

The Future We Hold is So Unclear

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The Future We Hold is So Unclear

by [lucianowriter](#)

Summary

It's January 2017 and Shane is still dating Rose Landry. After a solid week of feeling off and under the weather, Rose convinces Shane to see a doctor before he takes the ice in the Montreal vs. Boston game that night. Finding out he's pregnant definitely wasn't on his bingo card. He vows to tell Ilya that night, despite the fact the Russian has been ignoring his attempts at reaching out. But then, Ilya goes down on the ice after a hit from Comeau and doesn't wake up.

It is in that moment that Shane realizes two things: he's in love with Ilya and Ilya is also in love with him. Why else would he have Shane on his list of people to contact in an emergency. Getting that call from Cliff Marleau was not how Shane anticipated his life going, but here he is and he has some big decisions to make, with or without Ilya.

Notes

Hello my lovelies,

My creative juices have been coming and going quite a bit lately. The world around us has not been good for my mental health. That said, I have been working on this fic for the past week and a half and I am finally excited to share it with you.

There will be an epilogue for this fic posted in the next week or so as well. I have written about half of it at this point, but I wanted to put the bulk of this story out into the world to share with others.

Also, a couple of things: 1. I am playing fast and loose with the canon timeline. Don't think too hard on that. 2. I love the TV Show's way of spelling Cliff's last name so that is the spelling I went with.

This is a fic that has some heavy topics so please be sure to check out the tags for your own safety. I might have even over tagged, but it is better to be safe than sorry.

Without further ado, I want to give a thank you to all my loyal readers. This fandom has been such a blessing to me and I can't wait to hear from you guys about this latest addition to my collection of works.

Enjoy!

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

Chapter 1

Shane Hollander

Shane groaned as his alarm pulled him from his sleep. He felt heavy and as exhausted as he did on the nights when he barely slept at all. Thank you, anxiety spirals that kept him up more often than he cared to admit. He pressed the button to turn off the buzz and then rolled over to find Rose was already up and dressed. She smiled at him and leaned over to kiss him, but the smell of her perfume made his stomach churn and he had to jump out of bed.

Shane rushed off to the bathroom and barely made it in time to feel the burn of stomach acid making an appearance into the sink. *Fuck*. Once his stomach stopped rolling, and he stopped gagging on nothing, Shane looked at himself in the mirror. This had been a daily occurrence for at least the past week, maybe even more. He was a hockey player though and a touch of a stomach bug didn't stop him from doing what he always did: workout, practice, and play. Rinse, lather, and repeat.

Once he was feeling more himself again, Shane stepped out of the bathroom to find Rose sitting on the edge of his bed, a contemplative look on her face. He bit his bottom lip and nervously looked everywhere but at her, shoving his hands into the pockets of his sleep pants. She noticed he was there and shot up with a forced smile. She took a step toward him, that gentle look on her face she always got before she approached a subject that might spook Shane, i.e. when she'd asked him if he still loved hockey.

"Hey, you feeling better?" Her tone was soft, and her touch even softer as he hand landed on his right arm.

Shane finally made eye contact with her, ever so briefly, "Um, yeah. I'm good. Just fighting off this bug."

Rose tucked her lips behind her teeth for a moment, and then she spoke, "Shane, it's been days and you're still under the weather. I know you hockey players push through everything, even injuries, but maybe you should get this looked at by a doctor. If for nothing else than peace of mind."

Shane shrugged, “I’m not worried. It’s nothing. I’m handling it.”

Rose let her hand drop, “Would you do it for me? Your girlfriend?”

Their eyes met and Shane realized that he would do it because she asked and because she pulled the girlfriend card. He was trying to be a good boyfriend, which meant trying to not think of Ilya constantly, and so he would do anything she asked of him. As long as it meant he wouldn’t fail at this. He could be into women, like Ilya. He needed to distance himself from Ilya, it wasn’t safe and it wasn’t easy. Rose Landry was safe. Rose Landry was as easy as breathing, as long as she didn’t want to have sex.

“Okay. I’ll go see my doctor.”

—

Shane sat in his stall, his hands clasped between his knees and his head hung down. The words from his doctor a few hours ago were still ringing in his head. *Congratulations! You’re pregnant.* Only, Shane didn’t feel like it was something he should be celebrating. His life was a fucking joke if he was being honest. He was with Rose Landry, who he greatly enjoyed spending time with, but he was carrying the child of Ilya Rozanov, the man who has refused to speak to him for months now.

Shane felt the tears welling up in his eyes, but he couldn’t break down. Not right now. He closed his eyes against the emotions and tried his best to drown out the loud sounds of the locker room. In his heightened moment of doubt they felt especially grating on his nerves.

How could he be a captain to these guys if he couldn’t even keep his personal life from falling apart? How would the team react when he told them he would have to leave the season early for medical reasons? Did he tell them all the truth or just Coach Theriault? What about Hayden? How much should Shane reveal to his best friend? When was he supposed to tell Ilya about this?

He’d shot a text to Ilya right after he’d gotten out of his appointment, letting the man know they needed to talk. He’d asked if they could catch up after the game, but Ilya had yet to

respond. Thinking of Ilya, Shane reached up to the shelf above his head and grabbed his phone once more.

To: Lily

Please, Ilya. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. I need to speak to you.

After that message indicated that it had been delivered, Shane shut off the screen and stood up. He wasn't going to think of Ilya anymore until after the game. Both Montreal and Boston were close to making the playoffs and a win tonight would put Montreal in better standings. Shane needed to put his team in the best position possible before dropping the bomb that he wouldn't be able to play anymore for the rest of the season, maybe not even next season as well.

"Hey, bud, you doing okay?" Hayden's voice pulled Shane from his thoughts.

He shook his head and shot a quick smile toward his best friend, "Yeah. Just got a lot on my mind. Don't wanna let Boston beat us tonight."

J.J. shot his head up, his jersey half on already, "Foutons tout en l'air. Send that cocksucking Russian packing with all his idiot friends."

"Fuck Rozanov!" Comeau cried from another corner.

"Montreal is the best! Hollander is the best!" J.J., whose jersey was now fully on properly, came over and squeezed Shane's shoulder with a smile.

Shane returned the smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. His smiles never did when the locker room turned to slurs and homophobia to chirp their biggest rivals. He saw Hayden give him a quizzical look, but instead of addressing it, Shane grabbed his helmet and headed out of the locker room. He needed to put as much distance between his thoughts and the game as he could. Getting out on the ice was like taking the first breath of fresh air in days. Everything else fell away, this was his arena. Where he felt most at home. On the ice at the Bell Centre,

Shane could pretend that he was everything everyone expected of him; instead of the failure he actually was.

He saw Ilya in center ice, stretching. Shane bit his lip and thought about the unanswered texts. He really needed to talk to Ilya so, with a big sigh he moved, a bit sluggishly thanks to his body being against him, toward the center ice. Just as he approached where Ilya was, Marleau skated up and he and Ilya started chirping at each other with easy smiles and loud laughter. Shane stopped mid-skate and just watched the joy blossom on Ilya's face. How he missed the man and his easy joy and teasing nature.

Shane sniffed and pushed back the bubble of emotion that came up just then. He couldn't start crying, that was a one way ticket to being a big ass target on the ice if anyone discovered him. Taking a deep breath to recenter himself, Shane continued to skate toward the center ice. He didn't care if it came off as weird, he needed to know that Ilya heard him and knew how desperately they needed to talk.

He came to a stop with a bit of ice spray at Marleau. The bigger player gave Shane a weird look but then patted Ilya on the shoulder, tapped his head against Ilya's and said, "Let's fucking destroy them Rozy!" before he skated off to his position on the ice.

Ilya glared at Shane and then spit on the ice between them. *Fuck*. He was mad, Shane could see that, but what he didn't understand was why. Sure, Shane had run scared from Ilya's house months ago, but in the days after he had tried multiple times to apologize. To no avail and so he'd leaned on other people, namely Rose Landry.

"We need to talk. Meet me at the apartment after the game." Shane said, staring into Ilya's eyes, insistently holding eye contact.

Ilya didn't respond, but a flicker of recognition and acknowledgement flashed over his eyes before they both leaned over to prepare for the face off. Shane pushed it all from his brain, now was the time for hockey, not messy personal stuff. He needed to focus so that he could win the face off. But, just as the ref dropped the puck, Ilya responded to his request.

"Okay. I'll see you later," and then Ilya smirked. That alone caused Shane to hesitate and he lost the puck.

Shane raced after Ilya in an attempt to get the puck back. And so they went for two whole periods. Neither of them relenting control, competing for dominance in a game they both loved. It was the first time in months they seemed to be on the same page, speaking the same language. For a brief moment, Shane felt maybe things would be better now. Maybe they'd be on this new journey together.

And then, at the top of the third period, Comeau slammed Ilya into the boards more aggressively than usual, or so it seemed to Shane. Either way, Shane's world screamed to a halt along with the game. His ears started ringing and the lights that usually didn't bother him were suddenly so piercingly bright he almost felt nauseous. He couldn't hear anything and he didn't consciously move his limbs across the ice to where Ilya was lying crumpled, unmoving. And yet, he somehow came to a stop right outside the circle of refs and team doctors who had appeared on the ice. He couldn't get his ears to work and take in anything the doctors were saying about Ilya's condition.

His heart was in his throat as he watched them perform CPR and checked his other vitals. Then, a couple of paramedics appeared with a backboard and a stretcher. Shane blinked rapidly in the hopes that would clear his vision, which was blurring for some reason. His hand landed on his abdomen as his chest tightened and his heart pounded against his ribcage. Shane felt the nausea hit him just before his stomach turned and he vomited right there on the ice.

As he recovered from the sudden revolt of his stomach, Shane felt the touch of someone's hand on his shoulder. He looked up and came face to face with Hayden Pike. His best friend's mouth was moving, but Shane still couldn't hear over the ringing and rushing noises in his ears. Hayden's face shifted into concern as he continued to talk but Shane didn't respond. Shane opened his mouth, but the words got lost in his chest. His eyes swept behind Hayden to watch as they took Ilya off the ice on a stretcher, his body completely still.

Shane opened his mouth to yell, scream, speak, anything but instead of words more vomit came out. Hayden unfortunately, caught some of it on his jersey and skates. Fortunately, he recovered quickly and wrapped his arm around Shane ushering him off the ice and back toward their locker room. Shane's body felt weak and shaky as they moved slowly away from the ice. He'd never witnessed a player get sick on the ice before, but he figured the clean up must be similar to when a player would get injured and his blood would litter the surface.

As they re-entered the locker room, Hayden guided Shane past the stalls and into the showers. With Hayden's steady hand on his back, Shane found himself, gear still on, under the flow of warm water. It was the perfect antidote to whatever was affecting his ability to speak and hear. It all came rushing in on him suddenly, every little sound. Every one of his senses is now back online and working overtime. Shane leaned over, his elbows on his knees, the water rushing through his hair, creating a sort of umbrella of water flowing down over him. With the water there to hide them, his eyes let the tears he'd been holding back for hours, flow.

"It's okay. I've got you, Shane." Hayden's voice accompanied the hand that was providing a steady heat up and down his back in a rubbing motion.

Shane gagged, but this time nothing came up. He spit onto the floor of the shower and watched as the water washed it down the drain in the floor. He slid down until he was on his knees and then slumped toward the wall until he was sitting with his back against it and his legs out in front of him. Hayden stood just past his skates and started to untie them so that they could be taken off. The tears continued to flow down Shane's cheeks as the water washed them away and his breaths came in sharp huffs.

Once he'd gotten control on himself, Shane looked over at Hayden and spoke, "I'm sorry. I've been under the weather all week, it must've caught up to me."

Hayden gave him a pained look and then reached up to turn off the water. "Bullshit. How long?"

Shane thumped his head back against the wall of the shower. He moved his line of sight to the ceiling, Hayden's gaze too much for him. He let a few awkward minutes pass between them before he responded, knowing Hayden never begged for answers like he appeared to be now.

"Like a week and a half. But we're athletes, we power through. It's no big deal."

Hayden groaned and Shane watched as he rubbed his hands down his face. "Not the vomiting dude. That's whatever. I'm talking Rozanov. How long?"

Shane's chest tightened in a panic. He quickly swept his eyes over the locker room and saw that they were completely alone. The faint sounds of the game resuming could be heard from the walkway beyond. His heart was pounding against his ribcage again as his career flashed before his eyes. *Was this the end?*

"I don't know what you mean. Rozanov is an asshole. I hate the guy as much as everyone else." Shane scrambled to cover his bases, but he knew from the look Hayden gave him he wasn't buying it.

"The minute Rozanov hit the ice you froze. And not like 'shit something just happened on the ice' froze but 'shit my life flashed before my eyes' froze. Don't worry, no one else was paying attention so no one saw. But I did. So, I'm asking again, how long?"

Shane leaned his head back once more and closed his eyes again. His mouth felt like cotton and too much saliva. He was probably going to vomit again, and wasn't that just his luck.

"I'm sorry about vomiting on your uniform, Hayd." Shane said, instead of answering Hayden. He didn't have the brain power to address the elephant in the room right now.

"It's no biggie. You know how many times one of my kids has vomited on one of my jerseys? Too many times to count." Hayden chuckled breathlessly. Then, instead of pushing, as Shane expected, he put his arm out and motioned for Shane to stand up. "Let's get you changed into your street clothes. You're done for tonight."

After everything that had happened, Shane didn't argue with him. He followed Hayden, who was carrying Shane's skates, back to the stalls and plopped himself down inside his. He slowly started to change back into his street clothes. And over the next fifteen minutes, with Hayden not pressing him about what he'd seen, Shane started to feel more comfortable with being honest with his best friend.

"2010." Shane finally said as he pulled on his Reeboks and tied them just the way he liked them.

