

C'est Toi

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C'est Toi

by [OrchidScript](#)

Summary

“You are still you, yes?” Ilya repeated. “You are still slow hockey player with pretty freckles, yes?” It was a weak attempt at a joke, so Ilya shook it away and tried again. “You are still Shane, same person, same brain, yes?”

Shane blinked up at him, thinking. Then, nodding slowly. “Mostly. Yeah. I don’t know about a name or anything yet, but—. Yeah. I’m still me.”

“Then it does not matter.”

A trans Shane Hollander AU

Notes

Sometimes, as a writer, you get a little smidgen of a plot and you build it into a story. Sometimes, you get bonked over the head by a plot and furiously get it out onto paper before realizing how much editing you have to do. And, sometimes, it is a third option, wherein the plot full possesses your brain and refuses to let go.

I'll let you guess which option happened to me... (psst, it was #3).

So, I have been picking away at this fic. I did not expect it to balloon to past 15,000 words. I did not expect it to be more than a one shot. But here we are. I'll admit to being a little afraid of my narrative here, considering the state of the world, which is why I chose originally to publish this anonymously. Hopefully, the story readers find here will be regarded as respectful, hopefully sweet and loving.

I didn't want to write a story like this and have it be anything less than those things. So, here's hoping we got close.

Thank you for reading ♥
xoxo.

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

Chapter 1

May 2022

Shane sat forward in her seat, thumb pressed to her teeth. She resisted the urge to bite at the nail, gnaw at the tougher skin next to it, but only just.

“Breathe.” Selena’s voice would have made her flinch if Shane hadn’t felt her hand first.
“Not much time left to go.”

Shane pulled her hands away from her mouth. “Three minutes can change everything. Down there, it’s hours.”

Selena hummed agreement. “You would know.”

The Centaurs were in the finals. The Stanley Cup Finals. It had taken the team by surprise as much as it had their fans, the whole city of Ottawa. Even after the previous season’s semi-miraculous run to the second round of the playoffs, it was startling. They’d celebrated every win as if it was going to be their last, all the way to this game. Game seven.

It had been an absolute, down-to-the wire series between the Ottawa Centaurs and the Minnesota Nomads. Both teams had won evenly. Both teams were limping to the bitter end. It could have been knock-down, drag-out, with fights every other play, but it hadn’t. Evenly matched dark horses, shocking the league by being in the playoffs at all, let alone the Finals.

The finals, Hollander, Ilya had laughed in their kitchen about a week ago, dancing on the edge of delirious. *I can taste it, on my tongue. The metal. Can you?*

Selena rubbed her shoulder sympathetically. “You want to be down there, don’t you?”

“More than fucking anything,” Shane exhaled and sat up.

It had been some really fucking good hockey, Shane thought.

Wives, girlfriends, parents, children, one or two sets of grandparents for the rookies. Lisa had managed to trade shifts to be there. Caitlin and Cassie sat side by side, Milo and Susie on their laps in matching bright blue headphones. Shane’s own parents sat with them, in the two seats behind her. Yuna about ready to vibrate out of her seat, and David watching intently, having not even brought a magazine or crossword puzzle for the intermissions.

Hayes batted the puck away for the second time in as many minutes. Ilya looped around the back of the goal before racing back up the ice, following Boodram and Barrett, ducking between Minnesota players and lurking.

Barrett and Boodram stayed neck and neck, passing back and forth until one of them was smacked into the boards – Bood, who didn’t have the puck.

Shane clapped hands over her mouth to hide her grin. Minnesota's number 29 had picked the wrong guy.

Barrett, free and clear, slid free of the melee. He passed to Ilya behind the net, as easily as a handshake. Ilya pushed forward, turned it, dawdling a second until Barrett was exactly where he wanted.

She pressed her hands tighter to her face, anticipation nearly suffocating. Shane could read the next moves on her fiancé's body. They had talked this through, just that morning.

Ilya faked right, then passed to Boodram on the left. Boodram rounded a Minnesota winger. Ilya slipped away from a fresh check in time for the puck to come back to him, backhanding it into the net under the goalie's arm.

The buzzer went. Music started blaring, hardly heard under the tidal-wave roar of the Ottawa crowd. Shane was on her feet in a second, shouting and jumping. The last time she'd done so, she might have been ten years old. Another place, another time. She looked back at her mother in the row behind, doing the exact same thing she always had – clapping, cheering, bouncing in a short wave happy dance. She found herself doing the same.

“Nice moves, Holly!” Cassie shouted from down the line. She was beaming, Milo sucking on four fingers crammed into his mouth.

Shane laughed. She pointed to Yuna. “I learned from the best!”

She dropped down into her seat. The first line had broken out of their celebratory clump. She could practically hear Ilya's resolute *I love you, one more*, as she watched him skate in for the next play. She glanced up at the scoreboard.

Centaurs three, Nomads two.

Shane cupped her hands around her mouth. “*Davai!*”

It was lost to the cacophony of the arena, the screaming and celebrating. Ilya couldn't hear her. Hell, her own father probably couldn't, and he was sitting right behind her. Still, Shane had a certainty that Ilya had at least felt it.

One minute and fifty-seven seconds left to go in the third period.

Let's fucking go.

Wow, this Montreal girl works you up, brother.

Ilya ran a hand over his hair. If only Marleau had known how right he was. If only Ilya had known. He jammed his cigarette back between his lips, inhaling sharply and deeply. The thought made his insides ache — wishing he had known when Shane hadn't even known, thinking he could have possibly guessed at the truths revealed the night before.

Fuck, Ilya, I'm not—. I can't be —. I need to tell you something...

He exhaled a plume of silver, then ground the heel of his palm into his eye. They were dry, gritty. It had nothing to do with the orange sunrise cresting the trees on the other side of the lake. It had everything to do with the hours and hours he had spent reading on his phone, searching the words Shane had told him, finding everything he could so that he could understand and not have to ask.

I'm a girl. Woman. Trans. You know what I mean?

Ilya knew what she meant, distantly, but he wasn't going to prod her for the answers he didn't have. He did not want to ask. He did not want to stick his fingers into a smarting nerve, or worse, an open wound. He did not want to be the cause, again, of Shane's eyes brimming with tears that never quite spilled over.

Ilya didn't want to cause more pain, more hurt. He didn't want Shane to take back what he — *she*, he reminded himself — she had said the night before.

Ilya took another long drag off the cigarette. It wasn't his first of the day, and he knew it wouldn't be his last.

Not until Shane took them away from him. Keep him from chain smoking. Made him shower the smog of nicotine off of him.

It's funny, huh? I've been in your phone as Jane for so long, I might as well just be...

She would take his cigarettes away. *She* hated him smoking because they were athletes and shouldn't.

Ilya felt ridiculous, overemphasizing it in his brain, but he couldn't help himself. Because Shane was *she* now, or had been.

There had been a stumbled, confusing explanation of how she had come to understand that, how she had told her parents, what her plan was for the next year, and Ilya had heard all of it. But he got lost just trying to listen, trying to keep up and remember.

Shane was a girl, a woman.

Could be *Ilya's* girl, girlfriend, partner.

Ilya counted out a deep breath, the way he had seen Shane do multiple times. Five in, hold for four, six out. He rubbed his eyes, squinting into the orange sun, cigarette dangling from

his fingertips. It wasn't the first time Ilya had felt like this, but he hoped it would be the last. Confused, unmoored, weak. Lost on open water. Deeply, certainly, hopelessly inadequate.

That Montreal girl really works you up, brother.

It's a lot, I know. It's okay if you don't—. If you can't—. What I mean is, I understand. If you don't want me, want to be with me, anymore.

He *did* want. He wanted so badly he ached.

Ilya couldn't imagine *not* wanting.

He understood some things that morning, but so much of it was still scrambled in his brain. He needed a few days. He needed a month.

He wouldn't dare tell her that. He needed to process, commit it all to memory. He knew it would take time, but Ilya wasn't sure what time he had. It felt like a stopwatch running down, but he couldn't see the face of it.

Did he have time? Before Shane got sick of explaining to him, sick of pandering to him? Before Shane got sick of him?

Ilya heard the back door to the house open and close, but did not look. He snubbed out the last quarter inch of cigarette before the filter, then reached for the carton of Marlboros and his lighter to ignite a fresh one. His third. He wanted to sit there, on that rock, chain smoking until he made himself sick.

"You shouldn't be smoking." Shane appeared in front of him, a mug of coffee extended up towards him.

Without a word, Ilya tucked the unlit cigarette back into its spot in the carton. He dropped the lighter somewhere on the rock, then leaned down for the mug. He didn't say anything as Shane clambered up next to him, draping a blanket around both of their shoulders and holding a mug of her own.

Her, Ilya's thoughts murmured.

What if you forget? What if you get lazy and selfish and you forget? What if say it wrong, you could hurt her, would you hurt her—?

"Did you get any sleep?" Shane murmured, shoulder pressed against Ilya's ribs.

Getting closer, Ilya realized. Closer, not further away.

He shook his head and took a long drink. It was milky, sweet; the way he had fixed it the last few days. Shane had noticed. Shane, who drank only black coffee at the whim of that stupid performance diet, remembered.

"Me neither," Shane said. "Up and down. Too many thoughts." Ilya felt her eyes on him and, for the first time, dared meet them. He knew Shane could see the exhaustion there. "I saw

you on your phone, when I was up. Are you, um, okay? After everything, last night, you know?”

“Fine,” Ilya managed. “Just reading.” He took a long swallow of the coffee then slid an arm around Shane’s shoulders, bent awkwardly to press a kiss to the soft dark hair. “Did I keep you awake?”

“No, not at all. I just was wondering, you know, I—.” Shane cut off sharply. She bit into her lip hard — hard enough to draw blood, Ilya noted. He reached up, letting a finger drag along Shane’s jaw and watching the muscles unclench. “How you were feeling about—. About it all..?”

Ilya slid his hand under her chin, tipping her face up to him. He’d done it many times in the last eight years, enough that it felt like muscle memory, same as cross-overs and slap shots. “You are still you, yes?”

He had asked the same question the night before, when they were pressed together on the couch, but it had been lost. Between Shane’s tears seeping into Ilya’s shirt and the stilted, whispered confessions, it had gotten lost. Ilya couldn’t think to ask anything else, praying to anyone who would listen that it didn’t make Shane cry again.

“What do you mean?” Shane asked, confusion evident.

“You are still you, yes?” Ilya repeated. “You are still slow hockey player with pretty freckles, yes?” It was a weak attempt at a joke. Ilya shook his head and retried. “You are still Shane, same person, same brain, yes?”

Shane blinked up at him, thinking. Then, nodding slowly. “Mostly. Yeah. I don’t know about a name or anything yet, but—. Yeah. I’m still me.”

“Then it does not matter.” Ilya bent again. “Montreal girl, boy, girlfriend. Does not matter.” He paused to press a kiss to Shane’s temple. “You still have a weak backhand—.”

“Ilya.”

“And I still never want you to go away.” Ilya almost lost his balance, sliding forward to wrap Shane up in his arms. “Never, ever.”

Shane sniffed against his shoulder. Their coffees jostled, spilled a bit over their fingers and wrists. “Please. Please don’t.”

Later, there would be more questions. Later, there would be worries about clothes and questions about being Ilya’s girlfriend. Later, there would be a smear of lipgloss in the center of Ilya’s chest and hickeys up and down Shane’s thighs. Later, beyond the cottage and the lake, there would be so much more.

But, for now, Ilya held Shane against his chest; comforted by the knowledge that he would stay right there forever if she asked him.

June 2019

“We got bad things to do...”

Ilya leaned against the wall. Fondness, love, welled up in his chest so deeply and surely that his head swam. Like he was underwater at the lake, staring at the sky. At sunshine — his sunshine.

“Baby, take me, don’t hesitate—.”

Shane Hollander, bouncing around their kitchen, singing along to whatever was blaring in her headphones. The soles of her bare feet squeaked against the hardwood floors, hips swaying against the beat as she wiped down the counters and stovetop.

“With a girl like me, you better activate...”

Her short ponytail swung back and forth against the nape of her neck. Her spandex gym shorts were riding up her thighs as she moved along to the song, a tee shirt stolen from Ilya swinging around her hips and stomach. She was half out of breath from singing along. She couldn’t dance for shit, but Ilya already knew that.

She was the most beautiful thing Ilya had seen all day.

All summer.

Maybe the whole last year.

“Matter of fact, I caught you lookin’ back— Jesus fuck!” Shane yelled when she saw him.

Ilya bit back a laugh, suffusing it into a warm, bemused smile. “Sorry. Did I scare you?”

“Fucking—. *Yes!*” Shane stared at him like he had five heads. The Clorox wipe hanging from her hand as her face warred between laughter and exasperation, settling somewhere affectionately in the middle. “How long were you standing there?”

“Not long,” Ilya answered. He pushed off the wall, grinning catlike as he approached. “But I did want to hear you say the part about panties dropping.”

Shane’s face fell. “Ilya. Gross.”

“How?” Ilya laughed. “These are the words in the song!”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“I am so sure. I showed you the song. Yesterday. In the car.” Ilya leaned a hip against the island. He grinned widely, mischievously; a signature. “It’s on, babe, I know you’re not shy.”

Shane rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. “You’re certainly not.”

Ilya laughed. “Mmm no. Not around you. Not anymore.”

“I don’t think you ever were.” Her smile was fond, her brown eyes soft. She wore the fake lashes Rose had sent her, the only gesture at being put together.

In three steps, Ilya could round the corner and snag her by the waist. Hold her close and kiss her neck as she whacked him with the cleaning wipe in protest. Lift her just enough that her feet no longer touched the floor. There would be time for that and, as much as Ilya loved teasing and prodding her, he knew it wasn’t then.

“Are you having a good day?” Ilya asked, changing the tenor of the conversation.

Shane dropped the wipe on the island, then lowered the headphones to hang around her neck. “Yeah.”

Victory surged in Ilya’s chest. He didn’t tamp it down. He didn’t force it off his face, but let it suffuse his every feature. Warm, besotted, proud. Because it was a victory; a stunning, brilliant, bald-faced victory. Ilya knew better than to turn down one of those. He knew better than to take Shane’s happiness or comfort for granted.

A blink later, she was back to sanitizing the granite. “It’s nice finally being here. All moved in.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, pausing in her endless wiping. “Kind of wishing I had done it sooner, but, well.”

“We had things to do.” Ilya rounded the corner slowly. He knew she was watching him, but brushed it off. She let him wrap arms around her ribs and kiss the back of her neck. “Bad, bad things to do.”

“Those aren’t the words, Ilya.”

“I know, Shane.” Ilya kissed her cheek. “You looked happy.”

“I am.” Shane dropped the wipe. “Happy, I mean.”

It shouldn’t have been a groundbreaking statement. It shouldn’t have been a thought that threatened to move the earth under his feet. But it was. It was everything, getting to watch her dance carefree around the kitchen, even if she was cleaning.

The end of the 2018 season couldn’t have been more welcome. A first in Shane’s nine year career. The post-All Stars run had left her bruised up and exhausted. The pressure to keep up, to keep pretending, had worn her down to the quick. She had tucked her chin and pushed through, but it had been painful to watch. Yuna, David, Ilya, Rose Landry, even Svetlana – they’d all been worried in their own right.

There had been tear-filled phone calls from hotel bathrooms, the door locked and her teammate out elsewhere, panic surging under her sternum and her skin smarting raw from too-hot showers. There had been stolen hours wrapped around one another, buried under soft blankets while Boston, Montreal, Ottawa, San Jose sped along outside their windows. There had been chirps that hit harder, checks that struck deeper, and an increasingly large gallery of Shane's sour faces plastered across sports reporting continent-wide. And Ilya stuck in Boston, stuck a hundred miles away, unable to do much.

She leaned back against his chest, tipped her head back against his shoulder. She sighed contentedly. "I am very happy. Right here. With you."

"Good. That is all I want." Ilya squeezed her again, humming happily at her warmth. At her body tucked up neatly against his own. A perfect fit.

The season had been studded by periodic days off for doctor's appointments disguised as sick days. The beginnings of transition, of affirming care — Ilya had had to look up 'affirming' just to be sure. It had been part of the plan, seeding the months to make her very early retirement plausible.

But retirement had not come easily, or quietly.

Speculation had swirled from the first press release. Loud, rattling, overwhelming Shane on even her best days. There had been a press conference, time for questions. Shane had held her own, said her piece, and asked for her own separate peace in return.

Still, Farah was hounded by journalists' *requests for comment*.

Still, Shane didn't answer the messages she got from old teammates. Old friends.

To the MHL and its fans, Canada's gold-medal phenom, Shane Hollander, had all but vanished off the face of the earth.

Because she wanted it that way. Even if it was lonely.

I've never been happy to not be in the finals, Shane had admitted to him the year before. After Montreal had been taken out by the Colorado Fifty-Niners in the second round - her last cup run, though neither of them said it - she'd stopped over in Boston before heading back home for the summer. They had spent ten days lounging on Ilya's couch, in Ilya's bed, watching Colorado go down to Buffalo in the finals.

Ilya had been sad to see her go then. Sad to sell that house in Boston with even the bad memories attached to it. He was happier now, in Ottawa, with her, in a house that was theirs. That she had picked for them. Where they were learning to live in a closer orbit.

"Oh really? All you want?"

"Mhmm. Top of the list."

There had been changes. Of course there had been changes. Shane had been having HRT appointments for just over a year, doing her level best to hide as much of those changes as

possible from the outside.

She'd been growing her hair out – another thing that had earned commentary right before the end of Montreal's last season. It skimmed the tops of her shoulders now, thick and dark. The weight of it lent it a soft wave when it was down, framing her face. Easily swept up in a small bun, a short ponytail, aided by a collection of hair ties Yuna had given her. She'd taken to wearing one or two around her wrist at all times.

Loose tee shirts hid the size of her chest, the extra softness at her waist. Sweats hid the new found curve of her hips. The weight, the softness, was too new and too stubborn. Shane had spent months fighting it with everything she knew – morning fasting, performance diets, running until she nearly dropped – until her doctor insisted it was fine.

It was normal. It was meant to happen. Her body would catch up with her mind, but she had to give it time.

That had sat better with her, but Ilya still found her absent-mindedly pressing her fingers into her legs and sides. He caught glimpses of faces she made when he put hands somewhere too quickly, too unexpectedly, without warning.

“Well, good. Because my parents will be here in less than an hour, so don't start anything you can't finish.”

Ilya tucked his face to the smooth warm skin of her neck. He'd been savoring the five inches of difference in their height that summer. Perhaps too much. “I maybe don't finish, but you. You always finish quick.”

Shane snickered. “Not lately.”

Arousal came and went oddly, leaving her frustrated in a different way – but not for long. Not if Ilya could help it. The hormones kept her off balance. More than a handful of encounters had left her in tears, and not the fun kind. A laundry list had developed – couldn't get hard, couldn't stay hard, sometimes got so pulled out of the moment she couldn't even come.

But, when she could – when she *did* – it was intense. Full body trembling. Eyes rolled back. Mouth dropped open in soft-lipped gasp. Back arched until her venus dimples made themselves known. Ilya licked the familiar moans from her mouth, cradling her hips against his, holding her close until she came all the way down again. Sometimes a few minutes, sometimes much longer, sometimes she would go sweetly boneless in his arms for hours.

Ilya loved it when it took longer. Seeing her dazed, sated, satisfied to the marrow of her bones. Wrapping her close in warm bathwater or next to the firepit at the cottage. Her nails scratching gently at his scalp, as if he was a lap dog, and whispering sweet things in his ear as he pressed her forehead to her collarbones, kissed her chest reverently.

There were times when she didn't want him to touch her. Times where she retreated into her head, doing no more than resting her feet in his lap or her head against his shoulder. Times where she escaped into the upstairs guest bedroom to avoid his touch, the swirl of thoughts

and sensations too much. Times were the impatience in her head and the oddness in her skin, made her snap, and spit, and say impossibly mean things.

Not about Ilya.

About herself.

“I did not say it.” Ilya nipped at her ear, loving the twitch in her shoulder as he did. “You did, *solnyshka*. Not me.”

“You’re impossible,” Shane huffed, but didn’t push him away. She wriggled a bit, putting enough space between them to turn around in Ilya’s arms. Her hands rested on his shoulders, teasing the strap of his tank top, then slid up to cup the curve of his jaw. “I need to get ready.”

Ilya clicked his tongue. “No, no, no, you do not.”

“Yes, I do. Look at me!” Shane laughed, waving her hands at her face.

“I am looking.” Ilya’s hand wrapped around her hips, kneading into the meat of them. “*Moya solnyshka*. So pretty.”

“Ilya. You’re exaggerating.”

“Mmm no. I do not do this.”

Shane rolled her eyes. “I can’t open the door like this.”

“You can’t, that is true.” Ilya kissed one cheek. “Too pretty.” Then the other. “Too sexy.” He dropped a kiss in the wrinkled spot between her eyebrows. “Will bring a crowd.”

“You’re biased.”

“I am right.”

“*Ilya*—” Shane pushed him away. Her bottom lip was already pulled between her teeth, worrying it. “Let me?”

Ilya removed his hands and stepped back. A crystal clear *I’ll back off* for her to see on him. A comfortably silent *of course* passed between them.

She let go of the breath she was holding. “Thank you. I’m sorry.”

By her own admission, Shane wasn’t particularly good with eyeliner or lipstick. Makeup still felt like a hard-won fourth language. She hadn’t worn it around the house, or around Ilya, all summer.

But, the moment someone else entered the equation, she had to have it. Not having it was worth than the annoyance at clumsily putting it on.

Shane flushed pink, but she didn't move to go to the bedroom yet. "I just want to look right, you know? The way I want, in front of people I care about."

"*Konechko, rodnaya*," Ilya said. "Make yourself feel good."

"You don't like when I wear it," Shane said with a small frown.

Ilya shook his head. "I love when you know you look good. Eyeliner, no eyeliner. Boxers, tiny panties. My shirt, your shirt. Does not matter to me how you feel good."

"Had me fooled."

"Could I say it more?"

"That you like seeing me in your clothes?" Shane smirked, but it was a thin cover. "Couldn't hurt."

"Then I will." Ilya pulled in a breath, crossing his arms over his chest. His mouth scrunched as he picked his next words. "I do not like when you decide you must do these things. Like no one will take you seriously without lip gloss or skirt on."

"Well." Shane shifted against the edge of the counter top. "They might not."

There was no disputing that. Unfortunately.

Ilya knew that. He'd read enough on the internet, talked enough with her that he knew it was a universal truth. He wasn't foolhardy enough to try. It wasn't his place.

An argument in July — Ilya whining about her freckles being covered by foundation led to Shane snapping that what he thought didn't matter when it was her face — had made that very clear. They hadn't talked for hours, the stalemate only breaking as Ilya cooked dinner. Shane had seated herself at the counter, watching him with sad eyes until he finished.

Ilya had said *sorry*. Shane had said *sorry*. Shane had held out a packet of makeup wipes, telling him he could wipe it all away if it meant that much to him. Ilya had shook his head, pushed the packet back at her. If she did not want to wear it, then she could wipe it away herself, Ilya had insisted. It was her face, her comfort, not his.

"I know," Ilya said. "But *they* are not your parents. *They* are not me." He pressed a hand flat to his chest, right over where his mother's pendant rested. "*They* are boring people at charity dinners and league parties. People we schmooze for money so we can run the camps and help people. They have money and no sense, yes?"

Shane nodded, mind whirring behind her eyes. "You're right. It's just mom and dad." She scraped her teeth along her lower lip. "I could get away with jeans and a tee shirt, right?"

Yuna had bought Shane the hair ties, a multipack of lipglosses and small stud earrings to try, a stack of books and tabs to mark pages for later. She sat next to her on the couch, ESPN playing low in the background, as Shane read through pamphlets from the doctor, scrolled Reddit forums, or online clothing storms until she overwhelmed herself.

Rose had swooped into Montreal one day in late May, a whole extra suitcase in hand filled with her definition of essentials – hair products, a brand new make up bag stuffed to the gills, folding bags of clothes and shoes to try from Rose’s own stylist. They had spent the weekend watching movies, Shane inspecting each item while Rose insisted she only take exactly what she wanted of it.

No hurt feelings at all, babe. It can all get returned, or you can keep it all just to play.

“You are getting away with nothing, Shane.” Ilya opened his arms, and was happy when she stepped forward into them. He held her close, dropping kisses along the crown of her head. “*Ya tebya lyubyu.*”

Shane sighed against him. “*Ya tozhe tebya lyubyu.*”

They had said it many times in the last year. More than Ilya could count or would have counted on. It never failed to make his heart squeeze happily in his chest, hearing his mother tongue in Shane’s voice, growing more confident with each recitation. Reminding him, for good and all, that he was a very lucky man.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I hope you all enjoy introspection, cuddling, and a fight. Because that's what you're getting here.

Thank you for the kind reception of this fic. I'm actually floored. Hopefully I continue to earn that.

Anyway, enjoy!

xoxo.

December 2019

The house was quiet when Shane stepped into the master bathroom. Her hair was sweaty in her ponytail. Her tee shirt stuck to her back and waist, sweat dripping from underneath her sport's bra. She made a face in the mirror as she peeled them off in turn. Wiggling out of her leggings was a chore and she was grateful she narrowly avoided bruising something against the vanity as she shoved them over her hips.

The air chilled her overheated skin as she walked naked to the shower and stepped under the spray. She clamped her eyes shut, pressed her lips together, and turned in a small circle, letting the water soak her head to toe. She stepped out again, wiping her face and gasping a breath. Then she turned it to warm.

Ilya made fun of her for that short, painful ritual. If they showered together, he would work hard to box Shane out so he wouldn't be subjected to a burst of freshet-cold water. But, he was long gone to practice, so Shane could do whatever she liked.

What she liked was the water heating as she tipped her head back into it, threading her fingers through her thick hair and guiding the water down to her scalp. She liked the water sluicing down over her hips and legs, the remnants of her body wash pooling in suds at her ankles, between her toes, circling the drain. She liked running her hands over her limbs with her eyes closed or staring at the ceiling; feeling the edges of herself without the extra scrutiny of a mirror.

She rarely looked down. She tried not to. There was a peace in it – just her breathing in her own skin.

She ran her palms flat up her thighs and stared at the far wall of the shower. There was hair – dark and soft across her skin. Soft for the length of it, soft for the body wash. She didn't shave often, or at all, if she could help it. She couldn't stand the dryness, the itch, the nicks

and cuts that stung but wouldn't make themselves known until the water was turned off. She had told Ilya once that, if she ever had to show her legs at a party, she would just pay for someone to wax it off. He had smiled at her, laughed warm in his chest, and said *whatever makes you feel good*.

Whatever makes you feel good.

The words never failed to warm her up.

She pressed her fingers into her abdomen, trying not to frown. Her middle was softer now, something she had only begun to stop wishing away. A combination of hormones and changing her exercise since retiring, but there was still muscle underneath. She could feel it under her fingertips. Present and useful, but smooth and lithe where she had once been dense, angular.

The softness disguised the strength – for now.

She hadn't quit her routines; hadn't even altered them. Yoga in the mornings, runs to get the heart rate up, strength training to keep feeling normal. Ilya joined her, the night owl in him grumbling away through beginner flows or determined to beat her in a race from the trailhead to the car.

Whatever makes you feel good.

She scrubbed shampoo into her hair, sighing happily at the rasp of her fingernails against her scalp. She kept them long now, sometimes painted. During away games, she and her mother would sit cross-legged at the coffee table in the house Shane grew up in.

Yuna would impossibly balance shouting at the television screen and snarking off at the color commentators while neatly painting Shane's nails. Mostly sandy, peachy, neutral colors – the ones Yuna kept for herself – but occasionally a rich burgundy or a poppy red would make an appearance. Shane would usually chip the polish away within the week, an outlet for anxiety or an inconspicuous stim, but it made her mother happy.

As the lather rinsed out, her hands spread over her arms, her shoulders. They caressed the curve of her back, the ridge of her lowest ribs, then rose to cup her chest. Cupped, pressed, rolled her fingers over them until she felt the first sparks between her hipbones.

Shane laughed to herself, the last of the shampoo dropping down the drain. Her chest had always been sensitive, especially once she was riled up. Hormones had made them even more so. Ilya was a menace when given an inch – playing with them, licking them, burying his face in them.

One day, I will make you come just like this. Ilya had said one night, laying between her legs, her knees on his shoulders, as he wrecked havoc on her breasts. *Just like this, just for me.*

Shane had gotten close to it that night, toppling over the edge with two fingers stretching her open and Ilya sucking at her nipple with a glazed look in his eyes. Once the season was over,

and summer set in, Shane would challenge him again. Let him spread her out all over the cottage, until they were sore and sated and dazed.

She turned the shower off, toweled off in the humid cocoon of the tile and doors. She turned her hair over, scrunched the water out of ends, then wrapped the towel around herself before stepping out again.

She couldn't avoid the mirror any more.

Her reflection always felt like a confrontation. Her own personal face off, off of the ice and without a helmet or a referee. Two years on, the engagement wasn't as fraught as it had been at the start – when her hair was still too short for her liking and the faint rasp of stubble made her want to dig her nails into the skin of her face. There were good days and bad, in all things, but Shane liked her reflection.

She clipped her damp hair back from her face and set to work. Winter's dry cold and shower steam never failed to turn skin to sandpaper. She smeared moisturizer over her cheeks and forehead, then ran the extra down her neck. She slathered Aquaphor on her lips, massaged lotion into her hands, wiping the excess on the towel around her waist.

Her hands glanced over the small cosmetics bag she kept on the counter, then decided against it. She wasn't leaving the house that day. If she talked to anyone, it would be a phone call. Only Ilya would see her face without the accoutrement.

It's okay, she reminded herself. You can go without.

She felt better with it on. She was learning to not be so dependent. If she could go until summer without shaving her legs, then lounging around the house without lashes and powder should be a breeze.

What if they see...

“Shut up,” Shane muttered to herself. “No one's gonna fucking see.”

Not sharply, not combative, but tired. The same, worn out exhaustion with which she greeted the intrusive thoughts about food, leftover from years on performance diets. She wished she could shove the whole lot out of her brain for good. She hadn't quite managed it yet.

She pushed away from the counter and hung up the towel in its proper spot. She didn't glance back at the mirror as she stepped out of the bathroom, wandering naked and barefoot through the bedroom to the closet. The main door was closed. The curtains were drawn. She was the only one home, though she could imagine what Ilya would do if he was there, with her, in the next room.

Scoop her up, large hands gripping her thighs wrapped snugly around his waist. Press her against the wall, or drop her on the bed, or lay her out on the floor and kiss her senseless. He'd groan as she yanked on his curls, licking into his mouth hot and insistent. She'd hold him close and rut up against him, savor his cock pressed up against her own, and beg him to open her up.

She picked her phone up from the bedside table and stepped inside the walk-in.

Shane had half a mind to call him. To send a scandalous picture, or a panting voice memo. She wouldn't – he was at work, that was more than out of line – but thinking about it made her nerves crackling happily under the skin.

She busied herself with dressing instead. Retrieved a pair of underwear from the top drawer – old boxer briefs gifted from CK at the last shoot she did for them – and a pair of joggers. She tugged a soft cupped bra over her head, then a plain long-sleeved tee after it. Last, a pair of socks doubling as slippers while she wandered around the house.

She paused, hand still in the drawer. She glanced down at herself, then another stolen glimpse at the full length mirror they kept on the back wall. She frowned at it.

Comfortable wasn't a bad thing. Shane had never cared about being stylish – only that once, years ago, which only served to prove something entirely different about herself. Everything she liked best in her closet was function. Athletic wear, tee shirts and one pair of jeans she wore sometimes. Sneakers and sweatshirts.

A small collection of professional garments hung from hangers at the far end of the rack, a lone pair of heels lurking underneath them. She hardly wore them unless forced. They'd been purchased for Foundation-related events, meetings, pressers, but Shane avoided those at all costs. Ilya was the face of the Irina Foundation, his mother's name being attached to it. Hardly anyone knew Shane was involved, save for the moments in interviews where Ilya would mention *my girlfriend* as being instrumental in the organization.

She is very dedicated. It was her idea, too. I could not have thought of this on my own. I am very lucky she suggested it be in honor of my mother, and her struggle.

Shane tugged on the hem of her tee shirt. Discomfort crept up around her ankles. Wet hair, face bare, wearing clothes she had had since before she transitioned.

I am very lucky.

She looked at the slim display of clothes – as compared to Ilya, who never seemed to get rid of anything – and frowned more. It was comfortable, easy. Stuff that was good for healing, good for hiding. Maybe, perhaps, good for pretending.

Shane opened her phone and, on auto-pilot, called the one person who could talk her into caring about clothing. She pressed the speaker phone icon, and listened to the dial tone, lost in thought.

“Hey there!” Rose's voice came through the receiver. “Long time no see!”

Shane huffed a laugh. “Well, you're not really seeing me, are you?”

“That could change, miss. What's up?”

“Is it a good time?” Shane asked. She ran a hand through her damp hair. “I'm having thoughts.”

“I’ve got nothing going on. Big thoughts or small?”

“Medium-small,” Shane replied. It was a short-hand they’d come up with for how serious they should be. Big thoughts meant anger, sadness, tears and frustration. Small was a simple question, silly advice. This fell somewhere in the middle.

“I’m listening.”

“I hate my clothes.”

Rose hummed. Shane could picture her, tucked into the corner of her sofa in LA, playing with a piece of red hair as she thought. “Speak more on that?”

Shane couldn’t help the inelegant snort. She’d always hated when journalists tossed out phrases like that. Aimless, directionless nonsense that amounted to *your soundbyte was too more we need you to talk more*. “I feel fine in them. They work, but that’s about it. I don’t feel anything about them.”

“Like you could toss them out today and it wouldn’t make a difference?”

“Exactly. And I feel like I should.” Shane ran her hand along the line of a deep blue dress that had never once touched her body. “They should make me feel good, right? Even when I don’t outside of them.”

“A good outfit makes a bad day better and a great day fantastic,” Rose mused. “Even if it’s just a cute bra under an ugly hockey sweatshirt.”

“The Cens’ logo is terrible, isn’t it?” Shane sighed.

“Hmm, who said I was talking about you, babe?” Rose teased. “I’m kidding, on all counts. So.”

“So.”

“I might guess why you’re calling me about it, but can you tell me?”

Shane nodded though Rose couldn’t see her. “I want to look good. For myself.” She took a breath. The call was starting to feel like therapy, but she pushed through the feeling. “My body feels like mine, the way I see myself in my head. But I’m still dressing like a rookie, or a college kid.”

