as the Metros’ good opinion is worth shit to Ilya, but Shane likes him too. And that—Ilya doesn’t know what to do with that, how to swallow that in a way that doesn’t feel like it’s going to break his ribs and burst from his chest.

Sergei Dovonchezky. First line right wing of the AHL Montreal Magnitude, now playing wing for the Metros as they prepare for their Cup run. First line means pretty much nothing when you’re on

a second-rate team; he doesn't even play in the MLH. He's a call-up, a temporary jersey number to fill the gap left by Pike, and Ilya shouldn't even know his name. But he does.

The Raiders have one game left against the Metros, then they head straight into the playoffs. When Montreal gets knocked first round, Dovonchezky will pack up his locker and go straight back to the Magnitude where he belongs. So none of it should matter, not the team clicking with Dovonchezky or him putting up two points in his first game on MLH ice.

Except of course it does.

Because Shane likes him.

And after years of paying attention to everything Shane likes—ginger ale, linen fabrics, hotel rooms with a balcony door you can crack open just enough for a breeze to come through, the octopus emoji for some reason, putting on his right sock and right shoe before putting on his left sock and left shoe—and everything Shane dislikes—the smell of cigarettes, the taste of good vodka, someone being more than seven minutes late, wet cappuccinos, macadamia nut milk, sexting, polyester blends—this feels monumental. Like something Ilya has to notice even as he wants to bury his head in the sand and pretend he doesn't.

Or, at least, Ilya thinks Shane likes him. Dovonchezky. It's not something he's mentioned bluntly, but that's not surprising either. Shane's never been straightforward with his emotions, his preferences. Ilya's just spent many, many years learning them. Paying attention. So when a stranger sneaks into the peripherals of Shane's texts, Ilya notices. When the *I*'s become *we*'s, Ilya notices. When Ilya gets a text from Jane in the evening on the West coast, asking if it's true that in Russia, you don't *cross your heart* when you tell the truth, you promise to give someone a tooth, Ilya fucking notices.

Dovonchezky is everywhere in Shane's life, insidious and unshakable, and Ilya would cut off his own hands if it meant he could stop keeping score on his fingers.

In the last six days, Dovonchezky has gotten coffee with Shane three times and lunch twice. And since the Metros flew out to Seattle, he's probably eaten dinner with him and the whole team at least a couple of times, probably pressed up along Shane's side at the table, leaning closer to hear him over the rowdiness of the Metros, watching and learning the way Shane likes to eat all of his vegetables before touching his pasta, like he's still a five year old child with his mother watching over his shoulder.

And since it was Pike who went and got himself fucking injured, Dovonchezky's probably rooming with Shane too, slipping into the gap left behind by Shane's usual roommate on roadies.

The thought of someone else—of Dovonchezky specifically—getting to hear what Shane sounds like asleep before Ilya does makes Ilya see red, so he's been trying not to think about it.

It's almost enough to make a man hope Hayden Pike makes a speedy and full recovery, which just goes to show how far Ilya's fallen. How absolutely insane Shane Hollander makes him feel.

"I know this," Ilya tells Marleau, glaring at the phone in front of him. It's a video, paused on Shane's sweaty, post-game face. "Is no big deal."

It's a very big deal, but not for any reason that Ilya wants to discuss over gym equipment with Cliff.

“Playoff hockey is different,” Ilya reassures the both of them, turning back to glare at the bike’s bars. “They will not play him so much. He has no experience of it. He will take bad hit, not get up again.”

Even to his own ears, it sounds like a promise.

“Barstool Canada has a whole thing about it, look,” Marleau says. He’s taken his duties as alternate captain very seriously, which Ilya has appreciated right up until this very moment when he unpauses the video and Shane’s voice echoes out of the phone’s tiny speakers.

“Yeah, it’s been good so far,” Shane says. There’s a microphone at his chin, aggressive in the way Shane hates. It picks up the sounds of his rushed breathing—this must have been post-game, just as they were getting off the ice, before he’s even had a chance to sit down. “You know, I think we’ve really got something on the powerplay. We just need to keep driving the puck where it’s gotta go, you know?”

You know? Shane’s mostly escaped growing up in Ottawa without an accent, but sometimes it’s there. Inflection, elongation—it feels like pulling back a curtain to find something private. It always makes Ilya smile a little bit. Usually.

“Wow, Shane Hollander gives boring media interview,” Ilya drawls now, sitting forward on the bike to restart his cool-down. “Marley, you should go public with this.”

Marleau huffs and slides his finger over the bottom bar of the video, speeding it up. “He’s really talking this guy up, Rozy,” Marleau tells him. “Look, they ask—”

Shane leans forward towards the camera to try and hear the question. “Uh,” he says, “yeah, I mean. The team misses Hayden, he’s a super special part of our locker room for sure. But I know I wouldn’t be the only guy tonight to say that Chexy’s been great on the ice, really stepped up. That pass he gave me third period, no way we would have won without that.”

Ilya’s lip curls up. Hollander is lying, but he sounds earnest, like he really believes what he’s saying which may be the worst part. By the third period, they’d already been up 4-0. *Chexy* could have skated backwards and blindfolded, and the Metros still would have won.

Chexy could have stayed back in Montreal on his shitty second-rate team, and the Metros still would have fucking won.

“Is no big deal,” Ilya grinds out, throwing three turns of resistance on his bike just so he can focus on the way his muscles strain to push the pedals down instead of focusing on the way Shane looks flushed and gorgeous under the harsh lighting. Or the way Dovonchezky has already become *Chexy*, the way Shane has, apparently, become *Shanya*.

Shanya.

Ilya is going to throw up. His stomach lurches with the promise of it, and his hands are white-knuckle tight around the bike’s bars.

He’s been trying not to think about it. About the way Hollander has just accepted Dovonchezky into his life like there was always a space waiting for him there. About *Shanya*, about the way the word had hit Ilya in his most vulnerable spot, his soft underbelly, and how Shane sounded so *unbothered by it*.

Sorry I didn't respond, I was at practice, Shane had texted. But Google said it's just a friendly nickname.

Hayden's call-up is Russian, he just joined the team today, Shane had texted a little while later. Sergei Dovonchezky, but he goes by Chexy.

Or Chex-Mix, but no one's going to call him that, Shane had texted.

I can pass over his number if you want to add him to your super secret Russian group chat, Shane had texted.

And when Ilya had responded in the middle of his own practice, posted up at the bench and stabbing out the letters with his un-gloved hand, *he should not call you that*, Shane had texted back: *it's fine.*

It's *fine*.

Seriously, Shane had texted later with a laughing emoji tacked onto the end of the word like there's anything to laugh at, *I'm blaming you for making me think that everytime someone says something to me in Russian, it's vulgar. That can't be normal.*

Ilya had wanted to reach through the phonescreen and shake him. He still does, every time he thinks about it for too long. What Shane doesn't seem to understand—what Google hadn't thought to tell him—is that it's a misplaced nickname, *Shanya*. It sticks out amongst locker room chatter and the shortened last names thrown around so fucking carelessly.

It's not vulgar; it's *sweet*, and Google does not understand how that's *worse*.

The first time Ilya called Hollander *Shane*, he'd left the fucking city like Ilya'd declared war on his loved ones. And they've talked about it, moved past it, Shane says his name all the time now, Shane's eyes go all soft and liquid when Ilya says *his* name, like every time is a gift he doesn't know how to accept, but it's still—it took eight years to get here. It took Ilya *eight years* to become something more to Shane than just Rozanov, and Dovonchezky apparently needs less than eight fucking days, and Ilya can't not notice even when he thinks noticing is going to kill him.

The video on Marleau's phone is still playing, and Ilya reaches out to bat it away.

Before he can, a loud voice booms in, cuts through Shane's words like a hot knife passing through butter.

"Great passes only turn into goals when they connect to the sticks of good hockey players," the guy says, and it takes Ilya a second for his brain to flip, for his ears to register that he's hearing Russian.

Dovonchezky.

"Turn it off," Ilya's starting to snarl because he doesn't want to hear it, doesn't want to see the way Shane's face will flicker into confusion for a moment before it smooths out into rueful acceptance that he won't be able to understand what's being said to him because it's in another language and he'll have to wait to be told in English. That's *Ilya's* expression, that's not for others—

But the Shane on the phone screen ducks his head and grins to the left of the camera, short and sharp and sweet, the way puppy bites are sweet, “*Spasibo*,” and Ilya’s hitting the emergency brake on the bike in a heartbeat.

It’s awkward in Shane’s voice, too slow, like he’s running his tongue over every syllable to check that they’re all in place before letting it leave his mouth.

But it’s Russian. It’s *thank you*.

Marleau starts to move the phone away, like what’s running on the screen now isn’t the point, isn’t the most important and terrible and gut-wrenching thing Ilya’s ever heard in his life.

He’s grabbing at the screen, Marleau’s wrist, before he can pretend to be anything but heavily invested.

The reporter in the video shoves the microphone back into Shane’s face, like he’s scented blood. Funny, because Ilya’s the one who feels like he’s been cut open.

“Shane, Shane, was that Russian?” The reporter asks, even though he must know already. “What did he say? When did you start learning Russian? *Why* did you start learning Russian?”

Well, Ilya thinks, distant, through the pounding rush of blood to his head. Perhaps if he suffers some career-ending injury in the next few years, he can pivot to sports journalism. After all, he has all the exact same questions for Hollander. Maybe he has a knack for it.

“Uh,” Shane says, his eyes jumping from the journalist back to off-camera, where Dovonchezky must still be. “He called me good?”

And of course—of fucking *course* that’s a word Shane knows in a language he doesn’t even speak. How many times has Ilya told it to him? When did he learn it? How did he pick it up, because Ilya whispered it in between kisses down his naked chest or because Dovonchezky sat him down and taught it to him?

Ilya is going to be sick. And then he’s going to be put in jail for homicide. If he doesn’t kill himself first, fuck.

“Like,” Shane says. Does the flush on his face look deeper? More red? “He said. A good hockey player?”

“I say great hockey player,” Dovonchezky pipes up from out of the camera’s line of sight, and Ilya grinds his teeth together so hard that his entire jaw aches from the movement. He fucking didn’t, either. He called Shane *good*, the way he called him *Shanya*, maybe. Like it was easy. Like those words belonged to him.

“Are you learning Russian to help out your new teammate? Make him comfortable in the locker room, maybe?” The reporter asks, practically writing the news story in front of him, like he’s already found his angle and he doesn’t need Shane’s input at all.

“I mean,” Shane says, rubbing at the back of his neck. He’s blushing now. Ilya knows the difference between the way he looks when he’s flushed from exercise and the way he looks when he’s embarrassed. He knows the way they *taste*, each of them, and this is a blush.

“I’ve been wanting to learn for a while now,” Shane is saying. “Chexy’s a pretty good teacher, but it’s just small stuff.” He pauses, not like he’s searching for the words to say more but like he’s searching for a way out of the conversation entirely. “Anyway. It was a good game, good set up going into our last home game against Boston. I’m sure we’ll talk more then, thanks.”

“*Spasibo*,” Dovonchezky says, corrects, from off-camera, and Shane’s head jerks back to look at him.

“Yeah, *da*,” Shane says, and the way he’s rolling his eyes makes a terrible ache spread over Ilya’s chest, like he’s just been slammed against the boards and left for dead. “*Spasibo*.”

The video cuts out.

“They’re definitely going to play Dovonchezky on Hollander’s line,” Marleau says, tugging against Ilya’s grip on his wrist. “Sucks that they’ve managed to find a replacement for Pike that plays better than Pike, huh?”

Ilya can see the edges of his grin from the corner of his eye, but he can’t look away from the still image of Shane stuck looking out, over the microphone. The way his face creases, fond. The half-smile on his face looks easy, like it doesn’t hurt to wear, like he’s not compromising parts of himself to give it to Dovonchezky.

Eight years. It took Ilya eight years to get Hollander sitting next to him in a hotel room, snapping at him, *I think I like you, maybe a little bit too much*, like if he made his tone confrontational enough, it’d hide the softness inherent in the confession.

Eight years to get there and it takes less than eight days to lose him, and it’s not fucking *fair*:

Ilya hauls himself off the exercise bike, grabbing at the towel on the bench behind him. Whatever expression is on his face must convey the calamity of the situation, because Marleau trails off, mouth hanging open in the middle of a shitty, useless deconstruction of Montreal’s powerplay.

“No phones during dryland,” Ilya snarls, feeling more dog backed into corner than hockey team captain. “Is bad for team morale.”

“Uh,” Marleau says, glancing around at the deserted gym.

Ilya can feel his lip curling up, so he runs the towel over his face like that’ll hide his expression. What he wants to say but can’t is that if one more member of the Boston Raiders tries to show him a news clip of Shane Hollander *with other people* during practice, Ilya’s going to override the coaches and have everyone doing bag skates until they have to call-up the whole of Boston’s AHL team to sub in for them because all of the pros will be in the hospital. Ilya *will* put them there.

“Sure, Captain,” Marleau says, because he’s taking his alternate duties seriously this year and because he’s got good instincts when it comes to defusing bombs or taming feral animals. “Gotta protect team morale.”

Ilya makes it all the way through practice, the drive back to his place, and four re-run episodes of *Friends* in a row before he gives into the raging beast in his chest.

He forces himself to reheat dinner first, quinoa and broccoli and salmon tasting more flavorless than usual as he chokes it down, standing at the counter and glaring into empty space. Food does not have to be enjoyed to be eaten; he's a professional athlete and even though he doesn't live and die by his macros and team doctor-approved diet plans, he knows all about food being fuel, primarily.

It's just hard not to remember the way Shane had sat at the counter, this counter, with his chin resting on the palm of his hand as he watched Ilya cook for him. Simple and lazy, by design, something that could be thrown together in minutes because that was the only way Ilya knew how to track his time with Shane. He's always only had minutes.

The quinoa tastes like shit; the tuna melt had too, really, if Ilya's being honest. Too greasy, too heavy on the mayonnaise, light on the onion.

But he wants it again so desperately that it's hard to make himself chew. To settle. To take what he's been given.

Tomorrow morning, early, Ilya will board a plane to Shane's city. They'll play against each other tomorrow night and then—Ilya doesn't know.

He knows what he *wants* to happen, obviously. He knows he wants to be invited into Shane's space again. It's been months since Tampa. They've changed. Ilya's changed. They talk now, all the time. They call each other. Of course Shane will text him once the game's concluded, and Ilya will drop his gearbag off at the hotel before heading to the apartment Shane only ever uses when Ilya's in town.

Maybe he won't even drop off his gear bag. Maybe he'll skip media, skip a shower, show up at the back stairwell still dripping with sweat from the game, bag slung over his shoulder. Shane would let him in. He'd bitch and moan about it, probably, but he'd let him in. Ilya would convince him to.

But—but this was before. Now there is Dovonchezky.