Hayden looked up, pulling on his sweater, "Huh?"

“You asked how long. Since 2010.” Shane sighed, staring at the floor between his feet.

If Shane had been looking up he would’ve seen Hayden’s mouth open and close in quick succession, much like a fish. But, he hadn’t so he took the silence to mean Hayden was either processing or was mad.

“You can’t tell anyone. If he gets outed and loses his contract he’d be deported back to Russia where it wouldn’t be safe for him.”

Hayden finally managed to find the words that had been eluding him this whole time. “Shit man. Don’t you fucking worry. I’m not going to tell anyone. It’s just...since 2010? That was like your rookie season.”

Shane finally lifted his head, “Summer before actually.”

—

Cliff Marleau

After Rozanov went down, Cliff didn’t have to think. He immediately dived for Comeau to give him a piece of his mind. It wasn’t the first time an opponent got rough with Ilya on the ice, but it was the first time Cliff saw Ilya get hit so hard he couldn’t get back up. He was so distracted by shoving his fists into Comeau’s face, well worth the penalty in his opinion, that he missed the other excitement on the ice. It wasn’t until the ref had shoved him back toward the visiting team’s bench that Cliff Marleau saw Pike escort Shane Hollander off the ice too.

He saw the vomit that the officials were trying to clean up alongside the remnants of the equipment trash from helping out Roz. *Had Hollander gotten sick on the ice? Or had he been hit causing him to vomit?* Cliff let the thought leave his mind almost immediately after he thought it. Shane Hollander was on the opposing team, he barely knew the guy, no need to worry about it. At least now both teams were down their best players. Perhaps Boston could win this shit after all.

Before he knew it, the third period was done and Boston was trudging back to their lockers in eerie silence. Their captain was down for the first time in his career, and even the most seasoned veterans were spooked by it. Sure, Roz was a bit of an asshole, but they all respected him and loved his cocky humor, especially when they were in the midst of a tough game.

“Hey coach!” Varkov shouted across the locker room at LeClaire when he finally made an appearance, “How’s Roz?”

Cliff looked up and saw the lines of exhaustion on their coach’s face as he looked around the locker room at everyone else.

“I am not privy to any detailed information about his condition at this time. All I know is that when they loaded him onto the ambulance he was unresponsive and they were fighting to keep his heart going.”

Cliff slumped down onto the bench inside his stall, right next to Roz’s. The energy and confidence he always carried with him seeped out of him at the thought that something could be seriously wrong with his best friend. He thought about Roz’s jokes before the game and how he had made a bet for all of them in order to motivate the guys to send Montreal packing, knocked back from playoff favorability. He sniffed and then stood up once more.

“Listen up! I know we are all worried about Roz, but we played a great game. You should all be proud of that. If Roz were here right now he’d be asking each of you to pay up for each of the goals he made in the 1st and 2nd periods. I won’t hold you boys to that, just keep him in your thoughts. Let’s go back to the hotel, rest up, and we will visit him at the hospital tomorrow before our flight leaves.” Cliff looked around at each of the guys and saw them all give solemn nods.

“Marleau, could you come chat with me?” Coach LeClaire motioned his clipboard toward the office space off to the side of the locker stalls. Cliff gave him a nod and followed.

Once they were in the office, Coach closed the door and sat behind the desk. Cliff took the other chair and stared at the older man, a million scenarios of what he could possibly need running through his head.

“So, according to Rozanov’s NHL file he listed you as his medical proxy, did you know that?” LeClaire looked at him sympathetically.

Cliff’s hand went up to his hair and he pulled at the strands it got tangled in. *Fuckin hell, Rozy. What the fuck were you thinking?*

“I, uh, no.” Cliff stumbled over his words, thoughts still racing over what that means.

“Not exactly sure why he didn’t name someone in his family, but here we are. Since you are his medical proxy you’ll need to go to the hospital in case they need you to make decisions for him.” LeClaire had what looked like Rozanov’s file out on the desk in front of him.

Cliff moved his hand from his hair to his mouth and rubbed back and forth a couple of times before another thought hit him. “Am I the only person he listed as a person to contact?”

If the answer was yes, Cliff didn’t know if his heart could take it. Roz, who was everyone’s friend in the locker room, had no one outside of it.

“He also has a Jane listed. No last name, just Jane.” LeClaire’s eyebrows furrowed at that. “And a Svetlana Vetrova.”

Cliff sighed, thank god Roz wasn’t alone outside of hockey. And leave it to Roz to have two women he frequently hooked up with listed as his points of contact. He smirked knowing he’d been right all those years ago when he’d chirped Roz for his “Montreal Girl” meaning something to him only for Roz to deny it.

“I don’t know who this ‘Jane’ person is, but there is a number listed for Svetlana right here in his file.” LeClaire continued.

Cliff looked up, “Don’t worry coach. I know how to get ahold of Jane. She’s his Montreal girl.”

“The one you guys are always chirping at him about? Fuck, I hope she wasn’t at the game tonight.”

“So do I,” Cliff muttered as he stood up. “I’ll go call her.”

“Thanks, Marleau. You’re a great guy. It’s why we gave you that A on your chest. You know how to step in when Roz can’t.”

Cliff stepped back into the locker room and found that a few of the guys had taken their leave, but that the majority of them were still hanging around. He gave a small nod to Varkov and Connors before he stepped up to Roz’s stall and grabbed his phone off the shelf. He’d never really handled his phone without Roz right there. In fact, he’d only handled Roz’s phone for him on two other occasions, both times were when he’d had a few too many on a night out and needed help summoning a car back to the hotel or his place depending on where they were.

Cliff turned the screen on and shook his head seeing that the background image was a photo of the back of Rozanov’s jersey hanging in his stall back in Boston. *Asshole*. He swiftly typed in 8181 to unlock the phone and found himself holding his breath as he was given access to all the things on Ilya Rozanov’s private cell phone. If it weren’t an emergency situation, Cliff would probably scroll through his photos to see what the guy found interesting enough to take a picture of.

Instead, he went to his contacts and scrolled until he found Jane. There was an angry cat face emoji next to her name. Cliff smiled to himself at that. Trust Roz to date a girl who was as angry and hot headed as he was. His thumb hovered over the call command before he stepped out into the hallway to make one of the worst calls he could ever imagine making.

The phone rang a few times before the call connected and Cliff heard anxious breathing for a moment before a voice rang out, upset and clearly crying, and distinctly not feminine.

“Fuck, Ilya. Where are you? Please tell me you’re okay!” There was something vaguely familiar about the voice coming through the speaker, but Cliff couldn’t put his finger on it.

But then, in the silence that had settled between them briefly, he heard someone in the background say, “Shane, breathe.”

Shane fucking Hollander was Jane.

Cliff shook his head and gathered himself enough to finally speak. “Um, actually it’s Cliff Marleau. From Ilya’s team. Your name was listed, well Jane was listed on his people to contact in his file.”

There was a muffled curse on the other end of the call before Shane Hollander came back and spoke, his voice breathy and held back, as if he was preparing himself for the worst.

“H-how is he?”

Cliff closed his eyes, cursing Roz silently for keeping such a big thing from him, but also understanding why he did.

“All I know is that he has been taken to Montreal General. I am headed over there myself if you want to meet me there.”

Cliff wasn’t sure the guy would agree considering how famous he was in this city, but he wanted to offer just in case. Considering Roz would probably be happy to see him.

“Uh, yeah. Thank you.” Hollander let out a wet breath.

“Be sure to come prepared for the press and concerned fans in the lobby.” Cliff muttered, he would hate for the person that meant so much to his best friend to be unnecessarily outed because he showed up at the hospital looking for Ilya Rozanov.

“I know the back entrance and can easily slip in and out. It's not the first time I've had to avoid being noticed at the hospital.” Shane finally replied, and then the line went dead and he was gone.

Once the call was disconnected, Cliff stood there with the phone in his hand and thought over everything he had just learned. Roz wasn't entirely the ladies man he'd led everyone to believe, how true it actually was Cliff still wasn't sure. But, what he was sure of was that Shane Hollander was important enough to Roz that he blushed while texting him and listed him in his official file, under a pseudonym but still, he was important enough.

“Yo, Marley! Any word from Coach about Rozy?” St. Simone hollered from across the locker room pulling Cliff out of his thoughts.

He looked up and saw a couple of guys standing there in their street clothes with bags slung over their shoulders. He shook his head and grabbed his bag and Roz's.

“No, but I'm headed to the hospital now. I will text the team when I know more. Don't come to the hospital. Go back to the hotel and rest. Tomorrow's a travel day.” Cliff reminded them with a quick slap to each of their shoulders as he passed them on his way out.

—

Shane Hollander

“Fuck!” Shane hung up the phone with Cliff Marleau and started to anxiously pace the locker room as Hayden watched him. The sounds of the other guys getting changed out of their uniforms fell away, as if they didn't exist.

“What happened man? Is everything okay?” Hayden's voice caused Shane to stop pacing the length of the room. As he came to a stop his stomach lurched reminding him of the other secret he had to keep buried. The one he was going to tell Ilya about after the game tonight.

“Fuck!” Shane pulled at his hair and felt his chest tighten, the beginnings of a panic attack upon him.

Just as suddenly as his chest got heavy and his vision narrowed, Hayden was there with his hands on Shane’s biceps and staring him in the face.

“Shane, relax. Breathe, 2, 3, 4. Come on man. Breathe with me.”

Shane felt the panic start to slide back into the recesses of his mind, silenced but not forgotten. It was likely it would come out again to make an appearance. Especially once he made it to the hospital.

“I need to get to the hospital. They took him to Montreal General.” Shane spun around trying to remember what he needed to grab before he left. “I need...”

Hayden stepped up to him and forced him to stop moving and gaze directly at his best friend. Shane held his eyes even with Hayden’s for a moment before he closed his eyes and took a deep steadying breath.

“Okay, I can take you to Montreal General, but we have to talk to Coach Theriault first, at the very least. That way you don’t get in trouble with the whole Voyageurs organization. You know, the less questions the better.” Hayden gave him a pointed look, reminding Shane that he had secrets to keep and an image to uphold, no matter how he currently felt.

“Right, the team.” Shane sighed and crossed back to his locker stall and sat down.

Just as he did, the guys around them came back into focus. Shane realized just how not alone he currently was. He swept his gaze quickly around the room to gauge if anyone had made notice of his breakdown, but it seemed as though no one even batted an eye. Shane figured his typical anxiety disorder helped in that regard, it wasn’t uncommon for him to have a moment of panic when things didn’t go the way he anticipated. Most of the guys probably just thought he was freaking out because he was under the weather and they’d lost the game.

J.J. looked at him quizzically, but even he turned his gaze away after only a few seconds. He shrugged his shoulders as if he agreed there was nothing to worry about. Just Shane Hollander being way too intense about hockey again. Nothing new. Shane felt his body breathe a sigh of relief. With an encouraging nod from Hayden, Shane stepped toward Theriault's office off to the side.

He knocked on the door frame, and watched as Theriault looked over notes from his clipboard. The older man looked up at the sound and gave a forced smile as he motioned Shane to step inside. Shane closed the door behind him and sat down.

"Hey, Coach. I'm sorry about what happened on the ice tonight. I've been under the weather, but I thought I was fine enough to play." Shane bit his lip and hoped his coach would accept his explanation with no fuss.

"Hollander, you more than anyone on this team, hell anyone in this league, are the one most likely to play even while battling the flu. Just get yourself sorted out by the time we travel to Buffalo in a few days. Take tomorrow off, rest up, be on your game by the time the wheels go up. You understand?" Theriault raised an eyebrow at him.

Shane stared down at his hands. *Was now the time he informed his coach and by extension the whole organization that it is more than just the flu? Is now the best time to quit for the rest of the season?* He cleared his throat and then forced himself to look up.

"About that," Shane faltered, he didn't know what to say, but he knew he needed to play things safe. "I actually went to my doctor this morning. Just to be sure things are all good. He suggested I take a few weeks to rest and recuperate. I ignored his suggestion because I thought I knew better. But, after tonight, I think he might've been right."

"So, you won't be joining us for Buffalo?" Theriault asked in clarification, his voice quiet and measured, which is how Shane knew the man was angry.

"Or the whole road trip stretch. I'm sorry Coach. I know it's not convenient, but I need to do this if I hope to not completely derail my career." Shane's knee started to bounce in anxious anticipation of Theriault throwing the worst at him.

With a sigh, Theriault leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hand down his face. “Okay, we will reconfigure the first line to adjust. We will put you on the temporary injury list which will give you three weeks to get your shit together. Come back healthy and ready to fight our way into the post season, if we can by that point.”

His words might’ve been supportive on the surface, but Shane knew how much Theriault would be pulling punches with him once he came back from this break. Theriault was the type of coach who felt Shane shouldn’t ever need time off because he was the best in the league. The pressures he’d been putting on Shane’s shoulders for his entire career had always been a comfort, but right now they felt like a punishment.

“I will, I promise Coach.” Shane stood up and hastily left the man’s office. He needed to get to Montreal General and Ilya Rozanov. He needed to know if the love of his life was doing okay.

—

Room I156, aka Ilya’s room in the intensive care unit. Ilya Rozanov was in critical condition.

Shane stood outside the room, unable to reach out and grab the handle, putting him that much closer to Ilya Rozanov. This would be the first time they were being forced into a situation where seeing them together would cause a stir and create more questions than they wished to handle. Shane lifted his arm up, trying to reach for the door, but halfway through the motion he let his arm drop once more. Despite wanting nothing more than to step inside that room and be next to the man he loved, he couldn’t.

His stomach lurched again, it was as if the other elephant in the room wanted to have a say. Shane shoved any thoughts of his *pregnancy* from his mind. He didn’t have time to focus on that right now. Right now he needed to worry about Ilya and gain the courage to step over the threshold into his hospital room. He turned away from the door, his breaths coming in little spurts. His eyes burned with the burgeoning emotions threatening to leak out.