“Well, we can fix that,” Rose said. “You know you’re gorgeous, so now we do it up a little. Show it off–.”

“I don’t know about gorg–.”

“Shut all the way the fuck up. I mean it, Hollander.”

Shane pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh. “Okay, okay. Force of habit.”

Rose sighed. “We’ll get you out of the habit. One of these days.” There was a rustling on the end of the line as she changed ears or shifted positions on the couch. “So. How do you want to look?”

“Like a fucking adult?” Shane answered. It was as simple as that, really. “Like I’m not playing dress up or like my mom dressed me. Like, I’m not putting on a mask or something.”

“Like I said, that’s fixable. And we don’t even need to call in the cavalry to do it!”

“Who’s the cavalry?”

“Me, your mom, my stylist, maybe one or two of the Queer Eye guys.”

“Yeah, if I could limit it to you and me, I’d be happier.” Shane turned back towards the mirror, considering herself. “I like my shoulders, I like my ass.” She slid her hand over the curve of her hip, palm settling heavy at her waist. “I want to look like I have a waist.”

She could practically hear Rose’s eyes rolling. “Babe. Shane. You *do* have a waist.”

Shane scoffed. “Not unless it’s squished under work out gear.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it!” Rose protested. “You know, you’re totally doing a disservice to the gals up top, okay? You’re as hourglassy as me!”

“Rose.”

“I’m not done, Hollander! You’ve got great boobs and butt, and a cute little waist! Total fucking package!”

Shane huffed, crossing her arms, still holding her phone near her mouth as she stared her reflection down. “I don’t want *cute*, Rose.”

“Well.” Rose paused. “What do you want then?”

“I want...”

Shane tipped her head back, staring at the ceiling to avoid the mirror glass. She closed her eyes for good measure. Many mental images of herself had lived in her mind over the years. Sporty, sweet, cutesy, sophisticated, sexy – like naming the Spice Girls one by one. She’d tried them on, in her own way, not one being the silver-bullet-solution to her worries.

Rose understood that. Rose lived in the spotlight, lived with a job that wanted her to be exactly everything all at once and got fussy when she refused. Rose had been the one to flick the switch in Shane’s head, in the back corner of a club in a slinky, shimmering dress. She had been beautiful, fun, the center of attention. Shane had stared at her dancing – her legs, her arms, her manicured nails and swishing hips – and had realized that she didn’t want to date Rose. She wanted to *be* Rose.

Shane had confessed that to her, eventually. After Rose prompted the end of their relationship, but not their friendship. They had sat side by side on the floor in Shane’s

Montreal apartment, talking in hushed voices about what they wanted.

Help me chase mine and I'll help you chase yours, Rose had said, holding up her hand. *Pinky promise*.

Shane had promised. Neither of them had gone back on that promise. Rose had been on the other end of the phone for as many firsts as Ilya and his parents had. First HRT appointment. First ear piercings. First meltdown over a tee shirt. First snag in the timeline Shane had expected to keep. First person to know she didn't want to change her name.

"I want to be bad ass," Shane answered. "I want sexy. Strong. Professional, classy. But I—" She rubbed her hands over her middle, clamping her fingers down at the sides and squeezing the softness there. "I want his hands to go right where I want them, and I want him to squeeze."

Rose giggled. "I can hear you blushing through the phone, babe."

"I know, I know—."

"That man of yours gets you hot and bothered, huh?" Rose's voice was nothing but warm. She and Ilya got on like a house on fire, once Ilya stopped his pouty jealous streak. "When's he get home from practice?"

Shane shrugged. "I don't know. An hour maybe. Not long."

"Okay, well, that's enough time to make a plan, isn't it?" Rose drawled. "You like a plan, don't you, Shane?"

"I can't live without a plan." Shane smirked, turning away from the mirror and walking out into the bedroom. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm going to come visit you. Soon," Rose began. "But before, with your permission, I'll talk to my stylist and get her to pull a bunch of stuff. Your measurements, say it's for a friend. She'll love it. So, if you want to go get comfy, We can write it all out, exactly what you want, so I can give it to her, and then I'll swing by with the loot." He could hear her grinning. "We'll have a mini fashion show. Show your boy our favorites, maybe have some winners. Then, you know, go from there."

"That—" Shane exhaled. "That sounds perfect. Thank you."

"Soo, I'll have to check, but I could probably squeeze in a trip before the end of the year. Ottawa isn't too far a hop from Michigan. Thoughts?"

"I..."

"Shane? It's okay if not."

"Come in January, after the holidays," Shane blurted out. "Ilya's friend, Svetlana, is coming up from Boston to visit him." She crawled up on the edge of the bed, pulling her legs up.

“You’d really like her, Rose. She’s funny, doesn’t take shit from anyone, can out shit-talk Ilya.”

“Ooh, well. That I would pay money to see, really,” Rose replied. “She can talk hockey too, I bet.”

“Her dad was a goalie for Boston.”

“No shit, really? Now I have to meet her, not to mention I’d love a partner in crime in making you enjoy yourself.” Rose laughed. “Ask her if that’s okay, and then send me the details if she’s cool with me joining. Oh, and Ilya too. Wouldn’t want to overstep.”

“I invited you, so you wouldn’t be.” Shane cleared her throat. “It would be nice to have a buffer too.”

Rose paused for a long time. “A buffer?”

Shane hesitated. “They had a thing, a long time ago.”

“Are you worried—?”

“Oh no, god no. Not at all. I just—” Shane rushed to answer. She scrounged for words, then gave up. “Fuck, she’s *gorgeous*, Rose. Like, should have been a model but she sells luxury cars. I get up in my head sometimes, comparing.”

“Oh, I get you,” Rose said. “Buffer.”

Shane bit her lip and winced. “Tell me if that’s terrible.”

“I can, but just answer one question for me.”

“I can do that.”

“Does she make *you* uncomfortable?”

Shane shook her head. “No. She never has. She loves Ilya, so she’s always been kind. Generous really.”

“So what’s the problem, babe?”

“You’ve met Ilya. You know how much confidence he has.”

“When he’s pretending not to be a big scary Russian or a total softie? Yeah, yeah, I do.”

“Okay well. Multiply that by, like, seven.” Shane leaned back against the headboard. “That’s Svetlana.”

“Damn. Well. Maybe she can teach us a thing or two about a thing or two.”

Shane cracked a weak smile. “I have no fucking clue what that means.”

“Neither do I, but we’ll find out together.”

“I guess we will.” Shane tucked her toes under the comforter. A knot had undone itself in her chest, or at the very least loosened enough to feel relief. “You got a pen and paper handy?”

Rose scoffed. “As if. Get your laptop. Let me show you the wonders of Pinterest, Holly. You’re gonna love it.”

January 2020

The buzzer went for the end of the first period, feeling more like relief than just noise. Ilya rolled his head on his neck, feeling each muscle stretch as he dawdled crossing the ice to the bench.

The score sat at 0-0. The Fury had been nearly skating circles around the Centaurs, but they hadn’t made any shots. Wyatt had blocked everything that came his way, but had been fading by the final few seconds. Intermission would help, but Ilya didn’t know how long they could keep pace with Philadelphia.

It was frustrating, but he kept it off his face as best he could. It wasn’t anyone’s fault Ilya Rozanov still wasn’t used to losing. It had only been a year. He had time.

“Yo, Cap.” Ice scraped up as Dykstra came to a stop to his right. “You know your seats are filled, right?”

“My seats?” Ilya blinked. “No. I am not expecting anyone.”

He really wasn’t. The only people who used those tickets were Yuna and David – mostly Yuna. The elder Hollanders were out of town visiting Yuna’s brother in Vancouver, and they hadn’t mentioned giving them to anyone else. Ilya assumed they would have, but he wouldn’t hold it against them if they didn’t.

“Then, you should take a look, dude.” Dykstra nudged him with a devil-may-care grin. “I think they’d be really disappointed if you didn’t.”

“They?” Ilya asked, but he was already skating ahead of Ilya, smirking back at him and jerking his head towards the stands.

Ilya pushed forward to follow, lifting his head and gliding along. He stopped hard at the wall as his teammates went first – captain instinctively making sure everyone was off the ice – and his eyes found who exactly were in his seats. His mouth dropped open, surprise overtaking his head as his heart raced against itself inside his chest.

Rose Landry was hard to miss. Strawberry blonde hair and one of the most recognizable faces in summer action movies, Ilya was surprised no one in the booth had announced her presence at the game. She was visiting Shane, that was no surprise. Ilya had picked her and Svetlana up from the airport himself the afternoon before; laughed good-naturedly as the pair of them shoved him out the front door that morning.

Gal time, Rose had called it. Her visit overlapping with Svetlana's visit was convenient for more *gal time*, Ilya supposed. It had been planned that way, but beyond that he couldn't have said what was involved. Shane had mimed locking her mouth with a key, then pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Rose and Yuna talked. Yuna would have given her the tickets. Which explained Svetlana's presence, two seats down, in his old Boston jersey. She grinned and waved at him, her curls bouncing against her cheeks and gold earrings flashing in the arena lights.

Ilya raised a hand in a wave, eyes resting on the figure between them. His heart nearly stopped. He'd know her anywhere.

Shane.

Out of the house for something other than the grocery store, a trail run, or picking up takeout for dinner because restaurants were still difficult. Shane, dressed in one of Ilya's own sweatshirts with her hair pulled up to show her face. Wearing makeup, Ilya realized; pink glossy lipstick and silver hoops he knew were Svetlana's. Shane, just a few rows from the glass, sandwiched between their friends in Ilya's seats for a home game.

Lifting her hand in a wave, smiling, watching him too.

Ilya's heart pounded as he stepped off the ice.

She was here, for him. Right there in the stands.

He placed his glove to his mouth, then pulled it away – like blowing a clunky, padded kiss. Even from a distance, he could see Shane's cheeks pink and knew how stark her freckles would look. He knew the small, pleased smile that she was hiding behind her hands as Rose squealed and squeezed her around the shoulders. As Svetlana laughed and clapped, shaking her shoulder so that her dark ponytail swung wildly.

He held down his own laugh as he made his way into the locker room. They greeted him with easy teasing and smiles, Dykstra having already passed around. Ilya brushed them off – *score a goal and maybe I will tell you* was now ample motivation to turn the game around – and reached for his phone.

First, to Shane: *I'm glad you're here. Send me a picture, for safe keeping.*

A moment later, a photo popped up in the chat. One of all three of them, likely taken before the game started; Rose and Sveta grinning widely to counteract Shane's smaller, more hesitant one. Ilya saved it all the same, looked at it longer than he could have looked out on

the ice. Lashes and eyeliner, the lip gloss, earrings, and dark hair curled at the ends, counterbalanced by the old sweatshirt, black leggings, and sneakers.

His heart flip-flopped in his chest. The laces were tied and tucked into the sides of her shoes so they wouldn't annoy her. Some things about her would never change.

Then: *You should score three goals. One for each of us. (Rose told me to send that, sorry if it sounds stupid).*

Ilya smiled. *I will try. It's tough out there tonight.*

I know, Ilyunia. Hang in there. On 2nd line, # 17, leaning hard on his right side. In case they don't pull him.

Ilya sent her a thank you, told her to keep her eyes out for anything else – if only to keep her in her seat for longer than the second period. Finally, just as Wiebe was getting into his wind up, Ilya opened his chat with Svetlana. The last few messages were flight numbers and times, her Uber arrival, and the code to get into the side door.

He typed quickly. *Thank you for bringing her.*

Her reply was just as fast. *For you both? Anything. Now score a fucking goal!*

Christmas Eve 2020

"Eat the cookie, Hollander." Ilya held one out in front of her face, for the fourth time that night.

Shane rolled her eyes. "Knock it off."

"Come on," Ilya pressed. "It will not bite. In fact—." He snapped the sugar cookie in half, holding out one of the pieces. Easier bait. "You bite it."

Shane didn't budge. She sank lower in her chair, arms crossed. "Ilya. Stop. I'm serious."

Ilya exhaled hard, worry curling and uncurling in his chest. He set the cookie down, defeated. "You hardly ate—."

"I'm not hungry." The reply was sharp, uncompromising. Her eyes were trained on the reindeer candle holder Yuna had set in the middle of the table, refusing to meet his. Her expression was tight, forced, and it left a hollow feeling in Ilya's stomach.

“Since breakfast, Shane,” Ilya pushed in a whisper. “You ate nothing, then more nothing, and then you pick at your plate like a bird. What is wrong?”

Shane held her glare firm, but her eyes were turning watery and pink. She rubbed it away, but only really made it worse. “I don’t feel right. That’s all.”

Ilya looked her up and down. On the outside, nothing looked wrong. She had looked good when they left the house, smiling as she tugged her coat over her black sweater. In the kitchen, she’d turned in a circle, showing off the pair of jeans she was wearing – a new pair she had found herself, that she loved – and laughed when Ilya made to snatch at her, darting to the living room to grab the bag of presents to bring to her parents’ house.

It was all in the face though. Shane was very good at hiding what she didn’t want anyone to see. Ilya was too. It was why neither of them could get away with diversion tactics much anymore – like saw like, it took an avoider to know an avoider. The tightness of her arms over her ribs. The way she pulled her knees up close to her chest. How she wouldn’t look at him, and squeezed her limbs down tighter and tighter–

“Okay, is it head, stomach, what?” Ilya leaned forward, placing a hand on her knee. “Before your mother comes back, *solnyshka*. Please tell me.”

Shane swabbed a hand over her face, then tapped her temple with two fingers. “Head. Thoughts. I feel...” She deflated, curling in on herself, but spared him a look. “Gross. Stretched out. Just– *ugh*.”

“Okay, yes, I see. Come here.”

Ilya reached for the legs of the chair. They were the only two left in the dining room. David was queuing something up on the television. Yuna was digging something up for Shane to look at. It was just them, together. No one to see the curl of Shane’s nose as she hit back tears, or hear the rasp on the chair against the dining room carpet as Ilya pulled her close to him.

He placed his hand on her legs, rubbing up and down her thighs like he was going to warm them. “Come here, sweetheart.”

Shane shook her head. She squeezed herself tighter, her shoulders nearly touching her ears. Rolling forward protectively, even if it was her own brain launching the siege.

Ilya sighed, then leaned forward. It wasn’t often he disregarded her body language, even less that he drew outright attention to it anywhere other than their own home. He knew Shane might squawk at him, push him away, but he reached for her anyway. The attempt was worth the risk of her thumping him on the shoulder like they were in pads.

“Shane,” he murmured. He slid one hand under her thighs, the other along her back.

She rolled her head to the side, eyes finally finding his. She gave a very small nod. Allowing him to pull her into him; settle her between his legs with her back pressed to his chest. She pushed his hands away from her middle once, then grabbed his wrists and pulled them back

around her. Ilya rested his chin on her shoulder, nosing at her ear and pressing gentle kisses wherever he could reach – her hairline, her jaw, the pulsepoint on her neck, the curve of muscle that ran into her shoulders.

He smoothed a hand over her hair, a remnant of his mother. “Talk or no talk?”

She shrugged, eyes slipping closed. Her stomach growled and she flinched.

“You’re hungry.”

“Stop–.”

“Shane.”

She sniffed, the end of her nose turning pink. “It’s stupid. Like, really stupid, Ilya.”

“Tell me,” Ilya murmured into her warm skin. “Tell me and we can both call it stupid. Tell it to go away.”

She shifted, pressing back more surely against him. Her feet were propped up on the chair where she had been sitting, clad in socks stitched with candy canes – a silly gift from him. “You know. I never thought I was going to be, like, dainty. Or anything. But sometimes I wish I was, or that I wanted to be. Like I looked like the girls in flimsy dresses you used to take out of clubs with you.”

Ilya froze. He knew *exactly* where this had come from – some stupid youtube video circling around, attempting to decipher why, exactly, noted lady’s man Ilya Rozanov hadn’t been seen partying in years. It was stupid, very stupid, and short-sighted – a new phrase Harrison had helped him with – but Ilya could have cursed the person who made it.

“I know it’s not a problem, logically,” Shane continued, gripping Ilya’s wrist where it rested across her stomach. “But my head wants me to think it is. Like, it doesn’t matter that we’ve been together for so long, you’ll still want a girl like that.”

“You are right,” Ilya replied quietly. “That is stupid.” Shane winced and Ilya hummed into her neck. “Do you want to look like that?”

“No.”

“Okay.” He hummed again, burying his nose in her hair. “So. Is that why you did not eat? Head is stuck?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Stuck. Like with the performance diet stuff. Remember?”

“I do. You did not want to hear it then either.” Her stomach growled again and Ilya hugged her tight before she could squirm about it. “Can I get you something? So you’re not hungry anymore?”

“I’m not–.” She stopped herself. Pressing both hands to her face, she made an angry noise into her palms. “Fuck, this is stupid. I’m starving.”

“Then you should eat.”

“I know.”

Ilya reached to pick up a cookie half. When she dropped her hands into her lap, he was holding it in front of her face. Instead of looking at it with disdain now, her expression crumpled into an exasperated laugh.

“Not that,” she said, pushing his hand away. “There’s, um. There’s probably more lasagna, right?”

“Your father always makes too much food, of course there is more.” He set the cookie down, leaning onto the arm of the chair so he could see her face better. “I can get it. You want to eat in here, or..?”

Shane shifted to stand up. “Mom won’t mind if I eat on the coffee table.”

“Definitely not.” Ilya knew she wouldn’t. Yuna had been shooting Ilya concerned faces across the table throughout dinner. She’d probably be just as relieved as he was to see Shane eating something.

Shane stood up, and Ilya let her go, listening to the fridge door open and close and the shuffle of pottery in a cabinet. Eventually, he stood up himself, replaced the dining room chairs where they should be and stepped out into the living room. On the television was a San Francisco-Winnipeg game from the previous season, playing just loudly to block out the sound from the other room. David was comfortable in a chair, reading glasses on with his new book in his hand. Yuna was half-watching the television, perched on the arm of the sofa, playing with the rings on her fingers.

She looked up when Ilya entered. “How’s our girl?”

“Eating,” Ilya answered when he was even with her. “Said it is like performance plan. Up in her head, yes?”

“Yes.” Yuna chewed her lip. “You got her, honey?”

Ilya rubbed a hand across Yuna’s shoulders. “Yes. I have her. Don’t give it attention, I think.”

“I can do that.”

Ilya bent at the waist, hand still on her shoulder. “More wine?”

“Yes, please.” She patted his face, seeming to let go of a breath she was holding. “You’re a life saver.”

“You would never have said that four years ago,” he teased, going for her glass.

“And now I know better. There’s an open bottle in the fridge–.”

“White then?”

“Yes.”

“Be back soon.”

Both glasses in hand, Ilya made his way to the kitchen. Shane was leaning against the counter, a cereal bowl and fork in hand, tines pressed between her lips. She looked up and flushed when Ilya set the glasses on the counter. He pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Your mom wanted more wine,” he explained lightly, casually. “You want some?”

Shane chewed and swallowed, thinking. “Yeah. A little bit.”

Ilya found a fresh glass and pulled the half-empty bottle from the refrigerator door. He filled his and Yuna’s, then made eye contact with Shane. “Tell me when?”

“Sure.” Shane speared another chunk of noodles, watching for a moment. “When.”

Ilya corked the bottle, then slid her glass to her. “Come join us. Don’t hide.”

“I’m not,” Shane said around a mouthful. She swallowed, flashing him a sheepish look. “I was just *really* hungry.”

“Okay, so, eat,” Ilya answered easily. “Then come sit next to me and watch Winnipeg fuck San Francisco, okay?”

Shane grinned. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“That’s my girl.” Ilya dropped a kiss on the corner of her mouth, then made his way back to the living room.

Yuna took her glass gratefully, already folded up on the couch with a blanket. Ilya dropped down on the other end, leaving enough room for Shane. She appeared a few minutes later, in sock feet and wine glass in hand. She slid into the spot next to him, eyes glued to the game as she got comfortable. It wasn’t long before she was talking about points, stats, plays and where they went wrong, her hockey IQ showing itself off without her noticing.

Ilya took a long drink, making a small noise to show he was listening, but his eyes met Yuna’s over Shane’s head. He lifted his glass a fraction. She did too. *Crisis averted, back to herself, thank goodness.*

Ilya had spent most of the day working himself up to asking. He regretted it almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth. “Bood is having a party tomorrow.”

Shane blinked behind her glasses, mug poised in front of her mouth. “Zane Boodram?”

Ilya nodded.

“He’s having a party on Boxing Day?”

“Yes. Not a big one,” Ilya continued, trying to keep his voice as casual as possible. “Just the team and partners. Very chill, just hanging out.”

“Oh.” Ilya held his breath as Shane sipped her tea and turned the page of her book. “Do you want to go?”

His heart jumped in his chest. “Yes.”

“Okay.” She lifted her chin to smile at him. “Have fun before it’s back to the grind.”

Ilya stared at her, squinting in confusion as she went back to her book. “Shane?”

“Hmm?”

“I want you to go too.” Ilya pulled out the chair next to her at the kitchen table and lowered himself down into it. “I want you to come with me to the party, Shane.”

Shane’s whole body tensed. “Why?”

Ilya’s stomach sank. “They are cool. Good people. They know I am in a relationship, and I —.”

“Ilya.” Shane wouldn’t look at him, but it was obvious she wasn’t reading anymore. “Ilya. I can’t.”

Ilya’s throat tightened. His ribs felt even worse. It felt like a match had run up them, igniting underneath them to scorch his insides. He fisted his hands in his joggers, staring at Shane as his mind whirled. She wouldn’t look at him and Ilya couldn’t look away.

It was expected that she would say no, then him down, say *go without me*. Ilya knew it, but his traitorous heart had hoped it might be different. Shane had come to more games with Yuna that season. She spent more time with Foundation donors and less time stuck in the house.

Progress, tangible progress. But Ilya was still wrong.

“You can go— please go. I’ll be fine.”

Ilya stood up before he could think otherwise, moving quickly to the living room. His head buzzed. His teeth grit hard together. Anger consumed him, stinging like vinegar in the back of his throat and threatening to spill over. He walked straight through to the bedroom,

dropping into the armchair Shane kept there for reading at night. He shoved his face into the throw pillow, trying to stifle the outburst.

He wouldn't yell at Shane. He couldn't yell at Shane. She wasn't acting any differently than usual. Ilya should have known better.

"Ilya, what's wrong?" Shane's voice moved closer, sounding frayed and bitter. Like he was a petulant child and not her partner.

"What *isn't* wrong?" Ilya growled into the pillow.

"What does *that* mean?"

The pillow was snatched away, tossed across the bedroom, to reveal Shane's pinched fury. She loomed over him, arms crossed tightly over her chest. Hair fell out of her bun. Her brows were wrinkled together, lips pursed in a snarl, and glasses sliding down her nose.

Ilya glared up at her, anger real but heart already not in it. "It doesn't matter. Go back to your book."

"No! Tell me why the fuck you're throwing a *temper tantrum* in our bedroom—."

"I have a girlfriend who doesn't want to be seen with me!" Ilya burst. "That's *what that means*, Shane!"

She jolted like she had been struck. "I go places with you!"

"The grocery store *does not count*!"

"I come to games!"

"Yes, and that's how they know about you! They see you, every home game, but never anywhere else!" Ilya's face flamed with frustration, a fresh wave of guilt. "You never want to be seen with me, is that it?"

"No!"

"Then why?" Ilya threw his hands in the air. "It has been *years*, Shane!"

"Don't you think I know that?" Shane shouted back, face turning tomato red from the effort. "I've spent years in the league, and I've spent years out of it, but every time I think about the MHL, it makes me want to throw up!"

"Even my team?"

"Even your team."

Ilya exhaled sharply, trying very hard to calm down. "They are not like that! I would not ask you to come with me if I thought they are—."

“But you can’t know unless they say something!” Shane hissed. “Would you be friends with them, if you thought—?”

“No! I would not! And they are not!”

“How do you know? How can you *possibly* know, Ilya?!”

“Because they are my friends!” Ilya snapped. “Why can’t my girlfriend meet my friends?!”

“I’m sorry I don’t know your friends, but I gave all of mine up! Remember?!” Shane’s chest heaved, anger leaving her out of breath. “I have you, I have my parents, I have Rose, maybe Svetlana but I’m still not sure. You are the *only thing* in the league I didn’t leave behind when I retire. *You*, Ilya!”

Ilya rose to his feet without thinking, hands curling into fists at his side. “I did not ask—.”

“No, but you know why!” Shane was ranting, spinning out; frustration governing her whole body as she pressed up into his space. “You know *exactly why*! Because it isn’t safe, the league can’t know, I don’t *want them* to know!”

She shoved him in the shoulder.

Ilya’s hand jerked up to push her back. He just caught himself, pulled it away quickly, fresh dread breaking over him. “No.”

He side stepped her, moving back towards the bedroom door. Back towards the kitchen, where there was more space and more doors. He wouldn’t hurt Shane. He would *never* hurt her, even when she was taking cheap shots at him. He heard her footsteps following him, but didn’t look back. He lifted his hands up to his head and clamped them tightly. Keeping them there – *please, for the love of god, keep them there.*

“Ilya! Damn it, Ilya!”

Anger still coursed through even his smallest bones. It swirled in his head and built in his throat. It scared him. Ilya’s anger *always* scared him. It was vicious, feral, snarling and awful. It reminded him of that well-appointed apartment in Moscow he’d happily run away from the first chance he could. It felt like his father and made him wish for his mother, nerves pulsing painfully in the center of his palms. Made him feel all the weight of the name he carried with him because of hundreds-years-old traditions.

“Go away, Shane,” he gritted out, staring at the backslash.

“No.” Shane’s voice was closer than Ilya would have liked. “We’re not finished!”

Ilya whirled around, smacking his hands against the island counter top, and staring her down. “It is! It is finished! I will not fight you, I do not want to, I can’t, Shane.”

Shane took up the spot opposite him. “No. That’s not where we leave this. We’re not dropping it there.”

Ilya glowered at her. He dug his fingers into the stone. Words built up and up in his throat. They were jumbled, mixed up, nonsensical. If they came out of him, Ilya wouldn't even be sure they would come out in English. Shane had been learning Russian, but not that advanced. Not yet.

"Ilya—."

"Why is it hard?" Ilya managed.

"What do you mean why is it hard?" Shane stared at him like he had five heads. "Have you not been listening to me?"

"I am. I am listening."

"Then why is that even a question?"

"You're not being fair."

"You're not listening to me."

"Sweetheart, I *am* listening," Ilya said through gritted teeth. "But you need to listen to me. Okay?"

Shane huffed. She looked poised to argue, ready to bite his head off. She didn't. She roughly yanked out the counter stool and dropped into it hard enough to rattle the frame. She made a face at him, that he should keep talking.

Ilya exhaled slowly, trying to calm down. "Okay. Listen. You hide yourself away here, still afraid, and I cannot watch it. It hurts to see—."

"Then don't look—."

"No." Ilya held up a hand. "I *will* look. I *have* to." Ilya swallowed tightly, stuffing down the last dregs of his anger. "I love you, and I do not want you to hurt. To be afraid."

Shane tucked her head, avoiding his eyes.

Ilya ignored it. She was still listening, he knew she was. He exhaled again. "Why does my team make you afraid?"

Shane bit into her lip, body impossibly still.

"*Shane*," Ilya pleaded. "Why—?"

"Because. Because! Ilya!" Shane cried. "I left for a reason, and the league is all of it! They don't like people like me!"

"The team is not the league, Shane. Troy and Harris—."

“It doesn’t matter that Troy and Harris are together, you know that right? They could still—. I could still—.” She broke off in a horrible croak. Her hands sank into her hair, her whole body bending towards the countertop.

Overwhelmed, Ilya chided himself. *Meltdown*. *She’s having a meltdown*.

He didn’t hesitate. He pushed off the counter and rounded the island, moving immediately to her side. Perching on the edge of the next chair, Ilya rested his hands on top of hers, trying to loosen the grip. He didn’t box her in. He didn’t grab her. “Breathe, *solnyshka*. Breathe. I am here.”

She did breathe. Short, rattling inhales that turned into choked off sobs. Eventually, she came to rest with her head against the granite, arms shielding her head, shoulders shaking with the force of tears.

“Shane,” Ilya said. He stroked a hand down her back. “Sweetheart, I am sorry.” His own face pinched with emotion. “I should not have said anything. Forget it. I will not ask again.”

She pushed upright, only to drop again into his arms. She sagged against his chest, hiccuping as she calmed down. Ilya cradled her, as gently as he could, his face tucked to her hair.

“*Mne zhal, moya lyubimaya*,” Ilya murmured, rocking her gently. “I’m sorry. I should not have said. Should not have yelled.”

He spared a thought for his mother, who he never saw break like this, though he knew she did. His father would shout at her, berate her for anything he could think of. She would brace against it, take it day in and day out. But Ilya knew she locked herself behind the bathroom door after she thought he had left for school. He knew she cried into an old tea towel in the kitchen while dinner was on the stove.

She never let him see.

Shane *always* let him see.

Guilt overtook him, and Ilya shut his eyes as tightly as he could. *I am not my father, I am not my father, I will not be him, I will not be him, please don’t let me be like him...*

Shane’s hand pressed to his chest. “Why do you stay?”

Ilya opened his eyes again. His breathing had gone ragged. Her face was blotchy red, her mascara smeared into the corners of her eyes.

“What do you mean?” He rasped.

“I mean that,” Shane sniffed. “Why do you stay? With me?”

Ilya gaped at her.

Shane cursed under her breath. “You gave up Boston, you gave up home, you gave up *so much* Ilya. And I can’t even leave the house with you. Why? What’s the point? You could

have—.”

“I do not want just anyone. I want *you*.”

“I take too much—.”

“You give up much too. You give up hockey, you give up contracts, you give up one more cup. You give up three years to make yourself again.” Ilya huffed. “It is not a competition, *lyubimaya*. This, we will not compete. No.”

Shane nodded to herself. Her fingers reached up to his collar, deftly finding his mother’s chain and pulling it free. “You asked me why.” She let the pendant drop against her palm, holding it like a snowflake; like it could disappear. “I’m scared.”

“I know.”

“I hate it. I hate feeling it, but I can’t help it.”

“Then be scared, and come with me.” Ilya wrapped his hands around hers, nearly enclosing them. “Be scared with me.”

Her eyes were wet and red. “Ilya.”

“I will not ask for anything big. Baby steps,” Ilya promised. “Just going to Boyd’s house with a few other players, yes? Or maybe, a few of them come here.” He took a breath, tucking his forehead to hers. “Not Vegas awards. Just friends, okay?”

Shane swallowed audibly. “What’s it like? When you hang out?”

“We watch game, we eat. Bood cooks too much, always.” Ilya pressed a kiss to her forehead. “We can come home whenever you say. We will say your stomach, or something. You can give yourself another name — Jane, Holly, you could borrow Lily—.”

“That’s yours, Ilya.”

“I know, but you can do whatever you need.” Ilya found himself hoping again. “Whatever you need. I will do it. I promise.”

Shane went quiet. Ilya still held her. He should give up the errand. He would. He wouldn’t push anymore, it wasn’t worth it. He would push too far, his anger would come out too hot, and then where would he be? She would leave him. And then where would he be?

He hardly noticed his own tears slipping down his cheeks. Not until a gentle hand brushed them away. Shane with a napkin in her hand, pressing the rough thin paper to his face, brow creased in determination. Satisfied, she pulled away from him completely, settling back on her own chair again.

Ilya wanted to reach for her again, keep apologizing, but she shook her head. She crossed her arm, giving him the very same stare down he remembered from season after season of face

offs. From the bench at All Stars Weekends, calculating the best way to take down the leader's record and claim it as her own.

She pursed her lips. "Win the cup this year."

"Shane." Ilya gaped again.

The challenge, impossible though it was, was clear in her face. "Win the cup and I'll go with you to the stupid awards show. As your girlfriend."

"Shane, no, you—."

"Yes, or no, Ilyunia?" She deadpanned.

Ilya frowned. He rested a hand under her chin. "No. No deal. You come with me tomorrow. No awards show, and I will deep clean the kitchen."

"What, Rozanov?" She asked. "Don't think your team has it in them?"

"I do, they do. You—." Ilya tilted her face up, looking her in the eye. He saw the trick in them, a faint gleam. The challenge was for her, not him, and she was hoping he would play along. He didn't think twice. "You play dirty, Hollander."

Shane shook her head. "I don't. I never did. And I'm not starting now."

"Okay. Then. You come with me tomorrow, for two hours." Ilya held up two fingers for them both to see. "Only two." He cupped her cheek, swiping away some of the sticky dampness from it. He'd get a wash cloth, clean her up. "And, if we make playoffs this year, you come with me in June."

"Round two," Shane countered. "You get your godawful team to round *two* of the playoffs this year."

Ilya felt his smile returning to life. "And you will dress up like a movie star with me and hang off my arm?"

Shane stuck out a hand. "Two hours at Bood's tomorrow, and round two of playoffs."

Ilya took it and squeezed. "Deal, Hollander."

Shane smirked. "You're on, Rozanov."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Sooo this chapter started at 5000 words whe I started editing.

It has, apparently, now ballooned to almost 10,000.

So. Fair warning: this chapter goes places, and results in Shane unexpectedly coming out to the Cens. Brace for impact. Hopefully I didn't do a big scene badly, and I promise the end of the chapter is happy 

Thank you for reading and for your kind reception of this fic. I hope you enjoy!

Xoxo.

Shane was shivering in the passenger's seat, but Ilya already knew it wasn't from the chill outside the car door. Her face had gone tight the moment he turned out of the driveway. Her eyes had stayed fixed out the windscreen the entire drive, her mouth tucked down into the neck of her winter coat, and her hands absentmindedly fidgeting with her gloves.

Ilya had reached over to take one in his own hand, only to have her pull away and grip her other hand tighter. He held a breath in the center of his throat waiting for the light to turn green, letting it pull down the sting of rejection threatening to spin up in his head.

The car was cold, painfully quiet, but Shane was in the car. She was in the car with him. She was going with him to his teammate's house, even though her fear had her in a strangle hold. Ilya had gotten what he wanted.

Guilt crept up on him all the same. It stuck in his throat as he turned into the right neighborhood, turned his stomach as he parked the car in the Boodrams' driveway.

He had promised her that he would be there to lean on, to grip as tight as she needed for as long as she needed. He had promised they could leave whenever she asked, no questions asked. Ilya had promised. He wasn't sure Shane believed him, but he had meant each word.

He turned off the engine, tucked the keys into his coat pocket. He stared at the steering wheel. "I will be right here. The whole time."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ilya saw her nod. Once, sharply, but no words came.