Ilya grinds his teeth together, jaw hurting from the pressure. Now there is Dovonchezky to think about, and Ilya hates him. He doesn't even know him but he hates him, hates that he has to think about him. Has to wonder if he factors into Shane's life now, if he has to make room for him in Ilya's plans. No, of course not. Right? Shane wants *him*, Ilya, has wanted Ilya for years, turns to putty beneath his hands and saves all his softest parts just for him. That won't change, cannot change just because of—

Of fucking *Shanya*.

Right?

It's that small sliver of doubt that makes Ilya's breath catch in his throat. That makes him feel like he's accidentally swallowed wrong, like a piece of salmon bone is trapped in his chest, choking him.

He'd told Shane that they couldn't, that things weren't different, that it didn't matter. Ilya had said that. Ilya had believed that. Or—had believed in the importance of saying it.

But things have changed, a little.

A lot.

Things have changed. Now there is no more father to think about, no obligation to his brother pinning him in place, not even an apartment in Moscow to return to.

And he's said other things too. To Shane. Since Tampa. Things that Shane couldn't understand but things that Ilya believed. Believes. God, he is so in love with him. God, it hurts. The impossibility of it. The odds of it, the odds that he is up against. It's a bruise in his chest, permanent and spreading through his body.

But things have changed. Now there is Dovonchezky to think about. Dovonchezky and all he fucking represents: *Shanya* and coffee with Shane out in public and team dinners and teaching him Russian as if it is nothing, calling him *good* in front of cameras as if it is *nothing, easy, a given* that he should be able to say it like Ilya has not been choking down the words for eight years and hoping against hope Shane understands somehow anyway.

So Ilya makes it through practice, the drive home, an hour and a half of mindless television and most of his dinner before he gives in to the howling, wounded thing in his chest and calls Shane.

Anger has always been easier to bear than agony, at least for Ilya, so the moment the call connects with a breathless sort of, "Hello?" that he'd recognize anywhere, Ilya is speaking, smooth and rapid.

"There is only one night left until I am in Montreal, sweetheart, I know you have missed me. Perhaps not the same way I have missed you, of course. Unless you also feel as if you are walking around with broken ribs and a stupid fucking heart that's fled your chest entirely."

"Uh," Shane says.

"But then I wondered if perhaps you do not miss me at all. I saw the interviews, you know. In the fucking gym. Do you need me, darling, do you ache, or have you found someone else since January?" The words come out sharper than he intends, pointed and angry. Jealous. Furious at just the idea of it, even if he'd wanted to play it cool.

It's the first time he's said it out loud, even though the acid of the possibility has been bubbling under his skin for a week now and dissolving every inch of control he has.

"It's alright," he lies, quick and easy. "If you have gotten on your knees for him. I would break his fucking legs, but it is alright. *I* made the first mistake, I told you that we could not. I did not think you would find a Russian player who *would*, so easily, but I should have, and I am sorry. It's alright."

Ilya pauses, eyes flicking to that empty seat at the counter. It'd be fucking crazy if he hasn't let anyone sit there since October of last year, so of course he has. Random girls, teammates, Sveta when she visits. An endless stream of people with varying importance in his life—and Shane's ghost overrides each and every one of them so that even in March, five months later, he still looks at the barstool and thinks *Shane*.

"It isn't alright," Ilya admits. "It'd break my fucking heart. I don't know how you don't know that, it is—so obvious. So maybe you do. Maybe you just know as well I'd forgive you for anything and that's what makes it alright. Because it has to be. Because I'd break my own legs before I walked away from you even if I *should*. And the scariest part is that you make it so easy to forget all the

reasons I should. They pale in comparison to how it feels to hold you, even if I am just holding onto more ghosts.”

“Uh,” Shane says. “Hey, this is Shane. I don’t—I can’t understand you. Did you mean to call me?”

Ilya closes his eyes, forces a long breath out of his lungs, and switches from Russian to English for the first time since the call connected, even though he thinks for a brief moment about hanging up. Everything he’d wanted to say he already has. Maybe it’s for the best if Shane never hears him.

“Yes, I am sorry,” Ilya says, English now, for Shane. The words feel awkward and weighted on his tongue, and he can’t help but recall the way Shane had sounded out *spasibo* in that video, slow and careful, like the word didn’t belong to him and he was only holding it for a friend.

The memory sharpens his anger; this is good, because for a second there, the agony had almost won out.

“Is just that I thought you were fluent now in Russian. My mistake,” Ilya says, tone a shitty imitation of *light* and *unbothered*.

“Oh, you saw,” Shane says. Embarrassed? Shy? “Hang on.” There’s shifting on the other end, clothes and couch maybe. “It’s uh, Lily,” Shane says to someone else, which is enough to make Ilya put down his fork with a clatter. “Uh, no—you can’t talk to her, Chexy, what the fuck—” there’s more noise, the distant sound of someone else talking back. Shane hasn’t muted his end of the call then; he’s just pressed his phone up to his chest, putting Ilya on hold and now he’s talking to fucking Dovonchezky. Even though it’s—seven in the evening. And Shane should be at home. Alone.

Ilya is going to be sick.

“I don’t care that you’re both Russian,” Shane is saying, exasperated maybe. Ilya can hardly hear him over the white noise filling up his head. “She’s *shy*, ” and then, “Fuck, yeah, fine. Whatever, I’ll tell her you said hi. *Spasibo*. Just help yourself to the ginger ale, if you want. It’s in the fridge.”

Ilya stares at the counter. The empty seat. He sinks into it and wants to hang up the phone even though he knows he’d never be able to. He’s tried to distance himself from Shane before, but Shane is an excellent fisherman, or Ilya is just a very stupid fish. Either way, the hook is deep and permanent and speared through Ilya’s ribs.

“Sorry, sorry about that,” Shane says, closer now. He’s talking to Ilya again, phone pressed up to his ear. In his bedroom? Out on the balcony?

Ilya doesn’t know. Can’t picture it because he doesn’t know what Shane’s bedroom looks like, if he even has a fucking balcony.

“He is in your house,” Ilya says, and this could be in English or Russian or gibberish, he doesn’t know, can’t hear himself.

His hand is shaking on the counter, so he curls it into a fist so tight that his nails bite into the skin of his palm.

“Oh, yeah, that’s Chex-Mix, Sergei Dovonchezky,” Shane tells him, easy. “There’s a mandatory team thing in an hour, so I told him he could come over early so we could go together. He’s still a

bit scared of the team, I think. The whole AHL thing, some of the guys are dicks about it, you know?”

“Nice of you,” Ilya says between gritted teeth. “Very generous.”

Ilya hadn’t known Shane was so fucking generous. With his time. His attention. His house. All of the slivers of Shane Hollander that Ilya has gathered over the years, he’s had to *earn*. Fight for, a board battle every fucking time.

And now maybe Dovonchezky is just—just getting all of it, spoonfed to him. Maybe Hollander is shooting the shit with him, lounging on his couch, laughing up at the ceiling at his jokes, telling him the things Ilya has had to weasel his way into knowing. Like how Shane hates ketchup and loves vanilla scented candles and knows all the words to *While You Were Sleeping* because he used to watch it with his mom everytime his team lost, so now he can’t see a movie with Sandra Bullock in it without a pit opening up in his stomach. Maybe Dovonchezky just gets to know those things. Maybe he doesn’t have to spend eight years asking. Eight years performing elaborately plotted heists, stealing information he can never fully convince himself he has the right to take out of Hollander’s head. Eight years throwing himself up against the glass windows of Shane’s house like a torrential downpour, begging to be let inside.

Maybe he just gets let inside.

And Ilya can’t even be angry about it. Can he? He doesn’t think he can. Sometimes you just—sometimes there are people you love, and there are people you want to try loving but can’t quite bring yourself to trust. And maybe teammates get sorted into one category and hockey rivals get sorted into the other, and that’s that. Despite how much things have changed.

He still wants to fucking break Dovonchezky’s fucking legs though. Every one of his fingers. It won’t ease the tightness in his chest, but maybe it will. Anger is easier to swallow than agony. It’s easier to express, too. Lighter to hold in your hands. Easier to throw at someone else. And when he thinks about Dovonchezky, he feels so angry he can’t even see straight. When he thinks about Dovonchezky and Shane, together, he wants to curl up in the Raiders’ locker room, turn everything else off so they can just break him out when there’s a game and shut him away when there’s not.

“I was thinking though,” Shane is saying, and Ilya doesn’t even know how long he’s been talking. “After tomorrow’s game, I mean—I want to see you.”

Ilya nods, because at least there’s that. At least the want is still there. Ilya’s holding onto ash and trying to remember how the bonfire felt, maybe, but at least the ash is proof it happened at all. That something other than him burned.

Then he bites his cheek and braces himself for the *but* because there must be a *but* coming. *But I have to think about the team. But this just isn’t going to work. But you already said nothing was going to change, that we can’t do this, so I’m cutting my losses now because I’m so beautiful and smart and perfect so I’ll find another guy who won’t lose everything if we’re outed.*

But I just can’t leave Chexy alone, you understand, he’s only a baby. A twenty-year-old baby who has lived at least two years in a foreign country already, but really just a baby, you know, you understand.

But I’m choosing something else. Over you. You should be used to this feeling by now, yes?

“Okay,” Ilya says. It will hurt less, if he just gets out in front of it first maybe. Instead of letting it bowl him over.

“But I don’t want to go to the apartment,” Shane says, and Ilya blinks. Frowns.

“I am sharing room with Marley,” he tells him, auto-pilot. His fingers ache, so he opens his fist to lay them flat against the counter. “You want to say hi to Marley?”

Shane makes a noise. Protest, disgust, impatience, Ilya can’t name it. “No, I want—if you wanted to come here. I want that too.”

“*Here*, to Montreal?”

That noise again. “Here to my house,” Shane says, and he drops his voice, like it’s a secret or a confession. “I know we don’t, like...do that. Usually.”

“*We don’t do that usually* because you have secret sex condo you bought so we do not have to do that,” Ilya reminds him, feeling generous enough to say *we* when he really means *you*.

“Yeah, well, I’m thinking of selling the sex condo,” Shane says, and he must be feeling cornered because he says *sex condo*, even though he’s always scowled when Ilya called it that.

And Ilya can’t even *enjoy* it because he’s too busy trying to work out what that means. What Shane is trying to tell him or what Shane doesn’t know he’s telling him but means all the same. Shane wants him in his house, where he lives and sleeps and eats, and he wants to sell the place he bought just for Ilya and him to exist, and currently Sergei Dovonchezky is sitting in Shane’s living room, probably. Maybe in his kitchen. Drinking his ginger ale like he has any right to it at all.

Ilya’s head hurts, but it’s got nothing on his foolish heart.

“He is going to give you stupid accent,” Ilya hears himself say, even though he doesn’t recognize his voice at all. It’s too low, too full of jagged edges and bared teeth. “I looked him up, his family lives in Derbent. Too southern, you speak to anyone in the north, they will not understand you.”

It’s not even *true*, really. Differentiations between regions are small things, the softening of a sound here, the elongation of a letter there, nothing at all like listening to a Boston local talk to someone from Texas in the States. But it’s all that Ilya has and maybe it’s a part of the bruise all the same. The idea that maybe, one day, because *Dovonchezky is such a good teacher*, Shane will be able to look at Ilya and have a conversation with him in Russian. But it won’t be Ilya’s Russian in his mouth. It’ll be different in a hundred small ways that will dig under Ilya’s skin like pieces of shrapnel.

“Oh, really?” Shane asks. He sounds worried, suddenly. “And, uh, are you from the northern part? Or the southern part?”

Ilya closes his eyes and leans forward until he can press his forehead up against the cool marble of the countertop. He wonders if Shane has ever even seen a map of Russia; if he could point it out if he were given a globe. “I am from Moscow,” he says. “Is north.”

North enough.

“Oh,” Shane says. “Well, I mean...”

He trails off. Like he doesn’t even know what he means, which feels at least very honest.

Ilya doesn’t want to do this anymore. He has a hockey game to prepare for. But he is hooked, all the same, hanging on the phone. “Will they put him on your line tomorrow?”

Shane pauses. “Chexy? That’s what’s projected at least, but Coach likes switching things up in the moment. Whatever’s not working, cut and changed, you know. We’ll see. I think probably though. We’ve been playing really well. He’s a good liney, but don’t tell Hayden I said that.”

“Hm,” Ilya grunts because he can’t unlock his jaw enough to say anything else. Doesn’t know what will come out if he does.

“I know, I know,” Shane laughs, a chuff of air that would make Ilya feel like he’s swallowed a firefly if he didn’t already feel like he’s trapped in an inferno. “We stand no chance against Boston, you’ve been working on your powerplay, you’re gonna pound us into the ice, whatever.”

Ilya blinks, then shrugs. Close enough.

There’s a beat of hesitation. A pause that lengthens into two. “I still want you in my bed tomorrow night,” Shane says quietly. “If you want.”

Ilya lets out a sigh, rolling his head against the counter and looking out into the nothingness of his kitchen. “I always want you,” he admits, just as quietly.

It’s only when Shane makes a small, confused-sounding noise that Ilya realizes the words he’d meant to say in English had refused to come out that way, the imprint of Russian hanging on the phone call between them.

“Okay,” he says instead. English this time. He sounds both syllables out carefully.

Shane hums. “I’ll understand what you’re saying one day,” he tells him, like it’s a promise.

Funny; all Ilya hears is a threat.



Ilya Rozanov
[@Ilya_Rozanov81](#)

[@Hayden_Pike_Official](#) get better soon.

8:14 PM · Mar 29, 2017

38.3K Retweets **959** Quote Tweets **84.1K** Likes



Hayden Pike
@Hayden_Pike_Official

what in the twilight zone

7:03 AM · Mar 30, 2017

22.1K Retweets **1.3K** Quote Tweets **96.1K** Likes

The Bell Centre is loud the way Montreal fans are always loud. Most dedicated fanbase, even though they hadn't won a Cup for two decades before they drafted Shane Hollander. If they know what's good for them, they'll never let Hollander go. They'll sink their claws so far into him, love him good and treat him well, and then he'll never want to leave either.

It's a low moment, Ilya thinks, being jealous of Montreal fans.

So he tears his eyes away from the swarm of red and blue in the stands and focuses instead on warm-ups. He skates loosely around the net, shooting each puck someone passes to him back towards the goal purely by rote. His body feels tight all over still, even though he'd done a brief workout in the hotel's gym after landing, before his nap, and has been on the ice now for at least ten minutes.

"Hey," a voice calls out from behind him. Unmistakable. So very precious. His body unspools immediately, strings cut. Ilya turns like his leash has been tugged and goes to meet Shane Hollander at center ice.

They're both careful not to cross the line, cognizant of all the eyes that could be on them. Behind Shane's shoulder, the Metros are still warming up lazily, pucks flicking through the air and players

riding their circuits, talking to each other in twos or threes.