A nurse approached him, she had a sympathetic look on her face and a little sad smile. He turned away from her and back to the door he was trying to convince himself to go through. *Come on, Hollander. Jesus Christ. Ilya needs you to be brave and walk through that door. He needs to know you are there for him, just like he’s always there for you.*

Just as he was about to reach out to the handle once more, the door swung open and standing before Shane was the tall, looming, intimidating figure of Cliff Marleau. The taller, bigger Boston player looked surprised to see Shane actually there. He looked beyond Shane to the nurse he had turned away from, and Shane appreciated that despite his surprise Marleau seemed unlikely to make a big scene.

“I have a few questions for the doctor, is she around?” Marleau’s voice was deep, but filled with an unnamed emotion.

It surprised Shane to see someone so larger-than-life have a normal, human reaction to someone he cared about being hurt. Marleau had always been this figure in Shane’s life that he never wanted to cross on the ice because he was ruthless and unforgiving. But this version of Marleau was the exact opposite. His demeanor made him appear smaller, more vulnerable.

“I-is he...” Shane found himself speaking, stopping midway, unable to speak around his emotions.

Marleau turned to him. He reached out and gently grasped Shane by the shoulder and manhandled him across the threshold that had been insurmountable only moments ago.

“Come, I think he’d love knowing you are here.” Marleau whispered, showing a kindness Shane had never considered he possessed.

Shane nodded silently and followed Marleau until they went into the room deep enough to get a full visual of Ilya Rozanov. The Russian looked small lying there so still. It made Shane’s heart stutter. He brought his hand up to his mouth and willed his tears back, not wanting to appear weak or overly emotional in front of Cliff fucking Marleau.

Ilya had a cannula in his nose providing him with oxygen and his arm was attached to an IV bag delivering some kind of medication to his system. Shane looked from one machine to the next, taking stock of everything attached to the man he loved. There was a heart monitor alongside the IV and oxygen. But, other than that, Ilya Rozanov could’ve been simply sleeping after a long, hard game. It made Shane’s heart ache to see just how normal he looked

despite nothing about this being normal. He wanted to wrap himself up in the man, but couldn't.

Shane hung back, too scared to step close enough to Ilya that he could touch him. They'd kept their relationship a secret for so long, he couldn't bring himself to break it out into the open, not even now that Marleau already knew.

"Hey, Roz, I got someone here who wants to see you. We're gonna talk later about how you kept him from me all these years. But, for now, I think it'll do you both some good to see each other." Marleau's voice was low, but kind. It made Shane realize that Marleau wasn't an enemy. He would keep their secret without even having to be asked.

Marleau looked toward him and Shane felt his breath catch in his chest. Too many things were happening to him all at once, he didn't know what to do. His heart ached to grab Ilya's hand and never let go, but they were still in a very public hospital and neither of them were even known to be friendly to each other. Add to it that Marleau and Hayden both now knew of this thing between them and Ilya had no say in the conversations being had.

Then there was that thing he keeps trying not to think about, the thing that is rearing its ugly head just waiting to explode and ruin both of their lives and their careers. Shane bit his bottom lip and turned his gaze away from Marleau, the pressure of maintaining eye contact too overwhelming for him. He knew he should probably say something to ease the tension in the room, but what the fuck does he say to a guy he's only ever known and hated on the ice?

As if the universe loved to fuck with Shane's mental health right now, his phone started to ring, pulling his attention. He pulled the device out of his pocket and groaned seeing Rose on the screen. *Shit, he didn't have time to deal with her right now.* Shane couldn't stop the tears this time when they started to spill over, his chest got so tight he couldn't even breathe, and his knees went weak, forcing him to fall to the floor.

If Ilya were awake right now his soothing voice would calm the voices inside Shane's head but he isn't. So, the voices grow louder, more insistent. He dropped his phone to the floor beside him and curled on himself as his hands covered up his ears, hoping that would block out the voices. But it's no use, they're inside his head after all. He kept trying to catch his breath and focus his attention on the one problem he could handle right now, walking the few steps necessary to be at Rozanov's bedside, holding his hand.

His stomach churned again, angrily this time. For a brief second, Shane allowed his brain to think the worst thought possible. *What if I were to miscarry right now? It wouldn't be the worst thing, would it?* He shook his head and moaned under his breath, he couldn't think like that. He needed to make sure Ilya woke up and he needed to have a chance to make Ilya understand how sorry he was for leaving him and running to Rose. The thought of Rose brought him back to his phone, which was ringing once again.

Fuck. Shane didn't want to deal with Rose right now, but it seemed as though she wasn't about to take no for an answer. So, he focused on quelling down the panic that was now taking over every nerve in his body. Everything felt like it was on fire. He couldn't speak and explain himself. He was certain that Marleau was watching him with so much judgment on his face. But, after what felt like hours, when he finally looked up with clear vision once more, the only thing he saw on Marleau's face was concern. Shane swiped at his face with his arm, removing any remaining trace of the tears he'd shed and the snot that had built up. Then, he stood up on his two feet once more and picked up his phone.

"I need to take care of this," he waved his phone as if to explain why he was inching back toward the hallway once more.

"Okay." Marleau shrugged, there might've been judgment in his tone, but Shane couldn't be sure.

Once Shane was back in the hallway he unlocked his phone and dialed Rose back. She sounded breathless and upset when she finally answered.

"Shane! Oh my god! When I saw you leave the game early because you got sick on the ice I freaked out. And then you didn't answer any of my calls from the last hour or so."

"Sorry, Rose. I was handling stuff," Shane muttered.

"Where are you? Do you want me to come and be with you? Are you home?" Rose's voice was still a bit panicked, but now she was in game plan mode.

Shane sighed and leaned against the wall next to Ilya's door. "No, I don't need you to come. I'm currently at the hospital."

"Oh god! Which one? I can be there within 30 minutes at the latest." Rose was anxious, and he could hear her gathering things in the background.

Shane rubbed his face. "Shit. No, Rose, I'm not at the hospital for me. Look, I didn't want to do this over the phone, but I think we should cool things off."

Rose's end of the phone call went eerily quiet. "Why are you at the hospital, Shane," she finally muttered after the silence grew painstakingly large between them.

"I think you can guess, if you were watching the game." Shane didn't say it out loud, but the implication was astoundingly loud and clear. That alone eased some of the weight on his chest.

"Oh." Rose breathed, "Oh, Shane. I suspected that maybe you were gay, but I didn't want to say anything just in case you needed time."

They talked for a bit more between the two of them. And as Shane hung up, Rose made him promise to text her when things settled down so they could get a coffee together and really talk it out. Shane smiled and agreed. Then, he slid his phone back into his pocket and leaned his head against the wall, closing his eyes. This whole day had been the most exhausting he'd ever experienced and it was far from being over.

—

Cliff Marleau

Twenty-four hours. It had been twenty-four hours since Cliff watched his closest friend in the world fall to the ice like a rag doll. Twenty-four hours since he'd been sitting in a hard plastic chair watching a green line tell him that Roz was alive, but not present. Twenty-four hours of spiralling thoughts about how much this sport can take from you in the blink of an eye. And

most importantly, it had been twenty-four hours of Cliff sitting there in silence watching Shane Hollander.

When Hollander and Rozanov had first hit the professional circuit at 18, Cliff had been about to start his 3rd season with Boston. He was a part of a burgeoning team, hellbent on securing fresh new talent that could take them places the old fucks only ever dreamed of. When the rumors had started circulating that Boston would get the first round pick at the draft that year, Cliff had secretly hoped they would sign the good ole Canadian boy from Ottawa. Nothing against the Russian powerhouse, but he wasn't sure a guy who barely spoke English could help their team rebuild the way they needed to get back into the playoffs.

So, naturally, when Ilya Rozanov had walked into that locker room his first day, Cliff had paid attention. Rozanov might've blustered about being the best in the league, better than that good boy Hollander, but Cliff noticed something others missed. He saw the terror in Rozanov's eyes. After seeing that, he had marched right into LeClaire's office and asked if he could be the rookie's mentor and roommate during away games. LeClaire had smiled and heartily agreed, just happy to see one of the seasoned players volunteering to look out for a kid thousands of miles from his home.

Watching Shane Hollander at Ilya Rozanov's bedside Cliff is struck by how comfortable and familiar the guy was around Ilya. How every movement and stroke of comfort he showed was calculated and perfect. Like he knew all the right things to do to subconsciously put Roz at ease. And Cliff saw it actually happen. A few hours ago, Roz's heart rate spiked causing the heart monitor to make a few sharp whistles. Before any nurses could rush to his bedside, Hollander had reached out and placed his hand into Roz's curls and had gently rubbed his scalp, letting his fingers get tangled. The effect was instantaneous. Roz's heart slowed down and his monitors went silent. It was as if he'd had a nightmare or something and Hollander's touch eased his mind.

In the twenty-four hours that the two had shared this tense space, Hollander hadn't said much of anything. He would occasionally mutter something under his breath and squeeze Roz's hand, but nothing Cliff could pick up on. Cliff was a talker, it was one of the many reasons he and Roz got on so well. They would fill the awkward spaces and silences with stupid chirps and comments, but also knew how to be open when the moment called for it. It had taken almost 5 years of playing together before Roz opened up about his family and Russia, at the start of this season, but when he had, Cliff had taken that moment seriously and gave the appropriate comments in return.

Taking a stab at the dark, Cliff shifted in his seat and started talking. “Okay, Roz, either you wake up and start chirping or I’m gonna have to bore Hollander here to tears with stories about my horrendously bad dating history.”

His eyes met Hollander’s over Roz’s prone body and they exchanged smirks. Then, surprising everyone, Hollander actually responded.

“He’ll probably wake up and groan, ‘ugh Marley why must you be so boring.’” It was the first time Hollander had really spoken since they’d exchanged information in that initial phone call.

“Yeah, he would.” Cliff mumbled, slumping back down in his chair once more. He let the comfortable silence linger between them for a second, “I asked him about Jane once.”

“Y-you did?” Hollander looked both intrigued and terrified. Cliff nodded with a smile.

“I had chirped him previously about how he must be pretty whipped by his Montreal girl since he was always blushing looking at his phone. And after he insisted Russians don’t blush, I asked him about her.”

Cliff observed as Hollander looked at Ilya sadly and didn’t respond. He had hoped that this would encourage the other player to continue the back and forth they’d started. But, he also realized this was probably the most Hollander had ever spoken in one sitting in his life.

“He said, ‘Marley, shut your idiot face. She is boring Canadian, there’s nothing to tell.’” Cliff chuckled under his breath at that. “Now I can see why he couldn’t say anything else, it would reveal too much.”

A silence fell between them. And then, Hollander mumbled a quick reply. “No, that was him being completely honest. That’s how he describes me.”

After that exchange, Hollander had stood up abruptly and left the room for some time. Cliff was in the middle of watching the Buffalo vs. Montreal game on the TV by the time Hollander came back hours later. He was wearing different clothes and his hair looked wet, as if he'd just gotten out of the shower.

"Ah come on! You don't lose focus in the neutral zone!" Cliff exclaimed as he watched Ryan Price shove one of the Voyageurs to the ice.

Hollander took off his coat and draped it over the chair he usually sat in. He leaned over and placed a discreet kiss on Roz's temple before he turned to stare at the screen.

"Who's winning?" Hollander asked as he sat down. His tone told Cliff that he was grateful to have something other than personal stuff to talk about.

"Somehow, Buffalo. It's like your team can't do shit without you there." Cliff muttered, and then a thought occurred to him. "Why aren't you there?"

"Officially? The flu." Hollander shrugged, "Unofficially, I couldn't dream of taking the ice right now."

"Canada's Golden Boy lied to get out of hockey?" Cliff shook his head and smirked, he was starting to see what drew Roz to Hollander the longer he spent time with the guy. "Now I see why Roz and you are together."

"Because I lied?" Hollander's voice sounded like he didn't believe Cliff, and honestly he didn't blame him.

"No, because you chose him over hockey. Roz doesn't have people that choose him."

Cliff let his gaze slide over to observe Hollander's reaction to his words. What he saw gave him quite a bit to think about. He'd figured Hollander and Roz had only been doing this for a couple of years at most, but the way Hollander's eyes grew sad and then fond told him it

went deeper than that. Whatever was going on between the two rivals was serious and probably built to last.

“We aren’t actually.” Hollander finally mumbled, pulling Cliff’s attention.

“What’s that?”

Hollander sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Rozanov and I. We haven’t spoken in months. It’s complicated.”

Cliff didn’t know how to respond. It wasn’t his place to make heads or tails of whatever Hollander was trying to say.

“The doctor came by when you were out. He told me that Roz’s scans looked good so they were going to wean him off the sedative tomorrow morning.” Cliff filled the silence between them as the game on the TV went into overtime with a last minute goal by Pike of all people. “How the fuck did Pike manage a goal?”

“He’s not that bad, you know.” Hollander responded. Cliff belatedly remembered that Pike and Hollander were famously best friends. “And, weaning him off sounds positive.”

“Yeah, doc said he could wake up within a few hours or a few days.” Cliff shrugged, “But they’re always saying vague shit like that so they can’t get sued if something doesn’t go right.”

“Yeah. Last time I had a concussion it knocked me out for a bit. My dad said my mom almost went full tiger on the doctor for being vague as hell.” Hollander chuckled, then he leaned forward and rubbed his hands down his face with a sigh. “Fuck.”

“I know you don’t really talk much, but...” Cliff started, unable to finish because he’d lost his nerve halfway through his statement. They weren’t friends. Hell they played on rival teams. In no universe would they ever be close. But in this environment, as the world around

them moved on and they were stuck in limbo, Cliff could see them leaning on each other in a way they both needed. “If you wanna talk about anything, I promise not to judge.”