"Even if it is only ten minutes," Ilya pressed on. "Right by your side. Okay?"

Ilya held his breath again, waiting. The engine clicked as it cooled. A car passed in one direction, then another from the other. Ilya closed his eyes. Every second thought he had had all day, the whole drive, bounced around inside his skull like a pinball game. He couldn't shake them, couldn't drown them out.

This was a bad idea. He should take them home. He shouldn't have pushed. She said she didn't want to, and he should have listened. This was a bad idea. Would she hate him? Did she already hate him? Had he finally—

"We said two hours," Shane answered. "We'll stay for two hours."

"Are you sure, *dorogaya*?"

Shane nodded. She turned her head just enough to look at him. "I trust you."

Ilya turned to the right. In the dark, her eyes rested on him; wide and worried, but earnest. A faint smile turned up the corner of her mouth, sending his heart beating faster in his chest.

"You do?"

"Yeah," she breathed. "Always, Ilyunia." Her hand came over the console, stiff and shaking, to hold his wrist. "I'm not gonna chicken out."

"I was only teasing, I—."

"I know." She inhaled. "It's terrifying. I wish I was done doing the terrifying things, but I'm not." Her exhale came in a rush. "It's easy to waste time, when you're scared. But I'm sort of sick of it, so drag me in there, okay? These are your friends. I'm going to get to know them. Even if they never know who I really am."

"You tell them only what you want," Ilya impressed.

Shane took another breath. "Only when I want to."

"Okay. Okay." Ilya nodded, resting his free hand on the door handle. "We can go in now?"

Shane laughed faintly. "We should. Before we freeze to death, or they think we're doing something naughty."

"Eh." Ilya made a show of looking behind their seats. "The backseat. It is a little small for both of us, don't you think?"

"Oh my god." Shane wrenched her hand free, smacking him on the shoulder before shoving the car door open. "C'mon, you asshole."

Shane felt clingy walking to the front door. Clinging to Ilya's hand, then arm, as her brain spun up and up and up, until she had to remind herself to breathe. When Ilya paused on the walk, right in sight of the front door, she almost snapped at him. When he took her by the forearms, looking her in the eyes, and holding her steady.

"Shane," Ilya began. "What do you need?"

Shane held her breath for a long moment. "Stay with me until I tell you to go."

"Okay."

"And I—" She second thought herself then shoved it away. "Jane. Call me Jane."

Ilya nodded. "What else?"

"That's all right now." She swallowed and double checked herself. "Yeah. That's all."

"You tell me if it changes. The minute. I am here." Ilya nudged her forward, wrapping her in a warm embrace. She tucked her arms under the open front of his puffer coat, soaking up his warmth as long as he would let her. "Okay. Give me a kiss before we go in?"

"Of course." Shane tipped back, letting Ilya guide her lips to his. She melted into the kiss, his hand solid on the back of her neck. Ilya Rozanov was quite a lot of things – snarky, sarcastic, difficult, annoying, dedicated, lionhearted, unfailingly loyal – but it always struck Shane how gentle he was. She pulled back, then brushed their noses. "I can do this. I know I can."

"Of course you can," Ilya chuckled, warm and loving. "You are second best player in the league."

"Fuck off." At least her laugh sounded real.

"Um, no. Maybe fuck you later." Ilya yelped as Shane pinched him in the ribs. He dropped a smacking, obnoxious kiss on her cheek. "All right, Hollander. Let's go. Before you become a popsicle."

"I won't be a popsicle." Shane took his hand, following him up the front steps to the front door. "I grew up here."

"Freckled Canadian popsicle."

"And Russians can't be popsicles?"

"No. Blood is too cold, will not freeze."

"So you're a lizard?"

Ilya opened the front door, keeping down laughter. "No, I am a drunk."

“Ah.” Shane stepped over the threshold. “That’s what all the vodka is for.”

“Exactly. Essential. Water of life–.”

“Roz!” A voice boomed through the front hall, a man sauntering towards them. “You made it!”

“Did you think I was going to bail?” Ilya fired back, shutting the door behind them, already grinning. “Bood, I’m hurt.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t put it past you.” The man came to rest in front of them, a smile splitting his face. He held his hand out. “Hi there. Zane. Nice to meet you.”

Zane Boodram wasn’t much taller than Shane was in her old Reeboks, but he definitely knew how to make a better entrance than her. Curly haired, tattoos peeking out from under his shirt sleeves, and a trouble-maker smile, he reminded her vaguely of Boiziau.

“Bood, this is my girlfriend, Jane,” Ilya started, voice brimming with happiness. It was adorable. “Jane, this is Bood, my assistant.”

“Assistant *captain*, thanks very much.”

Shane took Zane’s hand, summoning a smile and feeling vaguely like a fraud. Hearing *girlfriend* settled a nerve though. “Thank you for having us. Your house is lovely.”

“That’s kind of you, but I just live here. Cassie’s made it as nice as it is, so she deserves all the credit.” He glanced between her and Ilya, smile broadening. “Ooh, the boys are gonna give you so much shit tonight, Rozy.”

“When do they not?” Ilya brushed off.

“True, but this is different.” Zane tucked his hands into his front pockets, tipping to talk just to Shane. “Roz has never brought a girl anywhere, so it’ll probably be a baptism by fire in there. Fair warning, but just know it’s all in good fun, and mostly taking the piss out of your man.”

“Got it.” Shane nodded, and Ilya slipped her coat from her shoulders. “Shoes on or off?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Zane stepped back, waving them forward. “C’mon in! Almost everyone’s here, we’ve got more food than we know what to do with, beer, wine, harder stuff, soda, a baby or two, a dog – whatever you want. Make yourselves comfy.”

Ilya perked up. “Chiron is here?”

“Why would he not be?” Zane walked ahead of them, the consummate host. “Cap’s here, guys! And he brought a girl! Look alive!”

Shane’s stomach clenched, but Ilya had already taken her hand. He squeezed it twice, flashing her a crooked smile. She was safe with him, and he was happy to hold her hand. He

was happy she was there, next to him. So obviously, sweetly, adorably happy. It made Shane feel a twinge of guilt.

“Happy Christmas, Cap!”

“A girl!”

“Holy shit, Rozanov brought the girl!”

“*Damn.*”

“Oh my god, boys, don’t rush her! She just got here, we don’t want her to run yet!”

The team didn’t rush her, Shane thought, but it was a near thing. Her instinct, however, wasn’t to run but to set her foot firmer into her shoe sole. A remnant of bracing for an incoming check in her skates. Ilya noticed, jostling her arm with that self-same smile, and Shane forced herself to relax again. It was hard.

A man with shaggy brown hair and a beer can in one hand beat out the rest of them. “Holy shit, it’s the girl from the seats.”

Shane’s face flamed. She glanced at Ilya. “They noticed?”

Ilya shrugged. “Told you.” He waved a hand. “Everyone. This is Jane. Play nice or Dykstra gets the speaker for the rest of the season.”

Good natured groans and grumbling broke out among the small crowd of players. The man in front of them, however, put his hands up in victory. Evan Dykstra, Shane put together. She held out a hand to him, throat tight. “Hi.”

“Pleasure’s ours.” Dykstra took her hand, then let out a low whistle. “Roz, dude. She’s a fuckin’ Amazon.” He looked Shane in the eye, a teasing glint in his face. “You know he’s a total asshat, right Jane?”

“Oh I do,” Shane managed a thin laugh, cheeks pinking. “But what does that say about me?”

“That you have very good taste, *solnyshka*.” Ilya kissed her on the cheek. “Look at me. I am a catch.”

Shane watched him greet his teammates, arms crossed and sat into her left hip. “You’re something all right.”

Zane snorted a laugh, resting a hand on her shoulder. “I think you’re gonna fit right in here.”

Names and faces blurred past her, but Shane knew she kept up. Ilya’s arm was draped over her shoulder for a reason, making her feel less like she was going to float away. Bood and Dykstra gave way to Wyatt Hayes, Lucas Haas, and Nick Chouinard. Tanner Dillon waved from the couch. Harris Drover was buoyant and adorable, his dog Chiron fluffy and sweet-faced circling their legs. Troy Barrett was quieter by comparison, almost lurking in the background, but she could see he had heart-eyes for the social media manager.

Nearly as bad as Ilya had for her, which Shane found she could appreciate; her past opinions of the man, momentarily, be damned.

“Jane, right?” he asked. They were eye to eye. If she had worn heels, she would have been taller.

Shane nodded. “That’s right.”

“Just wanted to be sure.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “They mean well, you know.”

“Zane already warned me,” Shane answered. “Nice to be in on the joke. I don’t normally catch on so quickly.” She squeezed Ilya’s hand. “Sorry. Been a while since I’ve come to something like this.”

“You’re already doing great. Better than me, first time out, if it’s any consolation,” he said, somewhere between encouraging and uncertain.

He had a nice smile – earnest and sort of boyish – something Shane wouldn’t have dared say when he was still playing for Toronto. He and Kent had been thick as thieves before, but Ilya had said Barrett had gotten dealt a bad hand in his trade. Ilya wasn’t a liar, and he had a decent read on people. Shane was inclined to believe him, even if it went against her own instinct.

“Alright, you two.” A woman with tawny hair waved her way between them, holding out a hand to Shane. “Let us have for a little bit.”

Ilya gave her a look checking in, watching for Shane’s smile. It was alright, for now. He passed her Shane’s hand. “Take care of her, Cassie.”

“You know I will. Get yourself something to drink, okay?” Cassie said, guiding Shane away. “God, it’s so good to have someone new around here.”

“Oh?”

“Yes! Fresh blood, new stories, new sarcasm!” Cassie said. “Besides, if anyone’s gonna have anything on Rozanov, it’s going to be you.”

“If you say so.” Shane let the shorter woman move her into the kitchen – large, clean, the counters littered with everything on offer. In the center of it stood a small cluster of women, revolving around one another as they uncorked wine bottles, filled glasses, and popped snacks into their mouths.

“We’re the unofficial party house, but only because Zane can’t help himself. If this team was a cruise ship, he’d be the activities coordinator, you know?” Cassie continued. “This is the crew. Caitlin, Selena, Lisa, and Emilia. Meet Jane.”

“Hi!”

“Welcome!”

“Hi there.”

Shane raised her hand. Cassie had let go of her and, without her or Ilya, she felt out of sorts. Anxiety spiking left, right, and center. She fell back on instinct – good, old fashion, nice. “It’s good to meet you all.”

Caitlin Dykstra, a woman with dark curls pulled into a ponytail, gave her a funny look – sympathetic without being pitying. “You nervous, hun?”

“What gave it away?” Shane tried, voice weak. She took a breath, leaning against the counter for support. “A bit. It’s not you, I swear. I’m not so great with new things.”

“And a lot of new things all at once,” another woman – Selena – chimed in. Her Quebecois accent was distinct from the rest of them, familiar and calming to Shane’s ear. Her blonde hair was sleek and long, green eyes lined with a cat-eye. She reminded Shane of Svetlana; the self-assuredness, the effortless cool. “You’re with Ilya, yes?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, he’s mine.”

“Let’s at least get her a glass of something before we start giving her the third degree,” Cassie laughed. She held up two bottles. “Red or white?”

Shane flushed. “Um. Neither?”

Cassie raised her eyebrows. “No?”

Caitlin looked her up and down. “Is there a reason we’re meeting you tonight?”

Shane stared at them for a long while. When the other penny dropped, her flush deepened – the color that sent Ilya calling her *moya pomidor* – and she clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh. God. No. Not that. I can’t anyway. No, I just don’t drink.”

“Oh, geez, sorry!” Cassie made an apologetic face. “We shouldn’t have assumed. Starting off on the wrong foot, huh girls.”

Shane’s stomach tossed. “It’s okay, really. You didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Cassie is trying and Caitlin had her first in October,” Selena drawled, expression knowing and teasing. “So babies are on the brain, you know?”

Cassie smirked. “Not trying anymore, thank you very much. So, I’ll join you.” She set a hand on Shane’s arm. “What do you normally go for?”

“Ginger ale?”

“Comin’ right up.”

Shane shifted awkwardly. It was easier talking to the team, more straight-forward anyhow. She glanced towards the living room where they were gathered, a pre-game show on the television while they stood around chatting. Selena and Lisa began moving a collection of

appetizers towards a long wooden dining table with matching benches, setting them up in a cluster on one end.

Cassie set a hand on her arm, handing her a cold can, and steering her towards the table. “We’re gonna ask you a million questions now, okay?”

“That’s okay.” Shane tucked a bit of hair behind her ear.

“We know each other way too well these days, so don’t feel pressured to answer,” Caitlin added, picking up the open bottles. “We’ll start you off easy, then get to the scandalous stuff later.”

“Fair enough.” Shane leaned close. “Congratulations, by the way.”

Cassie grinned. “Thanks. Due right at the end of summer, so I expect to be very warm and very uncomfortable. But I’d rather it not be in the middle of the season.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“I’ll complain enough that you’ll be able to come July,” she teased, then motioned for Shane to sit down.

The WAGs seemed to have their own configuration, like kids at a lunch table. Shane almost froze – not wanting to disrupt the usual, not wanting to pick the wrong place – until Selena took her hand. The woman sat at the head of the table and nodded to the spot at the end of the bench, next to her. Shane gave her a grateful smile, taking a seat.

“So, Jane, tell us,” Selena started. “He uses that mouth on you and not just the ice, right?”

Shane flushed bright red as the women around her squealed and admonished.

“Oh my god, at least start her off with something *easy*, Selena,” Lisa shoved her playfully. “Like where are you from or what’s your favorite color or something!”

“Alright.” Selena rolled her eyes. “Jane?”

Shane recovered with a swallow of ginger ale. “Yes, Selena?”

“What is your favorite color?” She batted her eyelashes. Teasing, making a joke, but not *at* Shane. *With* Shane.

“Well.” Shane set her drink on the table and leaned onto her elbows. “I really like blue...” She leaned forward. “And the mouth is better in bed than on the ice.”

Were it not for the bright, chiming peals of laughter, Shane would have been utterly mortified. She hadn’t ever known what to do with the raunchy talk in the locker room or on road trips. It had taken a few rounds with Ilya before she started looking up dirty talk on her phone, trying it out in fits and starts in person or FaceTime. Texting never quite clicked in her brain.

Caitlin, across the table, leaned forward. “Oh, I like you, Jane.”

“Do you like me, or my gossip?” Shane asked, trying on the lilty way Rose talked sometimes. “It’s okay if you say gossip.”

“Stick around long enough and we’ll probably end up saying both,” Caitlin replied. “But we really do love gossip around here. And a smidgen of sexy talk.”

“It’s why we have to do happy hours at someone’s house,” Lisa added. “Can’t have just anyone hearing the good stuff.”

“Next one’s at Selena’s in January. We’ll add you to the group chat so you can see.” Cassie picked up her phone, opened it, and handed it to Shane, motioning for her to type in her number.

Shane did, hesitating on the name to put it before settling on Jane. It wasn’t the first time she’d been in someone’s contacts as Jane. It didn’t bother her.

“I’ll see, but that would be fun.” She passed the phone back. “Then you can tell me whether or not my gossip is actually good or not.”

“It will be,” Selena reassured. “If only because we know Ilya, but we don’t know *that* Ilya.”

Shane hummed. “New equals good?”

“Exactly,” Lisa nodded.

“We like cute date stories, drama mini series, and details about birthday presents.” Caitlin took a sip of her drink. “Is Roz good with gifts?”

“In his own way, yes. Very.” Shane looked down at where her fingers pressed into the green aluminum. “He got me a framed photo for Christmas this year.” When she looked up, they were watching her curiously. “It was a photo he found from when we first met. Laughing, smiling, even though we didn’t really know each other.”

“Oh.” Lisa made a soft face.

“That’s really sweet.” Cassie leaned into her shoulder.

“I didn’t even know it existed,” Shane admitted. “We don’t have a lot of pictures from then”

Selena swirled her glass on the table. “So. Rozanov is a tender-heart.”

“Sentimental,” Caitlin added. “Noted.”

“He’s a big softie.” Shane smiled. “He didn’t show it for a long time, but when he did, I was a goner.”

The conversation devolved from there. Lisa complained about her upcoming shifts and a new hire getting up in her face about paperwork. Caitlin talked about her work at a women’s

shelter and how she and Evan were waiting for their daughter, Susie, to start sleeping through the night. Selena lit up when Shane mentioned living in Montreal, switching to French for a minute to ask her about a few of her favorite restaurants in Saint-Denis. Shane had to admit she hadn't been to three of them, but they went back and forth about one for a long while.

"*Shane*," Ilya called. His tongue curled around the *sh* and morphing it into a *zh* sound, a fuzzy middle ground between Shane and Jane and just enough Slavic to smooth it over. Svetlana said it the same way. It felt like an inside joke.

"What?" Shane called back in a joking lilt.

"Come here, *moya umnitsa*. Montreal is playing and I want you to laugh at them with me."

Shane preened quietly. She didn't mind being called clever. She turned around, leaning a hand on the bench. "What do you care? You don't play for Boston anymore."

"*Shane*," Ilya whined, for dramatic effect more than anything.

Shane rolled her eyes, the other women snickering with her. "Excuse me, but I think I have an oversized toddler to attend to."

"Preaching to the choir," Lisa snickered.

Selena reached to pat her hand. "It's okay if you would rather watch the game. We won't take it personally."

"Speak for yourself," Caitlin said. "If you don't sit with us at the next game, we will have words. You're one of us now, got it?"

"Got it." Shane took her can with her, wandering over to the couch. Ilya had taken up a corner with a chaise lounge piece, legs stretched out and hand in his hair. She bent over the back of the cushions, kissing him on the temple. "*Kak dela, Ilyunia?*"

Russian did not come easily, but he always rewarded her when she tried. Shane thrived on those rewards, the praise, the increasingly delirious compliments as he felt her up and took pleasure in her own.

Ilya pointed at the screen. "*Smotret*. Andropov thinks he'll get a five hole."

"You can't possibly know that."

"I don't, but I do know he thinks too highly of himself." Ilya chuckled, motioning her to sit down with him. "I hear no arguments from you."

"What's there to argue?" Shane sighed. "If only he was half as good as he thought he was. Wilson too." She took Ilya's offered hand as she walked around the end of the couch, then let him pull her down. Between his legs, arms around her as he cuddled up like they were at home. "The rookie's got something to prove."

Ilya chuckled. "He is very fast. You might have some competition."

“Oh if only,” Shane chuckled too. “I’m lighter now. Probably makes me even faster.”

“Lucky thing you do not play anymore.” Ilya rested his chin on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Shane hummed, eyes on the television. Selena was right – she really *would* rather watch the game. “I’m fine. The WAGs are nice. They were asking me about you.”

“Sexy things?” Ilya teased.

“I’d tell you,” Shane drawled. “But it would over-inflate your ego, which is already dangerously oversized.”

A chorus of laughter broke out to their right. Haas and Dykstra were cackling where they sat. Shane flushed again. She hadn’t thought they could hear her.

“Here I was, ready to say that your girl is too nice for you,” Dykstra said. “Too polite and kind and friendly for an asshole like you.” He rolled his head on the cushions to look at them. “And then here she comes, smacking you down without missing a beat.”

Ilya laughed. “No one suspects, but she is quick. Very funny when she wants to be.”

“Secretly funny,” Shane corrected breezily. “That’s what my friend Rose says. I’m *secretly* the funniest person she knows.”

“Nothing secret about it,” Dykstra grinned. “Did you really play?”

“Oh,” Shane leaned harder against Ilya. “Yeah. A long time ago.”

“No kidding?”

“What position?” Haas asked.

“She was center, like me,” Ilya picked up smoothly. “Faster too, but you did not hear that.”

“I think we all heard that, Roz,” Zane called from the far end. “Is that how you met?”

“Sort of.” Shane glanced at Ilya. She was a bad liar, and this all sort of felt like lying, but he gave her a small head tilt. Permission to say whatever and he would play along, back her up. “I used to live in Montreal. We met there.”

“Ah yes, the legend of lady’s-man Rozanov,” Dykstra piped up.

“I do not know what you are talking about. Never in my life do I do this.”

“Sure, sure, Roz. Let me guess. It was at a bar and there was dancing?”

“No, actually,” Shane smirked. “A hotel, actually.”

“What were you doing?”

“Riding the stationary bike, burning off energy.” Shane huffed a laugh. “Really sexy, I know.”

Ilya pulled her close again. “It was *after*—.”

“Save it for when I’m not here, Ilya.” It earned her a laugh from the team, making her feel buzzy. She took a drink, checking on him. He was grinning like a fiend, so she hadn’t touched a nerve. She looked back at the boys. “He’ll probably tell you the moment I get up.”

“We’ll make him save it for the road trip next week,” Hayes said. “So, how long have you been together?”

“Serious since twenty-seventeen,” Ilya answered. “Less serious before that.”

“Well, when your team only shows up in town once every few months, and you spend all summer in Russia, it doesn’t leave much time in between,” Shane added. “It’s good though. We figured it out, eventually.”

Zane stared. “You’ve been serious for three years?”

Shane nodded. “When he signed with you all, he asked me to move in with him.”

“Serious *and* living together,” Zane corrected. “So how come we haven’t met you before?”

“I’m not, um, the best with change. I grew up here, but it’s taken me a bit to adjust. Just going to games was a big deal, at least for me, so...” She drifted off. Resting a hand on top of Ilya’s arm, she smiled at him. “He’s very patient. Whether you believe me or not.”

“On the ice is on the ice,” Zane shrugged.

“Seconded.” Haas raised his hand in the air.

“Thirded,” Barrett added from his spot on the floor. “He wouldn’t have stayed captain for so long if he was a total dickhead.”

“He’s only *mostly* a dickhead,” Hayes chimed in. “And almost always to the other team.”

“Speaking of the other team.” Troy pointed up at the television screen. “San Francisco just got one in on Mitty.”

Shane’s focus moved immediately to the television. Fast enough that Ilya laughed lightly at her. She reached a hand back to flick him in the ear, and was rewarded with a jab to the ribs that made her twitch. It didn’t make her lose focus from the replay.

On the ice in California, Couillard took a pass from Pike, and then shoved it towards Andropov. Andropov caught the puck, pushing towards the blue line. He had replaced Shane on the first

“Damn it,” Shane muttered.

“Still root for Montreal, then?” Chouinard asked.

“My mom’s the biggest Voyageurs fan in Ontario, force of habit,” Shane answered flatly. “But their passing game has always been crap.”

“I tell you this. For years, I tell you this and you always deny it.” Ilya sighed dramatically, slumping back against the back cushions. “It’s just the formation, Ilya. It’s the second line, Ilya. Games against Boston don’t count, Ilya—.”

“First off, games against Boston don’t count. That’s an entirely different atmosphere and you have to look at them in their own box.” Shane took another drink. “Second, their passing game still sucks. It sucked when I was there, it sucks now.”

“And why is that, Jane?” Ilya baited the hook, a smile like the cat who got the cream.

Shane gave him exactly what he wanted, brain on cruise-control. “Because Thierault makes plays like it’s nineteen-seventy. Puck always goes back to the center. Minimal passing, even if you’re about to get checked into the other team’s bench. Even if the center gets taken out and you have to race for it. Like, look, right now. Watch.”

All eyes turned to the television. The puck dropped, and it was a clean sweep for Montreal – Andropov gets off a neat little wrist shot that sends the puck up the ice with him chasing after it. He swings past San Francisco’s players, Pike and Couillard close behind him, blocking out whoever they can.

“Andropov’s going to get smacked in three,” Shane said, eyes flickering over the screen. “Two. Now.”

She pointed at the screen right as the collision happened. San Francisco’s center swooped in on Andropov from the right, slamming him into the boards as a left winger swiped the puck out from under them and, after a tight circle around Pike, backhanded it into the goal.

Shane put both her hands in the air as Ilya looked up at her, dreamy-eyed. “What did I say?”

“Holy shit,” Dykstra sat forward. “How did you call that?”

“Experience,” Shane said. She set her drink on the coffee table with a proud little smirk. “And knowing that Couillard’s not ever going to be fast enough to get where Pike can’t. Happened all the time.”

“Damn.” Chouinard rubbed his jaw, sizing her up. “Of course Roz lands a girl that can talk shop better than he can.”

“Oh yes,” Ilya drawled, stretching where he lay. “It is my favorite thing. I like—.”

Shane glared at him over her shoulder. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence.”

Ilya raised his hands in mock surrender, then settled them back on his stomach. “I know what is good for me.”

“Don’t finish that sentence either.” She looked back at him. “If only I’d had the guts to tell him to play like the Soviets. Might have kicked me off sooner.”

Ilya chuckled. “The world will never know, *solnyshka*.”

The game moved on, rolling forward as the time ticked down towards second intermissions. San Francisco was up two to Montreal’s one, but it was only the second. Anything could happen in the end. Even if Miitka was catching every shot on goal for the rest of period.

“Oh holy shit.”

Shane’s eyes flicked away from the television screen, catching Wyatt Hayes. He was staring right at her, shock and awe evident on his face. Her stomach swooped and her body tensed.

“Hazy, dude, that save *wasn’t* that impressive—.”

“You’re Shane Hollander.”

Oh god, no, please...

Shane’s lungs froze mid-breath. They refused to move, in or out, until they burned. Then they came in shallow bursts, not quite reaching her lungs.

“What?”

“Hayes, the fuck?”

Every eye was on her. Her head swam. Her voice wouldn’t work.

Ilya’s hands were on her, steadying and warm, but Shane couldn’t make herself move.

Her gaze stayed locked with Hayes’. The rest of the room turned to babble, white noise, a sloshing dislocated bloop like her every sense was being yanked deep underwater.

They were talking. They were talking about her. Looking at her. Picking apart her face, her clothes. Scrutinizing her, down to the stitch, the hair, the freckle.

“Sweetheart?” Ilya whispered.

The world crashed over her, bright and loud and shocking. “Oh god.”

Shane was up. Out of the room like a shot, moving towards the front door. She hardly felt her body, in her own head. Her skin was cold, shivery. Her breath came in awful, ragged gasps that she couldn’t even feel in her lungs.

She held tears off until she was outside. Burning, blurring, inevitable. They smeared over her cheeks and turned icy on her face. She made it as far as the sidewalk before her body wouldn’t move anymore. The winter chill was a shock to her system, but did nothing to bring her back down again.

It was cold, freezing. Her hands shook. She didn't have her coat. It was still inside. Inside, she couldn't go back inside.

She buried her face in her hands and tried her best not to scream.

The door opened and closed. Footsteps rushed towards her, and Shane nearly bolted for the car.

Ilya caught her by the wrist. Stopping her in her tracks. Pulling her in close. Bundling her up in his arms, his body impossibly warm and enveloping her tightly.

"Ilya," she choked out.

"I got you. I got you. I am here."

"They knew, they knew, they—, they—, *fuck*."

She clung to Ilya, not even certain she was inside her body. Every bit of herself had retracted into her center, until she couldn't reach her edges. She had never felt smaller, not even the afternoon before when they were at each other's throats.

"*Vcye khorosho*," Ilya murmured. "*Vcye khorsho, lyubimaya*."

"It's not okay," Shane said into his shoulder, head spinning. "Its not fucking *okay*, *Ilya*." She sucked in a breath. It sounded like it was ripping itself apart in the air. "Oh my god, I can't breathe, I can't breathe."

"You can, sweetheart. Deep breath, like me."

"I can't, I can't, I can't—."

"*Shane*." Ilya pulled her hand, pushing it against his throat. His hand stayed over top, making sure she could feel his pulse, his inhales, his exhales. His other arm stayed slung around her shoulders, their foreheads tucked together, as they breathed together.

"In. Out. Like me. In. Out."

In and out, in and out, in and out.

"Ilya," Shane whimpers. "They, they—. God, they *know*."

"It's okay, Shane," Ilya whispered. "Breathe, *lyubimaya*, I need you to breathe."

She nodded and tried, words conflicting with the "But they saw, they know, it's—, it's—."

Ilya smoothed her hair back from her face. "*Shane*."

"It's a fucking *nightmare*, Ilya," Shane wailed, then buried her face into his shirt to muffle the sound. "My actual fucking nightmare."

The words cracked in the cold air. Split down the middle, painful to get out and scraping her throat on the way out.

Ilya's face was stricken, heartbroken. He cupped her face in his hands, warm and gentle despite the cold that was burrowing through her sweater to her skin. "Sweetheart."

Shane tucked her head and willed the tears away. Her hands dropped to his chest and fisted the fabric of his shirt. As if she could clench it hard enough that the world would stop, time would go back, and this wouldn't have happened.

It had been so nice. It had all been *so nice*—.

"We will go home."

Her head jerked up, staring at him wild eyed. "No."

Ilya stared at her, expression creased with confusion. "Shane, it is alright. No more bet, you —."

"No." She surprised herself by saying it again. "No, I—." She took a slow breath. "Not yet."

"Not yet," Ilya repeated. The bewilderment was still on his face, but it slowly began to drain away. "What do you want to do, sweetheart?"

Shane's mind reeled. She felt unsteady on her own legs, but the all-consuming need to run had abandoned her. A headache was setting in. The nervous sweat was chilling on her back. It was probably a bad idea. Probably a disaster waiting to happen. But, somehow, she couldn't go running to the car.

Not yet.

Not. Yet.

"I want to go back in," Shane whispered. Ilya gaped at her, lost for words. "It was nice, before. They're nice, I liked them, I—." She let out a hysterical half-laugh. "God I'm freaking the fuck out, but I have to know."

"Have to know what?"

"Whether they hate me or not."

"*Lyubimaya*," Ilya gasped. "You said this was nightmare. We do not have to stay, it is alright."

Shane sucked in a breath. "Yeah, this is a nightmare." She stared at her fingers tight in Ilya's shirt. "But maybe this is how I wake up." She swallowed tightly. "Its been almost four years, Ilya, I know who I am. This is what's scared me the whole time. This exact thing."

"I know."

“It’s kept me up at night. It follows me around. We’re together, we’re happy, but–.”

“It’s hard, I know.”

“But it doesn’t have to be.” Shane took another breath and released her hands. “It doesn’t have to. I can–.” She looked him in the eyes. “I can do this.”

Ilya took in his own shuddering breath. “Sweetheart.”

“If they hate me, they hate me. We can leave, and you can handle that at practice tomorrow, but I can’t leave until I know.” She managed a weak, watery smile. “I just can’t. I don’t know why.”

Ilya nodded to himself, nearly frantic, and thoughts moved quickly behind his eyes. Eventually, he too settled and took her hand. A ferocity had made a home in his hazel eyes. “Then we find out.”

“Stay with me?” Shane gripped his hand harder.

“Every step,” he promised. “I love you.” Then, he nodded towards the door. “*Davai, solnyshka.*”

Shane was shivering as she stepped back over the threshold. Back inside, Ilya took a slow moment to look her over, with that same gentle care she’d come to rely on for years. He checked her hands and her face, rubbed her arms to warm her up and inspire a watery giggle. He took her hand in his, kissed the back of, and smiled.

Ready? He mouthed.

Ready, Shane mouthed back.

The living room they walked back into was not the one Shane had left. The group was very nearly silent, save for the sound of the television and some urgent sounding whispering. All the air, all the laughter, had been sucked out of the room leaving a hollow ring like the room had been emptied completely.

Guilt swooped low in Shane’s stomach. It was all her fault. *Her* fault. If she hadn’t run, hadn’t reacted, hadn’t fucking *cried*–.

“Hey.” Cassie caught sight of them first, walking right up to her and Ilya. She looked cautious, worried, arms crossed over her sweater. “Are you alright, hun?”

Shane managed a nod, a thin smile.

“It’s okay if you aren’t, or if you need to go, okay?” Cassie said, looking between her and Ilya. Zane came up behind her, a sturdy presence. “No hard feelings. But you’re welcome here, I promise.”

Shane had lost words. She looked to Ilya, helpless – the worst feeling, she thought.

Ilya stepped in seamlessly. “Thank you. She has been scared of what people will think for a long time.”

“Oh honey.” Cassie held out her hands for Shane to take. “I can’t even imagine.”

Shane nodded, offering a small face, but no words. They were lodged in her throat. She let Cassie squeeze her hands, knowing it was helping the other woman more than it might help herself, but it was a tether. A line in the water to someone who wasn’t Ilya, wasn’t her own family.

“I’m sorry,” a new voice piped up. Wyatt Hayes looked like he had seen a ghost, then watched someone get hit by a car. Lisa, his wife, had a hand on his back.

Supporting, Shane realized, *not forcing*.

Ilya squeezed her waist. Supportive, grounding, everything to keep her from flying off the handle.

Shane took a breath. “How did you guess?”

Hayes looked surprised. He shifted his weight. “You said a few things before. Met Roz in Montreal. Played hockey, been in face offs. Can’t have kids— *ow*.” Lisa had jammed two fingers into his ribs, giving him a warning look. Wyatt flushed red hot with embarrassment. “Sorry, deserved that. It was the bit about Montreal’s plays. Sounded like insider knowledge.”

Shane nodded, letting that tumble through her brain. She should have been more careful, or less honest. She should have watched her words, shouldn’t have gotten too comfortable, remembered where she was—.

Shane pulled herself sharply out of the spiral. *No. Not worth it. Don’t do it.*

Hayes was still watching her. He looked mortified, upset with himself and genuine about it.

“It’s okay, Wyatt” she said quietly. “I should have known a goalie would be the first person to figure it out.”

Wyatt looked like he wanted the floor to open up underneath him. Like he wanted to be sick right then and there.

Zane let out a purposefully audible exhale in the quiet living room. “That’s fucking generous of you, Shane.”

Shane shook her head. “Leave him alone.” She looked back at Wyatt. “You didn’t mean to say it like that, did you?”

“Fuck no.” He shook his head. “I know better, I really do, it just came out, I’m so, so, so sorry—.”

“It’s okay.”

Her voice was steady, even. She believed it was all for Ilya's hand on her shoulder, for the presence of Cassie and Zane in front of her, but was grateful it didn't betray the seasick sensation overwhelming her. She didn't look at the rest of them. She only looked at Wyatt.

"You're right. For the record. I am, you know, Shane Hollander. That's still my name. I just." She cleared her throat, shifted in place. "Look. Different."

Ilya's arms slid down around her shoulders, wrapping her like a collar. He rested his head on her shoulder. Shane didn't have to look at him to know he was stone-faced and tight-lipped; his expression a silent warning to the rest of his players. Shane needed the weight and warmth more than she needed the protection.

She raised a hand to his forearm, tucking her head to whisper: "You playing guard dog now?"

"Mhmm," Ilya hummed. "Very scary."