“Hey,” Shane says again, when Ilya is directly in front of him. His eyes look warm, and the smile he gives him is small but genuine. Toothy and unguarded. “You never said about after. Tonight.”

“Maybe I want to hear you beg,” Ilya says absently, letting his eyes run over Shane’s face, Shane’s body, his stance. It’s been months since he saw him last, in person. Now Ilya has a dead father and an estranged brother and Shane has a few stolen Russian words pressed against the backs of his teeth. They’ve both changed.

Does Ilya look changed to him? Shane looks the same—or maybe he looks different, and it’s just the way that Ilya reacts to him that’s the same. His heart stutters, tripping over itself. Then it starts to run.

“I’m not gonna do that,” Shane says, even though it’s all over his face that he would. That Ilya could make him. That Shane wants him to.

But before Ilya can reply, one of the players in a Metro jersey breaks off from his group, skates closer. “Text me address,” Ilya says. Agrees. Gives in.

“Yeah?” Shane asks, and his eyes look lighter. Happier. Like Ilya has made him happy, which is nice. Ilya wasn’t sure he could do that, not in this new world where everything is changed.

“Yes,” Ilya says, abrupt and short because the Metro player has gotten closer now and Ilya recognizes him, even under the jut of his helmet, the hockey pads and jersey. He’s spent enough hours scrolling through everything he can find on the Internet about the kid, he’d probably recognize him anywhere now.

And he doesn’t want to talk to Sergei fucking Dovonchezky, so he turns away. Back to his team.

“Wait, Rozanov,” Shane says, and Ilya stops like he’s not in control of his own body. He skates back around slowly, giving Shane every chance to take it back. To not do this. Not here.

But Shane just blinks up at him with an embarrassed sort of smile. He jerks his head to the hulking Russian figure at his shoulder. “This is Sergei Dovonchezky. I know we’re not like, friends or anything, Rozy,” he adds, with that glint he gets in his eyes when he thinks he’s getting away with something. Shane Hollander is the worst liar in the world; Ilya loves him so much it hurts. “But he asked if I could introduce you.”

Ilya stares at him.

Shane just smiles back, small and genuine and so clueless that Ilya thinks he really could reach across the center line and strangle him and no jury would blame him if they heard his side of the story.

Ilya lets himself imagine it for a moment, before he looks over Hollander’s shoulder. “Hi,” he says shortly. English.

Dovonchezky’s eyes are very wide. The gaps in between his teeth are bigger. Maybe they do not pay AHL players enough to visit a dentist, or maybe Dovonchezky just likes whistling with every breath, because there are too many teeth missing from the edges of his grin. He should look less happy. Smile smaller. Ilya thinks he should never smile at anything ever again, even.

“Hi, Mr. Rozanov, it’s an honor to meet you,” Dovonchezky blurts, and Shane blinks back and forth between them. Russian, then. “I’ve watched your games for years, I never thought I’d get to share ice with you. I’ve already told everyone back home. It’s very much an honor, Mr. Rozanov.”

“That’s nice,” Ilya says, English again. Shane has moved away, skated sideways just enough that they’re three people huddled around the center line instead of three people in a line of their own. It seems very unwise for Shane to remove himself as Dovonchezky’s shield if he actually likes the boy. Ilya doesn’t know what he wants to do, what his body is aching for, but his hands are itching.

Maybe the problem with Dovonchezky’s smile is that he has too *many* teeth still in his gums. Ilya can fix that for him.

Shane brushes his glove against Dovonchezky’s shoulder, something light and brief and encouraging.

His nose is too straight. That is another thing Ilya can fix for him.

“You are such a good player, Mr. Rozanov,” Dovonchezky is saying, rapid-fire Russian made into staccato beats of noise because of Dovonchezky’s own excitement. Nerves, maybe. “I know this game is going to be very fun. I am so glad I asked Captain Shane if he knew you well enough to ask you to meet me.”

Ilya blinks, shooting a confused look between Shane and Dovonchezky. “You are hockey player,” Ilya tells him in case he’s forgotten. English, for Shane. “You are on ice. We would meet in game. This is game. Hollander did nothing.”

“Shane has done so much to help me,” Dovonchezky tells him earnestly in Russian, turning and blinking wide, awestruck eyes at Shane before he looks back at Ilya. “He is a good captain.”

“*Spasibo*,” Shane interrupts, lips turning up into a small, self-satisfied smile as he grins at Dovonchezky and then at Ilya, like he wants Ilya to be proud of him. He’s heard his name and the word *good*, and he knows what that means.

Ilya’s told him enough times what that means.

So has Dovonchezky, probably.

“Okay,” Ilya says. English. He feels sick again. His anger is so far away. He tosses a thumb over his shoulder. “Goodbye.”

Good riddance.

Shane stops him before he can turn though, hand catching the edge of his stick. “Rozanov,” he says, and it’s clear that he wants something. Ilya just doesn’t know what. And if he can give it to him. And if he can survive the act of giving.

Shane’s eyes dart down to his glove and then back to Dovonchezky, who is still standing there like an idiot, stick clutched loosely in one hand. “C’mon,” Shane mutters when Ilya doesn’t move. “Please.”

Ilya can feel his nostrils flare with his next exhale, but he is helpless against the way Shane says *please*. He hesitates a moment longer, digging his heels in against the inevitable.

“Pozhaluysta,” Shane says. *Please.*

It’s dirty game, but of course it works. Ilya tugs his hand free from his other glove, keeping it tucked under his arm as he reaches across the center line towards Dovonchezky.

Dovonchezky trips over his own skates and drops both gloves and his stick on the ice in his rush to accept Ilya’s hand and shake it once, twice, three times.

“This will not be an easy game for you,” Ilya tells him in Russian. A warning. A threat. A promise.

“I look forward to it, Mr. Rozanov,” Dovonchezky says, Russian as well, and he grins at him like he means it. Even his eyes are bright and eager and earnest, and Ilya hates him. He hates him so ferociously for being everything that Ilya cannot be that the anger is suddenly so much easier to reach for than it had been seconds ago, when he was looking at Shane and seeing everything he could never have.

“Good,” Ilya says. And that’s all. That’s it. That’s all he wants to say to Sergei fucking Dovonchezky for the rest of his fucking life.

Ilya slams Dovonchezky up against the boards twice during the second period. One check is clean, the other dirty enough that he should probably get a four minute penalty for it. He gets two instead, which should feel like a victory except for the fact that in the last thirty seconds of the powerplay, Shane shoots the puck to Dovonchezky who takes it easy into the goal, clean past Vandy’s glove.

It’s a goal, it’s good. Dovonchezky throws himself at Shane in celebration, skating halfway across the rink to reach him, and Shane’s arms wrap around his shoulder automatically. He’s laughing; they both are. This is the goal that ties them with the Raiders again, the goal that sets them up for a third period in their favor.

“Shanya, it is good!” Dovonchezky yells, and Ilya snaps his stick against the railing of the penalty box.

When play restarts, Ilya is free from the penalty box to take the face-off. Shane has been pulled back to the bench to catch his breath until the third period starts, and the Montreal coach has called for another winger to take the ice in his place, not a center.

And when he looks up, it’s Dovonchezky there in front of him at center ice, leaning down with his stick poised to swipe the puck back. He’s grinning, incandescent with it. With his goal, with playing on the Metros, with being able to wrap his arms around Shane Hollander and call him *Shanya* out loud, in public, like it is nothing.

The only time Ilya has ever played with Shane, he was able to kiss him on the helmet and swing him around the ice in a celly because it was in Tampa. The All-Stars Game. Special permission to fool around, nothing serious. It’d been instinct to want it; it had been a gift he’d given himself, to act on it. To actually pull Shane into his arms on the ice in front of a crowd.

And Dovonchezky gets to do the same thing thoughtlessly. He gets to call him *Shanya*. He gets to touch him in front of other people, and the world continues spinning.

“Call him that again,” Ilya murmurs in Russian, quiet and sharp and brimming with every ounce of hatred he’s ever felt towards Dovonchezky and the hockey fans and his homeland and his heart and

everything else that has ever made him hesitate when all he wants is to hold onto Hollander. “And I break your jaw. Yes?”

Dovonchezky blinks at him, mouth going slack.

“This is a clean game, gentlemen,” the ref barks, puck clasped loosely in his hands. “No threats, not in any language, you got that, Rozanov?”

“Was not a threat,” Ilya tells him, glancing up at the linesman with a smarmy smile, too wide, too bright, too many teeth. “Was just a promise. That is right, isn’t it, Dovonchezky?”

Dovonchezky ducks his head into something like a nod. He’s not smiling anymore.

When the puck drops, Ilya slides it back to Marleau. It’s a win, however small. Give it long enough to sink in, maybe he’ll even feel like it is too.

Chapter End Notes

broke: shane hollander is extremely bad with his teammates and only actually gets along with one other guy. he was made captain because he's really good at hockey, despite being bad with people

woke: shane hollander is a good leader and his teammates like him even though he's closest with one guy. they respect each other and shane may be quiet or sometimes withdrawn, but he goes to team events and participates in team and community, which makes him a good captain (even though the metros don't deserve him)

bespoke: shane hollander is catnip for russian hockey players and would have nineteen russian hockey player best friends if his team were just full of russian hockey players. also, this is ilya rozanov's literal worst nightmare

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

oohhhh man thank you so much for the response on this fic so far!! here is the last part and i hope it's worth the wait!! i drafted like three different ways i wanted the confrontation/climax scene to go (and how angry i wanted to make them be at each other) but i really like the way it ended up. there's some anger, some introspection, some cuddling, some kissing, some tweets etc. best of all worlds hopefully! enjoy!

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

Montreal loses, and it's not even close by the game ending buzzer. It's embarrassing, Boston's 7 points to Montreal's 2. They don't need a win, it's not like they're the DC Monuments or the Pittsburgh Puffins, vying for a Wild Card spot in the post-season. Montreal's sitting nice and comfortable this year, 5th in the league and 2nd in the Conference standings.

It's just embarrassing, losing like that. The first few years, when Shane was a rookie and the Metros were losing more often than they were winning, he let each loss eat at him, fang and acid and the sting of mortification when the score looked like his team hadn't even been on the ice at all.

It's different now though. He's wearing the C, for one, and that means he has to shove that knee-jerk reaction to brood down into the pit of his stomach to untangle later, in private. Here and now, the team needs him. They need to listen to the coaches, who have already begun dissecting the replays and the footage, who saw the loss happen in real-time, involved but one step removed from the ice, behind the bench.

So they also need to hear from Shane, who was in the thick of it with them, who needs to find a bright spot, something good they can hold onto. It sucks losing the last game of the regular season, especially on home ice. Especially to the Raiders.

Shane doesn't even look over to the other side of the rink as he lines up to tap his helmet against Drapeau's. It's not Drapeau's fault Boston got 7 goals in on him, not really. Their defense just wasn't there. Or it was, it just wasn't a match for the Raiders. For Ilya Rozanov specifically, who played like the Cup was on the line tonight, like he had everything to fucking lose, who got three goals all on his own and a mean assist on Marleau's second period goal like it was nothing.

He hadn't even had the decency to celebrate more than a perfunctory skate by his team's bench and a fist bump to his lineys after each point. Shane had caught a glimpse of him up on the jumbotron in the aftermath of his third goal, his hat trick, and he'd looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. His eyes had been strangely dull, his mouth tugged up in a smirk that didn't reach the rest of his face.

Maybe that's when the feeling of dread and *wrongness* began to crystallize in Shane's stomach. Not at the end of the third period, not when he slumped back onto the bench after the Raider's left wing slotted one past Drapeau's shoulder and put the score at 7 to 2.

But then, at that look on Ilya's face.

The pit in Shane's stomach only grows deeper during the handshake line, center ice. The Raiders are vibrating from the win, unable to stop their smug grins from slipping into their *good game's*. Shane shakes Marleau's hand, instinct, mutters out a *nice goal*.

Then Ilya is there, and Shane takes his gloved hand in his own like there's nothing special about it, like he hasn't been counting down Raiders jerseys until #81 is in front of him again. "Good game," he says, and he means it this time. Ilya played well. Brutally aggressive, moreso than usual, but technically fantastic. His second score involved a pass around the goal, slipping the puck right between Drapeau's extended arm and leg like it was magnetized to find the back of the net. It'd been beautiful.

"Yes," Ilya says, and then he moves on. Past Shane, skipping over Chexy entirely like he doesn't even see him behind Shane, moving onto JJ and muttering out a quick pleasantry before he's out of earshot.

"He, uh, gets like that. After games, sometimes," Shane tells Chexy when the guy looks back at him, mouth drooping and eyes creased up in concern. "It's not personal."

"*Feels* little personal," Chexy says, and Shane claps him on the back bracingly as they wind their way back to the tunnel leading to their locker room. It's funny; the last time Boston won against Montreal in the Bell Centre, Ilya had stayed on the ice as long as he could, shaking his goalie's helmet, tapping fists against the glass to say hello to the away fans, posting up at the door to the tunnel at the edge of the ice, slapping each player on the back of their helmet and telling them *good job, I love you, you play well*, each time sending Shane a shit-eating grin that Shane had wanted to punch off his face. Or kiss off.

Okay, kiss off.

But now, Ilya's the first to leave, off the ice and stomping down the tunnel in his skates like everything in Montreal has offended him, from the fans to the Metros to the Bell Centre itself.

Shane takes a deep breath and releases it in increments. Ilya is just in a rush to see him away from the rink. To get to his place. To shed the layers of Rozanov, hockey star centre, and just be Ilya with Shane, who won't have to be Captain Hollander. Who can just be Shane in return.

That's at least what's been making Shane's stomach flip over itself since he woke up this morning, phone almost dead and still lying next to him on his pillow, the chat with Ilya open and quiet. He's been nervous in a way that's somehow more embarrassing than the 7-2 loss. His palms have been sweaty all day, like he's a sixteen year old picking up his date for the end of year dance, and not a twenty-six year old professional athlete meeting up with the guy he's been casually seeing for ages.

His stomach is still tight, watching Ilya disappear off the rink. Nerves. Anticipation. Eagerness at the idea of driving from the rink back to his place and having Ilya there already, waiting for him. Shane'd been hoping to escape the media scrum, leave early, but that isn't looking likely with a loss like this.

But he'd texted Ilya his address and the access code he could use to get in during the second period's intermission, even adding a little note to help himself to the diet coca-colas that Shane'd stuffed into his fridge two weeks ago in preparation for suggesting Ilya come to his house.

He sort of regrets that now. Not the house, but the text about the cokes. Boston Raider captains who beat Shane so soundly into the ice don't deserve diet coca-colas. Which is a thought that belongs sort of both to Captain Hollander *and* Shane, which is sort of weird.