He watched as Hollander seemed to flash through a series of thoughts and emotions after Cliff stopped speaking. His face looked strained, like he wanted to talk about something but didn’t know how. Hollander’s phone buzzed, pulling his attention elsewhere, for a moment.

He tapped away at the keyboard for some time before putting it back in his pocket and slumping down in his chair. Hollander rubbed his hands down his face once more and this time when his gaze briefly turned to Cliff, the older man could see the exhaustion pouring off him and a hint of fear or maybe it was sadness.

When Hollander actually spoke, it surprised Cliff for how personal it was.

“You date a lot right? I know you and Il-Rozanov go out to clubs and bars quite a bit.”

—

Shane Hollander

Shane sat there awkwardly waiting for Marleau to respond. He wasn’t asking out of an insane level of jealousy nor was he fishing for confirmation of their exclusivity. He was asking because the fact that he had found out he was pregnant not even two days ago was starting to weigh heavily on him. He needed to see how Marleau would handle an unexpected pregnancy because maybe that’s how Ilya would handle it too. And hell, maybe Ilya had fucked up at some point with a woman and Marleau knew about it.

“Hey, Hollander, breathe.” Marleau finally spoke. “If you’re worried that Roz has been picking up women you don’t need to. In fact, I’m willing to bet his pissy behavior started about the time you two last talked. It’s been months of him being every bit the angry Russian everyone paints him to be.”

Shane swallowed hard. That wasn’t why he’d asked, but finding out Ilya had been miserable without Shane made him feel something he didn’t recognize. Instead of unpacking that, he

locked it in a box and shoved it to the back.

“Nah, that’s...” Shane sighed and rubbed his sweaty hands on his knees. “I, um, was wondering. Um, have, you um.” *Shit why was this so hard. Just fucking ask, Hollander.*

Shane took a deep breath, turned his eyes to Marleau, and finally said what he’d been trying to say for minutes. “Have you ever accidentally gotten a woman pregnant?”

Marleau whistled and leaned back. He pulled his gaze from Shane and stared at the opposite wall for a minute before he turned back, a sympathetic look on his face.

“Woah. You weren’t kidding when you said things were complicated. So what, you got Rose Landry pregnant and you don’t know how to tell *him*?” He motioned toward Ilya’s prone figure on the bed.

Shane’s mind was working a mile a minute. *No, that's not what is happening. But it would be easier to explain than the reality. I don't owe Marleau the truth. It's not his life or his relationship. I could still get advice from him with the assumption it's related to Rose. But what if he tells Roz and then they slip further apart instead of coming closer together? Fuck. Why'd I even open my big mouth?*

“Oh, um, maybe? She called and said we needed to talk, that it would be life changing.” Shane shrugged, hoping he appeared as casual and nonchalant as possible.

“Ahh. Well, don’t sweat it, Hollander. If she is pregnant the only thing you need to remember is the choice is hers. And if she chooses to keep it, you step up and support her choice.” Marleau gave him a sympathetic smile. “I had to take one of my sexual partners to a clinic once. It’s not easy, but I think she was grateful I was there even if we never spoke again after.”

Shane swallowed hard again. He thought of what might happen if he chose an abortion. *Would that ruin their relationship beyond repair?*

“And, um, did you want something with her before all that or was it a nothing situation?” Shane rubbed his hands against his knees again, the sweat pouring off his palms.

“Shit.” Marleau was looking at him with a concerned countenance. “Hollander, I think you need to have this talk with Rose. My situation was different. The woman was a quick release. I didn’t even know her name until I took her to a clinic. It’s not the same if you’re dating someone but not ready for a kid.”

“Yeah,” Shane chuckled and let out the breath he’d been holding. “You’re right.”

“For what it’s worth. I think if you’re honest with Roz he’d understand.” Marleau muttered, “Something tells me you could murder someone and he’d still forgive you.”

Shane let Marleau’s double ended advice settle into his chest as he looked toward Ilya and wrapped his hand around Ilya’s, interlocking their fingers. Their lives were going to be so different by the time Ilya left this hospital. Shane needed to make a decision about their baby before it was too late, but every time he thought about it panic set in. And maybe that was a decision in itself.

If Shane was freaking out this much just thinking of the word how could he possibly go forward with it and end up with a baby? And what about his career? A pregnancy would not only take him off the ice right before a playoffs run but it would also force his relationship with Ilya into the light. He looked over at Ilya and gently moved his curls off his forehead.

Despite knowing Marleau was right there watching a sports recap, Shane leaned close to Ilya’s ear and spoke to him.

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have run away that night. I should’ve stayed and talked through it with you. I just got overwhelmed. This was never supposed to be serious. I need you to wake up. I need us to be okay again.”

Shane discreetly wiped at the tears spilling down his cheeks. His phone chose that moment to start ringing. Pulling back from Ilya to deal with it, Shane saw Hayden on the caller ID.

“Hey, Hayd.” Shane breathed out, grateful for his best friend's distraction. His stomach twisted, forcing Shane to breathe through his nose and force himself to not throw up all over Ilya's hospital bed.

“Did you watch the game?” Hayden's voice sounded kind of breathless. Shane smirked knowing he'd probably just rushed through his evening routine so he could check in on Shane before calling Jackie and the kids.

“Yeah, Marleau and I turned it on. It was weird to see you get a goal and not hear Rozanov complain about it.” Shane allowed a small chuckle to leave his body. “In fact, it's super weird he's this quiet at all.”

“I still can't believe you guys have been doing this for nearly a decade. Anyways, that goal was for you man. We missed you out there.”

“Yeah neither can I, if I'm being honest.” Shane rubbed his eyes. He was exhausted. “Thanks for checking in, Hayd. I appreciate it. The doctors are gonna wake him up tomorrow so I'll probably be back in a few days. Well, more like when you guys get back from this stretch of away games.”

The minute he hung up with Hayden a weight settled in Shane's chest once again. He hated lying to his best friend. Especially after just being caught in a huge lie for years. But, until he knew what he was going to do next he needed Hayden and the team to think it would be business as usual.

“You are a bad liar.” Marleau muttered from his spot.

Shane smirked and shook his head. “Now I see why you and Roz are such good friends. He thinks I'm a bad liar, too. And yet, the whole league is oblivious to our relationship.”

“Coincidence. It helps that most of the guys in the league are stupid, unobservant, and have had multiple concussions. They see what they want to see.” Marleau gave him a knowing

look.

“Yeah. Maybe.” Shane bit his bottom lip.

“I don’t think Boston would give a shit if they found out about Roz. I hope Montreal is the same.” Marleau added softly, turning his attention to his phone, essentially ending the conversation.

But Shane was thrown by Marleau’s earlier comment so he threw caution to the wind and pressed the guy. “What did you mean? That I’m a bad liar?”

Marleau looked up at Shane and then threw a glance toward Ilya, “Nothing. Just that you’re clearly holding something back about the timeline of when you’ll be back on the ice. It makes sense you know,” Marleau motioned toward Ilya, “But, I’m headed back to my team tomorrow. I would think you’d want as few questions as possible so you’d do the same.”

“I, uh, I’ve got some things to consider.” Shane surprised himself by his own honesty. “Adjacent to Rozanov being hurt, I mean.”

Marleau gave Shane a measured look, but then he nodded and turned back to his phone. “A pregnancy scandal doesn’t have to derail your career unless you let it.”

After that, a silence fell. It wasn’t comfortable, but it wasn’t entirely awkward either. Shane realized that he kind of liked Marleau. He was clearly a guy that Ilya could trust with his life and he hadn’t judged them upon finding out about their relationship. In the NHL that was half the battle. Shane slumped back in his chair and gave a sigh of relief.

Ilya Rozanov

Ilya slowly started to come back from blackness. It started with random Russian phrases he'd grown up knowing and expressing. Things like *Yebat* and *Eto otstoy* and even one of his personal favorites, *Yob tvoju mat*. The pain he felt in his head was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. Worse than any of the many concussions he'd sustained over the years.

Chto, blyat', sluchilos'? *Gde ya? V Bostone? Net, blyat', s kem my igrali?* (What the fuck happened? Where am I? Boston? No, fuck, who were we playing?)

Ilya's thoughts were supremely jumbled. He wasn't even sure what day it was, let alone what happened. All he knew for certain was that it must've been a hockey injury. No other way to explain the pain that was now radiating to his ribs and hips as his body came further out of the darkness. He shifted his legs in the hopes it would relieve the stiff, throbbing pain in his left hip.

He could hear other voices, mumbling. None of the words they were saying came through the slog still filling the edges of his mind. He vaguely wondered if he was in Moscow and that it was his father speaking in that deep voice just out of reach. But, that didn't fully make sense because the other voice sounded male, but nothing similar to Alexei at all.

Pochemu moy otets zdes'? *Razve on ne dolzhen byt' v Moskve? Razve on ne bolen? Gde Aleksey? Kto etot drugoy chelovek? Eto moy vrach?* (Why is my father here? Shouldn't he be in Moscow? Isn't he sick? Where is Alexei? Who is that other person? Is it my doctor?)

Nothing was making sense, especially the more aware of his surroundings Ilya became. The voices didn't match up with anyone in his family. As he floated closer to the surface he realized they were speaking in English.

"Hollander, relax, you look positively ill. He's going to wake up. The doctor said it might take some time." The deep baritone that Ilya was slowly recognizing as Marley, finally came through.

"I'm fine," the second voice said, shaky as if trying to convince everyone they weren't about to vomit, "I just need him to wake up."

Ilya's brain floated between Russian and English as he tried to put the pieces together.

Hollander? Why the fuck was Shane here? Moya krasivaya idiotka. Where am I? Zhdai'te Marley chto-to govoril o vrache? (Hollander? Why the fuck was Shane here? My beautiful idiot. Where am I? Wait, Marley said something about a doctor?)

The pain in his ribs gave a nasty jab as he tried to take a deep breath to avoid panicking. He groaned. The sound must've reached the surface because all of a sudden the voices stopped and suddenly there was a hand on his cheek. Ilya recognized that touch anywhere. He smiled and leaned into it.

"Moy lyubimyy." Ilya finally managed to open his eyes. The first thing he saw was Shane with red-rimmed eyes and extremely pale skin. Before Ilya could say anything else, Marley jumped in.

"Aww, Roz. I love you too. I'm not sure about beloved and all that..." He laughed in a way that felt like a sigh of relief.

"You know Russian?" Shane's voice floated above Ilya, causing him to smile. *My best friend and my boyfriend are getting along.*

"Roz spouts off enough bullshit you pick up a few things. He likes to throw that word at opponents on the ice to throw them off. Ain't that right, Roz. You take pleasure in knowing exactly what you said and making everyone else think you cursed them out or something." Marley patted him on the shoulder with a huge grin.

Ilya moved his hand up and pointed at him. "Only you, Marley. Maybe you could teach Hollander a few things. He is rubbish at Russian."

"Excuse me, I haven't had a chance to learn it yet, asshole." Shane's thumb gently stroked Ilya's cheek to let him know there was no bite behind his words.

Ilya still felt tired so he simply nodded and mumbled, “Yes, like I said, rubbish.”

“Don’t sweat it, Hollander. Roz will teach you all the wrong things to say in Russian.” Marley laughed and gave another pat to Ilya’s shoulder.

Just as Ilya started to doze off again, the drugs still heavy in his system, Marley spoke again.

“Well, as much as I would love to stay for the love fest I’m sure this reunion is going to turn into, I gotta catch my flight back to Boston. We’ll talk later, Roz. Feel better.”

“Wait, Boston? Aren’t we in Boston?” Ilya’s eyes flew up in confusion. He still wasn’t sure what day it was, but the last hockey thing he could remember was talking to Shane at his Boston home about their game the next day.

“Roz, we played Montreal at Montreal two nights ago.” Marley squeezed his shoulder and looked at him with confusion in his eyes.

Ilya looked between Marleau and Shane, who was currently sitting with his head bowed and was breathing through his nose for some reason. Despite his confusion about what was going on, Ilya’s heart ached wanting to reach out to Shane. So, he placed his hand on the space between his shoulders.

“Shane.”

Shane looked up and plastered a smile on his face. “Sorry, must be still under the weather.”

Now, Ilya was completely confused. “What? So is not right after we spent the day together?”

What little color Shane had in his face disappeared completely with that question and Ilya watched as Shane scrambled to his feet and rushed into the ensuite bathroom, slamming the door shut. The distinct sound of someone vomiting into the toilet came soon after.

“He’s been off this whole time. I think he’s stressed.” Marley shrugged at Ilya when he turned to him for an explanation.

“What day is it?” Ilya asked, knowing his best friend wouldn’t let him down.

“January 19th. You’ve been in a medically induced coma for 2 days. We played Montreal the night of the 17th.”

Before Ilya could process everything that Marley had said, Shane came out of the bathroom, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. He looked positively green. So many pieces were sitting in Ilya’s brain and weren’t connecting. It was as if his brain knew the truth but the truth was the ice rink after a long, intense game. There were lines and crevices in it that needed to be run over and smoothed out.

“Alright, I really do have to go. My flight leaves in two hours. You take care, Roz. I’ll call you tonight.” Marley clapped Ilya on the shoulder one last time and moved toward the door. When he passed Shane, Marley stopped and said, “You got this, Hollander. Just be honest.”

—

Shane Hollander

Shane let his eyes follow Marleau as he left the room. A part of him wanted the defensemen to come back and keep the conversation flowing. But the bigger part of him knew that he and Ilya had quite a bit they needed to talk about. Shane bit his bottom lip and turned his attention back to Ilya, who looked exhausted, but also confused.