"Dial it back, Ilya" Shane murmured. She turned back to the group, clearing her throat again. "I retired so I could transition. Completely. I had known for a while before then, but it couldn't happen until I stopped playing." She took a breath. "It sucked to stop, but staying would have been a shit show. Hockey's my favorite thing. Pretty sure it's the only thing I'll ever be really good at. But it's better now. Like this."

The room still hung on that tightrope of silence. Not knowing what to say, or if they should say anything. Hardly anyone moved, but some fidgeted in place on the large couch.

"I wasn't lying when I said I don't do things like this," Shane continued. "Public things. I'm not the most sociable, everyone's said that for years." She didn't know how she kept on, but she did. "Ilya and I run a charity together, and I hardly go to events for it. We had a fight yesterday, about coming here, because I wasn't sure. But he really wanted me to meet you. He loves you all like family." Shane paused. "You *are* his family, as much as I am."

Montreal and San Francisco still circled each other on the ice, the third period just winding up. Drapeau was in goal, but Shane wasn't quite sure that would make a difference with the Mission's rookie picking the puck off Hayden's stick when he wasn't looking. She'd be surprised if gloves didn't drop before the end. The kid looked like he had a death wish, buzzing around the ice like a mosquito.

"I don't say that to put pressure," Shane continued after a moment. "I really don't. But it's true. If I make anyone, um, uncomfortable. Just—. Just say so, and spare me the humiliation?"

Ilya held her tighter. Shane sank into it, letting him keep her from floating away. She expected the silence to go on for an eternity. She expected the silence to speak for itself, to shout, to send her to the door again. It didn't.

"I'm not uncomfortable," Troy Barrett said from the far side of the room. "Anyone else?"

Haas sat up from where he'd been sprawled on the cushions. "Me neither."

"Not a problem to me," Chouinard said.

“I’m not,” Zane said, arms crossed. “And it’s my house.” He looked around at the team. “I know we’ve all got our bells rung a few times, but I hope we can all still put together what I mean by that.”

Be nice, or get out. Loud and clear from the assistant captain.

No one moved. No one shifted uncomfortably or looked wary of the missive. They all, shockingly, looked content with the ruling, quietly in agreement. Shane chewed the inside of her cheek and closed her eyes. Ilya took some of her weight, rocking her softly.

“We aren’t the queerest team in the league for nothing,” Wyatt broke the silence. “It’s my fault you’re on the spot right now, and I’m really sorry. But you’re Shane fucking Hollander, *and* you make Roz really happy.” He summoned a small smile. “We’d be really stupid to not want you around. For a lot of reasons.”

There was a low rumble of agreement. From the players, from their partners. From Ilya, vibrating from his body into hers. Chiron even let out a happy yap when Harrison plucked him up off the ground.

“Thank you.” Shane breathed. She gripped Ilya’s arms, eyes going watery.

“Don’t thank us,” Zane said, firm. “Am I good in guessing you don’t want this going outside this room?”

“Please. I’m not ready for that.” She looked at Cassie. “I think I might need that wine now.”

Cassie took her hand in both of hers. “Red or white?”

“White,” Ilya answered. “And thank you.” He unwound his arms but did not release his hold on her. “*Solnyshka.*” He kissed her on the cheek. “Let’s sit back down, yes?”

Shane nodded. Words were escaping her, but no one questioned it.

Shane was more than happy to let him move her around. Guide her back to the couch, down onto the cushions. Steady her as she toed her shoes off and curled up against his side, head on his shoulder and eyes on the last seven minutes of the game. Let his hand in her hair and the rhythm of his breathing drag her back down to center. A headache prickled behind her eyes, at her temples. Ilya’s hand massaged the back of her neck, the base of her skull, until she was beginning to droop.

“Thank you, Cassie,” Ilya said over her head. He jostled her gently for attention. “Shane. You want?”

Shane nodded against his shoulder and pulled herself up again. She took the glass, finding Cassie. “Thank you. Really.”

“Don’t mention it.” Cassie leaned forward to hug her over the back of the couch. “And I still mean it. You’re sitting with us next home game.”

“Are you—?”

“Don’t you dare ask if we’re sure. You’re with us now. No arguments.”

Shane held her hands up in mock surrender. The fight had drained out of her, and she didn’t want to push back anyway. Finding friends had never been her strong suit. She usually lucked into them; a rare few people who didn’t think she was bland, or strange, or too awkward to hang out with. She felt like she had lucked into something just there.

A cluster of people who wanted her there, and weren’t going to take no for an answer. She’d be stupid to refuse.

She took a long sip from the glass – more than she usually might – and dropped back against Ilya. He was comforting. Hockey was comforting. The thrum of other people talking around her was comforting. She poked Ilya in the ribs, earning his eyes. She held up the glass. “Want some?”

“Not if I need to drive you home soon,” he whispered, pushing her hand back towards her. “I know it is unusual, but I think you need it more than I do.”

“Maybe.” She took another sip. Shane sucked in a deep breath. So much that her lungs ached, threatening to burst. She let it out again when Ilya’s hand squeezed around her ribs.

“Feeling alright?”

“Mhmm.” She swallowed. “I’m going to crash when we get home, but I feel good.” She leaned in to kiss his shoulder. “That went okay. Right?”

Ilya turned and kissed her forehead. “Not just okay. Good.” His hand rubbed circles on her back. “I am proud of you. You are so brave.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “Flattery won’t get you anywhere tonight, I hope you know that.”

“I know. But, tomorrow morning..?”

She snickered against the rim of her glass. “We’ll see how I wake up.”

The cushions sank near her feet, drawing both of their attention. Wyatt Hayes, hands clasped between his knees, not shaking the obvious worried look on his face.

Ilya clicked his tongue. “Hazy, you do not need to keep apologizing.”

“I will, for a while, but that’s not why–.” He broke himself off. “I just want to be clear. You still go by Shane, right?”

“Yeah. Still do.” Shane offered a reassuring smile. “I never felt the need to change it. Jane’s a joke between Ilya and me. I asked him to use it tonight, but it’s not what I go by.”

“What kind of joke?” Haas had leaned forward, listening intently.

“An old one,” Ilya supplied. “She is Jane in my phone from when we first met. I was Lily in hers until she retired.”

“Lily and Jane.” Hayes mused. “That’s cute.”

“We were afraid of being found out then. No one cares if they see a girl’s name, yes?”

Zane dropped back down onto the couch, cracking the tab on a new beer can. “I get the feeling that’s a different story than the one we heard earlier.”

Ilya shrugged. “Mm. Not so different, but a longer time.”

“How much longer?” Barrett asked from the floor, leaned back on his hands.

Shane and Ilya exchanged a glance. Shane shrugged, and Ilya nodded. “Twenty-ten. Summer before our rookie year.”

Barrett’s eyes went wide. Haas’ mouth dropped, making him look even younger than he was. Boodram started laughing from his corner of the sofa, spurned on by Hayes’ whispered *what the fuck*.

“Holy shit,” Boodram said through laughter. “Some fucking rivalry!”

“The whole time?” Barrett stared.

“Yes, the whole fucking time,” Ilya laughed. “It was fun. Chirping on the ice, sneaking around hotels.”

“Fun?” Shane scoffed. She felt more herself, coming back up to normal. “It was fucking stressful.”

Ilya shrugged. “Eh, for you. The sex was good.” Shane shoved him and he rolled his eyes. “Are you going to deny it?”

“No, but I’m also not going to admit anything right now. I’ve had enough excitement for one night.”

“So you do not care that San Francisco is about to send Montreal home crying?”

Shane turned towards the television, eyeing the score. She frowned. “Well of course they fucking are. If Drapeau’s letting in two shots in the last minute of the game, then that’s their fuckin’ fault.”

“You should come to practice sometime, Holly,” Troy said over his shoulder. “Bet you could still outskate him.”

“Hear, hear,” Dykstra said. He raised his beer can in the air. He took a drink and dropped his head back to look at them. “I wanna put money on that.”

“Money on what?” Dillon popped back in from the kitchen, a fresh can in his hand.

“On whether or not Holly can still beat cap in a race.”

“Oh. Fifty dollars on Hollander, easy.”

“Fifty?” Dykstra laughed. “C’mon, this is a once in a lifetime! Minimum one-hundred-twenty dollar buy in.”

“Fine then. One fifty on Hollander.”

“One fifty on Rozanov, then,” Zane smirked. “No offense, Shane, but I can’t bet against the captain to my assistant.”

“None taken.” Shane swirled her wine and took another drink. “Can I bet?” She watched eyebrows raise, felt Ilya start laughing next to her. “Two hundred that Ilya will try to win by tripping me.”

“But you’ll still win?” Troy asked.

“Winners don’t cheat,” Shane preened.

Troy raised his hand in the air. “Two hundred on Holly beating Roz by less than a second.”

“Alright, alright,” Ilya cut in, laughing. “Someone should write this down. We cannot forget before it happens.”

Zane snapped and pointed at him. “Great question. When are we staging this battle royale?”

“How’s tomorrow?” Shane turned to grin at Ilya. “I’m free.”

Ilya’s face was a bald-faced mix of giddy and devilish. “Come ready to sweat, Hollander. I will not go easy on you.”

“Don’t.” Shane leaned against him, sticking her tongue out. “If I’m going to kick your ass, I’ll be doing it *properly*.”

The howling laughter was worth the hooting catcalls as Ilya kissed her when they went to shake hands. Shane didn’t pull away until Ilya did, gripping her jaw in her hand and sticking her tongue out at him. What burned through her then wasn’t shame, but something else. She didn’t have a name for it just yet, but she liked it. She really liked it.

Ilya was not a morning person, never had been and never would be. But, morning sex had a mysterious hold over him. It was a different pace – bed warm and syrupy – a different sound. Movements were slower, heavier, their bodies less hair-trigger for the sluggishness of their

brains pre-coffee. Shane had her rules about brushing their teeth and when he could wake her up with his tongue or his fingers, but Ilya loved it more.

Her fingers clutched the pillow under her head, her dark hair spread like a halo on the white cotton. Her head tipped back with a breathy moan as Ilya slid deeper, barely audible. Her eyes had only opened once when he had pulled her closer, having slipped out to scrub his teeth before coaxing her into an embrace, into a kiss, then onto her back.

“Ah.” She arched against him, her heel in the small of his back. “*Please.*”

The comforter draped over them, holding the warmth around them. Grey wintry light filtered between the curtains, sliding in lines up the edge of the bed. He slid his hands over her thighs lowering himself further down onto her, pressing himself firmer against her.

“*Ilya,*” she gasped. “*Bolshe. Bolshe,* please, I need—.”

His touch rose back up to her waist, one tucking underneath her and arching her back on his forearm. The other trailed higher, slipped into her tangled hair, and held her head as he licked into her mouth. As he rocked into her, knees in the mattress and wetness smearing on his stomach. As she panted and whined against his lips, thighs trembling as her delight inched higher and higher. As her orgasm broke the kiss as she keened, lashes fluttering and nails scratching down his back.

“C’mon,” she murmured as her body tempered into the afterglow. Encouraging and slurred, her hands in his hair, on his face, fingers tucking into the corner of his mouth. “C’mon, baby, c’mon.”

Ilya sucked hard around her knuckles. His eyes found hers, just barely open in her drowsiness.

“Love you,” she mumbled. She tightened her legs around his middle. “S’much.”

He let himself break then. His body shuddered. He pulled off her fingers, burying his moans in the soft skin of her neck. He resurfaced with a content grumble. Rolling his head, he kissed the center of her chest. “Perfect. You are perfect.”

“You’re easy,” Shane snickered. “And way too good at that for your own good.”

“As long as I am always good.” Ilya kissed her again, then pulled out.

Shane yawned and stretched underneath him, toes pointed and arms stretched towards the headboard. She blinked, bleary-eyed, up at him. Her expression was mushy, smitten. She ran a hand up his neck to scratch at his scalp. “Always. You spoil me.”

Eventually, his alarm sounded, and Shane shoved him toward the bathroom. Ilya went unwillingly, a goofy smile plastered on his face and wrecked curls sticking up in all directions, but not before stealing another indulgent kiss and shoving her, flopping, back onto the ruined bedsheets.

He showered, the warm water not doing much to help him wake up, despite his blood thrumming in his veins. Shane slipped into the bathroom as he stepped into the closet. He took his time dressing; sweatpants, tee shirt, a zip up hoodie, and feet shoved into a beaten up pair of Sambas. He'd be changing at the arena anyway. How he got there didn't matter.

He wandered through the living room, shoving odds and ends into his backpack. Shane wasn't in the bedroom, but the sheets were stripped, or in the kitchen, but his water bottle was filled standing next to a large thermos of milky-sweet coffee. Traces of her going about her routine, taking care of things.

He found her in the front hall, dressed and ready. Shane stood on one leg, tugging on her second sneaker. Both on, she used her foot to slide down her leggings, the fabric having ridden up while she balanced. Her shirt poked out from underneath a plain sweatshirt, as she pulled back up to full height and raised her hand, scrunchie ready for a ponytail. The tip of her tongue poked out between her lips as she tipped her head one way, then the other.

She caught him staring as she dropped her hands. "What?"

"You are dressed." Ilya caught sight of her skates, laces knotted together by the front door. "You have your skates."

"Well" Shane shrugged and stretched. "Yeah."

Ilya blinked, trying to disguise the swooping feeling in his chest. "Why?"

"I said I'd come to practice with you," she replied. "I'm not going to chicken out now."

"You are..." Ilya stepped forward, smile widening as he hoisted his bag further on his shoulder. He came to rest in front of her, bending at the waist to meet her eyes. Glee ran through him as he saw the challenge sparkling in her eyes. "Going to beat me, yes?"

"I'm going to try." She laughed, prodding him in the chest. "Watch out, Rozanov, I'm lighter than I used to be."

"Sure, but you still pin me to the bed like a lion."

"Ah, ah, ah." Shane pushed him backwards and went to grab her bags. "*We* are going to be late." He stole up behind her when she stood back up, locking her in an embrace. Shane ruffled his hair and kissed his cheek. "C'mon. You can fuck my thighs later."

He kissed the side of her neck until his nose was buried in the collar of her sweatshirt. "*Fuck* Shane. Why do you tease me?"

"Because you like it." She shoved her hand into her pocket, the Jeep's keys jingling in her fingers. She pushed them into his hand and reached for the front door. "Stop whining and move your ass, Roz. You've got a practice to run and a race to lose."

Ilya watched her for a moment, jogging down the walk towards the car. Grinning, bright eyed, and face pinkening from the cold; a vision, something from the archives of his wildest

dreams. He felt winded standing on the threshold of their front door, keys dangling uselessly from his fingers. After a moment, he turned to lock the front door, and raced off behind her.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I tried something new with this chapter: work skins and a wee bit of coding (special thanks to my fandom friends who helped me figure out this, admittedly, fairly simple task). I'm better with my words than I am with CSS or HTML, so if the formatting looks a little funky, forgive me. I'm learning.

This chapter is a touch shorter than the last few have been, but it features one of my favorite scenes yet. Shane and Ilya, dancing together. In my mind, perhaps, to "C'est Toi" by Satine -- the song that I'm mildly obsessed with and which inspired the title.

It also contains the first sex scene I've written since, approximately, American Thanksgiving. So, hopefully it doesn't sound too clunky or contrived. I just really wanted Ilya to be strung out, borderline-slobbering, full lover-boy-mode over Shane. As Shane deserves.

thank you all for reading and continuing to stick with me. I hope you enjoy!

xoxo,
Orchid

January 2021

Sveta

Do you have a minute

I have lots of minutes, Shane. Slow day. What is it?

Ilya left this morning for the AS game. I know he wanted me to go with him, but I couldn't make myself.

And now you wish you were on a plane with your boyfriend?

Yes

Well. Simple fix.

Simple?

Buy a plane ticket. Better, I'll buy it for you!

Sveta, I can't.

Why not?

It's too risky, even if Ilya would love it. I just can't.

I think you can. I think you need nudge.

I don't need a nudge.

Then why did you text me? Only to whine?

Maybe...

You should go to Florida. The weather is better there, and your boyfriend is also there. So. Easy choice.

What if someone recognizes me? I mean, half the league is there.

No one will. They will all be too drunk, and they are too stupid to think any more than oh god she's hot.

Stop it. No I'm not.

They will all want you then be so mad you are with Ilya. And Ilya will be so happy to see you. Do you know that? He might cry.

He won't cry. He's not like that.

Stop, you know how he is mushy inside.

Not that mushy, and not in front of the league.

He will be. He will get on his knees for you and weep. I will come with you so I can see it. It will be great teasing later.

You'd come with me?

Yes, of course. You are my friend. Ilya is my oldest friend. I have already found tickets for tonight.

Oh my god, we're doing this aren't we?

I am. I don't know what you are doing, Hollander.

Buying a plane ticket to Florida.

Good answer. You book hotel rooms, and I will bother your boy.

Sounds good. See you there!

I will have a sign, just for you. Look for Jane in baggage claim.

Please don't tell me I'm 'Jane' in your phone too.

Fine. I won't tell you.

The name that refuses to die... Okay. I have first flight out, lands at 9am. Now what the fuck do I wear, Sveta?

Sunrise, Florida

Shane shivered, though not from the hotel air con. "It feels like a lot. Too much."

From the bathroom door, Svetlana rolled her eyes. "It is the perfect amount of too much." She ran her eyes up and down, appreciating her handiwork. "Trust me."

Shane nodded, running her fingers up the skinny strap of her top for the thousandth time. A bodysuit had sounded like a good idea when she hadn't really known what her friend was thinking. She'd bought one – creamy white and silky with long sleeves – for meeting with foundation donors and the limited flesh-pressing she did at cocktail parties.

What Svetlana had picked was, categorically, not that. The lacy thing Shane wore felt closer to lingerie – inky black, vaguely see-through, with a spectacularly low v-neck – than anything meant to be worn outside. The silk trousers and blocky heels were more her speed. The simple gold jewelry and loose waves in her hair were the same. Still, Shane couldn't get past the top.

"I think I'm one sneeze from falling out of it," she murmured, messing with the strap again.

Svetlana hummed. "The straps can be tighter. Would you like to try that?"

Shane swallowed tightly, but nodded. "Please?"

Svetlana stepped forward, placing her palms flat on her skin before fiddling with the sliders Shane had been afraid to adjust. The whole thing felt flimsy. One false move and it would tear or break. Too delicate for her own hands. The straps wiggled against her shoulders, the

front of the top lifting as they tightened. Molding closer around her chest, covering her just a fraction more.

“There,” Shane whispered. The words left her mouth before she fully realized.

Svetlana peered over her shoulder. “Better?”

“Yes. Much. It’s just.” Shane exhaled, considering herself in the mirror again. “So different.”

It was sexy, no doubt about it. Very, obviously, overtly sexy – at least for Shane’s regular taste. Although, her usual taste was admittedly as casual as she could manage. Leggings, tee shirts, and sneakers, sweaters and jeans, sweatshirts pilfered from Ilya’s drawers when the mood struck.

“From your usual athletic wear? Yes, very different,” Svetlana mused. She stepped away, drifting back towards the wall and leaning against it. “Different can be good though, yes.”

“Yes. It can. It is.” Shane exhaled. She waved a hand in a figure eight over herself like casting a magic spell. “What have the last four years been?”

“Mmm, exactly.” Svetlana mused. “So we show off.” She stepped forward to take hold of Shane’s wrists. “Put you in gorgeous clothes, surprise your fiancée, knock him to the ground.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “But it is not just about him. It is about you first, always.”

Shane nodded. “I know. It’s good motivation, thinking of him. His reaction.” She breathed deeply. “Makeup might help– *will* help.”

“See,” Svetlana drawled. “You *do* like being pampered.”

“Only by some people. People I trust.”

“So, do you trust me with your face?”

Shane nodded, cheeks pinking. She always did her own make up. Only Rose had ever done it for her, years before, when she was giving Shane a very diligent crash course in cosmetics on the floor of the Montreal apartment. “Yes, but nothing too... erm, much?”

“Nothing dramatic, like me?” Svetlana gestured to her own berry colored lipstick, smokey eye and cat-eye liner so sharply done she could have used a knife’s edge.

Shane hesitated, then leapt. “Okay, maybe a little dramatic. I like your lipstick a lot.”

“Then maybe we put you in it, just to see.”

Svetlana waved Shane to sit down. When she had, the other woman came closer, considering her face like she had so many times before. Running light fingers over her jaw and cheekbones, tipping her head one way and the other, smoothing her hair back from her face for a clearer view.

“Okay,” Svetlana said finally. “I know what to do.” She smiled again. “Trust me, *krasa*?”

Shane felt her cheeks heat and nodded. “Yeah. I trust you.”

Nerves were a natural sensation now, but Shane did trust her. Like Rose, Svetlana had a good eye for the details, colors and cuts and things Shane would never have noticed. It was a kindness, having so many people who enjoyed those bits enough to notice for her.

Svetlana pulled their bags across the counter and began systematically going through the cosmetics in them. First Shane’s, for the easy things – powder, concealer, mascara, a liquid liner she was too afraid of smearing to use – then her own for the glitzier things. The things Shane never quite got the hang of.

Svetlana was gentle with the brushes on her cheeks and nose. She dusted on highlighter with the tips of her fingers and drew the eyeliner in a barely-there flick. Shane did her own mascara and lashes, giggling as Svetlana wiped away the stray dots under her brows. She tried her best not to flinch at the eyeshadow – carefully layered and blended – but failed a few times, and they ended up laughing all over again.

“Okay, okay.” Svetlana plucked the tube from her fingers, screwed the cap on before dropping it into Shane’s bag again. Then, she pulled a sleek purple tube with gold trim from her own. She wiggled it in the air, her smile too feline to be wholly innocent. “You look very good right now.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mhmm. There is a word, not just pretty but not sexy.” Svetlana uncapped the tube, then wrapped a tissue around her finger. “*Sultry*.”

Shane opened her mouth to answer, but struggled to find one. “That isn’t, um. A word I’d use for me.”

“You should start.” Svetlana took Shane’s chin in her fingers and tilted her face up. “Hold still, okay?”

Shane held as still as possible as Svetlana carefully swiped and blotted, swiped and blotted. Until she was satisfied and pulled the tube away. She set the tube down, fingers still under her chin, and she returned to look Shane very seriously in the eyes.

“It is not too much. It is not a lot. Okay?” Svetlana said just as carefully. “It is different, but good. Look in the mirror. Let it, you know, grow on you. Do not wipe it off just yet. Promise?”

Shane nodded. “I promise.”

“*Spasiba*.” Svetlana pulled away, then gestured towards the mirror. “Take a look. I’m going to get dressed.”

Shane waited until she had slipped out into the main suite, leaving her sitting on the toilet lid. She fidgeted with the fabric of her pants, picked at the clear coat on her nails, and sucked in

even breaths. Until she felt settled again. Until she felt brave enough to stand up again.

She kept her eyes down. She rested her fingertips on the edge of the counter, leaning her weight onto her toes. Svetlana's music drifted in through the doorway and, for a moment, Shane swayed with the unfamiliar beat.

She took a breath.

She looked up.

"Fuck."

Her lips caught her eye first. A plush pout stained a sinful looking plum. Satiny, smooth, irresistible even in the bright bathroom lighting. She caught herself from licking it away, expecting it would taste of wine and berries.

She imagined open mouthed kiss marks littering a strong chest and shoulders, dotted with moles and birthmarks. The deep color remaining on his golden pale skin long afterwards, like a bruise.

The skin of her face was smooth, lightly powdered. Her freckles were still visible across the curve of her cheekbones. No trace of blush sat there, Svetlana already accounting for her propensity for blushing.

She met her own eyes last. A subtle smoky eye in glittering shades of beige and bronze played up her skin tone. A precise swoop of liner and a fan of lashes rendered her gaze deep and black, like polished stone. Something depthless, endless. Something to get lost in.

"Wow."

Shane wanted to touch the mirror, but didn't want to leave fingerprints. She wanted to touch her own face, but was too afraid to smudge it.

She hardly noticed the door swinging open, Svetlana preening over her shoulder. "So. How do we like it?"

Words built and built in her throat, but Shane couldn't force them out. She settled for even breathing, a satisfied smile, and turning to meet Svetlana's gaze with a small nod of approval.

The preening dropped away. "Perfect. Ready to go?"

Shane nodded again. When Svetlana held out a hand for her to take hold of, Shane didn't hesitate. She went easily as Svetlana pulled her into a close hug.

Shane never would have described Ilya's friend as *cuddly* or *touchy-feely*, but she was nothing less than present. Rock steady and unmovably loyal to Ilya since childhood, Shane hadn't expected to be given the same. She hadn't imagined it would be so seamless in the end.

“I got the club name. We’ll call a car now.” Svetlana pulled back and patted her cheek kindly. “I bought you that lipstick.”

Shane gaped. “Already?”

“I had to! The color is perfect, it was meant to be.” She ushered her out of the bathroom, holding her hand as she tucked room keys into her clutch and steered them out the door and into the hallway. “It will be at your house when you fly home.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But, you can thank me by dancing with my friend all night.” Svetlana laughed, pressing the down button at the elevator. “And by going back to his room with him.”

Shane snorted a laugh, cheeks flaming, but nodding all the same. The elevator bell chimed and the doors slid open. She shamelessly took in her reflection in the polished golden walls, forgetting all about pushing the Lobby button or ordering a ride share.

“So vain,” Svetlana teased, eyes flickering up and back from her phone.

“Sorry—” Shane started, but Svetlana waved her away. Her nails clicked against the glass screen, and Shane turned in a slow circle. Looking herself up and down. Tipping her head one way and the next. A wide, toothy smile grabbed hold of her features and refused to let go. “I can’t wait to see his face.”

“He will be stunned,” Svetlana mused. “Won’t know what hit him.”

“I’ll have to focus. Commit it to memory.”

“Yes, you should. Perfect plan. You watch his face, and I’ll watch all the poor, sad men who want to talk to you but can’t.”

Shane leaned close to the reflective wall. She tucked a bit of hair behind her ear, trying a few faces she remembered from ad campaigns of years past. She caught Svetlana’s gaze in the reflection. “They could, but they’d be disappointed.”

“Would they, Jane?” Svetlana lifted an eyebrow, smirk still firmly intact. She pronounced the name low and accented, rolling off her tongue with affection, amusement, a touch conspiratorial.

Shane nodded, then dropped into a pose she had seen Rose do in red carpet poses. She should ask for advice like that, just for fun. Just to practice. “Didn’t you know?” She flashed Svetlana a knowing look. “Rozanov’s my man.”

Florida felt cursed and maybe, for Ilya, it was. The emergency landing a little less than a month before. An All-Stars match-up that put him and Scott Hunter on the same team. Almost five days away from home, away from Shane.

The club the players had descended on that evening was fine – good music, decent vodka, dark enough to talk or slip away and observe the crush. Ilya would have liked it more when he was younger; when he could have taken in the whole of the place and didn't know who he was missing.

He'd broken away from the small group that had dragged him out with them – a friend he'd kept from Boston and Chouinard, who had brought his wife and small brood with him. Ilya was more looking forward to throwing kids into the hotel pool than he was for the party, the skills competition, the actual game.

He leaned against the bartop, waiting for one of the bartenders but not flagging them down. He didn't need a fresh drink, he just couldn't think of anything else to do, but he didn't want to leave. Not just yet.

Bodies pushed up against him, vying for a bartender's attention, then vanishing when they had gotten what they wanted. Ilya rolled his head on his neck, then his shoulders. He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling his curls stick in new directions. His phone was tucked into his front pocket. Texting her sounded good. Video calling her from his hotel room sounded even better.

A hand ghosted over his right arm, trailed barely there over his shoulder. Ilya stiffened, head jerking in the direction of the touch, but found nothing. No one. Just an open space in the glossy black counter where someone could have been.

Ilya shook his head, then turned back forward. He leaned, looking for the bartender. Maybe he did need that drink.

A new body slid next to him, brushing his left side. "Hi there."

Ilya turned sharply, a rejection ready on his tongue. It died the moment he saw.

Large, dark eyes glittering in the dark. "Is this spot taken?"

"*Solnyshka*," Ilya gasped.

"Surprise."

Dark hair fell in a curtain over Shane's shoulders. Her back arched as she leaned forward onto the glossy bar top. Her dark eyes were framed with a perfect fan of black lashes, the multicolor lights of the club reflecting in their centers like stars. Her lips were painted a dark, shiny raspberry pink, her pink tongue poking out at the corner to lick as she waited for his answer.

“You’re here.” He felt frozen, stuck in time, but grinning all the same. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Shane smiled, freckles on her cheeks crinkling. “It was sort of a last minute thing.”

She pulled up straight, giving Ilya a view of the rest of her. Smooth pale skin of her neck and arms on display. A thick golden chain sat at the base of her neck, cradled in her collarbones, almost distracting from the thin straps and plunging neckline of her top. Black, lace, encasing her perfectly and warm to the touch as she stepped forward, guiding Ilya’s hands to her waist.

“You left the house yesterday, and it felt wrong,” she admitted, moving closer so he could hear her. “I wanted you to come back. I wanted to go with you. I felt silly for turning you down.”

Her fingers danced along his shoulders. Her nails were done – professional and detailed. Ilya wanted to snatch one of them and hold it up to his face, inspecting them closer. He wanted to feel them in his hair, on his scalp, scratching welts down his back.

Ilya exhaled, grounding himself by kneading fingers into her back. “So you came to find me?”

“Svetlana helped,” Shane said with a light laugh. “But yeah. I wanted to be here, even if I’m not playing.”

“You–.” Ilya shook his head. He felt dizzy, floaty. “This is real, yes?”

“Very real.” She placed her hands over top of his and squeezed them down on herself. “Feel. Real.”

He did. Firm and whole. As warm as she was underneath their bedsheets. Her chest rising and falling in the same pattern he felt while holding her close. Soft, steady, and calm. *Calm*, Ilya’s brain reeled. She wasn’t pulsing with anxiety. Her face was smooth and open.

She released his hands, then lifted a hand to caress his cheek. “I wanted to be brave. For you, Ilyunia.”

The spell that had held Ilya firm finally broke. Every muscle and nerve seemed to release at once, and he was helpless to her. He tipped forward, bundling Shane up in his arms, and holding her as close as he could without being inside of her. He laughed, giddy and disbelieving, into the curve of her neck. Her hands smoothed over his neck and shoulders. Her chest pressed to his and her hips arched against his, accommodating his arms bound firmly around her waist.

“I feel I am dreaming,” he said in her ear. He didn’t resist the urge to nip at it, press a kiss to the sensitive skin under it. “You are a dream.”

“Not a dream, Ilya,” Shane murmured. She was already swaying with the music. “I’m here. Right here.”

“You look like a dream. I missed you, was going to miss you the whole week.”

“You won’t have to. I’m staying. I got the same flight home as you on Tuesday.”

“Shane—.”

“I love you.”

“*Ya tozhe*,” Ilya murmured, pulling back to see her face. “So much, *nenaglyadnaya*.”

She pulled him down into a kiss and he went willingly. He tasted her lipstick as she licked into his mouth, her own warm and yielding. He pulled away, breathing hard. Panting like a dog and head spinning, pulse pounding along with the beat of the music of the club. Her lipstick was smudged, but her mouth was set into a perfectly victorious shape. Confidant, daring, a dangerous combination on her face when Ilya was concerned.

He wanted to drag her into a bathroom and get on his knees for her. He wanted to pull her out of that stupid club, back to his hotel room, kiss her stupid and bury himself inside of her. He wanted her to gasp and tremble against him, wanted her to drop him onto the bed and give him orders.

He wanted everything. Was so flooded with the possibilities that he couldn’t choose.

So Shane chose for him.

“Dance with me.” Shane lifted a hand to his face, gripping his chin as she pressed her thumb to his bottom lip. Her eyes darkened as Ilya’s lips parted, sparkled as he took the tip of it into his mouth. “Please?”

Ilya nodded, half-mad half-frantic. He sucked in a lungful of air as he pulled back. Took her hand. Walked her forward to the ill-defined dance floor as the music thrummed and bodies moved around them. Watched in starstruck awe as she turned in front of him, lights glinting off her dark hair, and straddled his thigh.

“Shane—.”

“Move me however you want,” she said, clear in his ear. “Wherever you want.” Her fingers scratched around the open collar of his shirt. Her eyes were nearly black in the low light. “I’m terrible at it on my own.”

“Not terrible.” Ilya knew he was hard in his jeans. He could feel her through her flimsy trousers. “Just need practice.”

The song shifted and he turned her around – his front pressed to her back, her head dropped back on his shoulder, his hands tracing lines over her front as he kissed her neck, squeezed her chest, ground shamelessly against her ass. Shane rolled her hips against him, over and over, stealing his breath.

She lifted her arms over her head, encircling his from behind. “How am I doing?”

“Perfectly,” Ilya murmured. “Don’t stop, *moya lyubmaya*.”

“I won’t,” she purred.

Shane tipped her head against his neck and laughed. Breathless. Happy. Moving with him, not against him as the songs blended into one another. Turned to face him and clutch him close. Let him spin her, bend her backwards, tip her off balance side to side, watching her hair move and fall and sweep.

“Take me back to your room. I need you, Ilya.”

Ilya was again certain. He was a very lucky man.

Shane held Ilya’s hand as they stepped into his hotel room. Like he was leading her forward into the dark. The room was lit only by the city lights beyond the window, casting them in greyscale. Neither of them reached for the lights. Neither of them made a sound. The only sounds were muffled street noise, the soles of her shoes, and the soft click of the hotel lock behind them.

Shane’s hushed gasp as he pulled her against him.

“*Nenaglyadnaya*,” he murmured, their foreheads touching and voice reverent. He held her by the waist, by the hand; two people in the midst of a dance. He swayed her gently, a simple rocking reminiscent of the way Shane held him. “My most beautiful.”

“Ilya,” Shane sighed. Their noses brushed together. Her hand was wrapped around his bicep. “You mean it?”

Ilya hummed his ascent, then lifted her wrist to his mouth to place a kiss over the thin blue veins and metronome pulse. “Yes. Every time I see you. Every time I think of you.” He opened his eyes and met hers in the deep shadow of the room. “I want to touch. Taste–.”

He licked over the spot where he had just kissed. Locked in that waltzer’s balance, he moved her further into the room; slow wide circles until they were centered. Until the streetlights caught her across the shoulders and waist, a chemically color otherwise but, on her, pure shining copper.

“I want to get on my knees,” Ilya continued. He dropped her hand, slid his own over the curve of her waist and he lowered himself to the floor. “Like I am young, in a cathedral.”