Ilya brings out everything in him, is what it boils down to. The mature adult and the hockey captain and the pimple-studded teenager and the overly competitive mite who could only settle after a loss if he could watch some random movie with his head in his mom's lap.

Lines being blurry around Ilya Rozanov isn't new, it's just something Shane's getting better at accepting at face value. Even leaning into.

"Hey," Shane says, gripping Chexy by the back of his neck when he notices the guy pausing at the edge of the rink, looking at the emptying ice like he's trying to melt a hole in it just so he can drown himself in the puddle. Shane recognizes the expression. He's been there himself. "It gets easier, the losses," he promises. "You'll see."

Chexy turns those eyes to him. "Will I?" he asks, and Shane's halfway through nodding automatically before he remembers.

It's been easy to forget. Too easy to forget, really. Chexy's temporary. His contract's with the AHL, and he's only here until Hayden's back up and going. Technically, he could be called back down tomorrow if the coaches decide to try testing another player from the 'Burbs instead before the first playoff game.

"Yeah," Shane says. "You're good, Chex-Mix, you've got, like, a hundred points in the league already. There are rookies on some teams with less than that."

It's an exaggeration, but Chexy ducks his head and grins, scuffing the toe of his skate against the ice. "Yes, this is true. I am very good."

"That's the spirit," Shane claps him on the shoulder again, mostly because he doesn't know what to do with his hands. "Look," he says, lowering his voice. "I don't know what'll happen, but this isn't gonna be your last game on MLH ice, Chexy. I know it."

And it's the truth, as far as Shane's concerned. Chexy's *good*. Good in the locker room, good on the ice. Willing to put in the work, willing to grind until he sees results. Shane likes him on the bench for the Metros; it's just a decision that's out of his hands.

"It was fun," Chexy says, and his smile is smaller than normal, but it's there, which feels like a minor miracle. If the roles were reversed, if Shane thought there was even a chance at never being allowed back on this ice, even a chance of waking up tomorrow and having the dream of his lifetime right back at the tips of his fingers and yet so, so unreachable, he doesn't think he'd be able to smile.

He thinks they'd probably have to drag him out of the Bell Centre by his skates kicking and screaming.

"Yeah?" Shane asks, nudging Chexy. "Probably the Seattle game more than this one, huh?"

"Both fun," Chexy disagrees, shaking his head. His head tilts, back and forth, like he's weighing his memories. "Different, but fun. I like winning in Seattle."

Shane huffs out a laugh. “Can’t think of an MLH player that doesn’t, bud.”

“But in this game, Ilya Rozanov shove me against boards,” Chexy tells him, like it’s almost as good of a feeling as winning. “He knock loose my tooth, see,” and he opens his mouth wide enough that Shane can see the way his tongue is able to wriggle one of his canines, back and forth.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane says. “When did that happen?”

Ilya’d slammed into Chexy a couple of times, Shane’d seen it. Figured it was just his way of welcoming a new player to the ice, everyone’s always a little rougher with the rookies and the call-ups. But if he hit him hard enough to hurt him, that’s different. Right? Ilya knows how to pull his punches—it’s a skill he learned around the same time he learned how to make them land.

“I don’t know, maybe first period, maybe second,” Chexy says, tongue swiping out to tap against the tooth again. There’s a thoughtful look on his face. “I do not think he likes me very much.”

“Jesus,” Shane says again, rubbing at the back of his neck. Chexy’s got a thousand-yard stare, back out to the ice, maybe back to the game. “Shit, Chexy.” He trails off, hoping the words will come to him but knowing they probably won’t.

All he can think about is how he’d feel if he found out Ilya Rozanov really, actually hated him. And yeah, Ilya means something totally different to him than he does to Dovonchezky. But still. The guy had been nervous to meet him. Had asked Shane last night if he thought he could maybe introduce them before the game, just because he wanted to say *hi*.

It’d suck if Shane’s favorite player hated him.

Even if Shane’s favorite player is also Ilya Rozanov.

“He doesn’t,” Shane finally says, and Chexy shoots him a look that says *try harder*. “He’s just like that. And uh, he’s been going through something. I think. He just got back from Russia. I heard! I heard that he just got back from Russia, you know, cause his dad...well, I mean. He’s probably in a funk, it was just a bad night.”

Chexy shrugs, and his smile is back. “Wish he knocked out tooth,” he says, climbing off the ice with one last look at the rink behind him. “That would have been nice. I could tell people Ilya Rozanov broke my mouth. Now I just have to say, Ilya Rozanov says he break my jaw maybe. I am sure he says that to all boys.”

“Uh,” Shane says. “He said what?”

The light in the entryway is on, and Ilya’s scuffed up shoes are sitting next to Shane’s house slippers by the wall. Shane closes the door softly behind him, and he has to press his forehead against it and just—catch his breath for a second. Ilya’s shoes are next to his house slippers. And his winter boots. And the Reeboks he keeps forgetting to wear. And the ugly pair of bright yellow rainboots that Hayden had gotten him for his birthday, ostensibly to match Arthur’s and at the boy’s request, the ones that Shane’s never worn but never returned either, even when Jackie slipped him the receipt later.

They look right. Ilya’s shoes, next to his. They look like they fit. And further down the entryway, leaning against the wall, Ilya’s gear bag looks right too. Like it belongs there, even though it

objectively doesn't, and last time Hayden left his gear out in Shane's house like that, he'd threatened to throw it off the balcony if he didn't at least put it in the mudroom.

But with Ilya, it's just—it's so close to everything he wants that Shane has to take a stupid second to just stare at it. The shoes, the bag, the light left on.

This is the very first time Shane's ever felt like he's coming home to someone.

Of course this first belongs to Ilya, too.

Shane takes a deep breath, then another, then he toes off his shoes and drops his gear bag right there by the door.

Maybe it should feel weird, letting Ilya into his house without him there. Maybe it should feel like someone's taken all of Shane's control of the situation and dangled it out of his reach. After all, who knows what Ilya's done between arriving here and Shane opening the door? Maybe he looked through his drawers, his medicine cabinet. Judged the containers in his fridge and the contaminants of his closet, maybe walked the whole perimeter of the place and left the faucet dripping in the bathroom.

But it doesn't feel weird. It just feels right.

It's a simple layout. The entryway opens into the living room, dining area, and kitchen. Open space is in, still, his real estate agent had told him when he bought the house a few years ago. Good for wild hockey parties, she said, and Shane had agreed fast enough that maybe she still thinks the idea of *wild hockey parties* clinched the deal on the house for him. But really, he'd just liked the place and liked the idea of not having to hear her imaginations of what being a professional athlete is like. He liked the balcony next to the living room, he liked the hardwood floors and the way all the windows filled the place with natural light. He liked the way he could imagine his furniture fitting into the space, couch here—throw blanket there—coffeemaker on the counter next to his smoothie machine there.

He stops at the edge of the entryway and wonders if Ilya likes it too. If he looks around and sees the same number of possibilities in it that Shane had. If he sees room for himself.

Then he spots Ilya in the kitchen, leaning up against the counter with both hands spread over the marble, eyes already fixed on him, like he's been waiting, like he's been *pacing*, and every other thought stops immediately.

He's still in his walk-in outfit, and Shane's mouth runs dry at the sight. He thinks, distantly, that it's a really good thing that he hadn't seen pictures of Ilya before the game or he'd have played way worse than he ended up playing. Ilya looks *indecent*. No way he wore this. Please, Jesus Christ, let there be pictures if he did.

Ilya's dressed in black and it looks unfairly good on him. The shirt's shiny, silk maybe, and unbuttoned halfway down his chest, chiseled torso on full fucking display. Two thin pieces of fabric, the collar of the shirt, are knotted together at the base of his throat, hanging down in a loose bow on either side of the glinting crucifix necklace. His hair is pushed back from his face, wet still from the shower he must have taken at the rink. Even then though, his curls are already coming loose. It'd make him look soft if not for the way he's holding himself, the expression on his face making him look carved from stone.

He looks like a predator, wound up tight and ready to pounce. *Dangerous.*

“Hey,” Shane says. It comes out breathier than he meant it to, and he shoves his hands into the loose pockets of his sweats. He’d showered at the rink too, but he wasn’t about to put his suit back on just to go back to his own place. “You made it.”

I’m so glad, he doesn’t say. You look good here. In my house. I can’t remember why I fought so hard against this when you look like you could belong in my house, slot right in next to me on the couch and in the shower and underneath my bedsheets.

“Yes,” Ilya inclines his head. His eyes sweep up and down the length of Shane’s body. Maybe Shane *should* have bothered with his suit. “Was easy to find.”

“Good,” Shane mumbles. He jerks his head away from Ilya’s searching, searing gaze and looks around the room, trying to imagine seeing it for the first time. “Do you, uh, like it?”

It’s a weird question, maybe, a weird thing to want: Ilya’s approval on the most banal things like the color of his couch and the art on the walls he hadn’t even chosen himself. He wants it all the same. He wants Ilya closer, too. They’re in private now, just Shane, just Ilya. This is maybe the longest they’ve gone without kissing when they’re like this, and Shane doesn’t know what to do with that.

His stomach is twisted and tight again. Nerves. Not necessarily about Ilya here in his house, but about everything he wants to come after if he can wrestle it out of his mouth.

It’d be better maybe to just come right out and say it. Then Ilya can reject him, tell him *no, sorry, I thought I made it very clear in Tampa that all we are now is all we will be, but I will use smaller words this time*, and then Shane will ask him to leave so he can lick his wounds in private and he will. He’ll take his gear bag and his shoes with him and he’ll probably even turn the entryway light off when he goes.

Probably just best to get it over and done with.

“Is nice,” Ilya says, and his hands slide against the counter. He stalks closer to him, all tightly controlled movements and dark eyes that stay fixed on Shane’s face. Shane’s helpless against the urge to close the distance between them. They should have been kissing ages ago. They should have never stopped kissing, not since Tampa. Shane could do that, Shane could retire to fucking Florida if it meant kissing Ilya Rozanov for the rest of his life.

He gets to the counter just as Ilya rounds the edge of it and stops. They’re barely an inch apart, so close that Shane can feel every one of Ilya’s exhalations ghosting across his lips. Close enough that Shane can count the colors in his eyes. “Awesome,” he mutters, swaying forward on instinct, desperate to close the gap between them. Maybe talking can wait. Maybe the question can keep. Maybe kisses can come first.

Ilya scored a hat trick, racked up four total points tonight. Shane should probably reward him for that, even if it was against Shane’s own team. Good hockey is good hockey, and Ilya was so beautiful on the ice tonight. Lethal, unmatched, magnetic.

But Ilya stops him, hand pressing against his chest and then sliding up to wrap loosely around his neck. Shane tilts his head back automatically, giving him more room. Surrendering at the barest touch, the feeling of his rough fingers scraping along the soft skin of his jaw.

“You have rules?” Ilya murmurs, ducking his face closer to him and speaking right into the shell of his ear. Shane blinks at the ceiling, trying to remember if he has rules when it comes to Ilya.

He isn’t sure.

“Um,” Shane says, slow like syrup. All he can smell is Ilya’s cologne, all he can feel is the pressure of Ilya’s hands on him—one now at the small of his back, the other still on his throat like a claim. “No?”

Ilya makes a noise, a scoff or a laugh or something in between. “Shane Hollander does not have rules,” he says, and he clucks his tongue against the back of his teeth. “This is new information for me.”

Shane blinks and then frowns. Ilya sounds mean, like Rozanov. But he’s here, in Shane’s house the way Shane visited Ilya’s house last time he was in Boston in a month ago, and they’d lounged in his bed beneath the navy sheets together, laughing and whispering and then talking and then shouting when they remembered no one was around to hear them but each other.

Ilya isn’t supposed to be mean. He’s supposed to be kissing Shane.

“So I can fuck you in your kitchen,” Ilya says, shoving him back against the countertop. It’d be rough, except for the fact that Ilya’s still got his hand on his lower back, softening the blow until he barely feels it. “And you would not care.”

Shane shakes his head. Then he nods, because—no, he doesn’t want Ilya in the kitchen. He prepares food here. Or—someone prepares food here. The chef that comes by every two weeks prepares food here.

And this is Ilya’s first time in his house. He wants to take him into his bedroom, tangle their fingers together and let him press him into his mattress and kiss him soft and gentle like it’s their first time all over again.

Maybe then, in the aftermath of that, *then* Shane will ask him.

“Maybe not the kitchen,” Shane says, a ghost of a protest that sounds thin and flimsy even to him. Because he knows he’d let Ilya do it. Let him strip him here, turn him around, get him wet and ready without a single complaint as long as Ilya keeps touching him, holding him.

Ilya pulls back to study his face, eyes darting between Shane’s like he’s trying to pin him down with the weight of his gaze alone.

“I called you last night,” he says, the same tone he uses on the ice right before he wins a face-off. Focused, locked in. “Where were you when you picked up?”

Shane blinks. He can feel his eyebrows pinching together. He wets his lips, just to taste Ilya there. “On the balcony.”

“No, you weren’t, *kotik*,” Ilya tells him easily, petting at his neck, along his jawline. The touch is heavy, possessive. It ends with him cupping his jaw, tilting his face up again so he can demand eye contact. “Think. You were inside, weren’t you?”

But all Shane can think about is that word. *Kotik*.

He knows what it means now; he doesn't know how to pretend he doesn't. It shoots through him like a bolt of lightning, blood vessels turning to weather vanes all throughout his body, til he can feel his fingertips tingling from the energy rush.

The pressure of Ilya's hand increases. "Shane."

"Was on the couch," Shane hears himself say. "Watching Netflix with Chexy."

Ilya's hand tightens, just for a moment, like a muscle spasm. Then he's moving, gripping the backs of Shane's thighs and hauling him up into his arms like he weighs nothing.

It's almost second nature now, to cling onto Ilya's shoulders as he's lifted, carried, to be put wherever Ilya decides. Learned instinct. There's no fight in Shane against this, just a wave of hunger that crashes over him and threatens to pull him under.

"Bed?" he mutters, nuzzling against the curve of Ilya's neck. "'S through the hall, second—"

"No," Ilya says. "Here," and then he drops him down onto the couch. It's brown leather, wide seats and plush cushions, the sort of couch you see in the movies. It doesn't hurt to land on, obviously, but Shane makes a small noise anyway at the chill he feels to be separated from Ilya. To be put down and left untouched, alone.

It's not for long though.

Ilya crawls on top of him a second later, pressing a biting kiss against his neck, then his jaw, then finally his mouth. It's like getting consumed, eaten alive, the way Ilya's kissing him. Shane loves it. Loves *him*, loves the weight of his body pressing him down on the cushions, the hold he has on his wrists to keep him in place, the way Ilya fucks his tongue into his mouth with no hesitation, like it's his due, like he has something to *prove*.