Shane moved to sit back down next to Ilya when his stomach turned again and he had to rush to the bathroom once more. He was getting really annoyed with all the vomiting. It seemed as though now his body knew that he knew it was making the condition very noticeable. As he leaned on the sink to wash his hands once more, Shane looked at himself in the mirror and muttered to himself.

“Get it together, man.”

By the time he came back out of the bathroom once more, Ilya had closed his eyes. Shane watched his chest rise in steady, even breaths and knew that Ilya must've fallen back asleep. The doctor had prepared him and Marleau for this possibility, stating that weaning him off the meds didn't mean they completely left his system immediately. With a silent sigh of relief, Shane crossed the room and sat back down in his chair. He grabbed Ilya's hand and interlocked their fingers. Then, he turned on the TV to ESPN and put it on mute.

A few minutes later his phone started to vibrate. He pulled it from his pocket and saw that it was his mother. *Shit*. He'd been avoiding her since the night of the game. He knew she probably saw him throw up on the ice and wanted to hover, but Shane hadn't had the energy to deal with all that. So, he'd sent her a text reassuring her he was fine and then went radio silent. But now she was calling and he knew if he didn't pick up she would just keep trying until he did.

So, Shane glanced toward Ilya and made the hard decision to step out of the room to take his mother's call. As his manager the chances that she'd heard he was on the temporary injury list were high. He leaned over and placed a kiss on Ilya's temple and whispered, “I'll be back.”

“Hey mom,” Shane tried for as non-chalant as he could muster as he stood in the breezeway just beyond Ilya's room.

“Shane! Thank god you finally answered. I've been worried sick. The Voyageurs organization told me you are on a 3-week leave from active play? You said you were fine!” Yuna's voice was slightly panicked, but overall her usual game plan manager mode was dominating.

“Mom, could you relax? I'm just being cautious. I saw a doctor and he said I have a temporary condition that doesn't mix with the active style of hockey. It's why I threw up on the ice a few nights ago. I'm doing too much and my body is under too much stress so it's fighting back.” Shane knew his mom wouldn't be satisfied with the vague statements he was making, but he couldn't tell her the whole truth, not before he talked to Ilya. *Fuck, Ilya. That conversation was not going to be pleasant.*

He tuned back to the call when he heard his mom say, “Shane? Are you listening?” And realized he completely zoned out enough that he missed her full response.

“Sorry, I’m a bit distracted right now. Dealing with everything.” Shane sighed, understatement of his life.

Just then, some alarms started blaring behind Shane and he turned in a panic. He saw nurses and a doctor rushing into Ilya’s room. *Oh god. What was happening?*

“I’m sorry, mom, I gotta go. I will call you later.” And before she could even respond he hung up as his feet rushed back toward the room he’d only just left moments ago.

His mind started to spiral coming up with the darkest scenarios possible. As he got closer, a nurse physically placed her hands on his shoulders to stop him.

“I’m sorry, sir but you can’t go in there right now. The doctors are working on him. They need room to work.”

Shane’s eyes burned with tears he refused to let out. “What happened?” He croaked, his heart clenching with the thought that Ilya might die and he’ll never get to say what he needed to say.

“Mr. Rozanov had a seizure. They are trying to stabilize him. It’s not uncommon for someone who sustained a concussion severe enough. It’s part of the reason the doctors sedated him in the first place. In the hopes it would prevent it from happening.”

“But it did happen. So what is the plan now?” Shane was holding onto the tiniest threads of his sanity as he begged this stranger for comfort and reassurance.

“It depends. His doctor will talk to you once he’s stable and we know more.” The nurse gave him a sympathetic smile and led him over to a set of chairs for him to sit in.

The next few minutes seemed to drag for hours. As he waited for good news, Shane allowed his mind to wander. He subconsciously placed his hand on his belly. As he tried not to think of what Ilya was currently going through he allowed himself to speak to the child he was carrying for the first time, fully cementing the reality of it in his mind, once and for all.

Hey little one. You were quite the surprise, let me tell you. Your dad is a mess, honestly. I can't even figure out my own feelings for your papa so you decided to come along and force my hand. How could I not love him? It's because of our love that I'm even considering giving up hockey to have you. I don't know if that's what he wants, but that's okay because in all this mess I've had time to think and the longer I sit with it the more I realize, I'm already in love with you, too.

"Mr. Hollander?" Shane was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of Ilya's doctor's voice hovering above him.

He stood up and looked beyond the doctor to Ilya's room and saw that his door was propped open and there was only the one nurse inside with him. *That had to be a good sign right?*

"How is he?" Shane asked, attempting to slow his breaths down enough that he could keep his panicked thoughts at bay.

"He's stable. He'll probably sleep for a while due to the anticonvulsant we gave him. But, I'm not worried this happened. Mr. Rozanov took a nasty hit to his head that initially caused some minor swelling. It's common for that to also cause a seizure or two. His brain is trying to heal." The doctor was kind, but firm with how she spoke to him.

"So, what should I..." Shane trailed off, the tears still bubbling to the surface despite his refusal to let them fall.

"For now, just sit with him. Talk to him about mundane things. Let him know you are there, even if he's not awake to interact. And when he does wake up don't tell him anything that might trigger another seizure." The doctor gave Shane a tight-lipped smile.

“Got it.” Shane muttered, moving toward the room so he could go back to Ilya’s bedside. “Oh doctor, when he woke up earlier he seemed confused about what day it was. He thought it was early November. Is that something to be worried about?”

She gave a small smile and shook her head, “No. It’s likely he has temporary amnesia. Once his brain heals a bit more that should go away.”

Shane nodded but didn’t say another word. He understood. With the parameters she had put in place and the information she gave him about Ilya’s memory issues, Shane silently decided he would hold off on discussing the pregnancy and all that until Ilya was a bit more lucid. It also gave him more time to figure out what the fuck to say.

—

Ilya Rozanov

This time when Ilya resurfaced from the darkness it was to the dulcet tones of Shane arguing with someone on his phone in harsh whispers. He kept his eyes closed a bit longer so he could listen in without Shane knowing.

“Mom! I’m fine. I swear! The reason I hung up so quickly yesterday was because I needed to vomit and didn’t want you to have to hear that.” Ilya couldn’t figure out why Shane was lying to his mom.

“No, you don’t need to drive to Montreal.” Shane responded after a beat, this time he sounded bone tired. It worried Ilya, he cataloged that information with Shane’s vomiting and pale complexion to confront him later.

“I swear. I’m resting. The only stress I’m enduring right now is talking to you. So, could you please just trust me?” Shane huffed, and then softly groaned, “Mom, I’m not gonna call Rose. She’s busy and...”

Whatever Shane was going to say about Rose, whoever that was, got cut off by Ilya’s heart monitor beeping because his heart rate went up. *Traitor*. Ilya thought about the inanimate

object. *Now he'll know I'm awake.*

Sure enough soon after that, Shane ended his call with his mom, “I gotta go mom. Talk to you soon.”

Ilya opened his eyes to find Shane had crossed the room and was now at his bedside. His phone must've been put back into his pocket because Ilya didn't see a single trace of it. Without a word he raked his eyes over the planes of Shane's face. What he saw made his heart ache. There was stress and anxiety pouring off of him.

“Moy lyubimyy.” Ilya murmured, a small smile on his face. He reached up and attempted to smooth the wrinkles between Shane's eyes. “You are panicking.”

Shane shook his head and moved an inch back, out of Ilya's touch, “No I'm not.” Then, he turned to the room at large, as if looking for something to talk about that wasn't emotionally centered. Ilya knew Shane's tells better than anyone. The man he loved – *fuck did he really think that?* – avoided emotional confrontations like the plague.

As if spurned by that thought, a flash of a memory hit him hard.

Shane leaving his Boston home the day Ilya had invited him over for a meal and some relaxation.

Then, as if playing a highlight reel his mind gave him fragments.

A cold bed and Ilya's broken heart. A tabloid showing Shane walking with some girl holding her hand. Ilya being pissy toward the guys during workouts. A text thread gone untouched for weeks.

None of these thoughts really made much sense, but Ilya knew if he could convince Shane to talk he would find the answers. Just as he opened his mouth to ask, Shane also spoke.

“We could turn on the Montreal vs. New Jersey game.”

“Who is Rose?”

Ilya watched Shane as he processed the question. When Shane turned away from him and instead focused on talking about hockey, Ilya knew something was up and it set off alarm bells in his brain.

“You know, Montreal played Buffalo the other night and Pike scored a goal.” Shane was baiting him with a distraction, and Ilya was willing to accept it, for now.

“Pike? Pike scored a goal against Buffalo?” Ilya couldn’t help it, he loved to chirp Hayden Pike. “The 15th best player in the league scored a goal? Is because you were here. Pike only had a chance because he was covering for you.” Ilya murmured, leaning back against his pillows, his body felt heavy from the lingering exhaustion.

A silence fell between them, but as Shane sat beside him, holding his hand, Ilya realized it wasn’t an awkward one. For the first time since he’d woken up, it felt like they were just Shane and Ilya again. Like this was just another one of their moments together amongst a sea of moments apart.

He chose not to watch the game. Instead, he decided to watch Shane. There was something off about him and Ilya couldn’t quite put his finger on it. As he sat there he thought over the fragments of memory that had started to come back to him. *Something must’ve happened between Shane leaving in a panic and now. Was it that tabloid article? Was that woman Rose? The unanswered texts, we weren’t speaking to each other in the last few weeks at least. Why?*

When the game broke for the post-second period break, Ilya pushed a button on the remote and turned the TV off. Shane turned to him, a questioning look in his eyes. Ilya took his hand in his and stroked his thumb over Shane’s knuckles.

“Are you ready to tell me what’s bothering you?” Ilya asked in his softest voice. He knew Shane was close to spooking and he needed to put a stop to it before it started.

“What? Nothing.” Shane jerked his head away and stared at the door instead of Ilya.

When he pulled his hand from Ilya’s grasp it surprised Ilya so much his breath stuttered and a tear fell from his eye. Shane didn’t seem to notice.

“Is her, isn’t it? This Rose? You’re done with me. She is easier, yes?” Ilya couldn’t prevent the dejection in his voice. He should’ve seen this coming. After all, in the end, not even his mother chose him.

“Ilya,” Shane’s voice sounded pained, like perhaps Ilya’s worst fears were correct. And then he continued, “After that day at your house, I went to a party with J.J. He introduced me to Rose Landry and, well I was scared of people finding out about us. I was scared of my feelings...”

Ilya didn’t think his heart could take anymore. The pieces of memory were slowly stitching themselves together. *Shane left me for Rose because she was easier. He couldn’t fault Shane for that. It makes sense.*

“You should go.” Ilya finally responded, unable to look at Shane. His excitement and joy at Shane being there when he’d woken up yesterday was completely gone now.

“Ilya.” Shane tried to reach out for Ilya’s hand once more, but this time, Ilya pulled away.

“Go back to her. She’ll make you happy. You can get married, have family, all the things you deserve.” Ilya could feel the cloud that sometimes hovered over him coming in hot as he pushed Shane the way he knew how. The way he knew would get the other man to leave.

Only this time, this time Shane didn’t leave. Instead he moved his chair closer to the side of Ilya’s bed and placed his hand on Ilya’s knee.

“She doesn’t make me happy. I was too scared to see that. I thought I could push you out of my head and my heart if I put all my energy into her. But I couldn’t even make the sex work. With you, it’s always been so easy. But with her, I could never...” Shane trailed off, pausing to sniffle.

Ilya allowed himself to look toward Shane with a sideways glance. His eyes were glassy and he looked utterly wrecked.

“So what? I got hurt and now you think, ‘Oh I’ll just make nice with Ilya because maybe he won’t remember that I left him’?” Ilya knew he was being unnecessarily cruel, but now that he remembered the pain he’d felt when Shane left him that night he didn’t want Shane to make him feel like they were okay again. He wanted Shane to feel that hurt, too.

“No, Ilya. It’s not like that. I broke up with her. I realized that I would only ever truly be happy with you.” Shane squeezed his knee in a silent plea of forgiveness.

“When?” Ilya wasn’t ready to soften just yet, he didn’t trust that Shane was reacting with a sound mind.

“What?”

“When did you break up with her, Hollander?” He needed to distance himself or else his heart would get in the way and forgive him too easily.

Shane shook his head and swiped at his face to get rid of tears that had slipped out. Then he put his hand back on Ilya’s knee. “It’s not important. I chose you.”

“It is important.” Ilya kept his voice steady despite his heart slowly breaking the more Shane avoided the subject. “When, Hollander?”

Shane didn't answer right away, but when he finally did, Ilya's heart sank even further.

"The night of the game."

"Please go." Ilya's words were cold, final, and left no room for interpretation. The worst part was, this time Shane actually listened.

—

Cliff Marleau

Despite flying back to Boston on Sunday, he was back in Montreal on Wednesday since the team had a 2-day stretch til their next game day. He needed to get back to Roz and make sure things were still okay with the guy. He'd seemed a bit down when Cliff had called him the day before.

Besides, Roz had told him the doctors were releasing him on Thursday and that he'd be out the rest of the season due to the concussion. The way Cliff saw it, he could drive back to Boston with his best friend right after he gets released. Unless, of course, he had other plans with Shane. Cliff smirked to himself as he rode in the Uber from his hotel to the hospital. Finding out his best friend had a long term relationship he'd kept secret had been a shock, but surprisingly spending time with Shane Hollander made Cliff understand why these two guys fell in love and are fighting to make it all work.

He briefly thinks of Shane's cageyness the whole time Roz had been in a coma. Cliff mostly hoped that by leaving he had given the two of them time to work through whatever was going on between them. Shane seemed desperate to get back to normal with Roz, but Cliff also knew that Ilya could hold a grudge like no other.