On his knees, he held her hips. On his knees, he tipped his head back to gaze up at her. Eyes shining with lust, with longing. Her hair falling down her shoulders and back like a veil. Tipping forward, Ilya rested his face against her stomach, kissing worshipful over the fabric that separated him from miles of creamy, warm skin.

“This is what it feels like,” Ilya smiled. “To be blessed. To know it. To be happy knowing.”

“You make me sound like a saint.” Shane touched his head delicately, face a mix of astonishment and love.

So much love.

Ilya felt it radiating through his limbs. “You are a *goddess*.”

He lowered his mouth to the clasp of her trousers, sliding the tabs free with his teeth, then pulled down the zipper. He grinned madly when they puddled at her feet, when he could see the full length of her legs. He ran a hand down the backs of them, then pressed his mouth to the core of her.

“*Ilya*.” Her nails scratched his scalp as she clutched his hair.

He slid his tongue up the center seam, then pulled back. “Let me have you.”

She shuddered under his touch. “*Please*. Have me.” She wobbled as she stepped out of her trousers, wobbled a little further as Ilya folded them without question. “Fuck, you’re serious.”

“I am devotee.” Ilya’s fingers slid over the strap of her heel. “Very serious tasks.” He worked one shoe, then the other off, setting them side by side next to her trousers. He slipped a finger under the leg opening of the bodysuit she wore. “This. This stays on.”

“Don’t ruin it,” she replied breathlessly, head already lolling. “There are snaps. I wanna keep it.”

“*Konechno*, sweetheart. Will be perfect.”

He put his mouth back on her, satisfaction thrumming through his nerves. The wired sensation in his head began to abate as he felt her plumping up. Slowly, but surely. He licked over her. He pressed his nose to her navel. His fingers kneaded at her ass and thighs, her skin shivering as the sensitivity began living in her system.

“Oh god. Ilya, baby, please—.” Shane’s head dropped back in a whine. “Bed. Can’t stay up.”

Ilya pulled off, a bit reluctantly. He rose, kicking out of his shoes and stripping off his shirt. Her hands went to his waistband, tugging him backwards to the bed. She smiled, loose and barefoot, shoving them down over his hips. She flopped back onto the comforter, legs spread and hands dropping over her head. Ilya rid himself of his boxer briefs, the last stitch of fabric on him, and crawled onto the bed. He pushed her up towards the headboard.

“Snaps?” Ilya asked.

“Between my legs.” Shane directed. She spread them further.

He reached between them, finding and undoing the closures. He pushed the fabric up, revealing her cock, starting to leak against her stomach. “Clever.” He kissed her thoroughly –

messy, wet, and open-mouthed – and pulled away with a slick noise. “I want to suck you.”

“Yes,” Shane panted.

“I want you to swallow you.”

“Fuck, baby.” Shane arched against him. “F-Finger me too. Wan’you in me.”

Ilya didn’t need telling twice. He slid down the bed, settling on his stomach between her thighs.

He was woozy from lack of air. But Shane was grinding down on his face, her hips rolling her deeper onto her tongue. Ilya didn’t want to come up for air. He didn’t want to stop her. He didn’t want to pull off. Her stomach tensed in that tell-tale way – muscles trembling and jumping as her pleasure built.

“Ilya, Ilya, I–.” Shane threw her head back in a whine. “Need you. Need you in me.” Her thighs tightened around his head. “Oh my god, oh my god fuck, fuck–.”

She broke over his tongue and Ilya sucked her through it, the same swallowing, swirling attention as the peak dropped away and oversensitivity began to set in.

Ilya pulled away, chest heaving. He wiped his mouth. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes.” She stared up at him through her lashes, lids heavy with exhaustion. “Make me come twice.”

“Anything.” He kissed between her tits; a dotted line up her sternum to the hollow of her neck. He regretted pulling away, even for the sake of the travel-sized lube and a condom in his duffle bag. She welcomed him back with eager hands, wide open thighs, and the rosy flush of debauchery.

She grabbed his wrist. “Bare. Paint me.”

Ilya swore intelligibly, then nodded frantically. It was too easy to comply.

Two fingers were lubed up. Their pads were pressed against her hole, circling and pressing until she gave way, letting the first in to the first knuckle. Ilya’s fingers are calloused, precise, twisting and scissoring inside of her until she took three of his thick fingers with ease. She keens as he pulls out, his hand already setting to lubing up his length.

“Yes?”

Shane nodded. “Yes.”

He braces a hand next to her head, fingers gripping the comforter. His head spun as he pressed in, sinking deeper into her tightness, her heat. She gripped him around the neck, the only anchor as he shivered and groaned. His lips part instinctively, eyes fluttering as he pulled out and thrust in again. Shane stuck her thumb into his mouth, stretching the corner of his mouth. Ilya sucked hard on it. His eyes fell shut, heat overwhelming him.

“God, fuck, you’re deep,” Shane groaned. “You stretch me so right.”

Ilya nodded, bleary-eyed and still hooked on her hand.

She held his gaze, her own so dark it was nearly black. “Fuck. Me. Ilya.”

He wasted no time. He set a rhythm, heavy and deep, a continual roll of his hips against her. She cried out as his cock found her prostate, driving into it over and over. Ilya’s head went foggier and foggier, until all he could focus on was her vice-like heat, and the clench of her thighs around his waist, and her keening, overwhelmed noise.

“C-come in me,” Shane moaned into his mouth. Her fingers danced over his ribs. Her legs hooked tighter around his waist, eyes gazing between them to watch Ilya fuck into her. “B-Between my legs. Make a m-mess.”

“Fuck, Shane.” Ilya could feel his orgasm twisting in his abdomen. Tightening down, pulling between his hipbones, his head hot and hazy with desire.

He collapsed forward, still buried between her legs, and latched onto her nipple. He loved having her in his mouth, loved sucking on her chest like his life depended on it. The angle was awkward. His neck would ache in the morning. His crucifix pendant swung against her stomach as he thrust, and thrust, and thrust.

Until the tension snapped.

Until heat flooded his body.

Until went cross-eyed and coated her insides.

Eventually Ilya roused enough to pull out, to drop like a stone onto the mattress next to her. Shane didn’t let him get very far, pulling him close and petting his head as he descended from the burst of climax to the afterglow. The lace bodysuit was jostled on her, flecked with spit and pre-come, strap falling off her shoulders. Ilya kissed her ribs, her stomach, rubbed his hand over the curve of her hipbones.

“I may never recover,” Ilya mumbled against the pillow that was Shane’s abdomen. “If I lose game tomorrow, is your fault, Hollander.”

“Sure, sure, Rozy. Keep telling yourself that.” Shane yawned and shifted underneath him. Then: “Oh damn it.”

“What is it?” Ilya was expecting something he had heard before – the sheets are dirty, they were all sweaty, they should really brush their teeth or clean up or roll away from the wet spot.

Instead: “My bag is at another hotel.” She shifted, making to get up. Ilya stopped her with a strong arm and a strong grumble. “I need to text Svetlana, Ilya, it’s in her room–.”

“She can bring tomorrow. I will text her,” Ilya said, pulling her back down. “You can use my things, wear my clothes.” He kissed both her cheeks, the tip of her nose, then nuzzled

shamelessly into her neck. "I lay you out like you are saint. Consider it offering."

Shane huffed a contented laugh, arms draped around his shoulders. "Do saints get offerings?"

Ilya nodded. "Yes. The best ones." He turned his head to kiss her ribs. "You would look good in the gold."

"If you say so." Her sleepy hum rolled through him like distant thunder. "What would I be a saint of?"

"Mmm." Ilya thought. "Patron saint of real estate, hockey stats, and freckles." His eyelids grew heavier and heavier. "I am patron saint of stupid Canadian wolf birds, or hangovers."

Shane hummed herself, sounding unconvinced. As Ilya slipped further into drowsiness, spurned further by Shane's fingers in his sweaty hair, he heard her speak quietly. "Ilya Rozanov. Patron saint of healing wounds and good hearts."

Marley

Roz, brother. You're killing me.

Killing with what?
You're fucking kidding me right?

??????
Fucking Florida! You saw the pictures didn't you? You and that girl leaving the club?

Yes, I saw them. What about it?
She's hot as fuck and you looked very cozy.

Marley, what are you asking?
Fine. Are you hitting that?

Yes, I am. Regularly.
Jesus. For how long?

Long time. Remember my Montreal girl?
Holy fucking shit, Roz. Jane?

She is now my Ottawa girlfriend. Moved in.
Goddamn. Took you long enough.

Beautiful, isn't she?

Yeah The fuck is she doing with your ass?

I could joke, but I don't know. She is too good for me.
Don't need two eyes to see that. When's the wedding?

Who says you are invited?
Roz. Dude. Come on.

Maybe next summer. Watch your mail. I still have to ask.

February 2021

Ilya wrapped her hands around the coffee mug, holding them steady as he dropped a kiss on her forehead. Shane missed him when he pulled away. She curled further into the corner of the couch, blanket over her legs, and watched him walk away to fix his own, Any trotting faithfully beside.

"Thank you," Shane said, voice raspy from disuse.

Ilya glanced over his shoulder, smile tired. "You are very welcome." He stretched his arms and scratched the back of his head. "Anya and I will join you?"

"Please." She wanted him close, needed him close. Never mind that they had just spent the last week wrapped around one another in a hotel room in Florida. In their own home, guards down, it was different.

In their home, Shane could flip through the photos Rose had sent her late the night before from the comfort of her own couch. She could white-knuckle her coffee and let emotions cascade over her until they ran out of her system. If all else failed, she could toss the phone away and lean heavily into Ilya's side, letting his gravity pull her safely out of her own head again.

While he shuffled about in the kitchen, cooing at Anya, Shane reopened her phone. To the text chain that had woken her up the night before and the self-same photos contained within it.

The cushion next to her sank as Ilya sat down. He craned his neck. "What are those?"

"Pictures. Of us," Shane replied quietly. "The paps got us in Florida. Rose sent them, so we wouldn't get blind-sided."

"Kind of her," Ilya mumbled between sips.

"She's a good friend."

Ilya hummed, not sounding convinced. He slouched down on the cushions until he could rest his head on her shoulder. One arm was slung over her bent legs, rubbing her calf through the blanket. The other was crooked to keep his coffee balanced, Anya creeping closer and closer to his hip.

“Are you okay with the pictures?”

Shane nodded once. “Yeah.”

“You do not look okay, *solnyshka*.”

“I am, really. I promise.” Shane sucked in a deep breath, held it, then let it out to the count of seven. “They didn’t figure out who I am. No one caught it. No one knows.”

“Of course not.” Ilya kissed her shoulder. “No one is as smart as you think, Shane. Most of them look once, then don’t look again.” He squeezed her thigh reassuringly. “I could say your name into a microphone, and they still would not believe it.”

“That feels risky,” Shane said, eyes still on her phone screen. “You’d have to say it like Svetlana. Confuse them more.”

“If you like.” Ilya nudged her gently, stealing her attention before it sank too far away and into the phone. “Shane, what is it? Talk, please?”

She held her phone – and the photos – out for Ilya to see. “We look–. We look *good*, Ilya.”

Ilya hummed his agreement, taking the phone with a long drink from his cup. He flicked lazily through each picture, one by one. Taking his time, lingering, zooming in on the ones he liked best.

Them, walking down the sidewalk away from the club, the breeze blowing her hair away from her face. Them, waiting on their ride share to pull up, Ilya’s arm slung around her shoulders and Shane’s own arms tight around his ribs; fitted into the curves and edges of one another like matched puzzle pieces. Between Ilya’s dark jeans and unbuttoned shirt, and Shane’s gold adornment and black lace, they looked like the celebrities they were. Had been, in Shane’s case.

Young. Moneyed. Sexy.

Them, at the hotel pool, Shane in a boring black one piece and tucked into the shade with a book, sunglasses pushed into her hair; Ilya sitting on the end of the pool lounge as they talked, his curls plastered to his head and awful floral trunks dripping wet. Them – that same them by the pool – leaned close for a kiss, Shane’s smile obvious and Ilya’s fingers lovingly touching her neck. Softer than the club photos, more familiar and sweet.

Flirty. Happy. Comfortable.

All alone on the couch, Shane had let her mind drift back to the cottage, the dock, the lake. She let her mind imagine the pair of them only a few years from then, still close just like that,

but with a baby or a toddler between them. It had stirred something molten and sweet in her stomach, tinged with a new kind of longing.

To the press, she was just some girl. Ilya Rozanov's latest girl, the first after a long dry spell. They would make up stories about her – they already were spinning their wheels, if Rose's texts were to be believed. She was a model. She was an up-and-coming actress. She was a call-girl he had hired for cover. Her name was Amelie, Lily, Grace, Holly.

She was everyone. She was no one. She was herself, in plain sight, and they still couldn't see.

A fresh fire lit itself in the center of her chest. A wave of smugness washed over her. She'd gone almost a whole weekend by Ilya's side in public as herself, and no one hadn't noticed. That nebulous, terrifying *they* that lived in the back of her head hadn't seen, hadn't known, or were just too stupid to look closer than her boobs and legs.

Shane leaned closer, propping her cheek on Ilya's bed-rumpled curls. "We look *really* good, don't we?"

Ilya made a faint sound of disagreement around a mouthful of coffee. "No, *solnyshka*. You look beautiful. *Nenaglyadnaya*." Ilya tipped his head back just enough to kiss the underside of her jaw. The faint dampness of a lick over her pulse point. "I am just me."

"You're pretty handsome too, Ilya."

"Only because I am standing next to you."

Shane frowned. "That's not true."

"It is true." Ilya turned and pulled himself up, their faces even. Tipping close, their noses brushed together.

Shane's lashes fluttered at the closeness, the warm brush of air across her cheeks as he breathed, spoke.

"They only look because of you. Don't you know that? I am no one, not really, but I have the most beautiful woman in my arms." He dropped a kiss at the corner of her mouth. "That is why they look, Shane. That is why they take pictures. They wonder, yes? Who is she, how did he get her, does she keep him on a leash–."

Laughter bubbled out of her. Shane placed a hand over her mouth, but Ilya pulled it away. He was snickering too.

Eventually, they sobered. Shane took the phone back, finding another photograph of them, taken as they were walking from the hotel. Hand-in-hand walking to a cab, Ilya carried her bag as well as his own. He wore a baseball hat pressed down over his curls. Shane wore his sunglasses, staying perfectly in step with him. They were in their most casual clothes – joggers and a tee shirt, black leggings and a quarter-zip, sneakers for the airport.

"Do I always look that good on your arm?" she asked.

“Yes, but I am on your arm,” Ilya said quietly.

“Will I look that good in Vegas?” Shane asked quietly, like a secret with no one around to overhear. “Will you show me off in front of them all? Make the league stare and wonder, is that what you want, Ilyunia?”

Ilya’s cheeks turned a faint petal pink. His eyes went wide, adoring. “You were not kidding?”

“I wasn’t.” Shane reached up to cup his face. “I want to. I’m liking the idea more, actually.” She swiped a thumb across his cheek. “If you don’t win anything, I’ll be your trophy. Rub it all in their faces.”

“I will shout it if you let me,” Ilya said, impish sweet grin returning to its place. “I am marrying the best player in the league and she has more medals than me. Olympic gold medal, two cups, rookie of the year.” A kiss smacked against her cheek, Ilya’s eyes bright. His curls were wild, ridiculous, childlike. “Yes, I will do that. They will not know what to do. We will have so much fun watching their tiny minds burst.”

Shane snickered. “Mhmm, we will. And then, we’ll come home...” She let her voice trail off as she leaned close to his ear. “And I’ll out-skate your ass by two. Whole. Seconds.”

“Not a chance.”

“Take me to practice, Rozanov.” Shane preened. “Bood can time us.”

Ilya grinned, eyes turning hungry. “You’re on, Hollander.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

The countdown to the 2022 cup win BEGINS.

(just kidding, the whole chapter is the 2021-2022 season where the Cens go all the way, but enjoy some Ilya and Shane being obnoxiously cute along the way!)

Thank you all for reading this fic and enjoying it so thoroughly -- and for being patient with my beginner's attempts at coding text messaging and (in this chapter) a group chat... May we only ever improve, y'all ;)

xoxo, Orchid

May 2021

New Jersey had knocked them for six in four straight games. The final nail was put in the coffin at home, in Ottawa, to the tune of a crowded arena.

They had been happy enough to make it to the first round of playoffs to begin with. For the last decade, winning more than half their games in a season was a high point for the Cens. The first round of the playoffs two seasons in a row felt astronomical – to the owners, to the growing number of fans, to the team as they changed in the locker room. All of their drills, all of their line changes, all of the forced adjustments they had made since 2019 put the game in their favor; but it hadn't held.

Ilya shook the New Jersey captain's hand with an amicable nod. Sent his team off the ice with his usual rounds of *I love you* that Shane would kindly tease him about. He stepped off the rink himself, sharing a meaningful look with Wiebe as he made his way to the locker room. The Cens were doing well, but Ilya was tired of losing.

Sweat clung to the nape of his neck. His shoulders were sore. His beard was still an unfortunately manageable length. He would be glad to shave it later that night, then fall face first into the comforter bracketed by Shane and Anya, their deeply spoiled dog.

The Cens had kept up, kept pace, had come within striking distance. Still, Ilya was tired of losing.

The locker room was subdued, but not unhappy. Ilya was routinely, quietly grateful to be on a team of relentlessly hopeful people. Perhaps that was the upside to being at the bottom of the league for so long – everything else was up. He took claps on the back from Boodram and Chouinard, raised a cheer for Hayes' impressive blocking, then ducked into the shower. The

sweat was starting to itch along his back and scalp. Exhaustion was making a home in his chest alongside hunger. He wanted to be home.

Shane was waiting for him just outside the locker room door. Her hair was up in a bun at the top of her head – a new trick, courtesy of Lisa Hayes – and her hands were shoved into the pocket of yet another pilfered sweatshirt, plain black with white detailing. Her eyes flickered up to him as she leaned against the wall, pausing as she chewed a hole in her lower lip, and Ilya felt relief cascade over him. He walked straight into her arms, hardly hearing his backpack hit the floor next to their feet.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured in his ear as he stuffed his face into the curve of her neck. Juniper and cardamom lingered next to the salt on her skin – a new perfume she was trying.

Ilya breathed her in and sighed heavily. “It’s okay. It takes time.”

“I know.” She smoothed her hands over his shoulders, up into his hair the way he liked. “Four and done is a rough way to go out.”

“We underestimated them.” Ilya slung his arms around her waist. “Fatal flaw. We should not have.” He sucked in another deep breath. “Wanted to get to second round, but eh.”

Shane hummed quietly. Her hands skimmed over his shoulders and biceps, tucked underneath his arms to rub warmth over his ribs and back, and rock him gently. “I’ll still go with you. If you want.”

“Hm?” Ilya yawned. He’d fall asleep on the drive home, he was already certain.

“Vegas. This year,” Shane said. “I’ll go with you this year, if you want. I know we said second–.”

Ilya squeezed her tightly. “Shh, shh, shh, *solnyshka*.”

“Too much right now?” Shane asked, voice wavering slightly.

“No. Not too much, just not a big deal.”

“But, we had a deal.”

“Yes, for the second round. We did not make it to the second round, so unless I am nominated for something, I will not go.” Ilya exhaled and pulled up. He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Next year. Next year we will make it to the finals, and *moya lyubimaya* will come to get the MVP with me.”

Shane sighed and rolled her eyes. “Ilya, it was just a silly bet. I’ll come with you *this* year if–.”

“You can come, if you want. I would not say no, if I go, *but–*,” Ilya said evenly. “We had a bet, and I am going to win. Mark my words, Hollander.”

Shane stared at him. Her eyes had turned watery, pink around the edges and inescapably proud. "You know. I really hope you do."

"I will." Ilya bent and kissed her cheek. "You made me a promise, Hollander."

"A promise is a promise," Shane said, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Shook on it and everything."

Ilya nodded. "And I will make sure you keep it."

He loved the weight of her, the strength of her; how she was soft around the edges but could still pin him down, and put up a good fight when he did the same to her. "But not now, okay?" He buried a hand in the hair at the nape of her neck, wrecking her ponytail, and placing his mouth closer to her ear. "Now, I want to go home, and drown my sadness between my girlfriend's thighs."

Shane laughed fondly and murmured: "Just my thighs? What about my chest? Is that not good enough anymore?"

"Mmm, you are right, I should not forget them." Ilya held her closer. "New plan." His voice had a familiar teasing lilt to it. "We go home. I fix the sadness with my girlfriend's tits, then worship her thighs. The rest of you, all of you. Then midnight snacks. A perfect fix."

Shane laughed warmly, but it tapered off quickly. Ilya felt her shift, felt her breathing change, the soft sound of her throat as she swallowed. "Maybe fiancé, instead of girlfriend?"

Ilya pulled away to look her in the eye, but she wasn't looking at him. She was looking down, a hand tucked under the neckline of her stolen sweatshirt, searching for something. He watched her lift a thin chain from under the fabric, a black ring hanging like a pendant from it.

She looked up at him, face open. Her eyes were brimming with love, damp at the edges. Ilya still did not feel he deserved her. A decade in her arms, by her side, and Ilya did not feel he deserved that same love writ so large on her features. Ilya was selfish and demanding, but she loved him and teased him until those feelings gave way.

He was stubborn, snarky, sometimes angry, holding too much bitterness at the center of himself. But she loved him and, in spite of his own fears, declared that he didn't scare her, not even on his worst days.

He had kept his depression and therapist from her for a year. But she loved him, thanked him for finally telling her, and held him through the worst waves of sadness.

She loved him. Impossibly, patiently, for years even when neither of them could say the word.

She let Ilya love her the way he knew how, let him learn and try again. She loved him and Ilya devoured it. He was a glutton for it, unrepentantly. He took it into his mouth and

swallowed it back, breathed it into himself in great lung-fulls; because, no matter how long or how good, he was certain that someday it would slip through his fingertips and be gone.

Ilya's breath had stopped in his lungs as he stared at the black band hanging from that chain. Matte on the outside, shining golden where it would touch his skin. More than the metal it was made of. More than what it meant if he wore it.

Shane – *his* Shane – standing in front of him with a question on her tongue and the weight of a lifetime of promises dangling from her fingertips. When Ilya searched her face, he expected apprehension, tension. Once more, she surprised him. All he could see was love. Overflowing, steady, sweet and sweetly-earthbound love.

"Shane," he said, breathless. "What is this?"

Shane turned the chain, the ring's golden interior catching the artificial light of the hallway. She leaned close, her words only for him. "Ilya, will you marry me? No more wasting time?"

"No," Ilya inhaled, shaky and watery. "Yes."

Shane's brows knit together in confusion. Ilya knew he probably shouldn't, but he laughed. He couldn't help it. Tears pricked the corner of his eyes, a stray few trickled out onto his cheeks as he cupped Shane's face in his hands.

"No, no more wasting time," Ilya said, slow and clear. His heart was racing, he was nearly out of breath. "Yes, I will marry you."

He kissed her solidly, melting into it when her tongue flicked against his. They pulled away with an audible pop, giggling at it. Just the two of them.

"Yes." He kissed her cheek. "Yes." He kissed her nose. "Yes, *moya luna*." He kissed her again on the mouth, feeling her melt against him.

This time, when he pulled back, her doe-eyes had a gleam of mischief. "Luna?" She asked. "I'm the moon?"

"*Moya luna*," Ilya repeated slowly. "*My moon*." He reached around her neck to undo the clasp of the chain. "All the light, in the dark. The only way I find my way home when I cannot see."

"*Ilya*." Shane stared at him, tears threatening to spill over onto her cheeks. She cupped her hands for the pendant and chain. She watched as Ilya slid the ring from it, setting it gently in her palm before clipping the chain back around her neck.

She took his hand in hers, finding the right finger to slip it onto. The metal was warm from resting against her skin, under her sweatshirt.

Ilya raised his hand to his lips, kissing the ring, then kissing the palm of her hand. "*Ya tebya lyubyu, moya solnyshka. Moya luna*."

She wiped away tears with her sleeve, beaming at him. "*Ya tozhe, Ilyunia. I love you*."

They held hands walking to the car. Ilya carried her from the car into their house. Shane pressed him down into their soft bedding and wiped away every bad thought he had ever had. He was a very lucky man.

September 2021

Worst Logo Winners

Question for the chat

Shoot.

Go for it.

What's up?

I know I do not have to ask, but S wants me to because it is the nice thing to do.

She makes you a better, more considerate person, Roz

Imagine that.

She says it is very hard work and she does not mind more appreciation

what's her question, Roz?

She wants to know if she can come to practice some times. Be out of the house, maybe skate, touch ice again

Roz

Cap.

She's kidding right?

Does she really think we're going to say no?

"No Shane Hollander can't play with us" seriously???

Roz. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes

Jesus Christ yes, tell her yes

Holy shit yes. Come yell plays at us from the stands, Hollander

She has been watching the texts. She says thank you and see you soon :)

Cold air whipped across Shane's cheeks as she turned the back curve of the rink. She pushed faster into the straight away, gliding past the empty team benches and penalty boxes. She was just starting to break a sweat under her pullover, a satisfied warmth building in her legs. She exhaled and leaned sharply into the next turn. She had missed this. She hadn't realized just how much.

Practices had started up again in August, gearing up slowly after a long summer. Ilya had invited her for the first few days, but Shane had put him off. The team needed to get back in sync. There were rookies and new players to bring into the fold. They didn't need a stranger lurking in the periphery, and Ilya needed to focus on his responsibilities more than on watching out for her.

Not that she needed watching out. She could take care of herself, and he knew that as well as anyone. But Ilya still couldn't manage to keep down the latent protective awareness in his brain whenever she was around.

Preseason, she had promised when he pouted at her. *Get some ice time at preseason.*

Ilya had gotten ice time. Shane had gotten in the car with him that morning. He insisted on going to the gym first, leaving her to her skates and her own devices, but would join her afterwards. They had an hour and a half before the rest of the team started kitting up, warming up for their own time. She'd excuse herself to the box or a stationary bike, maybe hole up with the book she was slowly picking her way through. It wasn't interesting, but it had been a birthday present, so she felt obligated to give it a good college try.

For now, however, the whole of the ice was hers. Quiet, cool and dry, as she turned loops and laced figure eights through the surface. Easier than breathing.

She'd kept up her skills over the years, not wanting to give up the one thing she'd been exceptional at. It had been an adjustment. Her center of gravity had changed. She was lighter, nimbler without pads, gloves, and a helmet. She'd spent a few months studying videos of figure skaters, testing out simple moves on yoga mats then in skates, just for the sake of

learning something new. Keeping her brain busy where she might otherwise fall down a fresh rabbit hole of all the things she couldn't do anymore.

It was easy to do, Shane thought as she shifted her weight onto the outside edge. She pulled a leg up off the ice, leaning into a wide turn. It was easier to stop now.

She wobbled and dropped the leg, switching to more familiar crossovers. She put herself back in the direction of center ice, lazily tracing the circle before dropping into a deep lunge just to feel the stretch along the top of her thigh.

"Did you not do enough yoga over the summer?" Ilya called from behind her. "You have to do it on the ice now?"

Shane pulled up and pivoted, ponytail smacking her ear. "I do yoga every morning."

"I know." He skated closer, pink in the cheeks from his run. A baseball hat turned backwards mashed down his curls and the sweatshirt he wore wasn't the same as the one he had worn in the car. "Is the opposite of hot yoga ice yoga?"

"Probably." Shane snickered. "What's the difference between ice yoga and insane figure skating moves?"

"I don't know."

"I don't either." She cleared her throat and turned a circle around him. "Want time for yourself?"

Ilya shook his head. "No. I don't need it." Shane arched a brow, skeptical, and he smirked. "Did you think I got time for myself and invited you?"

"Sort of. I didn't want to assume."

"Assume." He reached out a hand, holding her by the elbow and letting her momentum turn him with her. "The time is for you, because you asked."

"Oh."

"You never ask me for anything," Ilya said. "When you do, it feels like a miracle, and I have no choice. I have to do it."

Shane slowed herself and pulled her arm from his grasp. "Okay, then." She held out a hand to him. "Skate with me?"

Ilya took her hand and squeezed, then pushed off. "Look at us." Ilya chuckled, then kissed her cheek. "Like a date in a silly movie, yes?"

"I suppose," Shane mused, watching closely to stay in sync with Ilya's strides. "We don't do those a lot, do we?"

"No, but it's okay," Ilya answered. "We are private. Peace is nice after the season."

“But, would you like to?” Shane asked. She caught Ilya’s eye, turning to skate backwards, their arms stretched between them.

“Would *you* like to?” Ilya pressed.

Shane nodded. “I want to go out to dinner with you. Hold hands on the table. Make eyes at each other like we’re sixteen. All that shit.”

Ilya snorted. His cheeks were taking on soft color, giving him a buoyant boyish look that made her knees wobble. “All that shit. All that shit that makes me love you more. You know that, yes?”

“You’re a sap.” Shane blushed.

“I am marrying the love of my life. Of course I am a fucking sap!” Without releasing her hand, Ilya skated forward, pulled her close, and spun them in an easy circle.

Shane tipped her head back and laughed. Hair fell in her face. The ice scratched under the blades of her skates. Ilya’s laughter rumbled under her hand, pressed to his chest. “How’s this Thursday?”

“Oh, do we make reservations?” Ilya teased.

“For the place I want, yes, I’ll have to.”

“So prepared . Already thought of the place.” He kissed her cheek. “I’m free, *moya lyubimaya*. Make all your plans.”

“I will. It’s what I’m best at.”

“And wear that dress from my birthday?”

“Keep making requests like that and I might call the whole thing off.” Shane unlinked their fingers and skated a bit away. “Then you’ll have to wait until Christmas break to see what I bought with the WAGs last weekend.”

Ilya paused. “At the lunch thing?”

“Mhmm.” Shane nodded. “We had lunch. And wine. And Selena showed me her favorite online store. And, well.” She spun and glanced back at him. “Let’s just say I know how they’ve ended up with three kids.”

“You—.” Ilya seemed to short circuit, then understanding dawned on his face. His smile went crooked, gaze honey-dark, and the rest of him looking criminally good. “Shane.”

“You’ll behave then?” Shane smirked.

“Oh, I will. I will be the best.” Ilya sped up to meet her. “But, now, I want to skate a lap then kiss you in the bathrooms.” He caught her hands in his. “Like we are sixteen and irresponsible, yes?”

November 2021

“Okay, c’mon. *Seriously?*”

Ilya’s attention pulled to the side, drawn by the exasperated sound of the rookie’s voice. The kid had just turned twenty the week before, signed right after the post-season came to an end. Despite being friendly and young, he seemed to be suffering under the delusion that he knew everything, didn’t need anyone else’s advice, and didn’t have any skills to improve on.

“What’s going on?” Troy Barrett leaned over the wall, his eyes following Ilya’s to the far side of the ice. Where Shane stood opposite the kid from Dalhousie in her skates with her arms crossed.

“What do *you* know? I mean, *actually.*”

“Quite a lot actually.”

Troy made a noise. “Gonna do something about that, cap?”

Ilya shook his head. “I would like to, but she would have my head.”

He turned, leaning the opposite way on the wall. The best way to help himself help Shane would be to put his back to the whole interaction. Watching it further would only stoke the protective anger stirring in his guts. Besides, Barrett was watching, keeping an eye on all of them while he recuperated from minor wrist surgery. He wouldn’t be back in play for another two weeks, but he vowed not to miss a single practice. Even if it only ended up being him and Shane, riding the pine and critiquing their scrimmages.

Troy sucked in a breath, then clicked his tongue. “Holly’s never really fought anyone. Has she?”

“I remember only once, but gloves did not drop,” Ilya replied. “Why? Is the rookie about to get cold-cocked?”

Troy snorted. “You sound like an old-school boxing coach.” He shook his head. “Not yet, but you know Holly. She’s got that look on her face, like she could cut him in half.”

“Oh.” Ilya knew exactly the look. He savored the many moments it was not directed at him. “Then he is fucked.”

“Yup.”

“Just because you’re dating Rozanov doesn’t mean *shit*, lady.”

Troy and Ilya stared at one another. There was a funny sort of glee on Troy’s face, like he was trying not to laugh. Ilya took it as a good sign. “Ooo-hoo. Arden better watch his mouth. Eric’s starting to circle.”

Ilya glanced back over his shoulder.

“I’m really supposed to be taking advice from someone in *figure skates*–.”

“I suggest you stop before you say something you’ll regret later,” Shane interrupted, calm as ever. “I played for a long time. I played before Ilya and I met, and we played together too. I know what I’m talking about.” She pushed backwards on her skates, putting ample space between them, then shrugged. “But, you know, take it or leave it, rook.”

Arden sneered at her, but it didn’t do the damage he was expecting. “Really?”

Shane tucked her hands into her jacket pocket. “Yeah, no harm if you don’t.”

“No I meant about playing Rozanov.”

“What? Don’t believe me?” Shane tipped her head to the side – to anyone else, a clear and dangerous challenge. A grim sort of smile pulled at her mouth, and Ilya felt his stomach flip. “Ask him yourself, Arden. I dare you.”

Shane didn’t give Colton Arden the chance to get in another word edge wise. She turned and skated around him with the grace of a dancer and that signature speed Ilya so loved. She wove through the rest of the Centaurs, brushing off their concerns as she did a wide half-lap back to the benches.

She came to rest at the gate to the benches, the locker room. “Hi Troy,” she said brightly, resting a hand on Ilya’s arm. “Why does Roz look like he’s going to commit a murder?”

“Funny you should ask,” Troy answered with a giddy trickster grin. “That chucklefuck giving you a hard time, Holly?”

“Oh nothing I can’t handle myself.” She squeezed Ilya’s wrist, then flipped her ponytail. Ridiculous, dramatic, a bald-faced joke.

“Troy and I were trying to remember if you have ever dropped gloves, Hollander,” Ilya cut in. “I couldn’t remember a time. Neither could he. Can you?”

“A few times, but only two or three were memorable,” Shane said. She snickered at the shock on their faces. “What? I’m just supposed to let some asshole get away with saying something racist about me and my mom? C’mon, guys.”

“When was *that*?” Troy blurted out.

“High school. I think I was sixteen or so?”

“OHL?”

“Yep.” Shane scuffed her blade against the ice. “Same guy from Kingston or wherever two games in a row. First at me, then mom.”

Ilya scoffed. “Anyone who talks shit about Yuna deserves to be punched.”

“And that’s why you’re her favorite,” Shane laughed.

“And the third time?” Troy asked.

Shane laughed harder. “Scott Hunter, a million years ago. Ilya was so mad—.”