It makes Shane shudder, eager to press up, rub against him. It's been so long since he's had this. Phone calls and voice messages and texts aren't enough. Not when having Ilya on top of him feels this good, this *right*.

He's been fucking spoiled for it, made needy and desperate and impatient. He frees a hand from Ilya's grasp just so he can tangle it through his hair and wrench his head back. "Bedroom, c'mon," he pants.

Ilya stares down at him, lips kiss-red, eyes dark, burning green. There's two pinpoints of color high up on his cheeks. "No, here," he argues, like it's a fucking call-and-response.

"I have *guests* here, Ilya," Shane protests, turning red at just the thought of his team sitting down in the same spot where Ilya Rozanov fucked him silly. He pushes at Ilya's chest to prompt him into getting up, but Ilya just presses him down further.

Something's shifted in his eyes when he looks at him. Like something's shuttered, maybe. Or maybe like something else has been blown open. "*Good*," he sneers, lips pulling up.

He moves, closes the distance between them, and Shane lets him because of course Shane lets him. His hand is still pushed up against Ilya's chest, useless as a deterrence when both of them know that's not really what Shane wants.

Ilya nips at his adam's apple, then down further, at the tendons of his neck. His lips brush against the skin there, but it's not really a kiss. Just teeth applied with pressure, goading. "Is what I want, you thinking of me," Ilya murmurs, smooth like venom, ice shifting in his voice. The dangerous kind, the kind that kills.

Shane's head feels filled with cotton, confused and slow. It's hard to think around his desire and the way it smudges the clear lines of his thoughts, the way his body has been conditioned to respond to Ilya on top of it.

He thinks—maybe something is wrong. Something has changed. Ilya is not—Ilya sounds angry, but it's not any kind of anger that Shane's heard from him before.

Especially not when they're—when they're like *this*.

Ilya is talking again, *snarling* really, rucking his hands up beneath Shane's shirt and pressing the blunt ends of his nails against his sides the way Shane likes. "Want you to think of me here every fucking time you let him sit here, next to you."

"Whu—what?" Shane stutters out. His mind snags on the words, rewinds the tape, even as his body says *fuck that*, and arches up into Ilya's hold. "Who?"

"Who do you think," Ilya snaps, kneeling back to strip his shirt over his head. There's the familiar, instant jolt of arousal at the sight of his bare chest and torso, the smooth muscles and trail of hair leading down to the waistband of his pants, but the sudden space between them at least allows Shane's thoughts to fall into some kind of salvageable order. Just enough for him to think: *okay, what the fuck is going on*.

"Wait, what are you *talking* about?" he asks, scrambling out from between Ilya's legs and towards the safety of the other end of the couch. The leather of the armrest is jarringly cold against the flushed skin of his back, and he tugs his shirt back down to cover himself, embarrassed and exposed, two things he hasn't felt around Ilya in ages.

Ilya's nostrils flare. It's definitely anger splashed across his face now, but just because Shane can label it doesn't mean he can understand it. "No one," he spits, but he stands up from the couch with sharp, precise movements, fists clenching and tightening in the material of his shirt. "Nothing at all, *Shanya*."

Shane blinks, head reeling back automatically like the word's a physical swipe Ilya's just taken at him. He's not actually a total moron off the ice, no matter what the commentators like to say about his hockey I.Q. never translating to real-life situations. He knows there's only one person who's ever called him *Shanya*, and it's the same person who's also quite recently come over to his house, sat next to him here on this couch.

It just doesn't make *sense*.

He holds up his hand, a physical *wait, stop, give me a second for the love of Christ*. "Are you—this is about Chexy? Wait, are you *jealous* of—"

"No," Ilya cuts him off, working his jaw like he's chewing glass. He crosses his arms and scowls down at him. "Obviously not."

But Shane's just been given a new puzzle piece to work into place against the backdrop of everything that's been happening over the past week. Ilya's attitude on the ice during the game, the way he checked Chexy so hard that he knocked loose one of his teeth. The way he didn't shake the kid's hand on the ice after the game, the way Shane had to pressure him into playing nice with him *before* the game too.

And—more than that, earlier than that. Ilya had called him last night. He'd sounded so strange on the phone, distant and sort of cold too. Like he sounds right now, actually. Maybe, Shane thinks, maybe that's what Ilya's anger is like when it's real. Like he takes the ice with him out of the rink, puts it in his voice and shoves it down his chest.

"There is no reason to be jealous of *Dovonchezky*," Ilya is saying, each word sharp and enunciated and precise, but he won't look at Shane anymore. His shirt is a crumpled pile on the floor and his eyes are fixed out the balcony door, a muscle in his jaw jumping. "He is shit hockey player. With bad teeth and ugly hair. Playing for shit team."

"Hey, careful," Shane warns, standing too because it feels kind of weird to be sitting down when Ilya isn't. "That's my teammate."

It's the wrong thing to say. Shane knows that as soon as he says it, but it's not like he can just take it back.

Ilya's head whips around, eyes piercing him where he stands. "*Just* your teammate?" he asks, but it's barely a question. It's really more of an accusation.

Shane blinks. "What the fuck," he says. He thinks, distantly: *oh, okay. We're fighting. This is a fight.*

"Is a fair question," Ilya snaps, taking a step forward. His shoulders are pulled back, tense, and the muscles on his arms bulge from holding himself back.

It's *not* a fucking fair question, not when Shane still has Ilya's spit drying on his neck, not when Shane can still taste him on his tongue. Not when Shane's spent months waiting to see him again, counting down days until the Montreal v Boston game, looking forward to the sex but mostly looking forward to running his hands through Ilya's hair and kissing him afterwards.

Christ, he's missed kissing him, but instead of doing that, Ilya's going fucking crazy right now because he's—what, jealous of Shane's new teammate? Angry that he's showing the new kid around the MLH, that he's being a good captain?

"Fuck you, Rozanov," Shane says, and he means it too. He's surprised by how much he means it, but it doesn't—it's not—it's not *fair*. Shane's been going crazy over Ilya for months, shit, *years* now. He hasn't even, like, fantasized about someone else since Tampa. Didn't really before Tampa anyway, outside of the trainwreck that was trying to get it going with Rose. It's been Ilya for him, for so long. Ilya he remembers with a hand around himself late at night, Ilya he thinks about when he sees an interesting headline in the newspaper, Ilya he wants to talk to first thing in the morning. First thing *every* morning.

And it's not like Rozanov can say the same. Shane's well-aware what Ilya gets up to, who he sleeps with, girls and guys alike. And sure, he thinks—thought—maybe after Tampa, things shifted and changed, but it's not like they've ever promised each other anything other than secrecy.

Definitely not *exclusivity*.

Which is why it's not *fair* for Rozanov to be in front of him like this. Furious and jealous and beautiful and accusatory. Chexy is a friend, a teammate, a part of Shane's responsibility as captain on the Metros.

And Ilya is none of those things, but surely it's so fucking obvious what Ilya *is* to him. How Shane feels about him.

"Seriously," Shane adds when Ilya doesn't say anything else. He scrubs his hands down his face and then up through his hair. "Shit, you know you knocked his tooth loose tonight?"

The anger curdling in his stomach is easy to stretch, like taffy, broad enough to cover everything he's felt towards Ilya in the last twenty-four hours.

"That is too bad," Ilya says stiffly. "I was not aiming for just *loose*."

Shane gapes at him. "Jesus, Ilya, he's a kid—a kid who looks up to you!"

"And now he knows better," Ilya snaps, arms uncrossing so he can shrug once, expressive, hand whipping through the air in careless nonchalance. "Look at you, Hollander, you say *just teammate*, but you were not this upset when it was random rookie busting Pike's shoulder. It is just small tooth, Dovonchezky is hockey player, he will have worse."

"That was an accident with Hayden," Shane says, blinking at Ilya and torn between incredulousness and irritation. "This was—was *pre-meditated*! You said you'd break his *jaw*, Ilya!"

Ilya shrugs, sharp. He turns his head back to the window and Shane can see the way his teeth are clenched. Not for the first time, he wonders what words Ilya is biting back and if he'll ever let Shane in on the secret.

It feels a bit like he won't, which makes Shane feel stupid and slow, unbalanced on new skates that keep him lagging behind everyone else. Maybe someone else would know what to say. How to de-escalate. What Ilya needs to hear. But no one else is here; it's just Shane.

"Okay," he says, mostly to himself. He takes a shallow breath and rubs his hand over his mouth. Okay. De-escalation. "Okay, look, I'm—Sergei is a teammate. And a friend. I'm not..." he can feel the heat of his cheeks, knows he's blushing. "*Fucking* him or anything. There's nothing to be jealous of. Not that that's what you are."

Ilya's eyes are back on him, but his spine is still stiff. His face is still dark, jaw working, anger evident in every line of his body.

"And, like, even if I *was* fucking him, *which I'm not*, it's not actually any of your business, is it, we're not—we never said...we're *not*," Shane adds, feeling wild. It tastes like a lie on his tongue. *It is* a lie. They are. They are, they *are*.

"You can fuck him, I don't care," Ilya says. His hands are fists at his sides now. Shane thinks—he's lying too. They're both just standing in Shane's living room, lying to each other like they don't know the other one well enough to be able to tell. "*What*," Ilya snaps when Shane shakes his head. "I don't. Russian hockey player is weird type to have, but it is free country here. I am sure Dovonchezky will make you very happy."

“I don’t want Dovonchezky,” Shane shouts before startling back at his own raised voice. He hadn’t meant to be so loud. He’d meant to de-escalate. But it’s just—Ilya is so—*stubborn*.

Gorgeous and beautiful, like some master sculptor has carved him from stone.

And arguing with him is like arguing with a fucking Greek statue.

Shane takes another breath and tries again, moving to sit down on the edge of the couch. “I don’t want Dovonchezky,” he says as calm as he can manage. “We’re friends and teammates. And I—”

He breaks off, rubbing his hands along the line of his thighs. They’re not going to get anywhere if they keep lying to each other, and that possibility scares Shane more than anything else. That they can just stand here and chase each other around in circles until they burn out. Until one or the other tosses in the towel. Until Ilya grabs his shoes and his gear bag and goes.

Against the backdrop of that possibility, it’s almost easy to take a breath and say, carefully, “And I don’t want anyone else but you, alright? I haven’t for ages.”

The words hang in the air between them, so heavy with honesty Shane’s sort of surprised he was able to heave them out of his mouth.

“So it’s just—like, really fucking stupid to be jealous of a guy I’ve only known for a week when all I’ve been able to think about since *February* is seeing you again. Okay?”

He glances sideways at Ilya, up beneath his lashes to gauge his reaction to his confession. He looks unmoved, but maybe his shoulders are more relaxed? He definitely has Ilya’s attention. He isn’t sure he’s even blinked lately.

Which is a step in the right direction, probably, but Shane’s definitely not an expert in this. It does feel monumental though, when he reaches over and pats the couch cushion next to him, and Ilya sits. Gingerly, carefully, like he’s about to bolt—but he sits.

Thank Christ.

Shane feels like he’s just pulled double shifts, winded and exhausted down to the bone. He doesn’t like it, he realizes suddenly. Fighting with Ilya. For a relationship they built off of competitiveness and throwing barbed comments around on the ice, it doesn’t feel good to actually fight with him. It feels wrong.

So of course Shane fucks it up a second later. “Chexy’s a good kid,” he says. “I asked him for a favor, he’s helping me out. That’s why we started hanging out, outside of making sure he’s settling in.”

Ilya tenses again, turning his head to glare at the television screen with his fists resting on his knees. “I know,” he bites out. “You are learning Russian.”

“Yeah,” Shane says, lost, blinking at Ilya’s profile. He knows he’s blushing a little bit now, sheepish and feeling exposed. When he asked Chexy about teaching him a few words, he hadn’t been thinking about Ilya’s reaction to it.

Or, well, he had been. But he'd been thinking more about how Ilya would react to hearing Shane speak his language, not—not how Ilya would react to him getting lessons in the first place.

He thinks maybe that was a miscalculation on his part, but he can't understand where he made the error. He just knows he has, because Ilya's jaw is bunched up again, and he's glaring straight forward, but his eyes look sort of wet in the low light of Shane's living room, and Shane had felt—when he saw Ilya's shoes and gear bag on the floor, when he'd seen the light on, he'd felt like he was coming home to someone, and he just wants to give that feeling to Ilya, too. That's all he wants, that's the crux of why he asked Sergei for help in the first place.

"I need you to tell me what you're thinking," Shane whispers, reaching across the space between them and rubbing his thumb along the bunched muscle of Ilya's jaw. "I can't keep guessing, I'm not good at it. I keep getting it wrong."

And Ilya is too precious to him to keep getting it wrong. He's not a minefield to be tiptoed through, he's a man who Shane could *hurt*. He's someone Shane loves. Like, a crazy amount.

Ilya's mouth falls open at the touch, just slightly, and his eyes flutter closed for a heartbeat. For another. He leans into Shane's hand, which is probably a good sign. But he doesn't say anything, even as his throat bobs with the force of his swallows.

"I thought you would like it," Shane whispers. "If I learned...I mean, you said I'd be good at it."

Which is sort of embarrassing to remember, because Shane *isn't* good at it. Chexy has laughed himself silly at least four times because of how horrible Shane's pronunciations have been. But he'd at least clapped his hand on Shane's shoulder and promised him that his girlfriend, Lily, would be very flattered by the effort if not the result.

Then he'd given him a list of dirty Russian words to try that Shane's *never* going to need to say, mostly because his *girlfriend* in question really doesn't have the correct parts for that terminology.

"You will learn bad Russian, have stupid accent," Ilya mutters, turning his face away from him. He's said that before, last night, and it'd needled at Shane for hours before he'd mentioned it to Sergei. Very casually.

"Actually, Dovonchezky told me that he and his dad moved to Moscow when he was a kid," Shane tells him. "He has a lot of family in the southern part still, but really, apparently his accent is very Moscowian. Moscovian. Moscowegian."

"Oh, that is so great," Ilya says in a tone of voice that manages to imply it is not great in the slightest.

Shane bites his lip. He's guessing again. He's getting it wrong. He shifts his weight, debates against himself for a moment before deciding—*fuck it*. He pushes Ilya back against the backrest and climbs into his lap. At least this way Ilya is going to *have* to look at him.

Ilya's eyes flick across his face and then away, over his shoulder. "Shane," he says, like even the word pains him.

"Ilya," Shane says. Then, because it worked last time he tried it, "*Pozhaluysta*." Russian for *please*, and one of the words he's already gotten a surprising amount of mileage out of.

Ilya looks at him.

For a moment, Shane isn't sure if he's going to say anything at all. If whatever he's thinking has been hidden so effectively away inside of him that Shane's got no hope at breaking it out and pulling it free.

"*Pozhaluysta*," Ilya says—corrects. "You are too sharp in the middle. Is more like...a slide between letters. They live in same house. You say like they are neighbors."