So, naturally, when he finally arrived at the hospital he was only slightly surprised to see Roz sitting up in bed, watching ESPN, completely alone. Cliff knocked on the door frame before entering, giving Roz the opportunity to turn him away if he wasn't in the mood for visitors. But, surprisingly, the guy seemed to light up at the sight of Cliff. It wasn't a rejection, so he would take it.

“Hey! We missed you on the ice yesterday against Raleigh. We sent them home crying, in your honor, Cap.” Cliff greeted his best friend as he plopped down in the chair closest to Roz’s bed.

Roz gave him a half smile, “That’s good. Did you make the boys pay up?”

“Come on, Roz, only you bet on shit like that. The rest of us just play for the fun, the thrill.”

“Mhm, that’s why you brag about and em-what’s the word?” Roz stumbled on his comeback, English words still tripping him up on occasion.

“Embellish?” Cliff asked, figuring that’s what the guy meant based on his context clues.

“Embellish, yes! That’s why you brag about and embellish your moves on ice for women at bars and clubs.” Roz gives him a raised eyebrow look before collapsing into a chuckle.

“Fuck off, Rozy.” Cliff groaned, “Just because you don’t have to try anymore doesn’t mean it isn’t hard out there for the rest of us.”

The effect of his words were immediate. Roz’s face fell and his eyes went cold. He turned his head away from Cliff and stared out the window in silence. The temperature of the room dropped a few degrees with his shift in mood. *Fuck.*

“So, I take it that things didn’t go well with Hollander when I left a few days ago.” Cliff pushed forward because he knew if he didn’t Roz would enact a stalemate and nothing would get talked about.

“It doesn’t matter.” Roz tried to deflect, but Cliff could hear the thinly veiled heartbreak in his voice.

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and say that it actually *does* matter.”

“Fuck off, Marley.” Roz growled.

“No.” Cliff shot back immediately. “Look you didn’t see him those two days you were in a coma. Hollander could barely keep himself together the whole time. He was crying and holding your hand practically every second. And we talked, man. He told me you guys were kind of on the outs right now because of a misunderstanding, but he had hoped to change that the night of our game, if you hadn’t gotten hurt.”

“He broke up with her because I got hurt. He told me.” Roz spat back, his eyes blazing at Cliff’s interference.

“He chose you! Come on, Roz! That’s romantic as shit.” Cliff rubbed his hand down his face. He knew Roz was stubborn as hell, but my god did he have to be stubborn about this?

“He doesn’t mean it. How could he? The choice was made because I got hurt.”

That’s when it hit him. Roz had a history of his family not being there for him when it actually mattered and only showing up when they wanted something from him. He couldn’t trust Hollander’s act of love because there was the tiniest seed of doubt that Hollander would wake up soon and regret making the decision during an emotional moment.

“You can’t trust that he won’t end up resenting you.” Cliff muttered, finally understanding. “I’m sorry man. That’s rough.”

Roz’s demeanor relaxed ever so slightly as he replied, “Glad you understand. Now can you drop it?”

Cliff still had one thing he wanted to say, so he threw caution to the wind. “One last thing and then we can talk about anything else. During those two days, Hollander approached me with some hypotheticals that didn’t feel super hypothetical. Basically, what I’m trying to say is, I think there’s more on his mind than just your break up, your injury, and Rose Landry. I think

he's shouldering something big that he hoped you'd be understanding about and support him in."

Roz didn't immediately answer, but when he did, the words hung long after the sound faded. "Then he should have thought of that before he abandoned me."

Jesus H. Christ. The hurt from their break up goes deeper than I ever could've imagined. Fuck me. These two idiots are never going to talk it out unless someone intervenes.

That was how Cliff Marleau, of the Boston Bears, found himself texting Varkov's wife to see if she had a contact for Hayden Pike, of the Montreal Voyageurs.

—

Shane Hollander

It had been a couple of days since Shane had gone to visit Ilya in the hospital. Their last conversation haunted his every thought, but he had pushed it aside in order to focus on team practice and working up the nerve to make a final decision about his condition. He couldn't bring himself to refer to it by what it actually was. A small part of him didn't want to get rid of it because if he and Ilya never spoke again at least he would always have a piece of the man he cared deeply about.

Shane knew that there were things he should push against Ilya's walls to talk about, but he didn't want to irreparably damage any small strands of connection they might still have. Sure, Ilya was mad right now, but eventually he'd cool down and they'd find their way back to each other. They'd done it before. Hell at one point they went almost a whole year without seeing each other much less speaking. This wasn't the worst they'd ever been faced with.

Or at least that is what he thought until he was getting undressed after a Wednesday morning practice and Hayden approached him. His best friend plopped down on the bench for the stall right between their assigned ones. Shane looked up, questioningly.

“So, I got a weird ass call a second ago when I walked out to my car. It forced me to come back in to find you.” Hayden had a smile on his face, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Shane wished he had the energy to make heads or tails of what Hayden was trying to say. Luckily, today didn’t seem to be a rolling stomach/vomiting kind of day. That’s that for small victories he guessed. But, his exhaustion had reached a new peak.

“Am I supposed to have any idea what you are talking about, Hayd?”

“Shane, Marleau called me. He told me you and Rozanov weren’t speaking and that I needed to convince you to go to the hospital to see him.” Hayden gave a wide-eyed look coupled with his charming smile.

Shane closed his eyes and sighed, “He doesn’t want to see me. He told me to leave, Hayd. I told him I chose him and he didn’t fucking believe me.”

After the words were out of his mouth, Shane realized his exhaustion was causing another problem, loose lips. He shouldn’t be so quick to tell Hayden these kinds of things and yet, here he is.

Maybe another attempt at talking to Ilya would help.

So, with a sigh, he gathered up his equipment into his duffle, stood up, slung the bag over his shoulder, and spoke to his best friend, “Okay. Fine. I will try to talk to him.”

Hayden seemed as pleased as a pig in shit at that prospect. “Amazing! Let’s go! I have to see you get your man back!”

“Hayden, go home to Jackie and the kids, I don’t need a chaperone.”

“Nope. Not a chance. Marleau dragged me into this, I’m seeing it through.”

Shane shook his head, but the tension in his shoulders eased a bit knowing that he wasn't alone in this daunting task. He followed Hayden out to the car park. After depositing his practice gear into his car, Shane crossed over to Hayden's and climbed in the front passenger seat. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

As they drove, Hayden remained quiet, but his thoughts were loud. Unable to handle the distraction any longer, Shane sighed and, without opening his eyes, said, "Spill it, Hayd."

"It's just, you've been off lately. It's been almost a week since Rozanov was hurt and you got sick on the ice. And yet, you still look exhausted all the time and I've seen you throw up at the practice arena a few times, even though you try to hide it." Hayden sounded nervous, Shane didn't blame him.

"I'm fine, Hayden. Just drop it. Please." Shane didn't have the desire to talk about this with anyone, not before he had the opportunity to tell Ilya. Besides, not thinking about it was becoming his favorite pastime.

They arrived at the hospital and immediately headed up to Ilya's room. Shane found he wasn't surprised in the slightest to find Marleau sitting in Ilya's room with him when they arrived. Ilya looked much better than he had a few days prior, but it was clear he was still unwilling to talk to Shane. If the glare in his direction was any indication.

Marleau stood up and cleared his throat, "You know what. Pike and I need to discuss plans for Boston and Montreal to make hospital visits for sick kids. Alternate Captains and all. We will leave you guys to it."

Shane felt his stomach drop the moment Hayden was dragged out of the room by his arm and the door shut behind them. He looked back toward Ilya whose focus was on the TV which was set to some talk show. Shane looked around, nervously shuffled his feet, and decided that sitting was the last thing he wanted to do right now.

"What the fuck do you want, Hollander?" Ilya finally spoke, his tone clipped and cold.

Shane shuddered involuntarily. Then, he took a deep breath and trudged forward. He needed to be brave.

“Il-Rozanov, I really am sorry about running off on you that night. It was stupid and I regretted it from the moment it happened.”

“Bullshit.” Ilya spat out, “You ran right to Rose Landry.”

All of a sudden, Shane felt his face get hot and his blood start to boil. Normally he kept his emotions in check, but for some reason, Ilya’s words really got under his skin.

“You literally asked me if I liked girls when we spent time together! I didn’t think it would be such an issue for you. Not considering the women you’ve slept with.” Right after he said it, Shane knew it was a low blow, but he didn’t care. They needed to stand firm and fight this out. If they were going to get anywhere, they needed to do and say what they were thinking, even if it was uncomfortable.

“I sleep with women. I don’t date them.” Ilya’s eyes were blazing, but his voice was small, and sharp.

Shane rubbed his hand through his hair and started pulling at the strands. “This isn’t the way I pictured us finally talking after all this. I didn’t think it would be easy, but fuck, Ilya. Can’t you give me a little grace here? I broke up with her once I realized it was pointless because all I wanted was to be with you.”

Ilya didn’t respond. After a beat, Shane continued.

“Being with Rose I realized two things. I think I’m gay, 100% only like dick, gay. And that I think I like you a little too much, which scares me. And I think you feel the same and that scares you, too.”

“We can’t, Shane. We can’t be anything.” Ilya finally whispered, his shoulders drawn, his body finally relaxed.

Shane saw that Ilya was giving him an olive branch so he took it. Without a word, Shane crossed over to Ilya’s bedside and finally sat down. He wordlessly took Ilya’s hand in his and chose his next words carefully.

“I know we can’t exist together in public, but something tells me we might have to soon.”

Ilya looked at him, his eyes filled with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Shane bit his bottom lip and thought through how he was going to say what he really needed to say.

“What do you mean, Hollander?”

“Well, I’ve been feeling kind of under the weather for a few weeks now. It’s, um, I actually went to the doctor about it the morning of your injury.” Shane paused, trying his best to figure out the next words.

“Oh my god, Shane. You are so boring.”

Shane forced a small smile toward Ilya to let him know he appreciated the Russian’s attempt at levity.

“Just know that whatever you want I will do it. This isn’t just my decision alone.” Shane fumbled through his words trying to force himself to say the one word he’d been avoiding even thinking since he’d found out.

Ilya watched him carefully, but didn’t say anything. His thumb started to stroke across Shane’s knuckles in comfort. “Whatever it is, we will handle it.”

“Are you sure? Not two minutes ago you wanted me dead.” Shane switched gears hoping that this back and forth would help calm his brain enough that he could say it out loud.

“Not dead. Just angry, at you and at myself. But, whatever is wrong I will support you.” Ilya paused and then, after glancing quickly at the closed door, added, “I care about you.”

Shane closed his eyes and swallowed deeply before whispering, “I’m pregnant.”

Saying the words out loud was like a giant weight was lifted off his shoulders. He didn’t dare open his eyes, for fear that Ilya would be angry or worse, completely reject him. But, then, he felt the gentle touch of Ilya’s hand on his cheek. Shane opened his eyes to find the man he cared about, maybe even loved, was looking at him with adoration and concern, not anger or rejection.

“Shane,” Ilya sighed, “How long?”

“The doctor said I am about 9 weeks. So, it must’ve happened the day I left. I am so sorry for that. I truly am. I never meant to abandon you without an explanation. You deserved better.”

Ilya shook his head, “No, is okay. You already apologized.”

A silence fell between them as they both stared at their joined hands. Ilya’s thumb continued to stroke Shane’s as Shane’s hand squeezed tightly to the feeling of connection.

“Shane?” Shane looked up at the sound of Ilya’s voice. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking how crazy I must’ve sounded to Marleau the other day when I asked him if he’d ever had to deal with an unwanted pregnancy. He thinks I knocked up Rose.”

“You asked Marleau about abortion?” Ilya’s voice was tentative, but steady. “Is that what you want?”

“Is that what you want?” Shane held back the tears that threatened to fall. “I meant what I said earlier, this isn’t just my decision.”

“But it is.” Ilya muttered, his hand gripping more tightly to Shane’s. “It’s not my body going through it.”

“Would you want kids?” Shane’s thoughts were running a mile a minute and refused to slow down. He had no idea what Ilya was going to say and he had no idea if what he said would even influence Shane’s decision.

“Someday, yes. Right now, yes if that’s what you want. I mean it, Shane. I will support you.” Ilya’s hand moved from where they were connected together and cupped the back of Shane’s head instead. It was a move that always calmed Shane’s spiralling thoughts.

“I don’t know.” Shane finally sighed, he let the tears fall. “I can barely think about it. I’d have to give up the rest of the season. The world would find out about us. It’s kind of hard to keep it a secret forever.”

After a beat, Ilya said, “Forget about hockey. Forget about the outside world. What is your heart telling you?”

Shane couldn’t respond. Saying what his heart wanted out loud was too scary. It was too much, too soon. They were not on solid ground, it wouldn’t be right. He thought of his parents and how they might react if he were to tell them they were going to be grandparents. Shane knew his dad would be excited, but his mom would immediately want to talk about logistics. And Ilya, the idea of Ilya being a father warmed his whole body from his chest to his feet. But, it wouldn’t be fair. They had careers to think about. The timing wasn’t right.

“Stop.” Ilya rubbed his fingers into Shane’s hair from where his hand still cupped the back of his head. “You’re thinking too much. Just go with your gut.”

Shane shook his head. “It isn’t fair.”

“Trust me when I say this, *life isn't fair*.” Ilya finished off in Russian which forced an anxious laugh out of Shane’s mouth.

“Sure, ask me to trust you and then spout off in Russian. Dude, seriously?”

“Just checking to be sure you weren’t panicking.” Ilya smirked, his eyes full of mischief for the first time in months. “I said, life isn’t always fair. So, what do you want?”

“You. Hockey.” Shane paused, his hand going to his stomach, and just like that, the answer came to him. “This baby.”

“Okay, so we figure it out. You will have to go on the LTIR, that is if Montreal doesn’t try to pull you from their roster completely.” Ilya murmured, his gaze soft.