“I was not mad! I was curious!” Ilya protested. “You would not tell me what he said to you to make you shout like that!”

“Oh please, it was harmless.” Shane brushed him away easily, pink-cheeked from laughing.

“Fine, but as captain you will tell me now,” Ilya pivoted. “What did Arden say to you?”

“Oh you know, the usual.” Shane rolled her eyes. “I don’t know what I’m talking about. That I can’t pretend I know everything just because I’m marrying the captain. That sort of nineteen year old bullshit.”

Troy exhaled. “Thank fuck I don’t ever have to go back there.”

Shane nodded. “Couldn’t pay me to.”

“Idiot,” Ilya mumbled. He looked her up and down. She seemed fine. “Do you want me to say anything?”

Shane shook her head. “Not worth your time. I told him I played and I even played with you, but if he didn’t believe me to ask you himself. Simple.”

“The way he’s looking over here, I think he will,” Troy added.

“Oh, but after the next drill,” Shane lobbed back, then shoved Ilya hard in the shoulder. “Stop glaring.”

Ilya shot her an unimpressed look. “I am the captain and he’s an idiot, *solnyshka*. He should know better, or his captain should remind him.”

“He’s nineteen and thinks he’s a genius. You were the exact same way, Rozanov— don’t give me that look. You were.”

Ilya sighed and relented. “Okay, but *when* he comes asking, what do you want me to do then?”

“If he asks...” Shane leaned against the wall, thinking for a long moment. “If he asks, tell him the truth.”

Ilya squinted at her. “You are sure?”

“Very.”

“Bold of you, Holly,” Troy added. “What’s the strat?”

“No strat, just probability.” Shane shrugged. “Either he thinks your fucking with him or lying to him, pretending Shane Hollander’s a girl, *or—*” Shane met Ilya’s eyes. “Or, that kid’s a lot smarter than he’s acting, which you can work with that.”

Troy hummed. “Which one would you put money on?”

“Honestly? A bit of both. He won’t believe you, but I *do* think he’s a heck of a lot smarter than whatever this showboating is,” Shane said. “It might fly in Nova Scotia, but it’s not going to in Ottawa. He needs to know he’s got nothing to prove to us, then he’ll simmer down.”

“So.” Ilya held her gaze for a long moment. “I can fuck with him? I have your permission.”

Shane nodded, shoving the gate open and stepping up. “To make a point. Sure, captain.”

Ilya grinned wickedly. Looping an arm around her waist, he tugged her down into a briefly filthy kiss before pulling away with a cartoonish pop. “You’re the best when you’re not being boring, Hollander.”

“I thought I was boring all the time?” Shane shoved him away, then yelled after him. “Run the new formation with teh second line again! Passing was sloppy!”

From the ice, the other players raised their hands or gave mock salutes to accompany their efficient and loud *ma’am yes ma’am*’s. It never failed to make Shane laugh. Haas had started it, and the players in the know had picked it up swiftly. Now, nearly a whole regular season in, the whole team was using it – even those of them who had no clue who it was they all called *Holly*.

They run the new formation three times. Once with the second line, twice with the first, switching to get a feel for supporting it and defending against it should another team catch wise. Wiebe called for a break, summoning the goalies for another drill, and Ilya skated off for water. Shane had rushed off to answer a phone call, leaving Troy to chirp at them for anything he could find.

“Hey, cap.” Arden, the rookie, slipped up next to him. “Can I ask you something?”

Ilya thanked God for having given him a face that could keep emotions off of the surface. “Okay.”

“Did you—” The kid’s face was smug, a little too smug. “*Really* play with your girlfriend?”

Ilya felt the team all tune in. He could have sworn Troy and Dykstra leaned in. Ilya just nodded. “Yes. We did, but mostly against each other. For years.”

Arden's face was a riot of confusion, disappointment, and vague frustration. "No, you didn't."

"Yes, we did. It was how we met." Ilya grinned at him. "What? You do not trust the best player in the league?"

"Roz." Arden rolled his eyes. "Your girl isn't the best player in the league. *You* are."

Ilya swabbed a hand over his face, considering. Then, he called over his shoulder. "Barrett?"

Troy was waiting. "What's up, cap?"

"Answer, yes or no." Ilya turned back to him, water bottle in hand. "Is my fiance the best player in the league?"

Arden tried to push in – "She doesn't even–."

But Troy was just louder. "Yes. No question about it."

"Ah, I see. Well." Ilya jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Rookie here had a question about it."

Haas, Chouinard, Boodram, Dillon, and Dykstra had all caught on. The others were either back on the ice or watching curiously at where this odd performance would go.

Dykstra looked Arden over like he was worried for him. "Seriously?"

"What?" Arden frowned at them, but there was no heat at it. Only worry.

"Holly spent all that time giving you advice and you *didn't listen*?" Dillon stared at him like he had five heads. "Damn."

"Kid." Troy leaned in from the second bench, sounding at once comforting and admonishing. It was a skill Ilya had only recently begun to appreciate in him – and what it could do for getting under other team's skins. "If Shane fucking Hollander is giving you advice, I wouldn't be fucking rolling my eyes at it if I were you."

Arden's eyes go to each of them in turn, confusion deepening as he found no sign of joking. "Shane Hollander?"

A quiet murmur of agreement and a cluster of nods between squirts of water into their mouths.

"Shane motherfucking Hollander?" Arden gaped. "Roz's girlfriend is *Shane Hollander*?"

Ilya grinned broadly, spreading his arms like an emperor at the podium. "I am just that good."

"No fucking way." Arden shook his head, looking hurt "You must think I'm dumber than rocks."

“We don’t have to think it, kid. You just proved it.” Boodram moved forward, clappin a heavy hand down on Arden’s shoulder. “Now, do us all a favor, and prove us the fuck wrong.” Then he pointed a finger in his face, the last word: “And always fuckin’ listen to Holly.”

A small chorus rose up – *Always listen to Holly!* – and Ilya met Arden’s eyes again. There could have been anger there, betrayal, hurt at being the butt of a not-quite-joke. He found something altogether different there. A deep, creased-brow thoughtfulness. The first threads of curiosity, consideration.

“Is she really?” Adren asked him quietly in the locker room, over an hour later.

Ilya tugged his tee shirt over his head, then fixed the twenty-year old with an uncompromising stare. “She is.”

His eyes went wide. “Wow. Wait—. Oh.”

“She gave us permission to tell you. So we are clear.” Ilya hoisted his bag onto his shoulder. “It is not ‘she *was* the best’, okay? She still *is* the best.”

“Even better than you?” Arden offered with a weak, dazed grin.

Ilya huffed a laugh. “I was the first draft pick, but compared to her, I am always second best.” He ruffled the kid’s hair as he passed him for the door. “Listen to her and maybe you’ll be the best in the world someday.”

January 2022

Ilya leaned into her space, proud smile on his lips. “I did not know you liked to lose so much, *moya luna*.”

“Lose?” Shane pursed her lips. “What are you *talking about*, we won tonight.”

The Centaurs had started the season strong. Wins against fierce opponents that mattered. The scant few losses coming from more evenly matched games where a coin toss was the predictor possible. That afternoon’s game was no different — blow out four to nil against the Voyageurs that left Ottawa screaming to the rafters and Montreal baffled on the bench. Shane had no true ill will against her former teammates, but god did it feel good to win.

The team trip to Monk’s wasn’t just tradition on days like that one, but an imperative. Necessary. A community event.

“I am not talking about sending Montreal home crying, *solnyshka*, I am talking about our bet.” He draped an arm over the back of her chair, leaning in close enough to rest his chin on her shoulder. “About taking my girl to Las Vegas.”

His tongue curled around each vowel, hissing the s’s like a serpent, on purpose. Shane lifted her ginger ale to her lips to hold back her grin a little bit longer. “Oh? That old thing?”

“Mmm, not old. Only a year.” Ilya sipped his beer. “If you keep helping at practices, Shane, you will lose. You know that?”

“Lose?” Shane feigned confusion. “I don’t *lose*, Ilya.”

“If we make it to the playoffs, you will lose,” he insisted.

Shane hummed and shook her head. “No. I won’t lose. I never lose. No one said anything about losing but you, Ilyunia.”

Ilya scoffed and set his beer down. He hadn’t caught on to her yet, a rarity after so many years together. Shane was enjoying every minute of it. “Shane, did you forget how bets work?”

“Nope.” She took another sip.

“Then why—?”

Shane turned in her seat and, without warning, pressed two fingers to Ilya’s mouth, cutting off whatever argument was brewing. He stared at her, gaze flickering down to her wrist and back up.

“Ilya,” Shane started voice pitched low. “I am not losing. I can’t lose.” She pulled her hand down and leaned close. “What is losing? How am I losing when, at the end of the season, I get to buy something gorgeous on your dime, let our friends doll me up, and let my very handsome future husband show me off like I’m the fucking Stanley Cup?”

Ilya’s eyes were blown wide, the pupils a bit larger than usual. He seemed to be fighting the urge to let his jaw hang open like a fish, fighting a baser instinct to grab her, lay her out, and devour her.

Shane liked that look. Liked it more now that she could coax out of him whenever, wherever she liked. She settled back against her chair with her drink, shaking her hair own.

“*Pizdets*.” He exhaled sharply, focus coming back to him. He set his beer on the table, that hand coming to rest on her knee. “*Chto ty khochesh?*”

A very basic *what do you want* leveled her way.

Shane stretched against where his arm lay, acting like there wasn’t a care in her head. That she couldn’t feel the subtle buzz of a camera pointed her way. That she wasn’t worried about where those pictures would end up or who would see them or what they would think or if they would get her name right.

Shane tipped her head towards his. “*Ya khochu tebya.*” She kissed his nose. Sweet and innocent. “Take me home?”

“I’ll pay the tab.” Ilya cleared his throat. “You will drive?”

“Of course,” she smiled sweetly. “After we say goodbye to our friends, baby.”

Ilya’s cursing under his breath would have sent a nun into a coma. Shane watched him go, then gathered their few things to leave. They wouldn’t be able to play it off in front of the team, their partners, not anymore. Shane didn’t mind. Not anymore. Not in a year.

March 2022

Shane is wearing his name and number in the airport. Not his jersey or anything so obvious, but a sweatshirt she bought herself. Black with crimson red stripes on the upper arm, the Centaur’s logo small on the front, and a *Rozanov 81* tucked up under the hood on the back.

Her legs crossed in a well fitting pair of jeans, reading pushed up her nose, and large gold hoops swinging as she pours over plays on her tablet. She looked like she meant business; like she was part of the coaching staff.

She was busy. Absorbed, leaning against his shoulder as they waited for the boarding call. The berry red stain on her lips was tempting but Ilya dared not disturb her. He wouldn’t dream of breaking her concentration; the outcome of their next game might depend on it.

“Hey.” Shane nudged him in the ribs. She propped the tablet up for him to see the screen better. “Can you watch number sixteen?”

Ilya hummed a note of agreement. “For Seattle?”

“Yes.”

“What am I watching for?”

Shane shook her head. “Just watch him and tell me what you see.”

Ilya agreed and she started the video. He watched the clip until she paused it. He motioned for her to run it back a second time, following the player in question until she stopped it again. “When was this from?”

“Last night’s game against Arizona,” she answered precisely.

Since the start of the year, Wiebe had adopted Shane as unofficial coach; even going so far as to get her a lanyard and intern's badge to prove he was serious. She had resisted at first, so very careful not to overstep, not to be selfish where the team was concerned.

Ilya hadn't been the one to talk her into it, neither had her parents. The team had staged an ambush disguised as another barbecue at the Boodram's. Shane hadn't been able to say no to that ringing, emphatic endorsement. Ilya was glad she hadn't. He had wanted her so badly to say yes.

Only in private – under their bed-covers in hushed tones before sleeping – had Shane divulged to Ilya how happy she was to say yes. She just hadn't wanted to be selfish. Ilya wished dearly she would be *more* selfish.

"Guarding his ribs, or hip," Ilya replied slowly. He ran the video back, still paused, to one particular frame. "Here. He is leaning to the right and forward. Sort of tilted, protective."

"I thought so too." Shane tapped the play button, watching the rest of the clip play to the end. "Still wicked fast though." She blew out a slow breath. "Between that and Reneau's left side blind spot, we might have something worth exploiting..."

"No, no." Ilya ran back the video. "Sixteen's ribs could be an advantage, yes, but Lodge here–." He pointed at Seattle's number forty-three. "He will not skate backwards if he can help it."

Shane looked at him, a small crease between her brows. "You're not serious."

Ilya nodded. "I noticed it in Boston, when he played for Carolina. He *can* skate backwards, but he is not comfortable in it. He has to think about it, you can see in his face."

Shane squinted at the screen, then sat back against the terminal seat. Pursing her lips, she shoved her glasses up into her hair. "I can't believe I never noticed that."

"I am willing to bet you did once," Ilya mused. "But it has been back here–." He tapped the back of her head, earning himself a mildly irritated stare. "The whole time."

"Very funny," Shane said dryly. "I think you were supposed to take credit for something I never noticed, Ilya."

Ilya shook his head and frowned. "No. I will not do that."

"Sure, you won't," Shane drawled with a good-natured eyeroll.

"I said I will not."

"I'll be holding my breath until your locker room speech tomorrow night." Shane made a few quick notes in her digital notebook, then flicked to the next video. She leaned closer to him, the ginger and rosewood scent of her its own kind of reassurance.

Ilya laid an arm across the back of her chair and kissed the top of her head. "Then you will pass out. A shame for you."

“Shame for both of us.” Shane exhaled. “When was the last time we shared a hotel room?”

Ilya snickered. It had been years, truth be told, but if Shane kept coming to games, granting the coaching staff her years of insights and plays, there would be more in their future. Still, Shane had tried to be stubborn about road-trips – namely, about not coming on them. Ilya wanted her to. Shane didn’t want to assume she would be welcome.

Things at home are different, Shane had said, curled into his side while they watched a Philadelphia-New Jersey game. *Wiebe isn’t that desperate and, if he is, he can always text me.*

A week later Wiebe had texted Shane.

Check your email. Your ticket is with Roz’s. Plane takes off at 2pm and you’re going to be on it, Hollander.

“I’m glad you are with us,” Ilya murmured in her ear. “I’m glad you keep getting in the car with me.” He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “You are so talented, *lyubimaya*, so good at this. It makes me so happy to hear you yelling plays at the team instead of at the television.”

“It makes me happy too.” Shane tucked her chin, a small pleased smile curving her lips.

“Good.” Ilya kissed her cheek. “Your mother will miss your comments though.”

“She’ll live.” Shane paused the video, then quickly turned to kiss his nose. “We’ve got a cup to win.”

Ilya’s insides melted. He was sure it was all over his face, for all the world to see. He didn’t care. He slouched lower in his chair, resting his chin on Shane’s shoulder to watch the carefully collected videos along with her, providing observations here and there.

We’ve got a cup to win.

Every so often, she would reach her hand up, gliding her fingertips over the stubble on his jaw or the tendons of his neck. There, for anyone with a pair of eyes and a camera to catch. When they were called to board, she stood and took his hand as they walked to the doors, to the plane, to a pair of seats just in front of the wings.

We’ve got a cup to win.

Ilya held onto her as the plane took off, keeping her hand tightly in his until they reached cruising altitude. Shane didn’t mind him. She didn’t mind the light ribbing from Dykstra and Bood, but played along easily. When Harris popped by to see pictures of Anya, Shane pointed out her favorites on Ilya’s phone and suggested a playdate with Chiron when they returned to Ottawa. When Wiebe checked in with them, she had a fresh strategy to suggest to him and a new play for the second line to test in pre-game practice the next day.

We’ve got a cup to win.

An hour in and headphones in, Shane dropped off to sleep. Ilya pushed the arm rest up, then balled up a sweatshirt in his lap for her to rest on. He let the music play in his headphones as he stared out the window, her hair thick and silky through his fingertips as he played with it. She didn't stir. Ilya was determined to let her rest for as long as possible.

We've got a cup to win.

Ilya's heart fluttered under his ribs.

They were going to go to the playoffs. They were going to get through to the finals. They were going to win a cup. He and Shane, together.

May 2022

Shane sat forward in her seat, thumb pressing her lip into her teeth.

The finals, Hollander.

Hayes batted the puck away for the second time in as many minutes. Ilya looped around the back of the goal before racing back up the ice, following Boodram and Barrett, ducking between Minnesota players and lurking.

I can taste it, on my tongue.

Barrett and Boodram stayed neck and neck, passing back and forth until one of them was smacked into the boards – Bood, who didn't have the puck.

Can you, solnyshka? Sharp and cold, not like you—

Barrett passed to Ilya behind the net. Ilya pushed forward, turned it, and faked right. Boodram on the left, rounding a winger. The puck went back to Ilya, then backhanded it into the net.

The buzzer went. Music started blaring, hardly heard under the tidal-wave roar of the Ottawa crowd. Shane was on her feet in a second, shouting and jumping.

Centaurs three, Nomads two.

I love you, come on, Ilya, one more, Shane thought, then cupped her hands around her mouth. "Davai!"

Let's go. Let's show them.

The first line dropped back into positions. Ilya and the Nomads' center going back and forth as they dropped into the face off crouch. Shane couldn't help but drop forward too. A second later, the ref was clapping at them – a clear signal to knock it off and reset. Shane held her breath, bottom lip pinched in her teeth as the puck dropped.

Wipe the ice with them one more fucking time so I can run to you. So we can show them all—.

A scuffle, then Minnesota won the puck. They pushed forward, cut off a second later by Barrett. He'd gotten trickier with his stick handling; his efforts repeatedly rewarded by the knowledge that Toronto hadn't squeaked out a win against them all season. He passed to Boodram and Dysktra bodied a Minnesota player.

I want to show them all.

Shane glanced up at the time, no more than a flicker. A second. A minute and sixteen seconds, rapidly ticking down and down and down.

Boodram passed back to Barrett. Ilya raced up to the Minnesota goal, a winger on his heels as he rounded behind the net. Buzzing, lurking, keeping up a dizzying distraction while still being the front man.

Fifty-eight seconds.

Chouinard took a check that had Selena grabbing for Shane's hand, but play didn't stop. Shane squeezed back and they leaned together, eyes on the ice. Barrett took a shot on goal, Boodram and Dykstra circling. The puck didn't make it to the crease before number 56 had snagged and was pushing back in the other direction.

Forty seconds.

Wyatt was set up and waiting before they had crossed the center line. The shot was made, and blocked, and the puck was put back in Boodram's control. Ilya swooped in from the far side, taking Minnesota's forward and shoving him into his own team's bench. He was still there to meet Boodram's next pass.

Twenty-seven seconds.

Shane's heart was in her throat. She could taste copper on her tongue, knowing it was staining her lip. She didn't care. She and Selena clung together as her mother shouted behind them. On her feet. With the rest of the stands. Shock and excitement and the barest shred of amazement coursed through the audience, poised for the bitter end.

Seventeen seconds.

Ilya handed off to Barrett. Barrett turned a corner, trading with Chouinard where Minnesota couldn't quite see. Boodram swept through, took it off them, then shot – *hard* – at the goal.

The puck slid in.

The buzzer blared. Music burst from the speakers. And Shane was yanked unceremoniously into an embrace – Selena, shaking her and screaming excitedly in French – then to her feet as the WAGs collided in the row the way their partners did on the ice. Shane hardly felt her body, but she knew she was being jostled. She knew she was laughing, and cheering, that tears were welling in her eyes just like they did in Lisa's, Caitlin's, Selena's, and Cassie's.

They had done it. They had put the 2022 finals in the ground for good.

Ottawa was bringing home a cup for the first time.

The WAGs crush eventually spread apart again. Shane pulled back, linking fingers blindly with the first outstretched hand – her father's, strong and soft-palmed from years of desk work. She grinned at him, one row up, and felt herself sniff. She laughed as he reached forward, wiping her face with the cuff of his jacket, like she was no more than five and wobbling on her skates. He was grinning and wet-eyed too.

Lights flared and swirled. The music roared in her ears, vibrating through the soles of her feet.

Down on the ice, the Centaurs were over the boards and racing towards each other. Colliding somewhere in the center; a mass of jerseys, helmets, and pads. Sticks and gloves littered the ice to be dealt with later.

And there was Ilya. Pulling in and out of embraces. Knocking helmets before he finally tore his off. Shoving the rookies with a brilliant, pride-filled grin. Colliding with the Minnesota captain for a well-meaning hug and a more professional handshake; words exchanged with smiles. Pushing away from the group to take a true victory lap, throwing his hands up in the air to encourage the crowd on to the edge of madness.

Stopping hard on his skates in front of their section. Searching the crowd until his eyes landed on her and her parents. He beamed up at her, arms outstretched. Her heart beat hard and fast under her ribs. She raised a hand to her mouth, then blew a kiss to him.

Her cheeks pinked. It was juvenile. Silly. Something stupid they'd replay on SportsCenter for the next week–.

Ilya raised a hand, the black band of her ring visible on his finger. He pretended to catch it, brought down to his chest. Where his mother's pendant rested. Where his ribs came together under his skin. Where his heart beat faster than Shane's own.

She rested her hand in the same spot. Her tears slipped down her cheeks as her smile widened. Not the camera-ready pleasant look she would pull on for press before games. Not the warm, self-assured smirk advertisement directors forced her to perfect before her twentieth birthday. The smile only Ilya ever knew.

Broad, warm, open and with stars in her eyes, because love pulsed through her skin, her nerves, her veins so strongly she was convinced it would set her on fire. Love so sure and good she was helpless to it; let it enfold her, gentle her, remember how beautiful it was to be safe with someone else.

Shane hardly registered the formalities. The carpet square going down on the ice where the cup would rest. The announcements, the final word, the cheering like a struck chord through the air. She knew, at some point, she was shuffled to the end of the row and onto the stairs. She knew her arms were linked with Lisa's, her mother's. Cassie in front of them in the cinderblock hallways beneath the stands. Selena's French curled in the air with her father's own as they moved closer and closer to the ice.

The cold air on her face. The blinking-bright fluorescent lights. Red and black jerseys, swirling on their skates, trading turns with the gleaming cup.

The moment she was able, Shane broke free and rushed. The ice felt different under boots than it did under blades, but she hardly felt a change. It didn't change her momentum, her ease, her goal – right in front of her.

Ilya, rushing for her too.

Then she's in the air, off her feet, and the ice hardly matters any more.

His curls were damp with sweat under her fingers, and he smelled like it too. Clean sweat, the warm salt of his skin, the last notes of his cologne clinging to the collar of his compression shirt. His face was wet against her own, but he was laughing. Laughing, clutching her like a long lost toy, turning her around like she weighed nothing.

Then his mouth found hers – soft, deep, thrumming with promises – and the world was blotted from her mind. Her mind didn't reel or flail, but quieted. Settled to a blissful, contented emptiness that Shane often could only wish after. But there it was, with Ilya's hands on her waist and his nose tucked against her own. With his breath on her face and her hands around his neck.

If this was how the cameras caught them, so be it. If this is how the world laid eyes on her this time, let them look.

Shane was happy. Shane was in love. Victory, in all its shade, ran riot in her blood and sang in her head.

"You did it," she breathed; quivery, watery, and elated. She found his eyes. "You fucking *did it*."

"Not without you." Ilya tucked his head back to her shoulder. "Never without you, Shane, you know this–."

"Shut up," she laughed. "You got them up to the line. You got them over it." She pressed her knees against his thighs, keeping her steady as she tipped enough to kiss his temple. "*You*, Ilya. I'm so, so, *so fucking proud* of you."

Her neck was chilled, smeared with damp cooled immediately by the rink's air. "*Shane*."

"*So proud*, Ilya," she kept going, the words barreling out of her without stopping. "You're all mine. I'm all yours. And next month, when you go to Vegas to get an armload of awards, I'm

going to be right there, on your arm. More proud than I've ever been, right next to my incredible man."

Ilya sniffled, mumbling some unintelligible things into her hair. Eventually, he set her toes back on the ice, but didn't let go yet. His face was smeared with tears, eyes gleaming from under spiked lashes. Grinning wildly, beautifully. "My fiance is coming with me to Las Vegas."

Shane beamed up at him, fisting his jersey. "A promise is a promise, Ilyunia."

"No worries? No hesitation?" He pressed.

"Well," Shane drawled. "One maybe..." She took an exaggerated breath, not even bothering to hide the obviously teasing expression. "You know I want to, Ilya. I really, *really* want to, but. Well."

"What is it, *solnyshka*?" Ilya held her steady.

She rose up on her toes; her heels not matching his height in skates. "I think *wife* sounds a whole lot better. Don't you?"

His answering kiss was borderline obscene.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Soooo, Vegas ended up being somewhere north of 17,000 words when all was said and done. So guess who gets an extra Vegas chapter AND an epilogue?

YOU GUYS DO!

(Jesus Christ, how did this fic end up so long. It was only supposed to be a one shot!)

So, this is the breakdown. Here, in Vegas Part 1, you will find a lot Awards Show talk and cameos from our favorite Game Changers series folks. A few reintroductions, a little bit of a coming out, but all on Shane's terms and quietly. I swear. I made the promise that chapter 3 would be the only dramatic one, and I'm keeping that promise.

NEXT TIME, on Vegas Part 2, you will get the sexy-times that Shane hints at in the second scene here. A recreation of that original 2014 encounter, but completely under Shane's control. It goes far better this time around, but stay tuned for that on an Ao3 update near you!

Thank you so much for reading, onto the rest of this mess! Enjoy!

xoxo,
Orchid

June 2022

Las Vegas

Lashes, mascara, then eyeliner. Shane mouthed along with her thoughts. Fake lashes came easily for her now, so easily she was content to leave them to the last minute. A thin line of glue, a good steady hand, and a concealing swoop of liquid liner and she would be ready.

Truthfully, she had been ready from the moment she had packed bags the morning of their flight. Bags she had packed right before leaving for the airport. Bags Ilya hadn't seen the contents of, wouldn't until a fair few minutes from right then.

It's a surprise, she had said firmly when the boxes and durable garment bag had arrived at their home. *A birthday present. You wouldn't want to spoil your own surprise, would you?*

Ilya had backed off, but Shane had tucked the pieces away. Just in case. Her husband was a decently patient man, but his curiosity would be his undoing, and she wanted this. This

reaction, this surprise. She needed it, dearly.

She pulled away from the mirror, lashes in place and swiped with fresh black mascara. She turned her face right, then left, inspecting her handiwork. *Not bad*, she thought.

Svetlana had walked her through the look over FaceTime twice; had sent her two new lipstick colors to try, both as dramatic and punchy as the bitten plum color that was now Shane's favorite to wear. The look was dramatic, bold, sultry – that word that more and more lived in Shane's head with less and less discomfort.

The WAGs had grabbed her and Yuna three days before leaving for Vegas. They had a packed itinerary, having never gotten to celebrate their partners' winning. A spa day was critical, and if Shane was flying out there with them, then they were joining in on the fun. They could pick and choose from a laundry list of massages, facials, waxings, skin treatments, and threading. Nails were a must, hair was optional, and Ilya had marvelled at the intricate designs on Shane's while they ate dinner that night.

She glanced down at her hands. Nothing was chipped or cracked. Her engagement ring and shining new wedding band sat stacked on her ring finger; the tattooed black ring hidden underneath them.

It was the only evidence of how busy she and Ilya had been since the Cup had been won. How they managed to squeeze in enough time to sign their marriage license – let alone find someone to do the rites on their sun deck – in only a few weeks astounded her. Waking up next to Ilya each morning and calling him *husband* put her at peace.

Her parents had made her promise a bigger party later in the summer. Invitations to be given to extended family, the Centaurs team, Rose, Svetlana, the Irina Foundation's many camp coaches. Ilya had agreed for them both. Shane was too busy floating dreamily through the day, happier than she could ever remember.

Husband. She smiled to herself as she turned towards the garment bag hanging from a hook on the wall. Her *husband* was waiting for her in the penthouse's living room. She could imagine him with a drink in his hand, fiddling with the cufflinks in his dress shirt, the jacket draped over the back of a chair as he waited.

Waited to see how she, his *wife*, would emerge.

You will look like a movie star, Ilya had murmured in her ear that morning, as they lounged in that massive bed under a cloudy white comforter. *So beautiful, sitting next to me*.

Shane hummed happily as she undid the zipper, revealing the soft black fabric enveloped within. She glanced over her shoulder and back into the mirror.

Pale skin turned golden in the moody light of the bathroom. Deep purple underthings accented her every curve, black leather heels setting her hips at just the right angle. Her dark hair styled, pinned, and sprayed in the hotel salon, finished off with a few golden hairpins from her mother in the fanned shape of ginkgo leaves.

Moya zhená, Ilya's voice murmured in her head, an echo from the night before. *They will all know tonight that I have gold, Shane Rozanova, and it is not the Stanley Cup.*

Shane turned back to the dress, running her fingers down the front of it. Her rings glinted in the light. Her husband didn't stand a chance, and he didn't even know it.

When it was clear the Centaurs were going all the way to the finals, Rose had stepped in with a phone call in early May. Sure, she had argued, Shane could buy something off the rack and look incredible, but wouldn't it be more fun to have something custom? One of a kind, something made *only* for her?

It had been a tempting enough offer on its own, but Rose – as she so often did – took it one good step beyond. She offered up her favorite red carpet designer, and Shane had jumped at the chance. The exchange of measurements and concept sketches went quickly. Shane tried on the prototype in the middle of the night, while Ilya was dead to the world for the exhaustion of the playoffs, and deemed it perfect.

When the finished, genuine article arrived, she had locked herself away in the guest bedroom with her new shoes and delighted in the full length mirror. In her own reflection.

She kept her back to the mirror now. Stepping into the dress, pulling it up her body and over her shoulders. Adjusting the full-length sleeve on her wrist and her breasts in the built-in cups. Setting the slit at the top of her thigh. Drawing the zipper back up the length of her spine, already imagining Ilya undoing it himself later that night. She reached a hand up to adjust her necklace – a bejeweled serpent twined around her neck, biting its tail at the hollow of her throat in a platinum ouroboros – then skimmed her hands over herself one final time before turning around.

The reflection that greeted her was exactly what she wanted.

Tall, statuesque, her waist nipped in for a full hourglass effect. Her own eyes stared back at her, their usual brown darkened to near-black; come-hither and a warning all in one. Strong, sultry, the shape of herself inviting and uncompromising. Striking, glamorous, as powerful as anyone else in that rented ballroom.

Her face split in a wide grin. *A fucking Amazon.*

She snatched her bag off the counter, sparing herself one more look before walking out.

Perfect.

Ilya had been idling, brain turning over and over as he waited for Shane to appear.

She was efficient, always had been. His last glimpse of her had been forty-five minutes earlier, as she swept back into the hotel room with her hair done; though, Ilya hadn't gotten a good enough look at it before she vanished behind the bathroom door. When she called out that it would take about thirty minutes for her to get ready, Ilya had believed her.

His wife – Ilya sighed happily at the thought – was nothing if not punctual. Accurate. Deliberate.

Ilya hadn't needed long himself. Formalwear wasn't unusual to him, so dressing himself went quickly; even tying the bowtie around his neck without a mirror, only muscle memory. His mother had taught him once he decided he was too old to let her keep doing them for him. He had been ten. He sometimes wished he'd let her tie his ties longer. Shane was hopeless with them, and Yuna was only marginally better, which left him to his own devices or David's.

The television played highlights from a tennis tournament in England, the pop of the ball slightly soothing background noise. A bottle of vodka – a good one, specially ordered by himself to the room – sat on the table in front of him, unopened and without a glass. He had thought about it, then disregarded it. His brain was running too fast that night. Too fast for television, too fast for mindless scrolling through his phone, too fast for even staring at the lights of the Strip, but he did not want to dull the sensation. He wanted to hold it, examine it, feel every second of it.

He stared blankly at the television screen, turning his cufflinks back and forth in place – a gift from Svetlana after a trip to Greece. Pressed his thumb to the engraving of the ancient Greek centaur on its golden surface, feeling it poke into his skin.

His fingers found his wedding and engagement rings, turning them over the skin. Both matte black with gold on the inside, both from Shane. The blink-and-miss-it ceremony on their deck less than a week after the Centaurs had won the Stanley Cup was Shane's idea. The thinner, tattoo version underneath, however, was all Ilya's.

Something permanent. Something binding. Something that neither of them could or would ever lose. *Like one another*, he had told her. *I will cut out the skin before I will lose you.*

Shane had held his hand as she had listened to him. They had been married two full days, the shine still in the air and Ilya certain they would never graduate from their honeymoon phase. When his pitch was finished, she had taken a breath, lifted her eyes to his, and replied simply. *I hope I give half as much to your life as you do to mine.*

If only you knew when you listened, Ilya thought, dropping his head back onto the couch cushions and closing his eyes. *I struck gold in knowing you, Shane.*

Between the pops of the tennis ball and his ping-ponging thoughts, Ilya nearly missed the sound of heels on the hardwood floor. He wouldn't have opened his eyes, or come to attention, if he hadn't heard her clear her throat.

Ilya froze where he sat, stunned into silence.

“Well?” Shane drawled. “What do you think?”

Curled tendrils of black hair framed her face, the most logical place for Ilya to start. Her eyes stared back, dark and glittering underneath a fringe of lashes. Freckles faintly dotted her cheekbones – not vanished under powder and cream, thank goodness – only just softening the second blow of rose petal red lipstick on her plush mouth.

His mouth dropped as he registered her dress, her form filling it out.

Her body was wrapped in deep black. Modern for its asymmetrical bodice, one long sleeve and thigh-high slit, revealing the smooth, golden length of her leg. Classic for the depth of the color, the way it skimmed her chest and waist and thighs all the way to the floor. Where the hem brushed over the tops of her shoes, their stretched black leather and impossible height made the effect nearly deadly.

Ilya sat up, high breath finally coming back to him in one long, protracted inhale. He felt dizzy. He had to remind himself to suck in another breath, then another; to stand up and swallow and put one foot in front of the other until he came to rest in front of her. Until the palms of his hands skimmed the softness of her waist, finding it just as warm, yielding, and familiar as he'd ever known.

"*Shane*," Ilya murmured. Reverent. Dazed. Amazed. She was beautiful, unreal. Awesome in the oldest, most fundamental meaning of the word. He had been awe struck, struck speechless. He could count very few times in his life where he had had the honor.

"Ilya." Her eyes met his evenly; those wicked heels of hers putting her easily at his height. She would match him step for step all night long. She rested a hand on his shoulder. "Are you still with me?"

Ilya nodded. His body and mind finally met again. His face relaxed into a starry-eyed, elated grin. "Just barely."