Shane blinks. "*Pozhaluysta*," he tries, and Ilya brings his hand up to his throat. Not restricting, not pressing. Just there, resting against Shane's vocal chords.

"Again," Ilya says, and Shane obeys. "Again."

"*Pozhaluysta*," Shane says.

"*Khoroshiy*," Ilya tells him, and Shane shivers, automatic. Learned instinct. *Good*. That's the word for *good*.

It gives him the courage he needs to ask again. Or maybe that comes from the way Ilya's looking at him, soft and like all the bruises he's gotten over the year are welling up in his eyes. "Ilya, *pozhaluysta*," he murmurs. "What are you thinking about?"

"You have never wanted to learn before," Ilya whispers, like the words are being pulled out of him. They're paper-thin; they wouldn't be able to stand up on their own. "You have had eight years to ask me. I would have taught you. I would have loved—it."

Shane opens his mouth and then closes it, frowning. He turns Ilya's confession over in his head, carefully pushing aside his knee-jerk reaction and thinking through it instead.

He wants to say that he'd never really considered learning Russian before he called Ilya after his dad's funeral, until he sat on the line with him and heard the way his voice broke like white noise waves against the craggy coastline of words Shane couldn't understand. That it'd felt different, then. Different from all the other times he'd heard Ilya whisper to him in Russian while they were fucking and Shane couldn't understand. Then, during the sex, it'd felt like—a bonus. Like knowing what Ilya was saying could only make him feel better, add onto the filthy, fantastic sex. But after, on that call, in Russia—it'd felt for the first time like a loss. Like Shane was missing something integral, like there were parts of Ilya he'd never be able to touch if he couldn't wrap his tongue around the same syllables Ilya knew in his heart.

So yeah, he'd spent the last eight years intensely aware of the fact that he didn't speak Russian, but only the last month really understanding what that meant, what he was missing, what was just out of reach.

And then Hayden had gotten injured and Sergei had joined the team, and it'd been something like a perfect solution with near-perfect timing.

Shane opens his mouth—he closes it again.

He wants to say that he thought about asking Ilya to teach him, he really did. For a moment. He'd thought about it. But—okay.

Okay.

“I thought about asking you,” Shane tells him when he realizes that there’s no good reason for him to hold this back, save for his own instinct to cover his most vulnerable spots. “I did. It’s just...I didn’t know if you’d want to.”

Ilya scoffs, immediate and visceral, and Shane rushes to cut him off.

“No, no, listen, it’s like...every time we’ve ever talked about Russia, you’re not—exactly fucking forthcoming, Ilya. And you don’t *have* to be, I’m not trying to say that, it’s complicated. I know enough to know it’s really fucking complicated, but that’s why I thought maybe you wouldn’t want to teach me. Or that it would be...sad for you, maybe. Or stressful. To like. Teach the guy you’ve been fucking for almost a decade your language, when if it’s ever—if someone finds out...I mean, you said it yourself, in Tampa. You wouldn’t be able to go home again. So I thought maybe you’d want to keep it separate. Me and...Russia.”

“Yes, which is why I called you from Russia and told you to take off your clothes. *Twice*,” Ilya says, but his hands have found their way to Shane’s hips and he’s holding him there like he doesn’t want him to leave.

“Yeah, well,” Shane says lamely, because he’d wondered about that *then* too. Wondered about the dangers Ilya’d been courting calling Shane, wondered about if he cared. Decided to give him everything he could anyway.

Which is maybe just how Shane is with Ilya. Like, in perpetuity.

“And um, logistically, it’s like...easier to learn a language if you have a teacher in person. And can do it an hour a day. I looked it up before I asked Chexy. He’s been quizzing me during practice, and afterwards sometimes.”

Ilya’s jaw ticks, but it seems to be more of an automatic reaction to Chexy’s name than it is an actual return of his anger from before. “That is very kind of him.”

Shane shrugs and reaches up to play with the chain around Ilya’s neck, rubbing his thumb against the dull edge of the crucifix. “I told him my girlfriend was Russian,” he admits. “And I wanted to surprise her. He’s a big believer in love, I think. At least, he’s always watching romantic movies on the plane.”

“I do not want to talk about Dovonchezky anymore,” Ilya decides suddenly, voice flat enough that Shane can’t tell if he’s joking or not.

“You brought him up,” Shane points out mulishly, and Ilya makes an annoyed noise in the back of his throat.

And Shane really does hate himself for it, but when Ilya leans in to kiss him, he tugs at his necklace to stop him.

“*Shane.*”

But Shane shakes his head. He can’t tell if Ilya’s joking, but *he’s* serious. Worse, he’s curious. “You were so jealous,” he says. “Tell me why, I don’t understand it.”

Ilya collapses back against the couch cushions with a groan—exaggerated, dramatic, annoying. Shane wants to lean forward and bite at the peak of his neck anyway.

“*Pozhaluysta*,” Shane adds, and Ilya groans.

“That will not always work,” he tells him flatly, looking at him through his eyelashes, still splayed out against the back of the couch like he’s trying to see if Shane will break and forget about talking in favor of fucking.

Knowing Ilya, he probably is.

But Shane can be stubborn too, so he just firms his jaw and glares back at Ilya. “I texted you, like, every day,” he says. “We called *twice*. And you really thought I was sleeping with another hockey player? One I just met? A *week* before the game where we’d see each other again?”

Ilya’s hands tighten on his hips, but he doesn’t push him off, which is something, at least.

“It did not matter, so much,” Ilya finally says, mouth barely moving. The words are more road-rash than whole, scraped out against his gritted teeth. “The fucking. I didn’t care.”

Whatever Shane’s face is doing makes Ilya huff, and his hands tighten again, then loosen. His thumb strokes along his hipbone.

“Okay, I care a little,” Ilya rephrases, tipping his head back to the side, a half-shrug. “But it was not just fucking I cared about. It was everything.”

“Everything.”

Ilya grunts out an agreement, and he must mean it, this must be the truth, because his eyes fall away, trace down Shane’s shirt. “When it comes to you, Hollander, it is always everything.”

Shane’s heart stutters then starts beating double-time. “You said we can’t,” he whispers because he remembers that like it’s been branded onto his lungs, like every time he breathes out, he’s fighting to lift the weight of those words.

“I know what I said,” Ilya tells him, and he lifts his hand to thumb at the back of Shane’s neck, just along his hairline. “But that was before I realized that we already are.”

“*Ilya...*”

“Even if we can’t. Even if there is not much more I can give you. So is a terrible feeling, to watch someone else give you more. *Everything*. Everything I would if things were different. Coffee and dinners in public. Laughing with teammates. Hugging on ice. Fucking—*Russian*, even, like it is easy to teach. For him. It is easy for him to teach, but for me, maybe you are right, a little. It would be like...opening myself up. With very sharp knife and very bad drugs. You would know everything about me then, but for him, it is just words. *Good, please, thank you*. Easy. Fucking—*Shanya*. For him, is so easy. For me...how do I say these things, without saying everything?”

Ilya’s mouth is wet, open slightly, but he doesn’t say anything else, eyes pinned on Shane’s face like he doesn’t know where else to look. Shane doesn’t even want to blink; he isn’t even sure he’s breathing, still. He thinks maybe he’s forgotten how.

Say them, he wants to demand. Tell me. Tell me how you feel, and I will tell you how I do too. I will tell you everything if you say it first.

But Ilya has said so much, so many things that strike so close to the heart of it, of the thing that's taken root in both of their chests that Shane thinks he can wait to hear the rest. He thinks, maybe, it's his turn.

"Ilya," he says slowly, stressing the second syllable more than he's ever done before, elongating the *yuh* the way Russian announcers say it on old gametape of Ilya's days playing hockey in Russia. He clears his throat. "*Priglashtayu vas pose a teet...no, posetit' moy kottedzh. Etim leetome. No—letom. Etim letom.*"

Ilya blinks.

"*Pozhaluysta,*" Shane adds. And then, in English, just to make sure he hasn't accidentally said something really wrong and gross, "Or—whatever the Russian is for, uh. *Please come to my cottage this summer.* Because I really want you there. And it doesn't have to be forever, it doesn't even have to be for a whole week. I'll take however long you want to give me."

Ilya stares.

"I wanted to ask in Russian," Shane mutters, buckling under the weight of the silence that fills the air between them. "So I asked Dovonchezky to teach me. Because I wanted to get it right, it was—it was important to get it right. Asking. Because it's...I love it there, it's like, more my home than Montreal, than Ottawa probably, and I want to show it to you too. I want you to love it there too, because I—"

He shakes his head the moment he feels his throat close around the words. He can't. He wants to, but it's like he *can't*. Like his body is physically incapable of saying it. Admitting to it. To the love. It's easier to admit that he wants Ilya to come to his cottage, not because it's their off-season and he thinks he'd like it and he wants to laze about with him in the sun and he wants to be able to count the time they spend together in days instead of hours for a change.

But because he wants to give Ilya the possibility of another home. One outside of Russia, outside of Boston. One where he can be just Ilya, just all of himself without having to hide any parts away. It's what his summer stays at the cottage have always meant to Shane, and he wants Ilya to have that, too, wants to give it to him like it's the best solution to the problem Ilya had laid out before him on the hotel bed in Tampa.

I would never be able to go home.

Okay. So here's a new home. And here, look, I will ask you to join me there in Russian, the first language someone ever used to tell you that they loved you, and I will learn the words in a language I don't know how to wrap my tongue around so that you know you are allowed to bring every sharp and jagged and complicated piece of yourself there. So you will know that I want it and I want you to allow me to learn it, every part of you. Your very heart. Please. Will you let me learn what you call a home? Please. Will you come to my cottage this summer? *Pozhaluysta. Priglashtayu vas posetit' moy kottedzh etim letom?*

"Anyway," Shane says, and his hand has looped back around Ilya's necklace like it's the only tether he has. He has to stop, swallow, try again just so his voice doesn't shake from the nerves. "It felt

right. To try it in Russian. But I didn't think about how it might make you feel, me asking someone else to teach me. And...well, it turns out I'm not very good at it anyway. So, I'm sorry."

Ilya clears his throat, but when he speaks his voice is still dry and cracked. Stones cascading against each other. "I have been saying," he says, hoarse. "You have bad teacher."

"Fuck off," Shane says automatically, tapping at Ilya's side with his free hand. "It's not Chexy's fault. I'm a bad student."

"No, you are perfect," Ilya replies, immediate, without even a second of hesitation. His eyes are bright. And soft. His eyes are so fucking soft that Shane has to convince himself he's allowed to look back at him. It feels like maybe something he isn't supposed to see, that expression on Ilya's face, naked and honest and beautiful.

Gently, like Shane is fragile or something to be treated with the utmost care, Ilya wraps his arms around his shoulders and pulls him into his chest until he can rest his chin on the top of Shane's head.

"And...*da*, Shane. *Da, ya soglasen*. I will come."

Shane blinks against the sudden sting of tears in his eyes. It's from the sudden rush of endorphins triggered by having finally done the thing that he's been worrying about for ages. Nothing else. Just chemicals. "Oh, thank god," Shane says, and his lips brush against Ilya's heart with every word. "Because I didn't learn the Russian word for *no*, so you really had to say *yes*."

"Our *no* is very easy word," Ilya tells him, sounding so fond that it almost tip-toes across the line and becomes something else entirely. "Babies can say it."

"And how am I supposed to know it?" Shane asks, and he's lying, obviously. Obviously, he's lying. Still, he smiles against Ilya's skin and Ilya's hands tighten on his back like he can feel it. "You never say it to me."

"Ah, see," Ilya says, and the lines of his own grin press into Shane's hair. "Now you are learning."

It's a toss-up which tastes better, when Shane leans up to kiss him: Ilya's laughter or his lips. But Shane will have a summer to make that decision. And then remake it, again and again and again.



Hayden Pike
@Hayden_Pike_Official

hey everyone, thank you so much for the well wishes! I'm happy to announce that my surgery went great and I'll be spending the off-season training up my shoulder to be back to 100% by next season. Go Metros! 😊

10:53 AM · Mar 31, 2017

56.3K Retweets **2.1K** Quote Tweets **104.5K** Likes



Ilya Rozanov
@Ilya_Rozanov81

@Hayden_Pike_Official ok. now get better at hockey soon.

11:24AM · Mar 31, 2017

40.9K Retweets **1.3K** Quote Tweets **72.8K** Likes



Ilya Rozanov
@Ilya_Rozanov81

@Hayden_Pike_Official is there a surgery for that also, or ?

11:24AM · Mar 31, 2017

32.1K Retweets **1.1K** Quote Tweets **65.8K** Likes



Hayden Pike
@Hayden_Pike_Official

@Ilya_Rozanov81 you know what honestly i prefer this. welcome back rozanov pls never change

12:06 PM · Mar 31, 2017

87.3K Retweets **2.3K** Quote Tweets **201K** Likes

Chapter End Notes

so this fic is finished, but i'm going to write a short epilogue (mostly to answer the question what happens to chezy my beloved) that was originally planned to go at the end of this chapter (until this chapter got way too long) - so if you're subscribed to the story and you're interested in that, it should only be a couple of days! it's gonna be like 2k words max (she says as if this was not supposed to be a writing warm up type fic)

Chapter 4: epilogue

Chapter Summary

epilogue

Chapter Notes

""oh it'll be 2k words"" my hubris and or obliviousness towards my own writing habits makes me SICK this is like 6k but at least it's much more light-hearted than chapters 2&3 lol

it's all from chexy's perspective because i do love an outsider's pov <3 and i have fallen in love with chexy tbh <3 if i ever write another fic where need another stand-in russian hockey player, he WILL return i fear. i am sneaking him into my canon

also lmaoooo this would have been shorter but for some reason i was allowed to call my long-distance big sister before i started writing the epilogue so the first part of this chapter is way more about sibling relationships than it has any excuse to be. the second part is mostly hollanov though because i worked through my big feelings i guess. most importantly this epilogue answers the question of which part of hollanov poor chexy has the bigger crush on it (bigger, because objectively he has a bit of a hero worshipping crush going on for both shane and ilya rip to chexy they'll never want a threesome with anyone im sorry my beloved)

this fic has been fun and i'm so glad you've liked it as well (if you have) !!

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

Sergei is forty-seven minutes early to his very first meeting with the coaching staff, so he sits in his car outside of the training rink and watches the digital clock in his dashboard tick down the seconds.

It's silly in a way he can usually coach himself out of being, but he'd just been so nervous. This morning. Last night. Every night since he got the call five weeks ago, the invitation to attend Dev with this year's batch of rookies and most promising AHL guys.