“They can’t do that, can they? Not in the middle of the season.” Shane’s chest got tight and his lungs felt like shattered glass each time he breathed.

“Shane, they can do what they want as long as they technically stay within regulations. They could claim you being out the rest of the season is not worth the risk.”

“I want children with you Ilya, and I know that’s way more serious than we have any right to be about each other, but I mean it. I can’t imagine my life without you and kids are part of that.” Shane sighed, and then trudged forward, “I will have to go over this with my mom and my lawyer and figure out if it even makes sense for my career right now.”

“We don’t have to make a decision today. This is big.” Ilya rubbed his head once more. “Please don’t panic.”

Just then, the door swung open and Hayden returned with Marleau and a few snacks in their hands.

Shane pulled back from Ilya out of habit and gave Hayden a forced smile.

“So, Hayd, we should probably go. You and the team leave tonight for Chicago.” Shane stood up and let his hand linger on Ilya’s shoulder as he spoke.

Ilya audibly sighed in relief. Marleau scrunched up his eyebrows at that.

“You okay, there, Roz?”

Ilya nodded, “Yes. I’m just grateful Hollander is taking his health seriously for once instead of insisting he can still play while vomiting all over the place.”

Shane squeezed Ilya’s shoulder in warning. But he faked a smile, “Yeah, well Coach didn’t care for my exorcism moment on the ice a few nights ago. He was more than happy to give me 3 weeks off.”

“Jackie had so many questions when I brought my jersey home for her to wash. I’m honestly surprised she hasn’t texted you offering to bring you some soup.” Hayden shrugged.

The easy conversation was nice after the stress he’d just been through with Ilya. Looking at the man now, Shane knew they’d both be seeing much more of each other in the days to come. A final decision needed to be made, and based on Ilya’s reaction, he wasn’t going to let Shane think, even for a second, that he was alone in this.

“Lucky me. I get released tomorrow and with my concussion I don’t care to fly just yet. Since you are on vomit leave I will just stay with you.” Ilya shrugged with a smirk.

“Who said I wanted you at my apartment?” Shane quipped back, slightly, jokingly, annoyed.

“Shaneeeee.” Ilya moaned playfully. “You’d make me ride in a car for hours with Marley? He is gross.”

“Who said I would drive you back to Boston, man?” Marleau chimed in, light-heartedly. “You’re the worst at picking music.”

“Alright, you can stay, but only to spare Marleau the agony of your extended presence. He’s my new best friend, you know,” Shane chuckled.

“Hey, what about me?” Hayden chimed in.

“Ugh, Pike. You are the 15th best player in Montreal, even lower out of the whole league. Who cares about you?” Ilya chirped and then laughed.

Shane let his eyes sweep from Ilya over to Hayden and finally landed on Marleau. Five days ago it would’ve been highly unlikely that they’d all be in the same room, let alone acting like they all had always belonged there. As Ilya’s hand gravitated back to Shane’s he felt a sort of calm come over him. This was how things were supposed to be. He still wasn’t sure what his decision for the future was going to be, but he knew he wouldn’t be alone in facing it.

Chapter 2: Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya welcome their baby into the world and become the family they both always dreamed of being.

Chapter Notes

Hello my lovelies,

Thank you for supporting this fic. I had so much fun writing it. To think before this fandom I was terrified of even approaching MPreg. Now, I've officially written multiple Mpreg fics.

I was originally going to write out moments from the game at the end of this epilogue, but since my knowledge of hockey is cursory at best I decided not to and instead went with broad strokes.

Also, if there are any mistakes with the pregnancy and birth of it all, just ignore them. I am no expert. I am simply going off basic research and from what I have seen on Call the Midwife.

Hope you enjoy how I wrapped this story up.

JULY 2017

Shane Hollander

Shane was standing in the kitchen of his Montreal apartment when it happened. With a sudden sharp twinge, his pants and legs were suddenly sticky and wet. He'd been having what he thought were the practice contractions his doctor warned him about off and on since the night before. Once his mind came back online from the shock he realized they must not have been practice after all.

But, that didn't make sense.

Ilya and Shane's baby wasn't due until mid-August. It was July 24th. They were supposed to have three more weeks. Ilya hadn't even finished building the crib yet. Everything had gotten crazy with the end of Ilya's season, he'd been medically cleared earlier than they had anticipated so Boston insisted he be on the ice for the post-season playoff run. Ilya had hated leaving Shane to deal with everything on his own, but Shane's parents had stepped up. His dad had tried to build the crib a few weeks ago, but Shane had had a meltdown insisting that Ilya needed to be the one to do it.

They were supposed to have more time. Shane started to spiral the longer he thought about all the things they hadn't managed to finish. His chest started to get tight and his hands curled into fists on the counter, knuckles turning white. This wasn't what they'd carefully planned out. Shane needed control. He needed order and lists and plans. This was *not* in the plan.

A longer, sharper pain rippled from his back around to the front of his abdomen. He leaned over, putting his weight onto his forearms and elbows on the counter. Shane let out a groan. He wasn't sure where Ilya was currently, but it must've been close enough that he could hear Shane's sounds of distress because pretty soon there was a warm hand in the middle of his back making soothing circles. Once the pain passed, Shane was able to relax and collapse against the countertop.

"Another practice one?" Ilya asked gently.

"Actually," Shane sighed and then turned so that Ilya could see his water had broken. "Turns out our baby doesn't want to wait three more weeks."

If Ilya was shocked he hid it well. Upon looking down and then back up at Shane's face, Ilya immediately pulled him into his arms. The embrace was like a balm on the edges of Shane's still very panicked brain.

"Shh. Shane, it's okay. The doctor told us this could happen." Ilya muttered against the top of Shane's head before placing a kiss there.

"But, we had a plan. Ilya we haven't even built the crib yet." Shane knew he was close to tears, but he couldn't get out of his panic spiral. His breaths were coming in short bursts which only got worse when he remembered he was still wet and sticky, two sensations he utterly hated.

He stepped back from Ilya. His eyes roamed the kitchen, unable to look at his boyfriend right now. He started to shake his head and move his arms in soothing motions. He knew he was getting overwhelmed but he could stop long enough to remember his coping methods. All he could think about was how this wasn't the plan.

"This wasn't the plan. This wasn't the plan. This wasn't the plan." Shane muttered over and over as he started to pace the length of the kitchen.

"Shane, look at me." Ilya's voice was soft, and low, like he always got when Shane was freaking out. "I know this isn't what we planned, but babies don't stick to plans. Remember, we talked about this. It's unexpected, but we are ready for this. You just need to breathe."

"Easy for you to say. You don't have to push a baby out of your body." Shane snapped, the pain from earlier still lingering in his muscles adding to his irritation from all the sensory overload also happening.

"Oh fuck. I have a baby coming out of me. How did we ever think that was a good idea? That's gross. I'm a hockey player, Ilya!" Shane was definitely panicking now.

Luckily, Ilya wasn't easily unmoored by Shane's freak outs. Instead, he wrapped Shane up in his arms once again and rubbed his hand through the hair at the back of Shane's head.

"Okay. Breathe. This is the new plan. You are going to take a shower because I know you are feeling really gross right now and that's affecting your thoughts. We are going to time the contractions and call your doctor for advice. Then, we are going to relax because today we get to meet our baby."

Shane nodded against Ilya's chest. His brain was still a mess, but the smell of Ilya and his warm embrace calmed his fears enough that he didn't feel like he was completely falling apart. As if to further reassure him, the baby chose to kick.

Shane gave a wet laugh, "I guess they want us to know they're doing okay."

Shane and Ilya had decided not to find out the gender of their baby. While the pregnancy itself had been a surprise, they both still liked the idea of not knowing who their baby was until it was born. Their lives had been filled with so many expectations, not putting their own on their child before it was born felt like a breath of fresh air. Neither of them cared one way or the other what gender they received, as long as they got to love and raise their baby together.

As Shane stood under the spray of warm water, Ilya helped him wash his body. With the lingering tightness in his back, Ilya's hands were like a godsend. About 20 minutes after the twinges in the kitchen, Shane felt the pain ramping back up. So, he turned and leaned his head on Ilya's chest and wrapped his arms around his neck. Ilya seemed to catch on to what was happening and placed his hands on Shane's hips and soothingly pressed into them.

All the while he was whispering words in Russian that Shane was too far gone on his pain to translate or even truly hear. But, the soft flow of words wormed into his mind and untangled the knots that had been getting tighter and tighter the more Shane freaked about what was happening to him.

Once the pain passed, Shane stood back and Ilya placed a kiss on his mouth. Shane brought his hand up to Ilya's cheek and smiled at the man he loved.

"I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here," Shane whispered.

Ilya smirked, "Lose your mind, moy lyubimyy."

Shane gave him his signature, 'I don't find you the least bit funny' glare before moving to step out of the shower.

Ilya tightened his grip, keeping Shane in place, "I'm kidding. You don't have to worry because there is nowhere else I'd want to be than right here, going through this with you."

Shane sighed and fell into Ilya's embrace. "I'm still not convinced I can handle the pushing part."

"Shane, look at me," Ilya paused until Shane looked up and into his eyes, his hand never leaving Shane's chin, "You are capable of so many things. Bringing our child into the world is just one of them. Is scary, I know. But, you can."

Shane nodded. Ilya smiled and placed another kiss on his lips. "Now, let's get you into comfortable clothes and lay down. We will call Dr. Santos and ask her what she thinks we should do. Okay?"

—

Four hours later, Shane's contractions were steady, painful, and less than five minutes apart. They had arrived at the birthing center about an hour ago. Shane still wasn't sure he could manage, despite Ilya and Dr. Santos being certain, but he was trying to keep those thoughts to himself. He didn't want Ilya to worry about him and their baby trying to be born. However, when his mom arrived all his walls vanished and he collapsed against her crying.

"Mom. I can't. I can't do this." Shane sobbed against her chest, wrapping his arms around her in the one embrace that had always been a comfort to him.

"Oh baby, you already are. You are doing it without even trying. Your body knows what needs to happen and it's been preparing. I know the pain is scary, but you are doing this." His mom's hands found their way to his face. She gripped him by his cheeks and wiped his tears away.

Just then, another pain wrapped itself around Shane's middle. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and let his body just hang as he groaned. This pain was particularly hard because it came with the added pressure of the baby definitely wanting out. His body wasn't screaming at him to push, like Dr. Santos said it would when it was time, but he definitely felt a vague urgency building. This one lasted a bit longer than the last, leaving him breathless when it finally relented.

He pulled back from his mom and looked around the room. His voice hitched and he started to panic when he realized his boyfriend wasn't in the room. "Where is Ilya?"

"Shh, relax, he stepped out when I came in. I think he went to find Dr. Santos since we are getting really close." His mom started to rub soothing trails up and down his arms and then around to his back.

Before Shane could really allow himself to relax he was hit with another pain. They were definitely coming closer together and Ilya still wasn't back yet. As the pain reached its peak, Shane cried.

"I need Ilya, mom. I can't." He paused to breathe deeply, "without him."

"Shh. It's okay. Just focus on getting through this contraction. Ilya will be back in just a moment." His mom's words flowed over him as he battled the pain.

As if summoned by her words and Shane's tears, Ilya appeared just as the pain went back into the dull tightness it had been between contractions for the past hour or so. Shane immediately moved to be in Ilya's arms instead of his mom's.

"Moy lyubimyy." Ilya murmured against Shane's temple as he leaned into Ilya's chest and felt his body relax. "Soon we will meet our child. You are doing so well. So strong."

"I'm not strong. I'm tired." Shane muttered against Ilya's shirt.

He felt, more than saw, Ilya's smile as he whispered into Shane's ear. "I know, you are. Soon we will have baby in our arms and you can rest."

This time when the pain hit Shane it was coupled with a new feeling. He tensed up, squeezing Ilya's biceps as his body involuntarily tried to push.

“Shane, what’s going on?” Ilya’s voice was sharp, he was clearly trying to stay calm.

“Push,” was the only word Shane could manage as he worked through the pain.

Out of his periphery Shane saw his mom rush off, probably to grab some nurses and Dr. Santos. Meanwhile, Ilya’s hands rubbed up and down Shane’s back as he soothed Shane through this latest contraction. Soon enough the pain released itself, but this time it ramped back up almost immediately. Shane couldn’t breathe. This was happening too fast. He gritted his teeth against the pain and forced his body to ignore its desire to push because he wasn’t ready.

“Shane, I need you to breathe,” A new voice entered the mix. Dr. Santos had arrived. “Is there any time between contractions?”

Shane quickly shook his head as another pain ramped up on the heels of the last one.

“I think he’s panicking.” Ilya murmured, his hands still trying to sooth his muscles. “Should we move him?”

“Shane, sweetie,” his mom cut in, “Do you wanna move to somewhere more comfortable.”

Shane worked through the latest contraction, still refusing to push, “Can’t.”

“Okay, then Shane, I’m going to need you to actually push then. If your body is telling you that’s what it wants, then it’s probably time. I’m still going to do a check to be sure.” Dr. Santos’ voice floated above Shane, but he couldn’t focus on that or what the words meant.

He could only focus on the warmth of Ilya’s embrace and his encouraging words as Shane relented and let his body do what it was supposed to. This time, aiding in the endeavour with pushes of his own. It was a weird sensation to feel something that had been an abstract idea become more solid and factual as it moved its way out of him. Before he knew it, Shane felt an overwhelming relief as the pain and pressure disappeared.

A baby's cry filled the room.

Shane collapsed against Ilya, relief pouring off him as he let his exhaustion take over. A small niggling thought at the back of his brain demanded he take a shower and get clean, but the rest of his body protested. The demand to lie down and rest is stronger than his anxieties about cleanliness.

Then, just as Shane was finding his voice to ask Ilya to help him to the bed, Shane heard Ilya whisper in awe.