"Only barely?" she teased. She knew exactly what she looked like. Was preening like a tiger in front of him; indulged and twice as fierce.

"I am breathless." Ilya slid his hands to her back, felt her ribs open with each breath of her own. "How will I get through the night, *solnyshka*? I will hardly remember how to think."

"Hmm, that could be a problem." She pouted her red lips – a daring color he'd never seen her wear – and sighed as she draped her arms around his shoulders. He held her closer, her weight a comfort in his arms.

"They will make me give a speech on stage and I will look at you once and lose all my words."

"Notecard, in your breast pocket–."

"No, no, no. My mind will go blank." Ilya pressed his forehead to her temple. "No English. No Russian. No very bad French. Nothing but you, *lyubimaya*." He closed his eyes, breathing in her ginger-rosewood perfume, drinking in the heat of her skin. "I could stay like this all night."

“I thought you were going to show me off, Mr. Rozanov?”

“I have to. I have to show everyone, otherwise I will burst.” He pulled back to meet her eyes again – brown so deep he could trick himself into believing it was endless. “*Mrs. Hollander-Rozanova.*”

The teasing, sexy smirk gave way to something brighter and lovelier on her face. Her hands slid up his neck to cradle his jaw. “For tonight. I want to be *just* Rozanova.”

Ilya nodded. He didn’t quite follow, but he knew she would explain. She would give him rules and he would follow them to the letter. Her here, with him in front of the League, was too precious. He would not let it be the first and only time she ever stopped a room on his arm.

“Let them call me whatever they like, whatever they think, because I’m *not* theirs,” Shane said. Firm, but honeyed. Her tone laced with love, but determination solid just under the surface. “My name – my *real name* – lives in no one’s mouth but yours, Ilya.”

“Shane.”

“Understood, Ilya?”

“*Da, konechko.*” He pressed a kiss to her cheek – powdery and soft, but with his beloved freckles still there. He chuckled, low and warm in his chest. “Who do you want to be, *lyubimaya*? Jane, Holly, Lily–?”

He broke off in snickers and so did she. She squeezed his shoulder. “I don’t see myself doing a lot of introductions this evening if I can help it, and the team will probably call me Holly all night.”

Ilya considered this. “True.”

“I’m glad they’re here. All of them. It’ll make it so much easier, I think.”

“Being around people we know.”

“Being around people who love us.” She took another deep breath, then maneuvered his hands into hers. “C’mon, we’ll be late.”

“We could be very, very late, Shane,” Ilya hummed, letting her steer them towards the door. “I would be happy to be very late to this stupid party with you.”

“Weren’t you the one who wanted to come all this way–?”

“You were the one who made the bet.”

Shane scoffed. “To force myself to go to Zane and Cassie’s party with you.”

“And yet, you promised and a promise is a promise.” Ilya held the door open for her, tucking the keycards into his suit jacket. He took her hand as they walked to the elevators. “A very

beautiful, sexy promise.”

“Oh, Mr. Rozanov,” Shane sighed dramatically as the car dinged and the doors clattered open. “If only you knew.”

“Know what?” Ilya’s heart tumbled inside his chest.

She pressed the button for the lobby, then leaned back against the wall of the elevator. She stared at him with those sparkling eyes and a wicked sort of smile. He squared his shoulders, tucking his hands into his pocket and wrinkling his buttoned jacket. He held his breath as her hand slid over his hip, a manicured nail catching at the apex of the thigh slit and tugging upwards less than a centimeter.

A flash of mesh, lace, something sheer and soft. Then gone.

His eyes met hers. His throat felt tight underneath his starched collar and black bowtie. The stiff front of his shirt and black silk cummerbund made themselves known for how they kept him still, upright, in control.

“You,” Ilya murmured. “Are trouble. Shane Hollander.”

Shane’s grin was too feline to be innocent. “I’m a gift. Your gift, Ilya. I might let you open it later.”

Ilya stepped forward to box her in, palms on either side of her head. “How much later?”

“We’ll see,” she lilted, dark gaze sparkling. “Behave, Mr. Rozanov, and maybe—” She pushed upright, pressing close to his ear. “*Maybe*. I’ll let you suck my dick.”

The air ran out of Ilya’s lungs. “Fuck, Shane.”

“Maybe that too.” She winked at him, and Ilya knew he was done for.

Ilya held her hand, his own on the car door. His eyes were always open for her, no one else. “Are you ready?”

Shane peered past him. She noted the flashes of cameras in the tinted windows, the flickering forms of other attendees, the muted music. She met Ilya’s eyes and the last, stubborn knot in her chest undid itself. “Yes. More than.”

“Okay.” Ilya lifted her hand to kiss the back. “*Davai, lyubimaya.*”

Shane nodded once. “*Davai*, Ilyunia.”

Ilya pushed the door open and slid out. He turned, blocking the door as she slid closer to the door and gathered her wits about her. She’d done this before, for nearly a decade. It had been uncomfortable then. She knew it would be uncomfortable now.

Ilya stepped back holding a hand out for her. Shane slid a foot out, resting her hand on his.

The only difference in all those years, Shane knew, was who surrounded her. Before it had been her parents, a single friend, a cluster of people she was friendly with. Even Ilya had only flitted in the background on a whim. Now, she had her husband, her parents, a veritable army of their friends and their partners.

There was no fear in slipping out of the car. There was no terror stepping onto the sidewalk and into the line of camera lenses and blinding lights. The anxiety that simmered omnipresent in her nerves had made a home in a quieter part of her brain, contented for the moment by Ilya’s fingers laced in hers.

Ilya moved forward at a leisurely pace, checking often. Some photogs flagged him down, calling for a picture, and he glanced at Shane with apprehension writ large on his handsome features. Shane kept her expression soft, open, exactly as she felt.

Fine.

Relaxed. Formidable. Unafraid.

Safe.

Shane knew he would do anything to help the moment he sensed her discomfort. She knew he would be whatever she needed him to be, the moment she asked. Shane couldn’t ask for anything more than who he was on his own.

Her partner. Her husband.

The boy she had met a decade before, and the man he’d become in front of her.

“Why not.” She stepped close to his side, wrapping his hand around the small of her waist. She rested her hand on his lapel, her rings well in sight of the camera. “It’s just a picture.”

Ilya stared at her in amazement. His most private smile broke over his features. “I love you.”

“*Ya tozhe*,” she returned. The cameras were a glaring blur of white light and clamoring voices – but she managed to look into their flashing and smiled. It was overwhelming. “How does Rose do this all the time?”

“You should ask her for advice,” Ilya drawled, dragging her even closer to his side. “Before she has to step aside for you, sweetheart.”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t dare.” Shane didn’t mind being draped all over him, looking as besotted as she felt. “I need her connections if I want to stay looking this good.”

“Do you?” Ilya raised a hand to signal they were done, then moved them along with the rest of the crowd of arriving players. “You have good taste. You look good with and without clothes.”

“She helped me design this dress.”

Ilya’s eyes raked over her as they strolled towards the doors. They lingered the way she always hoped they would – curious, then taken in; adoring with something darker just underneath. She stayed in stride with him, an arm wrapped around his bicep.

“*Seryezno?*”

Shane nodded. “Rose suggested it and I went for it. It made sense to show up in something one of a kind.”

“Mmm, it does.” Ilya paused to kiss her cheek as he held the door. “You are one of a kind, *moya zhena*.”

Shane flushed pink, pleased to the core. “And you’re so in love with me it's embarrassing, Rozanov.”

Ilya laughed and followed her over the threshold. “Imagine. Being embarrassed by loving the love of your life.” He slung an arm around her waist again – the looser, more casual hold she was used to and melted into. “Saying things like you are not so desperate when it comes to me too.” He chuckled her fondly under the chin. “Like you are not now a Rozanov too.”

“You’re a Hollander as much as I’m a Rozanov,” Shane replied breezily.

“You’re right.” He kissed her temple – another surprising outward display for him. “It might be the better thing to be.”

“Because you’re my mom’s favorite now?”

“Yes, and Yuna is very good at everything.”

“She’s not here for you to flatter. She can’t hear you.”

“No, but she will know.” Ilya pointed them in the direction of the bar where most of the awards attendees were gathering. “If I don’t, then she won’t negotiate such fun contracts for me.”

Shane chuckled. “You like that Rolex deal a little too much.”

Ilya shrugged. “Of course I do. Yuna made it a very good agreement because, as I said, she is good at everything. Like mother, like daughter.”

Shane squeezed him around the middle – a *thank you* and *say more* all in one. She knew he was laying it on thick to keep her happy. She knew he was pulling out all the stops, all the compassion he kept close to the chest, all for her comfort. Shane was grateful for it. Glad for

their happy little bubble, for their usual banter keeping her distracted from the lenses, the lights, the eyes that were no doubt on the both of them.

A small voice in her head was fussing. Worried. Buzzing with a thousand things that could go wrong.

A small, louder voice was going on about how handsome Ilya looked, how good his hands felt on her body, how wonderful he was, and how good they must look together if so many people were turning to stare.

Ilya Rozanov hadn't just brought a date, a girl, a girlfriend. *Nope*, Shane's thoughts preened. He had brought his *wife*.

That was why the room seemed to turn around them. Why the growing number of people seemed to part for them as they walked towards the bar. The playboy had fallen in love and gotten hitched when no one was looking, and they all wanted a good look at who had done it.

If only they knew, Shane mused.

Her hand stayed in Ilya's and her eyes trained on his back, the way the muscles underneath made the fabric move as he walked. Heat swooped in her stomach, curled around her spine, laced between her ribs and pulled tight.

Ilya was impossibly effortless sometimes; his curls styled just so, his expressions in perfect control, his body finely tuned to whatever he needed from it. When they were younger, it had made Shane jealous, curious, bitterly wondering how anyone could do that, be that, what it took to have it. He made everything look easy. Older and wiser, she knew now that it wasn't always so easy. Now, Shane could see the effort, the hard work, and let the combined effect make her weak in the knees.

A round of whooping went up as they appeared at the end of the long bartop, drawing more eyes. Cheering and clapping and a few wolf whistles from the assembled Ottawa Centaurs. Ilya had mentioned in the car they would all be meeting before going to find their tables, but Shane hadn't expected they would be the last ones there. She hadn't expected them to teasingly boo when Ilya took a joking bow in front of them.

"Fuck off, Roz!" Dykstra called, waving him off with a grin.

"Not you, asshole!" Bood called from the back of their clump, whiskey in hand. "Holly! Looking good!"

Shane flushed hot pink, but still managed to lean into the joke. She shooed Ilya away for drinks, then took a small turn as the team applauded and cheered like hooligans. The WAGs stood to the side, ready to pull her into a hug, trade compliments all the way around, as soon as Ilya had handed her a ginger ale.

Ilya feigned offense like an Oscar winner, vodka glass held to his chest. "*My own team—*."

“Oh I’m sorry, Roz, did you not see her?” Cassie chirped back, earning her own cheers and laughs.

“How could I not?” Ilya exclaimed. He waved his hands at Shane, embracing the dramatics. “I saw her in this dress and still let her leave the hotel room. You should be thanking me.” Ilya huffed as Shane laughed with their team, all for show. “I could be having a very good time in a big hotel bed, but no—.”

“Oh, quit your whining,” Zane said, hooking an arm around Ilya’s neck. “You’ll have her back all to yourself in no time.” He held his tumbler out and, with a nudge, the rest of the team did the same. “We just want to take a moment to appreciate our captain, for slumming it with us all these years—.”

“Hear, hear,” Chouinard lifted his glass.

“Hey! We’re great!” Haas snarked back.

“We are *now*,” Zane corrected. He squeezed Ilya’s shoulders. He pointed right at Shane. “Especially now that we have that we have you, too. We couldn’t have made it to the playoffs without *you* kicking our asses up and down the ice, and we *definitely* wouldn’t have made it to the finals.”

Thank you, Shane mouthed. Ilya beamed, chest out and just as proud as her. The WAGs gathered in close, arms slung around her and holding her hands.

“To cap and Holly,” Troy started.

“To cap and Holly,” the rest repeated eagerly.

“May they never, *ever* get a better offer anywhere else,” Wyatt added, then drank.

Ilya took a long drink and winked at him. “If I do, I will turn them down.”

“Well, glad to hear it,” Dykstra said, appearing on Ilya’s other side. “Because you married this SOB, Holly, so you’re stuck with all of us assholes for life. Package deal.”

“Yeah, we’re never letting him leave, Holly,” Troy reached around Caitlin to squeeze her shoulder.

“Eh.” Shane shrugged. “There are worse places.” She winked at him. “Like Toronto.”

He cracked a grin and laughed. The grandstanding and toast-making dissolved after that. Like at so many barbecues and after-game drinks at Monks’, they split off into clusters. Ilya made a round of the whole team while Shane talked with Troy, Harris, and Haas before getting pulled into the fold of the WAGs.

“Red.” Selena pointed at her lips, eyes lighting up. She was Shane’s best enabler after Rose. “That’s new.”

“I thought it was too bright when I bought it, but I like it a lot on,” Shane said. Ilya sauntered up behind her, wrapping arms around her waist and resting his head on her shoulder – content. “Not every day, but for special occasions.”

Caitlin smirked. “You say that now, but it’ll grow on you.” She regarded Ilya with the same expression. “She could rock it every day, couldn’t she, Ilya?”

“Yes, she could,” Ilya agreed. “It is a good color. Compliments you. I like it.”

“Figures you would.” Shane leaned into him, feeling just the right side of ‘pampered house cat’ and thoroughly enjoying it.

“Why?” Ilya sipped his drink. “Because I think my wife is beautiful?”

“No,” Shane’s eyes glittered mischievously. She popped open her bag and lifted the tube so he could read it. “Because it’s called Russian Red.”

He tucked his head to her shoulder and laughed. Hearty, chest-deep, and vibrating through her own bones and skin.

Eventually the call came for everyone to find their seats. The Centaurs were seated relatively close together, but not all at the same table, as they would have liked. Any complaints were hushed once someone – Harris, Shane thought – pointed out that they were all in note-passing distance from one another, so long as someone found paper and a pen. As if, she thought, they couldn’t act more like a high school cafeteria at lunch.

Shane and Ilya were at a table closer to the stage than she might have liked – Ilya was presenting the Calder trophy and was in line to accept a few awards of his own that night, so it made sense. She was glad to see the Chouinards and Boodrams on four of the other placecards, surprised to see who the last two belonged. *Scott Hunter* and *Christopher Grady* in neat font.

Ilya gave her a concerned look and she waved it away. “Of all the people it could have been, Ilya.”

“He will be okay, yes.”

“Not that I’ll be saying anything, but.” Shane cleared her throat. “There are way worse.”

“True.” Ilya sighed, unbuttoning his jacket. “But it is still Scott Hunter.”

“All these years, Rozanov, and you’re still giving me shit?”

Scott Hunter hadn’t changed much since Shane had last seen him. Still tall and handsome, still friendly looking despite New York’s reputation. There was more grey at the temple than Shane remembered and it was clear he wasn’t in his twenties anymore, but Shane still recognized him. Still felt the same sense of ease she had had after winning the Calder, years ago.

“All these years and you can still walk, Hunter?” Ilya fired back with a smirk. Still a little shit, but a little shit who knew when to offer a handshake.

“Just barely, but this season ran me ragged, so I’m sure my number’s almost come up.” Scott took his hand with an amicable grin. “I expect a hell of a going away party when I finally retire, Roz.”

“Why me? Ask Vaughn.”

“Nah, he’ll cry like a baby. It’ll bring the mood down.” Scott wrapped his arm around the man standing next to him. Shane recognized him from that broadcast; the kiss on the ice that had gone through her body like an electric shock. He was drawing eyes too, but less kind than the ones on Shane. “This is Kip, my husband.”

“Nice to meet you,” Shane began softly, taking Kip’s hand. Ilya did the same. “I think you’re sitting next to me.”

“Oh good. A buffer between all the chirping,” Kip chuckled. “Holly, right? We heard some chanting in the bar.”

Shane nodded. “They’re a loud bunch at the best of times.”

“And taking home the cup is the best of times.” Kip nudged Scott in the ribs. “We’d know.”

“Something like that,” Scott agreed. “I saw the rings. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“I assume you know what you’re getting into with this one.”

Ilya made an indignant noise over her shoulder, but Shane only smiled and laughed. “More than. I really exemplify the phrase ‘better half’.”

Ilya failed at fighting off a laugh.

Scott’s laugh seemed to surprise him. “Sounds like he’s got his work cut out for him.”

“Oh, he does.”

“Then let me say, it is very nice to meet you officially.” He took Shane’s hand easily.

The words left her mouth before she thought better of them: “It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Hunter.”

She felt Ilya tense behind her, but didn’t tense herself. She saw confusion flicker through Scott’s face, but her anxiety didn’t seize on it. No one else was staring. No one else was listening. It was just the four of them, and Shane could handle that.

“Holly,” Scott repeated. He looked at her closer. “Hollywood?”

Shane nodded. "That's me."

"God. Damn." Scott looked her up and down. "I hardly recognized you."

"Good." Relief flooded her. "That means no one else will."

"Jesus, the rumor mill had it all wrong. Half the conference was convinced we'd stumble on your obituary some day, or someone would find you dead in the woods. Something awful." He smiled at her, releasing her hand to take hold of her arms. "It's good to see you again, rook."

Shane swallowed. "It's good to see you too."

"You look unbelievable."

"Thank you. First night out like this in a long time," Shane said. "I thought I'd do it properly."

"Do it properly is an understatement because I'm pretty sure you've made the best dressed list. Now, a better question for you." Scott glanced at Ilya, then back to her. "Roz talks about how his partner helps him run the Irina Fund."

"Foundation," Ilya corrected lightly.

Scott rolled his eyes fondly. "I take it that's you, rook."

Shane nodded. "That's me, yes. Ilya's the face, since it's his mother, but I'm in the details."

"Clearly. You do amazing work."

"Thank you."

"So, what's it take to get in on your summer camps?" Scott asked. "I've wanted to for the last two years, but I could never figure out who to talk to."

Shane beamed. "We'd be glad to have you. We're doing two sessions this year with how big it's gotten, so we'd love more people to be involved." She reached back for Ilya's hand. "We've been talking about having more messaging for queer mental health as well, so having you involved would be amazing."

"When do you need me?"

"Our second session is the first week of August. Does that work?"

"Works perfectly." Scott clapped his hands together excitedly. "What do you need from me?"

"Your phone number," Shane answered. "We can sort everything out that way."

"Great."

The lights flickered, signalling the beginning of the show. Ilya pulled out her seat for her. Shane teased him for it – *where's my asshole husband gotten off to?* – but held his hand on the table as the music wound up, the lights lowered, and the hosts appeared. Shane wouldn't have pretended to be paying attention to the introduction. She sipped her ginger ale, made bored faces at Selena and Cassie, and stared at her place setting.

A soft touch to her shoulder, and she found Kip leaning forward in his chair. He motioned her closer and she leaned back, unsurprised when he whispered in her ear. "I'm sorry. I think I missed something. How do you know Scott?"

Shane huffed a laugh, and whispered back. "When I played, they all called me Holly instead of Hollander."

"Hollander." Kip laughed a bit too. "The kid that took a swing at Scott?"

"Mhmm. I think I called him old too?"

"God, that's funny. He was so worked up after that."

"Did you get something out of it?" she asked slyly.

Kip hummed. "Three rounds, if memory serves. Did you–?"

"Mhmm. The best phone sex of my life."

"Then thank you, and call me Kip."

"In that case, I think you should call me Shane. And thank you too." She winked and sat up, still snickering to herself.

Ilya shot her a funny look, but didn't say anything more. He twisted her rings on her fingers to keep the rest of himself still. They stayed that way for a long while, half-listening and half-posed for television cameras. When Ilya was called to present, he kissed the back of her hand before standing; his hand lingering on her arms as he passed her chair.

She hoped the cameras had caught it. She waited to see him stride out on stage in his well-tailored tuxedo. Shane settled back in her seat, at ease even when Ilya was out of her reach.

Progress, she thought happily. She was proud of herself. Ilya would be proud of her too.

Shane was relieved when Ilya pulled her aside, insisting that they leave the after party. It wasn't as late as they could have stayed, but Shane was well and truly past her threshold.

She'd kept up well, she thought, and they made a good team in the face of so many people. Shane could make jokes about Ilya, be gracious to every well-wisher who caught their wedding bands, and talk about the Foundation with anyone who asked. Ilya was charming as usual, blunt but affable, and quick to offer an answer, a story, a cover when Shane needed it most.

The Centaurs had given them a good enough shield for most of the party. Scott Hunter and Kip Grady had been easily folded into the fray as soon as the awards concluded. She entertained a tequila shot or two at Ilya's urging, and Scott's cheeky *like old times*. Ilya's old friends from Boston had approached, inspiring a new note of apprehension. It was quickly abated by Ilya's quick wit and blunt humor, his arm protectively on the back of her chair.

They claimed that they only needed to lay eyes on their ex-captain's *Montreal Girl* after watching him blush and smile in the locker room for years. Insisting he twirled his hair while reading his texts, fumbling and blustering whenever they mentioned *Jane* or *Montreal* in his presence.

Ilya made it easy for her to laugh with them. Easier for her to give it back as good as they had given, earning their praise and humor. Their congratulations were given with hearty handshakes, back-slaps, and another round of shots for the Centaurs.

The clock struck ten-thirty and Ilya crowded in close to her. "Shane Rozanova, my sweetheart, we need to go."

"Hmm?" Shane covered a yawn with her hand. She scratched her nails at the back of his neck. "Why's that, baby?"

"You promised me a present, yes?" Ilya kissed her cheek. "I would like to open my present before tomorrow."

Shane smirked. "Oh you would, would you?"

"I have been patient."

"Very patient."

"I was good for you, yes?"

Shane nodded. "Yes. A perfect gentleman." She carded her fingers through his hair. "I think you worried some people."

"Eh." Ilya shrugged. "Marriage looks good on me."

"Lots of things look good on you," Shane purred. "Your suit, for one." She pushed upright, smoothing her hands over the front of his shirt. "My lipstick, for another."

His expression turned heated, his smile wobbling. "You have a plan, *solnyshka*?"

"I've had a plan for weeks, Ilyunia," Shane said around another yawn, sliding off her chair. "Take me back and I'll tell you what it is."

He bent to kiss the side of her neck. "It will be my pleasure."

They said their goodbyes. Ilya wrapped Shane up in his dinner jacket for the walk through to the lobby, the wait for a cab out front. She leaned into him as they walked, his arm around her. Anticipation crept up her back, rousing her drowsy senses. She could feel the set she wore as she walked; a subtle reminder of what she had given him a taste of earlier in the night, and the control she hoped to hold while pushing him onto his back.

She shivered happily, wobbling on her heels. Her foot slid from her shoe, her shoulder knocked into someone.

"I'm so sorry—" Jackie Pike stared back at her, eyes big and apologetic. Hayden was just a step ahead of her.

"Oh my gosh, it's fine, it's fine." Shane fumbled with her heel, shaking. "It's my fault, really." She glared at her foot. "Fuck."

"Those stupid little straps," Jackie commiserated. "If they aren't snapped or tearing, they're slipping out of place."

"Completely." Shane huffed, still wobbling. "Might as well take it off."

"Here, *lyubimaya*. Stop." Ilya knelt, placing her hand on his shoulder to balance. He undid the clasp on her shoe and guided her foot back into place before redoing it. He rose back to standing, dusting his hands for effect. "There. Done."

Shane hardly heard him, hardly heard herself thank him. She and Jackie had made eye contact again. Inspecting, searching; a strange sort of compulsion building in the back of Shane's throat. "Jackie?"

The woman blinked at her. "Yeah. Have we met?"

"It's been a while." Shane's hands shook, but her brain moved on its own like a tidal wave. "When I lived in Montreal. I, um. We were friends. We, um. We'd have dinner together, and you'd try to set me up with your friends."

Jackie's face dropped, eyes large with shock. Shane's heart clenched hard in her chest as the other woman kept staring. She swore it was going to stop before anyone could intervene. Her head spun. Her fingers felt cold, and Ilya's own touch was distant on her skin.

Bad idea, bad idea, oh my fucking god why did you do that—?

"Jacks?" Hayden stepped closer to his wife. "Is everything okay?"

Jackie shook herself, recovering in the blink of an eye. "Everything's fine, Hayden."

"Then, what?" He glanced up, Ilya falling into his sights after glancing over Shane. "Rozanov. Have a good night?"

Ilya nodded stiffly. "Very good. You?"

“Great.” He shifted his weight. “No woman of the week anymore, right?”

“Not in *years*,” came Ilya’s reply, a deadpan hiss that had even Shane’s hair standing on end.

Hayden tossed his hands up in surrender, especially once Jackie kicked him in the ankle.

“Sorry. Sorry. That was in poor taste, Rozanov, I’m sorry.” He stuck a hand out, genial again.

“It’s nice to meet you, miss—. Um?”

Shane’s gaze flickered to Jackie and back. It came in a whisper. “Hollander.”

Hayden froze. The hotel and its patrons orbited them, the Vegas strip loudly omnipresent beyond the doors. Shane felt Ilya’s fingers tighten in the fabric of his coat, restraining himself. She white-knuckled her bag, still kicking herself.

You’re an idiot. You shouldn’t have said anything. Oh god, what did you just do—?

“Remember, Hayd?” Jackie said quietly. She cleared her throat pointedly. “She used to watch the kids sometimes so we could have date nights. Helped you get them out of the house during the summer.”

“Wait.” Hayden squinted at her for long seconds. “Oh my god, wait—.”

Shane held her breath, frozen. She gripped Ilya’s hand so hard, she could have broken one of the narrow bones.

Shock dropped over Hayden’s face like an avalanche. “Holy *fuck*. You—.”

“*Hayden*,” Jackie said in a warning tone, eyeing her husband carefully. “Jesus Christ.”

Shane had missed her dearly, but in that moment, she could have fallen into Jackie’s arms and kissed the woman. It was clear in her face there were no hard feelings, understanding and surprise warring for dominance, but nothing that sent a jolt through Shane. It was clear in how she looked at Hayden that she was boldly daring her husband to even try stepping out of line.

Hayden – *thank god* – snapped back to himself without any more guidance.

“You disappeared,” he began. “You retired without telling anyone, just—.” He waved hands in the air like he was trying to conjure words from the ether. “Out of nowhere. We—. I—.” He dropped his hands, face suddenly pinched. “I thought you *died*, Shane, I mean. You never said—. *Fuck*, is it still Shane, should I not—?”

“It is, but not—. Don’t let anyone—.” Shane swallowed tightly. “I’m sorry.” Guilt turned over in her stomach, misplaced but still there. “I couldn’t. I had to just leave, Hayd, I couldn’t—.”

Ilya cleared his throat sharply. “Pike.” Hayden jumped, staring at Ilya like a deer in headlights. “We will not draw eyes. Yes?”

“Oh.” Hayden glanced around frantically. “Sorry. No, of course not. *Jesus*, I’m fucking this up.”

Hayden closed his eyes and took a breath. Shane nearly laughed, remembering the way he would reset himself between periods in the locker room. When Hayden opened his eyes again, his expression was just as fond. “Dude. You look insane. Like incredible. Holy shit, you’re gorgeous— can I say that? I mean that, really.”

“Thanks, Hayd,” Shane managed, her head starting to swim.

“But *Rozanov*?” Hayden tried at a joke. It sort of fell flat. “Really?”

Shane opened her mouth, but no words came out. She took another slow, even breath, but nothing changed. Her head was full, thoughts spinning like small tornadoes, but none of them came out. The Pikes shared a look, as if they were both remembering, but it had been too long. Shane looked at Ilya, feeling helpless and unmoored.

Ilya only held her tighter, spoke gently in her ear. “We can go, *lyubimaya*, it’s okay.” A dry hand settled at the side of her neck, pulling her eyes towards his. “Take a breath.”

Shane did. Then another. Another.

“Focus on that, sweetheart,” Ilya murmured. He turned back towards the other couple.

“Sorry. It has been a long night. Exhausting, overwhelming.”

Jackie nodded. “God, yes, of course. We know what you mean.”

“Understandable.” Hayden leaned forward, resting a hand on Shane’s wrist. “Please don’t feel bad. Arthur does the same thing, and Amber, the baby, does too.”

“She’s not a baby anymore, Hayd,” Jackie chimed in. “We only recognized it because of you, Shane.”

“H-How old is she?” Shane forced out. “She was, um, one? When I retired?”

“Almost five. She’s starting kindergarten soon.”

Shane pressed a hand over her mouth, a short wave of sadness knocking into her. “Five?” She looked up at Ilya. “I—. I missed so—, so *much*.”

“It’s okay,” Ilya reassured. “It’s okay.” He cleared his throat. “The cottage. You should bring your family up for a weekend this summer.”

Hayden arched a brow, decently skeptical. “Are you offering, Rozanov?”

“I am,” Ilya said, tone brooking no argument. “This is not the best place to talk. So, for Shane and you, I suppose, I will chase your children around while you catch up. Yes?” He rubbed Shane’s arm absently, intuiting her need for contact just then. “Then we invite you to the wedding party in Au—.”

“Oh my fucking god, you’re actually *marrying* the asshole?”

Shane flashed him a watery smile. “Married, actually.” She held up her hand with Ilya's, their ring sets clear as day. “Two weeks ago. After the finals.”

“Fuck.” Hayden looked dazed. Then guilt-stricken. Then, suddenly, impossibly sentimental. He opened his arms, a sappy sort of smile on his face. “Can I give you a hug? Please?” Shane nodded and met him in the middle. He squeezed all the air from her lungs, leaving her ribs squeaking, but Shane hugged back just as fiercely. “Congratulations. I mean it. God, I’m so fucking happy to see you.”

Shane sniffled against the black wool of his tuxedo jacket. It was impossible to keep the emotion down now. “Why aren’t you mad at me?”

“Oh, I am,” Hayden answered with a well-meaning laugh. “I’m fucking furious you cut me out for three years, vanished without a trace like a bad crime novel, and left me wondering if I’d ever see you again, if you were okay and safe and alive.” He stopped and exhaled. “But that’s fixable.” He pulled back to meet her gaze again. “It’s fixable, isn’t it, Shane?”

Shane nodded. Every nerve in her body was on high alert, strained by the overload of the past few hours and the rush of the last few minutes. “As long as, you know, I don’t—. You’re not —.”

Jackie stepped close, a hand placed softly on Shane’s elbow. “We’ve missed you more than we could ever be mad at you. We’ll need a little help to understand, and the kids will just need a little guidance, but we can handle that.” She tucked her head, her smile familiar and unmissable. “They miss their auntie, Shane.”

Shane made a sound – an unflattering squeak in her throat. A watery laugh followed. “*Auntie?*”

Jackie nodded. “Of course. Unless you’d rather go by something else.”

“No, no.” Shane reached up to wipe her eyes hastily. “Auntie is great. Perfect, even, I missed them too. I’ll need to see pictures, I just—.”

Hayden squeezed her again. “We’ll come to the cottage. We’ll talk for days. The twins will run Rozanov off his legs, and Arthur might be scared of the lake, but we’ll get there.”

“Okay. Please. I’d love you to.”

“Does your phone number still work?”

Shane shook her head. “I, um. I got a new one.”

“What are you waiting for then? Give it here.”

Shane didn’t need telling twice. She yanked her phone from her bag and handed it to Hayden. He typed in his number, then passed it to Jackie. Ilya stepped back in, rocking her gently while she waited. Then, he gave his own number to the Pikes.

“For safekeeping,” he offered. “Do not think this will make me nice when we play you, Pike.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Rozy,” Hayden fired back, tucking his phone away. He grinned. “Where would be the fun in that?”

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I got a teacher snow day today, so guess who had time to finish Vegas Part Two!!

So, just as a reminder, this is the smut-only chapter. Written by me, someone who hasn't really written much smut in a calendar year. All that to say is, I tried my best, hopefully it reads as well as it felt to write, but if it's trash someone tell me so we're not all suffering the indignity lol ;)

For the "Shane in Lingerie" folks in the crowd (hi, nice to be here with you): the set I drew inspiration from for the set she wears here is the Scylla set from Thistle and Spire. You can find it here (<https://www.thistleandspire.com/collections/matching-sets/products/scylla-set-bra-panty-garter>). I have several pieces from Thistle and they're all gorgeous, fit beautifully, and are comfortable all day long if you chill like that. The scylla is absolutely on my list for my next purchase, so Shane got to wear it first ;)

Alright, enjoy!
xoxo, Orchid

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

June 2022

Las Vegas

The room was dark when Ilya stepped inside of it. He turned the keycard in his fingers, kicking the door shut behind him, the penthouse clarifying as he blinked into the dark.

He held his jacket, slung over his arm, tighter.

Ilya had listened when his wife asked him to stay outside their hotel room; to linger in the hallway while she righted her head and the space for her plan.

Shane's eyes were on him, glinting like flints in the darkness. "Welcome back."

Her voice was soft, tipping a note deeper. How she sounded at home, in the earliest hours of the morning or lounging on him late at night. Rich with authority that lulled and soothed instead of grabbed.

She sat in one of the armchairs in front of the clear, panoramic windows of the suite. Still wrapped in inky black, the snake necklace still at home on her throat, though her shoes were off and set precisely to the side. Curled and folded in the chair, she let one foot slip off and the toes press to the floor for balance.

Michelangelo himself would see her serpentine form and recognize his Libyan Sybil, stepped down from her high point on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling.

All Ilya saw was Shane.

The glittering lights of the Vegas Strip made her a thousand flickering colors, but her eyes were unchanged. Remained focused, steady. Safe and open pools for Ilya to fall headfirst into, not by mistake but by choice.

"Congratulations," she continued in a purr. Her smile unfurled from behind her water glass, lashes fluttering with each blink. "Most valuable player. Quite the honor."

She was a far cry from the woman she had been not too long before – quiet in the backseat of a cab, wiping away stray tears with the pocket square Ilya had previously thought was stupid. By the time they had reached their hotel, she was leaning heavily against his side, his arm wrapped snugly around her shoulders.

She had asked for a bit of time, and Ilya had given it to her. Looking at her now, he was glad she had.

"Don't you have anything to say?" Shane drawled, a perfectly manicured brow arching.

Ilya knew what she was angling for, what she was wanting from him. He swallowed his sticky, dry throat. "Thank you, Shane."

"You're welcome, Ilya," she answered. "Good boy."

Heat bloomed through his body, taking him by surprise. Shane wielded control differently than Ilya did, quietly bending it around her only when it suited her. She would hold him down, grip his face in her hands, make requests but not demands. Ilya was enthralled by her on the best of days.