First it was: *what if I don't make the cut during prospects camp?*

Then, when they'd offered him a spot on the team—the actual team, the *MLH team*—it'd been: *what if I don't pass the physical exam? What if the joint I took a hit off of three years ago somehow shows up in my drug screening? What if there is a mysterious and heretofore undiagnosed anomaly in my blood that bans me from competing at the professional level?*

And after he'd passed the initial check-ups with flying colors, no blood disease detected and iron levels right where they're supposed to be, it'd been: *what if I can't find a place to live? What if my*

apartment is too far from the training center? What if it's in a neighborhood that no one else likes and so no one will ever want to come visit me there?

Which hadn't really turned out to matter, because the Front Office emailed him to let him know it was unofficial club policy for rookies to board with a veteran of the team; they were willing to waive it for Sergei if he'd already found a place, considering he wasn't actually a rookie, but their heavy-handed preference would be for Sergei to take them up on the billeting offer.

Which he had, of course, for reasons that were a little too embarrassing to admit except within the privacy of his own head. It's just that he's never lived alone before. Not in Moscow, not during the summers he spent in Derbent, not even when he moved to Canada. The salaries of AHL players are nothing to turn one's nose up at, but it'd just been easier to find a place with a few other guys, to look for a room to crash in instead of a house to convert into a home.

So of course he took the offer to live with one of the vets, which really means he could have just carpooled to the rink with him today. But Wilkinson was too slow, wanted to sit at the table and properly chew every bite of his toast while perusing the paper like he was really actually close to old-people retirement instead of just being close to hockey-people retirement.

And Sergei couldn't stand to wait around for him because what if there were sudden and insurmountable street closures no one had reported on yet? What if he stopped to get a coffee but the line was very long and the barista couldn't understand him so he had to take two extra minutes to type out his order on his phone to show to her? What if he spilled his coffee on his shirt and he had to change in the parking lot of the training rink before he went inside? What if his player pass didn't work and the security guards didn't let him through the gates?

Which is how Sergei ends up in the parking lot of the training rink, forty-one minutes early to his very first day of mandatory meetings with the coaching staff followed by optional skating practice, cold coffee in his cupholder, two extra shirts in his bag, player pass still displayed proudly on his windshield even though the guards hadn't taken more than a cursory glance at it.

And now the only thing he has to be nervous about is, of course: *what if they don't like me?*

Thirty-nine minutes.

Sergei digs his phone out of his pocket; he calls his big sister.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" She asks as soon as the line connects. But the line connects, which Sergei thinks is the most important thing.

"Sofa, I do not even know what country it is for you," he tells her, relaxing back into his seat and letting his eyes fall shut. "Are you still in Indonesia?"

"That was last week," Sofiya says, airy and imperious in the tone of voice that older sisters are born having already perfected. "Keep up, little brother. It is Thailand now."

"Whatever. You're not the only person who has traveled recently, you know," he says petulantly, and she laughs. After a beat, he laughs too. Partially at the way she laughs, like a goose being strangled, and partially at the sound of his own voice and the whine threaded through it. He only ever sounds like this when he's talking with her. Thank god she picked up the phone.

Thank god she always picks up the phone, no matter what time it is and no matter wherever she is.

“Now that you mention it, I think I heard about that,” Sofiya hums, and if Sergei closes his eyes he can see her lounging on a beach somewhere or on the bed of her hostel room, tapping her chin with her finger. “I can’t remember where though. Couldn’t have been the fifty-two texts you sent to the family group chat about being an official MLH player.”

“Yes, not there because I know you have that muted,” Sergei replies. He checks the dashboard clock, then his wristwatch. Thirty-seven more minutes until the meeting.

“Thank god you sent out that newsletter then.”

“*Sofa*, you know that was mom.”

Sofiya laughs again, loud and unabashed. “You are kidding, *you* know that was *dad*. Mom called me to ask for an address so she could send me a jersey. She is very big on brand recognition, even if you are not a brand and I am not a billboard.”

Sergei sniffs and then fishes his coffee out of the cupholder. It is ice cold by now. He’d been too nervous to drink it, but he takes a sip now anyway. It cost four dollars. “Did you give her an address?”

He likes the idea of it. Of his sister somewhere out there in the world, in a country Sergei has never been to and probably will never step foot in, wearing their family name across her back and his number. A reminder for her, maybe, to come back eventually. That she had a place to come back to. For everyone else, an *if lost, please return to*.

“Pah,” Sofiya says, which is how she says *yes* when she’s embarrassed. “You know she hasn’t called me in three months? It is very clear sometimes who is her favorite child and who is not.”

“There is still time to become a professional hockey player,” Sergei suggests, because he can’t tell her that she’s *his* favorite. Person, phone contact, safe place. If she gets too embarrassed, she will just hang up the phone, and he still has thirty-five minutes on the clock. “Or give her grandchildren.”

“I am very far away from grandchildren,” she scoffs. “I am closer to being a professional hockey player, I think.”

Sergei laughs. “How far away from grandchildren is Thailand, *Sofa*?”

“Let us just say that I think you may be closer to them wherever it is you are. San Francisco, yes?”

“*Sofa*,” he whines and she laughs again. “You know I am not in San Francisco.”

“Yes, yes,” she says and he can picture the way she waves her hand, two times fast through the air like she’s batting away a fly. “I also know it is your first day of practice, no? Why are you calling me, Seryozha, you should be out on the ice catching more pucks with your mouth.”

“You make me sound like a dog,” Sergei complains, because when it comes to brothers and sisters, it’s always easier to complain than it is to tell the truth. “I am a professional now, I use sticks to catch the pucks like Ilya Rozanov does.”

“Pah,” she says. “Professional athlete is a fake profession. You play a game that children do and get paid a lot of money.”

"*You* write for a travel blog," Sergei points out, gesturing at no one with the hand still holding his cold coffee. It threatens to spill, liquid cresting just over the rim of the cup. He puts it down very quickly. "You cannot throw the first stone here, Sofa, our grandfather would be disappointed in both of us."

"Yes, but I do not get paid a lot of money," she replies, back to airy and untouchable, like they both don't know Sergei deposits a good portion of his paycheck into her bank account each time it lands in his hands. She's never asked for it; he's never asked about it. He just likes the idea of it, of helping her before she even has to ask, the way he'd tumble to his knees on the ice when he was small and she'd skate up behind him and lift him up by the back of his jersey before he could even begin to cry.

That's what's left out of all the stories that the media has started to tell about him and that his mother has been telling for years now: yes, he put on his first pair of skates and stepped foot onto the shitty hometown ice rink when he was barely two years old, hardly able to walk. But Sofiya'd been out there first; all he'd been doing was trying to follow her.

"Sofiya," he says, and then he doesn't say anything else.

Some of the guys on the Magnitude took him out to celebrate his signing a few weeks ago. They'd started with drinks, then karaoke, then more drinks, then bowling. They'd been so wasted by the time they got to the bowling alley, they'd had to ask the attendant to put the bumper rails up on the aisle. Even then, Tremblay had managed to hit the gutter twice anyway, but that's not what Sergei's thinking about right now. He's thinking about those bumper rails, and his sister, and the money, and wherever she is, and the parking lot where he is, cold coffee in his hand and phone pressed to his ear like it's a lifeline. Maybe it is like they are both the assistant, putting up the guard rails, and they take turns being the bowling ball too. Maybe it is like this with all sisters and brothers, or maybe it is just special and theirs.

"Sergei," she mocks, stretching out the last syllable of his name into an exaggerated whine that matches the way he used to say her name as if it were only yesterday. "You are being stupid. Hang up the phone and go play your professional little game. It is the same as you have been doing all your life, no? Same sticks, same net, same pucks?"

"But what if—" he starts to ask before his throat tightens up enough to stop all the words, which is probably for the better. *What if I'm bad? What if they don't like me? What if this is finally my chance and I can't become anything and I have to take that and hold it in my hands for the rest of my life?*

"It is," she says with all the confidence of a first-born daughter talking to her younger brother who will always be a little bit awestruck by her and a little bit dumber. "It is the same game. And you are the same Sergei Dovonchezky, just with a big boy contract now. So it will be okay."

"Okay," Sergei says, and he thinks maybe he almost believes it too. It will be okay. He has played with an MLH team before, he went through the first round of the playoffs with one just last season. He scored goals. Got points. Got ice time. And in the locker room, they liked him. It was good. It was fun. It was hockey. "Okay."

"Okay," Sofiya repeats. "Now, it is very late for me, so I am going to hang up the phone, and you are going to go be a Conqueror, okay, Seryozha?"

“Sofiya,” Sergei whines. “You did not read any of my texts? It’s not the Conquerors, it is the Raiders, I am a Boston Raider.”

She laughs again, goose dying loud enough to wake up her whole hostel he thinks. “You idiot, yes I know. Whose jersey do you think I am wearing right now?”

Sergei’s chest feels so warm that when he takes a sip of his coffee, he doesn’t even notice how cold it is. “I don’t know, Ilya Rozanov’s?”

Because, well, it’s not as if Sergei does not own more than one Rozanov jersey: for the team he played on in Moscow before he was drafted, for the Raiders before he became Captain, for the Raiders after he became Captain, for the Sochi Olympic team, for Worlds. Sofa would have had more than a few opportunities to take one of them.

Sergei taps the tip of his tongue into the gap where his left canine tooth used to be. Rozanov had rammed him up against the boards back in March, and there may have been some elbows involved because he’d managed to damage the root of the tooth enough that after a few weeks of walking around with it wriggling in his mouth, the team’s dentist had just extracted it herself.

Which is much less cool than being able to say *Ilya Rozanov, yes that Ilya Rozanov, THE Ilya Rozanov checked me against the boards hard enough he knocked out one of my teeth and I still got up and skated against him afterwards, blood and all.*

But it’s something at least. A nice little souvenir from his time on the Metros. Better than a t-shirt, because he’ll have this forever. Or until either he or Sofiya decides to get married and his mother drags him to a dentist to be fitted with fake teeth for the sake of the photos.

“Now you are just fishing for compliments,” his sister says, and she hangs up before he can respond.

When he takes his phone away from his ear, he has a new text notification.

Shane Hollander (!!):

hey Chex Mix, heard it was the first optional skate of the season for the Raiders. Good luck! You’re gonna do great.

Shane Hollander (!!):

let me know if Rozanov gives you any trouble. his bark is worse than his bite though, I promise

Sergei grins down at his phone and thumbs out a quick response.

When the Metros had been knocked out of the playoffs in the second round, Sergei had been pretty convinced that that was the bookend of his time with the team. He’d collected all his things from his borrowed locker on the same day that everyone else did, but it’d been different for him. He’d known he wasn’t coming back in August, and it’d made him sad as much as it felt like it made the whole experience real. Like the ending proved that it had happened at all. He’d been a Metro. He’d played on *Shane Hollander’s* line.

He’d been sort of surprised then, when Shane had texted him a few days later, extending an invitation to watch the Raiders face off against the Philadelphia Blazers for the Eastern Conference

title. He'd accepted in a heartbeat, and it hadn't felt weird to sit among the Metros at Hayden Pike's house. It'd felt nice, *fun*. Like he belonged there even though he wouldn't play with them again. The Magnitudes' front office had already told him he'd been waived back down to the AHL, which hadn't been a surprise at all.

What *had* been a surprise was the way Shane kept texting, periodically over the summer. Like they were friends instead of just temporary teammates.

It was nice. It was sweet.

Shane asked him if there were bears in Moscow and if there were, how likely it was to survive a fight with one, and Sergei told him yes there were bears in the city but only in the zoo, and if a Russian was trying to tell him that he'd fought a bear before, then he was having a conversation with a dirty liar.

Sergei complained about his favorite coffee shop discontinuing their blueberry muffins, and Shane sent him a recipe for whole-wheat blueberry muffins with nine grams of protein per serving.

Sometime in June, Shane texted him in the middle of the night to let him know that Lily was sleeping next to him in bed, at his cottage. The text had been very short but very sweet, like Shane was cupping a fragile, delicate thing in his hands and tilting his palms just enough to show Sergei. Sergei had responded in the morning, at a reasonable time, to ask if Shane needed any more dirty words to tell his Russian girlfriend. He received no response.

In July, Shane sent him a picture of a ferris wheel at some sort of local fair, and Sergei realized that somewhere between meeting in March and the end of the summer, they'd developed inside jokes. He shared inside jokes with Hollander. Shane Hollander. Wow.

When the Raiders' front office contacted him at the end of the month to offer him a spot in their prospects camp and, pending his good performance there, a position on the Raiders' roster, Shane had been the fifth person he told after his sister, his mother, his father, and his captain on the Magnitude.

Sergei glances from the text thread to the clock in his dashboard, back to the phone. Twenty-seven minutes before his meeting with the coaching staff.

But he can be a little bit early, he decides. It is his first day on the team: early is good. He is Sergei Dovonchezky and he has scored a few points already in the MLH. Not for the Raiders, but at least against them which is impressive in a different way. Ilya Rozanov has almost knocked out his tooth and Shane Hollander sends him recipes for baked goods. It is going to be okay.

Cliff Marleau is very tall, but he walks like he knows this and is trying to compensate for it. He ducks his head and hunches his shoulders and likes to throw an arm around the person nearest to him, which at the moment is Sergei.

It feels very weird to be escorted from the administrative offices down to the locker room with Marleau hanging off of him, but it is not necessarily bad. It's sort of nice, actually. There'd been a few guys on the Magnitude that were the same way, clapping people on the back and messing with everyone's hair and pulling the smaller guys into their sides like they were overly-socialized puppies and not adult men.

So it feels nice and familiar, what he's used to. But it's still sort of weird, just because Sergei has a trading card with Marleau's face on it and he keeps it tucked into a laminated folder in a binder to protect it, and now the same guy has his arm around his neck as he talks his ear off about the Raiders, the team, the training rink, the game schedule, his wife's star sign, Boston, on and on and on.

Sergei feels dizzy. A bit like he's experiencing some out-of-body thing, except he isn't sure he could make this up. He has a Raiders practice jersey tucked into the crook of his arm, his gear bag over his shoulder. He is being shown the way to the locker rooms so he can get changed and get on the ice. It's not a formal practice, as half the guys are in and out all day today for fitness tests and their own pre-season meetings, but it's sort of practice. It's ice time with his new team, which is the Raiders, which is objectively insane.

He's really actually very thankful for Marleau's presence beside him because he thinks if he'd been left to navigate this on his own, he'd have run into a wall ages ago and passed out in the labyrinth that is the underbelly of the training rink, loose pages of his newly signed contract spread out around him like pieces of falling snow.

"Oh, there he is!" Marleau crows as he shoves them both through the doorway to the locker room. "Here, Rookie," he adds with a clap of his hand on the back of Sergei's shoulder, gesturing towards a locker near the door. "This is yours. And *this* is your Captain."

Sergei wants to ask him to please slow down, just for a second. He needs a second to process the sight of his name and number stenciled carefully above an empty locker with the Raiders logo etched in the wood of the bench seat.

Sergei Dovonchezky, #57, Boston Raider.