The moment, however, her voice shifted lower, turned smoother – rare though it was – Ilya was lost to it. Weak in the knees, waiting for her next command, willing to be perfect for her. It startled him how much he craved it.

"A little trophy isn't enough though, is it?" Shane continued. "You deserve a real reward, don't you?"

Ilya took a measured breath, tucking his hands into his trouser pockets. His jacket hung in the crook of his arm. He managed to keep his eyes on her as she spoke, increasingly feeling like an insect in a museum, pinned forever to velvet.

Shane swirled her water glass, shaking her hair out. "Would you like your reward, Ilyunia?"

"I want whatever you will give me, *lyubimaya*."

"Good boy." Shane's voice pitched lower, richer. Only for a moment.

The tone caught Ilya by the jaw, holding him near-hypnotized where he stood. A last thread of her younger self, reserved only for Ilya. Only in their most private moments. He kept breathing, kept his head, but only just.

“One thing first.” Shane placed her glass on a nearby table. She ran her fingers through her hair, let loose from its pins to hang curling about her shoulders.

Ilya nodded, trying not to seem too eager. They had only just started. “Yes?”

She smiled at him, practically beatific by the tenderness it held. Her words were of a different sort. “Undress for me.”

Ilya draped his suit jacket over the back of the couch, then kicked off his shoes. He reached for his bow tie, ready to wrench it free, when the clicking of her tongue brought him up short.

“Is that how we treat our things?” Shane said, the answer clear within her question. Ilya shook his head. “Fold your clothes nicely.” She rolled her wrist in invitation. “Go on.”

“Underwear?” Ilya asked breathlessly.

Another flash of a smile. “Keep it on.”

Something for her, then.

Ilya went back to his task. He slid the bowtie from his collar, smoothing out the silk between his palms before laying it flat over the jacket. He carefully pocketed his cuff links, then unbuttoned his dress shirt. He felt Shane’s eyes slide over his chest, his shoulder, the remains of the marks she had left there the previous morning. Little pink nips, and scratches, and welts sucked into his skin by her mouth.

He skimmed a hand over them, drawing her eyes to as many as he could. He was proud of them; he knew it. His hands reached the waistband of his trousers. Button and zipper came away easily. He let them drop to the floor artlessly, before retrieving them. He tugged his socks free too, leaving him bare save for his black boxer briefs.

She motioned for him to turn for her. He complied, heady satisfaction building in his limbs. They had been here before. Right here, years ago. They were older, Ilya was a better person, but still, Shane’s hands were safer.

“Much better.” Shane smiled at him, pleased with Ilya. “Now.”

In one smooth motion, Shane uncurled her legs, slipped her feet back into her heels, and rose to full height. The water glass was retrieved as she sauntered towards the bedroom door. Pausing there, she turned back towards him. Her eyes roved over him, taking her time. Interest sat in her features, but the lust Ilya so often saw bloom there was hidden. Tucked away for later, when it suited her plans.

She crooked a finger, beckoning him forward, then turned and vanished inside.

Ilya didn’t need telling twice.

The bedroom was dim, save for a single lamp and the light filtering in from the Strip. Moody, colorful, blurring the edges like watercolors. The armchair from the corner was pulled to the foot of the bed. Her water glass sat on the bedside table next to a strip of condoms, a bottle of lube, and her golden hair pin – a clear sign of which side of the bed was Shane's.

Ilya closed the door behind it, leaned against as he watched her. She stood at a dresser, hands flat on the top of it as she stepped out of her shoes. Her earrings and bracelet went next, placed on the wood with a metallic, slithering sound. One of her hands reached up to scrunch unconsciously at her hair, expression overtaken by thoughtfulness.

"Beautiful," Ilya whispered. His voice carried in the quiet space.

She met his eyes in the mirror in front of her and, for a moment, was the person she was at home. The person he had shaken hands with in that arctic parking lot in Saskatchewan fourteen years before. Predictable, stable, familiar; steady and clear-eyed. The only person on earth who could make nineteen year old Ilya believe *boring* was everything he wanted in life. The only person besides his mother who could convince him that he was worth loving, worth forgiving; even when he was mean, sharp, or couldn't force himself from bed.

"Hi," she answered.

Ilya smiled. "Hello."

"Come here." She lifted a hand to sweep her hair over her shoulder. "Unzip me?"

"*Konechno, solnyshka.*" Ilya crossed the room, stepping behind her. He rested his arm on her shoulders, taking them in for a long moment. Then, he bent and kissed her cheek, the pulse point of her neck. "*Neneglyadnaya, moya zhena.*"

"I love you." Shane's nails scratched at his scalp as she leaned against him. She smelled of rosewood and ginger, faintly of the green tea she'd had after dinner. Ilya leaned closer, grateful she let him, and inhaled; wrapped her arms around her shoulder like a stole and bathed in it for a long minute.

"I love you too." Ilya nosed at her temple. "Tell me again."

Shane sighed and nodded. "Unzip me. Then go sit on the bed."

Ilya found the zipper pull and dragged it down slowly. If this was the unwrapping he'd been looking forward to since they had left that evening, then he was going to enjoy every second of it. He was going to make it last. The zipper split the black fabric down the middle, traced the ridgeline of her spine, ending at the small of her back.

"*Fuck,*" he whispered.

"If you like what you see," Shane said, even and seriously. "You'll go sit on the bed."

Ilya sucked in a breath and held it. It was the only thing keeping him from stripping her himself, the only thing that compelled him to disengage and stride to the bed. He positioned

himself in the middle, against the headboard with his knees bent. An echo of another place, another time, but neither of them were much bothered by it.

Shane watched him go, a hand resting on her collarbone. “Comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She pulled her arm from the singular sleeve. The dress clung to her for two strides before shivering and slipping over her body, pooling at her ankles. She stepped out, lifted it, and draped it carefully on the dresser. Satisfied, she continued to the armchair in an easy, unconscious saunter that gave Ilya time to absorb, appreciate, and be impossibly more aroused by her.

Dark purple framed and caressed her curves. Not lace, Ilya noted, but sheer embroidery. The looping forms of snakes in glinting black. Twisting over her waist. Curling over her hips. Cupping her chest and winding over her cock. A pair of similarly adorned garters banded her thighs, connected by lengths of elastic – the bit she had teased him with in the elevator.

She caught his slack-jawed stare, smirking to herself. She turned a slow circle on the ball of her foot. Showing off the whole piece. Revealing the bare length of her back. The thong he could move out of the way to lick and suck as she squirmed.

“You like?” Shane breathed. The pink tip of her tongue poked out to swipe at her full bottom lip.

Ilya hummed, a delighted rumble in his chest. “I am a very lucky man.”

“Oh?” She lowered herself into the armchair; a comfortable, lax sprawl. “Are you?”

“Yes, *lyubimaya*, I–.” His words cut off in a choke.

Shane had slid low against the seat, fingers settling between her thighs to rub gently at herself. Her gaze was steady, heavy with desire. Pink flushed her cheeks, skimmed across her collarbones. She bit at her lips and pressed harder, a moan reverberating in the quiet room. Her head tipped back, throat bared for his eyes. Her hips twitched against her fingers, her other hand fisted in her hair.

“*Shane*,” Ilya groaned. He pressed the heel of his palm to his cock, undeniably hard in his boxers.

“Mmmm.” Shane’s head lifted, eyes honing in on him again. “Don’t touch.”

Ilya moved his hand away. The frustration only momentarily counteracted by satisfaction in following her directions.

“Good. So good.” Shane breathed hard. “Watch me.”

As if Ilya could look away.

She hooked her knees over the arms of the chair, spreading her thighs as wide as they could go. Putting her hard cock, the wet spot in her panties, on full display for him.

Her hands started at her chest this time, squeezing the flesh and rolling the nipples from over the plum purple mesh. They drifted from there. Scratching lightly at her neck. Dancing over her ribs. Squeezing the softness of her waist and stomach. Plucking and pinching at the sensitive insides of her thighs as she gasped and panted. Then finally – *finally*, Ilya groaned, fingers twitching in the comforter. – she cupped herself again.

“*God,*” she gasped. Her fingers squeezed and rolled, rubbed expertly between her legs. The damp spot darkened and spread until she wriggled, shoved the mesh aside, and grasped her cock where it appeared in the high-cut leg hole.

“*Gospodi.*” Ilya pressed his hands to his eyes before shoving his fingers into his hair and gripping hard.

“No, no, Ilya, I need you to look,” Shane urged, voice a pleasure-filled rasp. “Please. Be so good for me.”

He wrenched his eyes open again to the same view. His wife, his Shane, legs up on that hotel room chair. Fisting and stroking herself with a heavy hand, but now with two fingers shoved into her mouth. Pointer and middle finger between her lips, up to the third knuckle. Ilya could see her tongue rolling around them, getting them wet; exactly the pattern he’d felt around his own fingers.

Ilya’s lungs heaved. “Please, Shane. I need–.”

“You *need* to watch,” Shane persisted, pulling her fingers free. They glistened with saliva. “You’re being *so good*, Ilya.”

“I want to touch you.”

“Tell me.”

“I want to taste you, *lyubimaya.*”

“You will. I promise, you will.” She granted him a warm, encouraging smile. “But you have to be good.”

Ilya knocked his head back against the headboard. “You will let me have you then?”

Shane nodded. “I will.” She moved her hand lower, shifting in the chair to show the tight furl of her hole. “Be good, and you can have anything.”

“Okay.” Ilya sucked in a painfully deep breath. “Okay. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Shane inhaled, fingers pressed against her hole. She exhaled, pushing the tips of both inside. Her other hand jerked her cock. Her legs twitched uselessly where they hung on the armchair.

Whines freed themselves from her throat as she pushed them deeper inside herself. Thrust them in time with her strokes. Scissored them and curled them until she keened, mouth dropping open in a perfect 'O'.

"Fuck. Fuck, Shane, you are too much. I can't--."

"You can. Tell me. Tell me, Ilya, tell me."

"You are perfect," Ilya breathed. "So perfect. I do not believe sometimes." His tongue was over-loose, his head cloudy with thoughts and need. "I need you."

Shane gasped, thighs clenching around nothing. Ilya wished they were around his hips. "Tell me."

"I need you," Ilya repeated. "So much."

He rolled forward onto his knees, moving down the bed to lay on his stomach at the foot of it. Not touching, not leaving the bed, not breaking her instructions but closer. Close enough to touch, to see every jump of her nerves in her skin. The perfect spot to drive himself mad watching her take her pleasure.

Her lips were just parted. She peered at him through the fan of her lashes, her sable brown eyes watching him. Her stomach and chest rose and fell with labored breaths. Her fingers twisted inside of herself. Her thumb swiped at the head, slick and glistening with precum.

Ilya was content to let himself ramble. "You are my whole life. I feel nothing like I feel with you." He dragged his palms over his face, stubble scratching at his skin. "No one is like you. You make me crazy. You make me hungry for you, desperate for you." He heaved another breath, resisting the need to grind his dick against the mattress. "So desperate, *solnyshka*. Mercy, please, *moya lyubimaya*."

Shane let out a shuddering breath. Her fingers stopped their trusting. Her cock was held in her hand, but she didn't move. She whispered: "How hungry?"

Ilya bit his tongue, then summoned his answer. "Starving."

She pulled her fingers from herself, wiping them on her thigh. Her cock rested against the fold of her hip as she lowered her legs one by one. They quivered as she rose to full height and stepped close to him again. She pet his head gently, as if he was no more than a loyal lapdog to keep her company. Two fingers under his chin, she tipped his head up to meet her eyes.

"Go on," she breathed. "Touch, Ilya."

Ilya stared up at her. Desire coursed in his body.

She moved his hands for him, placing them on either side of her hips. Pressing the fingers hard into the swell of her ass. "Have me, Ilya. Take what's yours."

Head reeling, he pulled himself up onto his knees. He brought her closer to his body, nearly taking her off her feet as he cradled her head and kissed her indulgently. Slow and strong, delving his tongue into her mouth to taste her fully. Until they were breathing hard against one another, but unwilling to part even for a full breath.

She placed a knee on the mattress, Ilya dragging her backwards with him. He rolled onto his back with her cradled against his chest, his thighs lifting to bracket her body. The landing was graceless, knocking the breath from their lungs. Shane broke first, giggling breathlessly into Ilya's neck. He followed soon after, nearly delirious for all the good that surrounded them.

He slid a hand through her hair, curling black tendrils around his fingers. "What do you want, sweetheart?"

"Everything," Shane sighed, breath hot against his skin.

"Where do you want to start?" Ilya crooned. "What was your plan?"

"To eat you out," she purred. "Kiss you all over. Fuck me until I cry."

"It's a good plan."

"Thought so."

"Then we start." Ilya guided her up for another kiss. She held herself up, her hair falling on either side of them like a curtain. His hands went instinctively to her back, searching for a clasp, but she took them and brought them to the front. To two metal slides, skin-warm between her breasts.

They came apart easily, the bra sliding off her shoulders and to the floor. She undid the garter belt herself, let him take time with the thong panties. Feeling them, sliding his fingers underneath them before freeing them from her legs. Ilya held the fabric in his hand, rubbing it between his fingers, marvelling at the softness and delicacy of it. Shane watched him, her fingers brushing the elastic waistband of his own boxers.

Ilya lifted them, raising his eyebrows. "You should put these in my mouth, then eat me."

She blinked at him, surprised. "You want that."

"I like to taste you," Ilya mused. He flashed her a sly smile. "And we should think of the neighbors."

Shane laughed inelegantly. Taking them from his fingers, she folded them in on themselves, then nodded at his mouth. Ilya opened and groaned as she pushed the mesh against his tongue. He could taste her in the fabric. Faintly, but still there.

"Good boy," she murmured, more playful than fierce now. Ilya liked it just the same; preened at the rush it gave him.,

She kissed his forehead, his temple, his cheek, criss-crossing her way down his body. Nipping at his shoulders, replenishing the fading marks there. Sucking at his nipples, tongue

lapping at them until they pebbled and smarted. Kissing the flat plane of his stomach, sinking her teeth gently into the curve of his hip. His underwear was peeled away while she dropped quick pecks to the insides of his thighs; then she pushed them over her shoulders.

She stretched up a hand to lace with his own over his sternum. “Yank my hand if it's too much, if you need me to stop.”

Ilya made a muffled noise against the fabric.

“Tug if you understand.”

He did.

“Tug if that’s okay.”

He did.

She pushed his knees to his shoulders and got to work.

Shane was better at being eaten out than doing it herself. They had had a laughing conversation about it in a hotel room in Buffalo, Shane beet red and swatting at him every time Ilya said something a little too scandalous for her tastes. Ilya loved it, relishing in getting to spread her out and get his tongue inside her in every conceivable way. Loved the way she yelped, and squirmed, and tugged her hair calling out his name, her thighs clamping down on his ears. Better the receiver than the giver.

But, still, she felt compelled sometimes to flip the script. To put him on his stomach, to kneel between his legs at the bathroom sink, and lick over him. Testing, teasing, tasting while Ilya gasped above her. There was power in it; she said as much to him.

That was what this was, Ilya knew now. The power in what she could do to him, touching or not. The command she held no matter if she was in a couture gown, her practice sweatshirt, or nothing but a tiny pair of underwear. The effect she had over him, what she could ask of him, and what he would give her.

It made her feel strong, capable, just right in her skin.

It made Ilya comfortably weak, and delighted in it.

Shane’s mouth was hot on him. Tongue wicked and practiced. Lapping at him, licking long wet strokes over him, tip probing at his entrance while her fingers probed at his taint. She sucked at him. When he was soft enough, she dropped her jaw and pressed her tongue inside. All the while, Ilya unraveled. Heat curled and tightened in his stomach. Sobs left his throat in spite of the panties dampening in his mouth. It had been his idea but she was relentless. Persistent. Perfect.

His orgasm rose steadily. Threading through his bones like vines until his nerves, bones, and sinews sang with impending release. He could feel it in the arch of his neck as he shoved his head back into the comforter. He felt it in the jump of his abdominal muscles, in the fresh sheen of sweat gathering on his chest.

Then Shane pulled away.

Ilya sobbed and reeled. He reached for her, only to find the mattress moving and her body stretching over his. Her hands on his face, opening his mouth and removing the fabric. Her lifting his hand where it held hers and kissing it. Warmth radiated from her. He wanted to curl into it.

“Shh, shh, not so fast.” Shane thumbed at his cheeks, the pad pulling away wet. Ilya blinked, feeling the dampness there. “Come down. Come down, baby.”

“Shane,” Ilya heaved.

She rubbed a hand in the center of his chest. “Listen, baby.” Ilya nodded fervently. She held his hand against her stomach, leaning across him. “How do you want me? Do you want me to ride you, hands and knees, on my back..?”

Ilya pulled in two more breaths, swallowed, then cleared his throat. “I want too much.”

“No, you don’t,” she murmured. Her fingers were gentle at his temple. “Not too much. Tell me.”

“Ride me.” Another breath, his head becoming clearer again. “Then I want you under me.”

She smiled fondly at him, then kissed his knuckles again. “Good boy.” She brushed his forehead, smoothing out the wrinkles that had formed there. “My husband is so good to me.”

“For you,” Ilya rasped.

“Yes,” she hummed. “For me, too.”

Ilya all but purred at the acknowledgment. This was as good for her as it was for him. He was good to her. He loved her. She took as much care for him as he did for her, and it lit his nerves up like candles in a sanctuary.

His younger self would have balked and sneered at him; unappreciative of the shades of release, control, and trust. He wouldn’t have comprehended how he himself, a decade and a half older, could willingly hand over everything to another person.

He changed the hand Shane held, rubbing her hip and thigh as they paused there. Massaging her bent knee, tracing nonsense lines over her skin. Matching his breathing to the cadence of her own, latching his mind to her hand in the center of his chest and the freckles on her cheeks.

His younger self would not have loved that warm body. Not with the acres and depths of sensation that Ilya did now. He would not have known how to hold her close for long, and he was glad that version of himself was put to rest. Deep, in the ground, next to the memories that had made him bitter for so long.

“Are you ready?” Shane asked.

Ilya squeezed her thigh. “Always, for you.”

“Flirt.”

“Slut.”

“Always,” Shane said. She dipped forward to press a kiss to his mouth. “For you. Always.”

She reached for the lube, then the condoms. She held up a single packet, its own question. Ilya shook his head and she set it back. If she wanted to go without, Ilya was more than happy to go without. They had a full day before their flight home. He would get her as clean as she liked, the moment she asked.

“Would you?”

“Please, Shane.”

She slicked up his fingers – two of his thicker than the two of hers, but not by much – and adjusted her legs, her hips. Ilya banded his arm around her waist, fingers tucking between her legs to find her open from before. She let out a harsh breath as her thrust them inside, muscles clamping down around his knuckles and her lashes fluttered.

“Good?”

She nodded. “Keep going. It’s better with your fingers.”

Ilya grinned. He spread his fingers wide just to hear the noises she made. Pulled his hand away, slicked up a third and fourth finger, feeling ambitious. Wanting to give her just the thing to make her eyes roll. He pressed three fingers inside and stilled. Her hips shifted and her knees spread as she shifted forward onto her hands. He worked them deeper, stroking her walls and stretching her wide.

“Ilya,” she rasped. Her head dropped between her shoulders.

“Right there, yes?” Ilya pressed his fingers against her prostate, rubbing circles over it.

“Fuck, god, yes.”

She fought to keep herself upright, to keep the whines down, but just like every time before, she lost. She bit her lip, thrusting back against his hand. Her shoulders trembled, arms about to give out. Her breaths came in whimpers in the same shape as his name.

Ilya pushed himself upright to take her weight from her. She hissed as he pulled his fingers out, but let him drag her leg across his hips. Let him move them back towards the headboard, guide her hands to his shoulders as he slicked his cock up and kissed her.

Shane tucked their foreheads together, panting into his mouth. “Let me. Let me sit on it.”

“Yes. Yes. *Fuck*, Shane.”

Ilya rested his hands on her hips, holding her steady as she sank down on him. His head thunked back against the headboard. He gripped Shane harder to keep himself still. Hard enough to bruise, but she gave him an equally bruising kiss, so he imagined he was forgiven.

She stopped only when she was fully seated. She braced herself on his chest, nails digging half-moons into his skin as she tried to regain control of herself. Ilya rubbed circles over her hips, moving her back and forth on him. Hot, tight, just enough of a grind. Just enough to keep his nerves humming and his head buzzing. Just enough to keep him fully lost in her.

Shane rolled her hips once. Her head dropped to the side, eyelids drooping for the pleasure of it. "Fuck, you feel good." She did it again, a groan vibrating through her body. "God. Do I feel good? Do I, do—?"

"So good." Ilya thrust up into her. "All I want." He pulled her close, kissed her harder. "Everything. Perfect."

"More."

"More."

His hands squeeze her waist, dip back down to knead her ass, keeping up a slow, deliberate pace. She moved with him, lifting herself up and rolling against him. They met in the middle, his heels digging into the mattress as she dropped back, tits bouncing with the steady rhythm. Ilya found himself staring, mouth watering and wanting. When she caught him looking, Shane gripped him tenderly around the jaw.

"You want that?" She asked, words punctuated by each drop of her hips.

Ilya nodded, words vanished from his mind. She nodded her permission, releasing his chin only once his mouth was on her, tongue laving her nipple before sucking in earnest. One of Shane's hands sank into his hair, the other scratched down his back. Ilya's own skated up the smooth planes next to her spine, spreading his fingers wide over her shoulder blades. Still, they kept up the same pace. Heavy, bone-wrenching, and steady.

"Oh. God. I—." Shane sobbed.

Ilya gave one final suck, then moved to give the other nipple the same treatment. His brain was hazy once more. Buried to the hilt in her. Sucking at her chest to satisfy something deep in both of them. Clinging to her as if she were all he had left. Ilya let her speed up, released her when the rhythm increased too much to be comfortable. He buried his face in her chest, eyes downcast to the place where they were joined, nails digging into her back as he kept pace with her.

"Ilya." Shane's voice was high, thready, wobbly in the way only tears managed. Good tears, happy tears, overwhelmed completely tears. "Ilya, Ilya, *fuck*. Baby, I need you. I need—, I can't—, I—."

He knew. Ilya knew was she needed, what she was asking for.

He lifted his head, sucked hard where her neck and shoulder met, and dragged his nails down her spine.

Shane's nails dug into his scalp. She wailed, her hips stuttered and legs clenched. She flew apart in his arms, release splattering on both of them. Painting their stomachs and hips.

"Shane," Ilya panted. "I-." He gasped a breath. "C-Can, can I-?"

Shane nodded rapidly, already holding onto him. "What you need. Take it. I can take it."

Ilya held her still in his lap, then shifted onto his knees, and let her weight pull them down. A move he was getting too old to be able to pull off, but would do for as long as he could. Shane on her back beneath him, hair splayed out in a tangled black halo. Ilya, still buried inside her, and lifting her knee over his shoulder to sink even deeper.

"Okay?"

Shane lifted a hand to paw at his face, eventually tucking her thumb into Ilya's mouth.

"Okay."

He kissed the inside of her knee, braced a hand on her hip, and thrust. Putting his weight into it, pounding into her in every effort to throw himself and his own senses off a cliff as fast as possible. She white-knuckled the comforter, hanging on as her face twitched with over-sensitivity. Ilya all but growled in his throat, nipping at the smooth skin of her leg until that heavy, knotted heat between his hips tightened, tightened, and broke.

His muscles seized, his brain quieting as he spilled deep in her. His body sagged, head toppling forward, and he clung to her leg and braced against the bed to keep himself upright. Long enough to ride out the after shocks. Long enough to pull himself out and not collapse onto her.

"Shane." The sound that escaped his mouth could barely be called a word. A whimper, at best, but it was met quickly by a warm, lax body pressing assuredly up to his.

"I'm here," Shane whispered, pillowing her head on his chest. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes glazed and sparkling with unshed tears. She leaned into Ilya's hand, carding through her hair. "I'm here, baby."

Ilya took another breath, feeling dampness cool on his cheeks. "You are incredible."

She chuckled. "Not so bad yourself."

"Feel good."

"Feel amazing. Like I'm on fire." She pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "Thank you for not tearing my lingerie."

"No problem." Ilya lifted his head enough to kiss her forehead. "It was very pretty. I want to see them again."

“I’ll wash them then.” She stretched where she lay, curling like a cat under his hands. “We should really shower.”

Ilya clicked his tongue. “A bath. There is a big one, we can do this more.”

“Alright. Before it gets all sticky though.”

“Of course.” Ilya clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle a yawn. Drowsiness was hemming in already. Maybe he was getting old, like the rookies said. “Five minutes?”

“Yeah,” Shane conceded with a contented hum. “Five minutes.”

Chapter End Notes

curvy trans girl Shane is my everything, Ilya Rozanov I know you can fight

Thanks for reading y’all ;)

Chapter 8: epilogue

Chapter Notes

c'est toi, c'est finite ;)

a teensy weensy little epilogue to tie this fic up like a bow! Thank you so much to everyone who's read this story, given it a chance, and for all you who have left comments along the way. I can't begin to tell you how refreshing and encouraging sharing this story with all y'all has been, and I genuinely can't wait for the next one :)

enjoy this last little bit!

xoxo,
Orchid

August 2022

Their house had never been so full. Not for holiday or Halloween parties. Not for playoff viewing or tape analysis. Not for summer barbecues, or team breakfasts, or puppy playdates for Anya. Not even at their wedding.

Four years, he and Shane had lived there, but Ilya had never gotten the chance to pack the place. They had grown together, grown up a little more, and had built a life when only a few people could see. Now, staring down their third decades together, opening up was the next step. It seemed that this – their kitchen, living room, and backyard bursting at the seams, food and drinks scattered all around, dogs barking and their friends' kids laughing and the television showing something – was all the proof that they had done everything right. Even, Ilya thought, if it made Shane a bit of a nervous wreck.

He had come in from Anya's late walk the night before to see his wife dusting the baseboards in the dining room. It had taken a combination of sweet talk, teasing, dirty talk, and then lifting her off her feet to get Shane to finally quit. To come to their bedroom, wash the day from her limbs, and crawl under the sheets with him. To flatten herself over top of Ilya as he played with her hair, drew pictures on her back with his fingers, reminded her over and over that this party, this day, was going to work out. Eventually, she believed him

It wasn't a chore, freeing Shane's brain from itself. Ilya could imagine plenty of players he'd met talking that way about their partners, but the word would never have occurred to Ilya. He liked watching her brain work. He liked turning her brain off just as much.

Shane tilted on an axis that Ilya did not, detail oriented and fastidious, treating the simplest things with impossibly gravity. Ilya could sweep through and see things differently, giving her a bigger picture. Shane set the order, and Ilya made sure to color perfectly inside the lines. Not a *chore*, not a *task*, but balance. A better balance than he had ever known.

This end of summer party was no exception.

The party had been planned for months, but Shane had left nothing to chance. Orders had been placed not long after returning from Las Vegas, diligent consideration being taken for allergies, restrictions, and preferences. She had gone over the whole house with a fine-toothed comb and a dust rag in the last week, cleaning to stave off the nerves. She'd given Ilya lists of things to be done, then needed to be told not to do them all herself, because Ilya knew she would have. He followed them precisely to the letter of her instructions; his flexibility getting a good workout whenever she would text with additions, corrections, or exceptions.

Shane, Ilya thought, kept him nimble. The quickest, most adaptive skater the league had known, showing Ilya how to be quick in all things, professional and domestic.

She was doing just that now as she slipped behind him, rushing into the kitchen through the sliding glass doors. A moment before, she had been talking with her father, handing him a fresh drink even as David told her he could have gotten it himself. Ilya, half-way through something now forgotten, watched after her.

"Shane alright, cap?" Luca asked, following Ilya's gaze.

Ilya exhaled. "She has been very stressed."

"I can imagine," Troy agreed, arm around Harris' shoulders. "This is a lot to put on."

"Yes, and she is a perfectionist. You know this."

"Oh, we know."

"I'm still terrified of that edgework drill," Luca said, eyes going big at the memory. "She's gonna put us through our paces this season, huh?"

"It is what Shane does best." Ilya grinned wickedly. "And she loves that drill."

Luca groaned into his beer. Troy and Zane clapped him on the shoulders, snickering, while Harris cackled. The social media manager had, thankfully, given his job a break that afternoon – but only because Ilya had let him photograph, record, and curate posts every blessed second of the summer camp's counselors.

"If I ask her what it is, do you think she'll teach it to me, or is that inside information?" Scott Hunter drawled, smirking at the Centaurs' commiserations.

Ilya nodded. "She would, because she is happy to share and because your newbies need it. They will be miserable the next day, everything aching and complaining."

“Only if you make them do bag skates first thing the next day,” Zane chimed in again. His smirk was nothing but fun. “Give yourself the full Hollander experience.”

“Sounds fun,” Scott chuckled. It was nothing short of fond.

“It’s fuckin’ *not*, but we do it anyway,” Troy said.

“Holly’s fuckin’ brutal, but we love her so we can’t say no,” Wyatt added, appearing next to Ilya’s shoulder.

“Speaking of,” Zane picked up. “Did Wiebe talk to her yet?”

Ilya shook his head. “Not yet. This afternoon, I think, but she has not stopped moving long enough.” He glanced back towards the kitchen. “I’m going to go check on her. She is probably forgetting to enjoy herself.”

The group shooed him off, then reconvened on the topic of brutal drills, how many times a work out had made them unsteady on their feet, or their old coaches concocting intricate ways of making rookies puke on the ice. Ilya easily slipped between their guests milling about on the porch, in the living room, and kitchen. He found Shane tucked into the large pantry, a wrinkle between her brows.

“What are you looking for, *solnyshka*?” Ilya asked.

She startled at his voice, but didn’t look agitated. In fact, she immediately turned sheepish. “I honestly can’t really remember. I stepped in here and it’s gone.”

Ilya hummed. He set his beer on a shelf before wrapping his arms around her shoulders and tucking his face to her temple. “It must have been very important.”

“It probably wasn’t important at all.” Shane huffed a laugh, all the while melting into his touch. Her eyes closed, a smile played on her lips, and she let Ilya take some of her weight to rock them gently side to side.

Ilya burrowed closer, more than happy to guide them in their odd half-dance. People talked and laughed somewhere behind them, muffled by the door. Shane was sun-warm in her wrap-dress, the juniper green fabric floating around her legs and showcasing her hips, waist, and arms. Her dark hair smelled like freshly cut grass and her shampoo, the ginger-rosewood smell of her perfume lingering at her collar, mingling with the salt of clean sweat on her neck.

“You are okay?” he asked gently, not bursting the quiet bubble around them both.

Shane nodded. “Very okay.” She sighed, sinking further against him. “Everyone’s having a good time, aren’t they?”

“They are. They have told me.” Ilya kissed her cheek. “If you stop rushing, rushing, rushing they might have been able to tell you too.”

“I can’t help it.”

“I know.” Ilya squeezed her, making a happy noise. He loved the give of her body, the strength underneath; the knowledge that only he got to see her fully relax, fully indulge, fully let-go during the summer. “But you should be enjoying yourself too. Are you?”

“Yes, but I could be more,” Shane admitted.

“I can help. Are you happy?”

“Right now? Very happy.”

“I love you happy.” Ilya kissed her temple, then nosed at her hairline. “Anything I can do?”

“Well...”

“Well what, *moya zhen*?”

Shane all but purred. “You like calling me that, don’t you?”

“Mhmm. It will never get old. Just like being good for you. Well what, Shane?”

She snickered, tipping her head so her nose pressed against his cheek. He could feel her grinned. “You could, you know, always win another cup. I mean, not *anyone* can go back to back, but—.”

“We have a shot,” Ilya finished for her. “With you running practice, we will be reigning champs one more year.” He turned to brush their noses together. “Like anniversary present.”

“I thought first anniversary was paper?”

“*Solnyshka*, I do not know what you are talking about.”

“It’s a tradition. There’s a list.”

“Yes, because we are very traditional.”

“We definitely aren’t.”

“Break tradition. Stanley Cup is better than fucking *paper*.”

“Well...” Shane kissed his nose. “Another day with it in the house couldn’t hurt.”

“Would be amazing,” Ilya said. “We will put Anya in it.”

“Like Eric put Milo in it?” Shane asked wryly.

Ilya nodded solemnly “Yes. We put the baby in the cup. It is the rules.” He pulled back enough for her to turn in his arms, for their eyes to meet, and his hands to settle in their favorite spot – cradling her jaw. “Winning two cups, back to back with you, *lyubimaya*, would be a dream. Getting to celebrate with you again and again, I don’t have the words.”

Shane grinned. “It would be pretty amazing.”

“Even though you have already done it?”

“Not with you I haven’t.” Shane looked uncertain for a moment. “Would the team mind, if I hung around again this season?”

“They would not. In fact, it is what they want.” Ilya paused for a second. He could keep it a surprise, or he could give Shane the gift of not being surprised. He chose the latter: “Wiebe is going to talk to you today about that. Lev is retiring from coaching, and Wiebe will need a good assistant.”

Shane’s brows shot to her hairline. “Assistant coach?”

Ilya nodded. “He asked me if you would want that. I told him to talk to you, but you would be good.”

“You think?” Her voice rose, hopeful and giddy and brimming with excitement. “I mean, it would be a first, wouldn’t it? There would be a lot to learn and go over, I’d need to get up to speed before pre-season since I’ve been out of the game for so long, almost literally, I mean—.”

“Shane,” Ilya rubbed her arm. “Breathe. Deep breath, you are rushing.”

Shane made a show of taking an exaggerated breath, happy pink flooding her cheeks. “Assistant coach. Really?”

“Really.”

“So you..?” She cleared her throat. “You wouldn’t mind, if I did?”

Ilya wanted to squeeze her. He wanted to be a little shit, roll his eyes and shake her playfully. He wanted to chirp her, he wanted to hug her. He settled for a kiss in the center of her forehead. “I do not mind. This season was the best since you retired. Playing with you, in whatever way, will always be my favorite thing in the world.”

“Okay.” She cleared her throat again. “Will the owners go for it? Me being me?”

Ilya scoffed and rolled his eyes. “They would be stupid to not hire the great Shane Hollander, especially after last season.”

“You’re right.” Her hands pressed to his chest. She grinned, nearly bouncing on her toes. “Fuck, Ilya. I *really* want to win a cup with you. *Officially* win a cup with you.”

“Then say yes to Wiebe and we will,” he laughed. “Together at the top, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane agreed, grinning brightly. “Always.”

End Notes

Thank you for reading, and I will see you for the next chapter :)

Please be kind.

xoxo.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!