He wants to do something really embarrassing, like pull his phone out and take a picture for the next newsletter his dad sends out. He wants to do something even more embarrassing, like cry.

But then he turns around and sees Ilya Rozanov standing at his own locker across the room, nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist, hair slicked back and still dripping from the showers.

Sergei has never turned back around so fast, not in his entire life. "Hi, Mr. Rozanov," he says in English because he sort of remembers every moment of the game they played against each other in March, and he'd noticed Rozanov's preference of speaking to him in English.

Most of the time.

"None of that *mister* stuff," Marleau protests immediately, abandoning Sergei's side to walk further into the room. Maybe closer to Rozanov, maybe just to his own locker. Sergei would look, but he thinks there's a very good chance that Ilya Rozanov is still mostly naked behind him, so it's very important that he busies himself with pushing his gear bag into his locker and pulling out his equipment. Skates and thick socks go on the bench next to him.

He packed his UnderArmor, right? No. Right, right. He's already wearing his UnderArmor shirt beneath his business shirt. Right.

"Is okay," Rozanov says, sounding closer and unbothered. "Is nice to have someone polite around."

“Rookie, don’t you dare call him *mister*,” someone else pipes up, and Sergei glances over at him. Flanders, 2D, #20. “Rozy’s got a big enough ego as it is.”

“Yes, I do,” Rozanov agrees and Sergei can hear the smirk in his voice. He sits down on the bench and carefully unties his shoes. “You only wish your fitness tests went good like mine.”

Flanders makes an offended sound, and Marleau jumps in with a chirp of his own. And then they’re off, raised voices echoing over each other as some of the other guys in the room join in. In the bubbling action and noise of a locker room clicking together again after a summer spent apart, Sergei is forgotten.

He changes quickly, eager to get out onto the ice. It’s so close he can almost smell it. It takes him two tries to get the pads settled right on his shoulders, that’s how excited he is.

It’s when he’s sitting back on the bench in front of his locker—*his locker*—that he feels eyes on him again. Heavy, unignorable. He slips off his left sock and puts the thicker hockey sock on before slipping his foot into his skate and tying it tightly. Then he does the same thing with his right skate.

Then he lets himself look up.

Rozanov is studying him from across the locker room, a strange expression on his face as he blinks at Sergei’s skates. He almost looks confused, sitting in his stall and twirling his phone around in his hand.

He’s still only in a towel even though it’s been at least ten minutes since Sergei and Marleau entered the room. It’s like he doesn’t even notice his own nakedness—or, probably, like he just doesn’t care.

Sergei glances down at his skates, thinking maybe he’s tied them together or something, but they look fine to him. Separately laced and everything.

There’s a small sinking feeling his chest though. Rozanov looks like he’s chewing something vaguely unpleasant, and Sergei can’t shake the feeling that *he’s* put the expression on his face. That Rozanov, for some reason, just doesn’t like him. It doesn’t make sense because it’s not like Sergei’s ever even beaten Rozanov at hockey or anything. Or stole from him or insulted his mother. Or shoved him up against the boards and cracked his tooth, for example.

He unties his right skate and then ties it again, tighter. He wants it to be perfect. He wants to be perfect. He wants to believe it when he repeats Sofiya’s words back to himself: *you are Sergei Dovonchezky, and it will be okay.*

Even if his new captain does not like him.

“Dovonchezky,” Rozanov says, and Sergei startles because he is suddenly much closer. Directly in front of him. Towel and all.

“Um. Hello,” Sergei says. Wondering if he should stand up. Rozanov isn’t so close to him that it’s *inappropriate* or anything, a good two meters in between them, but he isn’t sure this is a conversation he wants to have sitting down.

On the other hand, he isn’t sure he can survive this kind of conversation standing either. Rozanov’s abdominal muscles are front and center, and Sergei’s been in and out of locker rooms since he was

five years old so he should be used to this sort of thing. It's just that none of those locker rooms ever had *Ilya Rozanov* in them.

"Yes, hello," Rozanov says. And now he sounds impatient, which is not good. For a moment, Sergei is so distracted trying to analyze his captain's tone that he doesn't recognize the fact that he's spoken the words in Russian. When he does though, he can feel his eyes go round.

He didn't realize Rozanov knew how to say *hello* in Russian. He sort of thought maybe he'd forgotten how; he's only ever heard him use the language for threats. To Sergei.

"Shane says I should apologize," Rozanov tells him, point-blank and in Russian, the hand not holding his phone scratching at his bare hip. Sergei almost chokes on his tongue.

He wonders wildly if he could let Shane know that next time, it'd be really appreciated if he could make sure Ilya Rozanov decides to put clothes on before apologizing too. If that's not too much to ask.

"For the game in March," Rozanov adds when Sergei doesn't say anything. His eyes are very intense. He looks like he did during that game, during the face-off he'd taken against him.

"It's okay," Sergei says, more tentatively than he wants to sound in front of Ilya Rozanov. He sticks his tongue through the gap in his teeth where the canine used to be, partially out of habit. "It was hockey."

Rozanov nods, looking satisfied for a moment. Then he shakes his head, gaze following the movement of Sergei's tongue. Sergei stops moving his tongue very quickly. "No, it was not," Rozanov says. "It was personal, and it was stupid. And I am sorry."

"Oh," Sergei says. He glances around the locker room, but no one else is paying them much attention. Then again, even if they were, they're speaking in Russian. No one else speaks Russian here, Sergei is pretty sure, and so it's like a secret language just between Rozanov and him. Millions of speakers in the world, and only two of them matter right now. "Um, thank you for saying this."

He sort of really wants to ask Rozanov what was personal about it. Or, like, what Sergei did in the three minutes they met before the game that made Rozanov dislike him so much. He probably has the right to ask, but something makes him hold his tongue.

Rozanov looks different now than he did in March. And it's not just the near-nakedness or the slight flush from his fitness test and the shower. It's something in his eyes and the fall of his shoulders. He looks calmer, brighter—still intense, still a living hockey legend pinning all of his attention on Sergei like he's a lab rat to be dissected, but there's something settled about him now that wasn't there before.

Maybe Rozanov was just working through something back in the spring. Shane'd said his dad had been sick and passed away during the season, that must have been really hard on him. Maybe seeing another Russian was too much at the time. Maybe he was just grieving and trying to pretend everything was normal, and Sergei just represented Russia in ways that needled him.

Sergei can understand that. The tip of his tongue taps along the edge of the gap again. It's a nervous habit he's picked up since May.

“Do you want another?” Rozanov asks abruptly. He’s looking at his mouth again. Sergei is going to have to break this habit as soon as possible if Rozanov doesn’t stop looking at him like that, all quiet intensity.

“What, hit?” Sergei says, mind flashing back to the way that Rozanov had checked him into the boards back in March. He’d had a bruise on his back from the end of Rozanov’s hockey stick slamming against his kidneys. It’d hurt like hell, but that was hockey. Sometimes, it got violent; sometimes it got personal.

Rozanov smiles, a thin, flickering thing. “Tooth,” he corrects, tapping the edge of his lip. “Shane says you had to get it removed. He sent me a very strongly worded text.”

Sergei blinks. How often does Rozanov talk with Shane? How often does Rozanov talk with Shane *about Sergei*? It sounds like the answer is *not never*, which would not have been his first guess.

“Uh,” he says, so startled by the revelation that Rozanov and Shane Hollander *text* that he slips out of Russian and back to English, the only language that can convey how poleaxed he feels right now. “Is fine, I am okay. You are not first.”

“If you’re sure,” Rozanov says smoothly, still in Russian. “I would pay for it.”

Sergei wonders if Shane had told him to say that. “Mama says I do not have to fix my teeth until I retire or marry or my sister marry,” he tells him. “Both are many, many years away hopefully. Ask then.”

Rozanov blinks. Then he smiles, which is maybe worse than the focused intensity from before. “Okay,” he says. He looks away from him, down to the phone in his hand. “Here,” Rozanov unlocks it with a quick practiced motion before holding it out to Sergei. “Put in your number. I will add you to the Russian group chat.”

“There’s a Russian group chat?” Sergei asks, back to Russian now because he feels too dizzy for anything else.

“There are two chats,” Rozanov replies. “One with everyone and then one only with the Russians in the Eastern conference, because I do not care for Sasha in Las Vegas. He is my least favorite Russian.”

Sergei types in his phone number in a daze. If Aleksander Volkov, goalie for the Las Vegas Silver Crusaders, is Rozanov’s least favorite Russian, that means Sergei *isn’t*.

Forget the photo of his stall, that’s definitely going in the next newsletter.

“Good, thank you,” Rozanov says, accepting his phone back with a smirk that Sergei doesn’t know how to translate. “You are skating for the coaches today, yes?”

Sergei looks down at his skates then back up to Rozanov. He’s holding his gloves in the crook of his elbow. If someone tried to stop him from getting on the ice right now, Sergei thinks he’ll start crying. “Um, yes, I think so.”

“Good,” Rozanov says again, and he reaches forward and claps Sergei on the shoulder through the layers of protective wear. The warmth from the hit radiates down to his bones anyway. “Make sure to show off, Dovonchezky. I suggested they should look at your game tape from the Magnitude and

see if your contract was up for the taking when they started talking about trading Brexton. So if you fall on the ice, I'll never hear the end of it, okay?"

Sergei promptly drops his gloves on the floor. "I—you—what?"

"Yes, good, like that, get that out of your system now," Rozanov tells him, waving a hand and turning to make his way back across the locker room.

"Rozy, you bullying the rookie?" Marleau accuses, bending down to grab one of Sergei's gloves and giving it back to him. "Whatever he's saying, don't listen to him, alright?" he tells Sergei, voice pitched purposefully loud. "And whatever you do, don't call him *Mister* again, the fucker doesn't deserve your respect. It's Rozy, got it?"

Rozanov sinks down onto the bench in front of his locker like a king sits on his throne. His eyes are sharp, focused, and his lips are pulled up into a smirk that reminds Sergei of the stories his grandfather used to tell about leaving his village in the dead of winter to track down wolves that made a nuisance of themselves by picking off livestock. Sergei doesn't know if he's looking at a hunter or a wolf. He isn't sure it matters; his skin pinpricks with instinctive awareness all the same.

"Oh, Dovonchezky already knows my nickname," Rozanov says in English, scratching at his arm like he's disinterested in the proceedings before him.

Sergei can feel his face scrunch up in confusion. "I do?" he asks. His tongue taps against the hole in his teeth as he thinks. "I don't," he decides.

Rozanov's eyes flick down to his mouth, the gap between his teeth, and then back to his face. He grins, wolfish. "You do," he disagrees, Russian now, slipping into the language like it's a well-loved coat to be shrugged on. "You can call me Lily."

"Lily," Sergei blinks and then frowns, bending down to grab his other glove off the floor. Lily? That's funny; the only Lily he knows is—

"Just not around Shane, okay? He is a very jealous lover," Ilya tells him. He leans forward in his stall, eyebrows crooking up like he's sharing a secret. "He hears you call me that, he might knock out your other canine."

Sergei drops his gloves again, but he doesn't even notice as they leave his hands.

Rozanov's grin is all fang. "Tell you what," he says. "You win me a Cup and you can even call me *Lilichka*, yes?"

"Rozy," Marleau snaps, hands on his hips like Rozanov is a misbehaving child. "It's the Rookie's first day, save the bullying for after he's had lunch at *least*, alright?"

"And no chirping in Russian, that's not fair," Flanders calls from his stall. "We want to know what you say too. That goes for you as well, Rookie."

Sergei opens and closes his mouth but he doesn't think any sound comes out. He's pretty sure no air goes in either. He blinks at Rozanov. He blinks at Rozanov again, like that'll change anything.

Holy shit.

He sent Shane a list of Russian words to use when eating his girlfriend's pussy. But Shane doesn't have a girlfriend. Shane has a Rozanov. Holy shit. Sergei sent Shane Hollander a list of words to use when eating his girlfriend's pussy—*Rozanov's pus*—no, nope. No. No, thank you.

"Now, now, Marley," Rozanov chides in English again, but he hasn't taken his eyes off Sergei. "No need to call him Rookie, I hear they called him *Chex-Mix* on the Magnitude."

Sergei's mouth is very dry and his tongue feels very heavy. His cheeks are very hot; he feels like maybe he should start believing in spontaneous combustion again, like he did when he was fourteen and scared of everything. "This is a terrible apology," he hisses in Russian, and Rozanov—Ilya, Sergei decides, he's going to call him *Ilya* if he's going to have to face the fact that his captain is apparently fucking his one-time captain and current friend—tips his head back as he laughs.

"Welcome to the Boston Raiders," Ilya says, in English. And then he winks, and it takes Sergei six whole practices and a party-sized bag of chex-mix left in his stall before he realizes that for whatever reason, Ilya has really, actually, honestly decided to let him in on a joke no one else in the locker room knows about.

Probably as a thank you for the Russian lessons he gave Shane, Sergei decides later as he munches on a handful of pretzels. They must have come in handy somehow.

Not that Sergei ever, ever wants to hear the details.



💖✨ lost in the hollan-daze ✨💖
@hopeforthemetros

fellas have you ever hated your coworker so much that you steal his rookie from him and take him across the US-Canadian border to work for u instead? happened to my good friend shane hollander

1:14 PM · Sept 30, 2017

558 Retweets 129 Quote Tweets 1K Likes



Ilya Rozanov · @Ilya_Rozanov81 · Sept 30
Replying to @hopeforthemetros

we have joint custody agreement



35.5K



21.9K



76.4K



Ilya Rozanov @Ilya_Rozanov81 · Sept 30

Replying to @Ilya_Rozanov81

i send kid back to montreal with money for dentist and hairdresser but hollander keeps blowing it on fast cars, cheap thrills, and easy women



56.4K



11.3K



84.2K



Shane Hollander @shane_hollander · Sept 30
Replying to @Ilya_Rozanov81

Not funny, Rozanov.



70.8K



54.2K



90.9K



Chexy Dovonchezky | Boston Raiders @sergeidovonchezky · Sept 30
Replying to @shane_hollander

is a little funny, shanya





Ilya Rozanov · @Ilya_Rozanov81 · Sept 30
Replying to @sergeidovonchezky

@sergeidovonchezky No. Grounded.



104K



54.2K



117K

Chapter End Notes

ilya rozanov really said there must always be a russian hockey player on the boston raiders who yearns for shane hollander. not me though my boyfriend shane hollander asked me to move to ottawa to be closer to him so this is my last year here. have fun tho

End Notes

all of what will happen in the next chapter would have been avoided if shane had just remembered that actually he's been called hollzy by his teammates since he was like ten years old, but ilya has never once called him hollzy so he's forgotten all about this because he's so ilya-pilled rn and thus it's not important to his journey

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[a rookie's guide to navigating unrequited office romance \(allegedly\)](#) by [allthelovesaved](#)

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