“It's a boy. Moy lyubimyy, we have a son.”

—

Ilya Rozanov

The early morning light seeped through the break in the curtains of Shane Hollander's hospital room. Ilya slowly moved about the room, gently bouncing the bundle of blankets in his arms. Shane was sleeping soundly on the bed, having succumbed to his exhaustion after Ilya insisted he help him shower. Ilya had never seen Shane that tired before, but there was a warm, loving haze to it as they both murmured softly about their son. Shane had been exhausted, but still managed to smile and gush about their sandy haired boy with Shane's eyes and what looked like the start of Ilya's natural curls.

Now, he was sleeping and Ilya was unable to put their son down despite the baby also being asleep. Ilya held him and told him all of the things on his mind. He smiled as he realized there was never a thing in this world that could ever make him turn on his son like his father had always done to him.

“Myshonok, you will only ever know love and support. Your dad and I will never make you feel like you aren't enough. My papa was always calling me lazy and weak, but he was not a nice man so he didn't see how hard I worked to love your dad in the shadows while carrying my team to victories. But you, Myshonok, will only know love and hugs.”

David stirred a little at Ilya's words and he smiled again, this time his hand moved to gently trail a finger down the boy's cheek. "David Ilyovich Hollander-Rozanov, your name will change the world. Your dad thinks it is too much, but I think it is big strong name, for big strong child."

Just then, the baby's eyes opened and he seemed to stare directly up at Ilya. The Russian felt tears well up behind his eyes. Looking down at his son, his heart swelled with so much love. Looking down at him, Ilya felt this overwhelming need to hold the child close and never let him go. To protect him against anything negative the world could possibly throw at him. It made him wonder if his mama had felt the same when she first held him and every time after that, until she couldn't anymore.

"My mama would've loved you so much, malysh. She would've showered you with so many kisses and hugs and sweet treats. She was always baking things for me. I wish you could know her. She was beautiful and funny, not funny like your dad, but still."

"He will still get plenty of love from my parents," Shane's voice suddenly cut in, gravelly and sleep heavy.

Ilya turned and quietly crossed the room to come closer to his boyfriend. He placed their son in Shane's waiting arms, and then sat on the bed facing him. Ilya's hands immediately gravitated to Shane and David at the same time. He never thought his heart could love this much, but then Dr. Santos had placed their son in his arms for the first time and Ilya felt his heart grow in real time.

"What were you calling him?" Shane looked down at David with all the fondness a new parent should have. It warmed Ilya's heart to see it.

"Malysh, it means little one. My mama used to use it with me." Ilya's thumb stroked along Shane's cheek while Shane smiled and leaned into the touch.

"I can't believe this is real." Shane whispered, his own finger stroking David's cheek as the baby fell back asleep and Ilya's hand cupped the top of his head. "He came earlier than

expected, but now that I'm not in pain while also freaking out I'm glad. It gives us more time to finalize things here in Montreal before we officially move to Boston with him."

"Yes, it all work out. I don't know why you doubt it." Ilya gave a small smile, "Kotyonok."

Shane looked up from their son and finally made eye contact with Ilya, "Kitten, really?"

Ilya leaned back slightly in surprise. Then, once he'd processed it, his eyes bore into Shane's and he leaned forward for a kiss. Knowing that Shane somehow knew Russian, however little it really was, and had kept it a secret from him made him happier than he ever thought possible.

"You know Russian?" Ilya whispered in awe.

Shane smiled back at him and pulled him in for another kiss before he said, "I've been trying to learn while I was on leave from hockey."

The fact that Shane didn't say "on leave from the Voyageurs" hung heavy in the air between them. Things had gone terribly for Shane after they had decided to keep the pregnancy. He had sat down with his coaches and management to let them know the full story and they had legally been obligated to honor his LTIR placement, but once the regular season was over, they informed him he would be open for a trade. Shane had come back from that meeting on the verge of a breakdown and Ilya had held him as he processed his emotions and the sensory overload at the same time. It had been messy, and contained lots of tears and then anger.

Shane had given his whole life to that team, long before they had even drafted him. Shane had always been a Montreal fan, it was in his blood thanks to his mom. But, after that, no one could stop Yuna Hollander from going scorched earth about the team that she had always held dear in her heart. Shane had been less vocal about the whole situation, since he was trying to get on another team by pre-season, but his focus had also been more dedicated to the pregnancy and their son's arrival. Ilya knew, but he couldn't say because of contract negotiations and all, LeClaire had pulled him into his office the other day to tell him that Boston was going to trade two of their second line for Shane Hollander's contract.

It had been a relief to know the man he loved would still get to play hockey once he was ready. Ilya had spoken at length with LeClaire during that meeting about putting a clause in Shane's contract that allowed him flexibility not only with coming back to the ice, but also about away games for the near future. LeClaire had been more than willing to accommodate and Ilya had been so happy that his team still had his back despite the scandal all this had caused.

It helped that Cliff Marleau had strong-armed the guys into first understanding that their captain had always had their backs despite his personal life and declared that the Hollander-Rozanov child would be an official "special" member of the team moving forward. He had taken the responsibility of being asked to be their child's godfather extremely seriously.

"I forgot to tell you," Ilya murmured, breaking the comfortable silence that had fallen between them. Shane looked up and hummed.

"Marley already told the team that our son is the unofficial, official, special member of the Boston Bears. He even got a custom jersey made for him. Is too big just yet, but very cute."

"He's insane." Shane shook his head fondly. "But, we did choose him as David's godfather."

"Don't worry, I already sent him picture of David. Marley has probably plastered it all over Bears locker room by now. I don't know who is prouder, us or him," Ilya smiled.

Shane Hollander

Shane still felt exhausted, despite Ilya being the perfect partner and giving him the space and time to sleep after giving birth to their son. Their son. Shane was still wrapping his head around that. It had been a few hours since he'd woken up to find Ilya walking along the room talking with their son about his mother. Visiting hours were going to be starting soon, which meant his mom and dad would soon be returning.

"Mom and Dad are on their way back," Shane muttered, having just checked his phone.

Ilya, who was slumped in the recliner across the room, sat up and rubbed his eyes. He looked around, as if assessing his surroundings. Shane smiled. He recognized that Ilya had dozed off for a bit, finally taking a moment for himself for the first time since Shane's labor had really jumpstarted the day before. Shane felt bad for him, knowing he needed the rest just as much as Shane did.

"Why don't you go home for a bit. Take a nap. I can handle my parents meeting David officially on my own," Shane lifted his arm, reaching for Ilya's touch, his tone soft and warm.

Ilya shook his head and stretched before connecting their hands. "I'm okay. I can sleep later."

Ilya sat gingerly on the edge of Shane's bed, his body turned so that he faced Shane with his torso slightly angled toward the bassinet that held their son. Part of Shane's plan had been that their child would sleep in the same room as him the entire time they were at the birthing center. He wanted to be in control of the care for their child from the moment he gave birth. It had been especially helpful to see that request honored each time he had woken up and found he could have access to his son immediately.

Ilya leaned forward and scooped the child into his arms. David made a face, and then his mouth opened and he started to scream as if he was dying. Which, considering Shane last fed him the last time he had woken up, 2 hours ago, he probably felt like he was. Shane made a noise, directing Ilya to hand him the baby.

Once David was safely tucked into Shane's arms, Ilya got up and set about making him a bottle. The nurses had left them supplies to make bottles and safely warm them up. Shane found himself humming and stroking David's face to keep him satisfied in the meantime. It didn't do much to stop the crying, but Shane continued regardless.

"Shh, you're okay. Papa is making you food. Don't worry. Soon you will have the perfect bottle and you'll forget you were even upset," Shane whispered as he started to bounce his son a little bit.

Just as Ilya crossed back to the bed with a freshly warmed bottle, the door to his room opened and Shane's parents made their appearance. Shane smiled down at David as he latched on and

started to suckle the formula eagerly. He made cute little grunting noises as he ate, capturing Shane's complete attention.

"Hello, Yuna. Hello, David. Come in. Meet your grandson," Ilya greeted Shane's parents when it seemed apparent Shane was too caught up in the baby to say anything.

"Oh my goodness, he's even more precious than when he was newly born." Yuna exclaimed, all the proud grandma both men had known she would be.

Shane finally looked up with a smile, his eyes landing on his dad. "Hey, dad, would you like to hold him while he eats? Since you haven't actually met him yet."

David Hollander seemed to hang back a bit. "No, that's okay son. You can finish feeding him."

Shane and Ilya exchange a glance. Then, Shane responds, "Come on dad. Come meet David Ilyovich Hollander-Rozanov."

The response was instantaneous. David's hand went to his mouth and tears filled his eyes. He glanced toward his wife before taking a stumbling step forward. Once he was close enough, Shane handed him his grandson and waited for the baby to be settled before he handed over the bottle as well. David looked down at his namesake with a fondness Shane had never seen before. He knew that from that moment forward their son would be spoiled rotten by his grandfather. Little David would never want for anything and never hear the word no from the elder David.

Ilya slipped his hand into Shane's as he felt tears fall from his eyes. He turned to look at his boyfriend, a smile on his face. The road to get here had been hard, Shane still didn't feel himself in his own body, but he didn't regret any of it. Their son was the greatest achievement Shane could ever boast of accomplishing. Even greater than the Silver medal he'd earned at the Sochi Olympics. Because David had been a result of the devotion between Ilya and Shane that had been kept in the shadows for years, only to demand to be seen. Because of little David, they were finally able to admit to each other that what they felt for one another was love.

“Ya tebya lyublyu.” Ilya whispered as he leaned over and placed a kiss on Shane’s lips.

“I love you too.” Shane smiled up at the Russian.

Shane’s mind drifted to the first time Ilya had muttered those words to him. It had been a few months after he’d told Ilya about the baby. Ilya had flown back to Russia to attend his father’s funeral, but afterward he’d made sure to call Shane on FaceTime. It was the first time they’d ever done this when they were separated. Now that they were having a child together, many things had started to slip to the wayside, including their desire to push what they had into clean, easy boxes labeled casual.

“I wish you were here right now.” Shane muttered to Ilya after he finished speaking his heart out in fluent Russian. “I felt the baby kick for the first time today.”

“You did?” Ilya’s face split into the widest smile Shane had ever seen before. The pure joy and adoration on his face was something Shane knew would become commonplace for them soon.

There was something in the air between them that shifted with Shane’s simple admission. Like the mere existence of their child made them less afraid of the world. It was as if now that Ilya’s father was dead he no longer feared Russia and what she threatened.

“Ya tebya lyublyu.” Ilya murmured, his eyes filled with a softness that was directed at Shane.

“What does that mean?” Shane smiled, letting his free hand gravitate to his slightly swollen stomach. He started to rub circles on the top and received a gentle kick in response. “Keep talking, the baby seems to like the sound of your voice.”

“It means I love you.” Ilya tucked his lips and ducked his head nervously after speaking, waiting for Shane to respond.

“I love you, too.” Shane whispered. “I love you so much.”

“I’ll be home in a few days. I have to wrap up things with my father’s estate first. Then, I will be with you. No one could tear me away.” Ilya responded, emotion thickening his accent.

“Hey, where’d you go,” Ilya whispered, bringing Shane out of his thoughts.

Shane looked up, his parents were still very wrapped up in showering their grandson in love. He turned to Ilya with a fond smile.

“I was thinking about the first time you told me you loved me.”

Ilya gave a wicked grin, “If I remember correctly, David was stealing my thunder then too. Kicking for the first time. Being born. Guess I’m second now.”

“You and he will always be first in my life.” Shane reassured his boyfriend with a squeeze of their hands.

—

Later in the afternoon, Hayden and Jackie arrived with Cliff Marleau not far behind them. The moment Cliff arrived, Ilya mysteriously left the room with him and promised they’d be back soon. Shane brushed it off, figuring Ilya wanted to limit his exposure to Hayden and Jackie. It wasn’t that Ilya hated Hayden, it’s that he did his best to make nice for Shane’s sake.

“Hey man. You look great.” Hayden smiled and sat down in one of the empty chairs. “I figured your mom and dad would be hovering.”

“Nah. They went home a little bit ago. Though, my mom promised to come back tonight so we can have dinner together.” Shane laughed, his eyes drooping. He was still exhausted, but he wanted to give his friends the time and attention they deserved.

“You look exhausted. I remember that feeling.” Jackie smiled and patted him on the leg as she sat down next to her husband.

“How is...” Shane paused, trying to remember the name of the newest Pike child, “Amber, right?”

“Yes.” Jackie smiled. “She’s doing great. 3 months already and so much quieter than her siblings. Thank God.” She laughed, but Shane could detect the exhaustion under the surface.

Shane nodded, he leaned his head back against the pillows. “Little David is sleeping there in the bassinet behind you if you want to see him.”

“It’s a boy?!” Hayden exclaimed, his excitement taking root immediately. “Arthur and David are going to be the best of friends in a few years.”

“Hayd, sweetie, slow down. He’s not even a day old yet.” Jackie gently reminded her husband, as she stood up and walked over to the sleeping newborn.

“Actually, he’s 25 hours old.” Shane couldn’t stop himself from correcting.

Hayden looked at his best friend with a smirk, “Always have to be correct.”

Shane shrugged. He closed his eyes to rest for a bit. The exhaustion really was hitting him hard. It had been a long 48 hours. Based on the murmurings from Jackie and Hayden, they didn’t seem to mind in the slightest that Shane wasn’t actively participating in the conversation. A small part of him wondered if Jackie knew he wanted to rest and was entertaining Hayden so that he could. He tucked that in the back of his mind so he could thank Jackie later, when he was feeling more energized.

“Wait, who’s gonna be his godfather? We named you for all of our kids.” Hayden’s voice disrupted Shane’s attempt at sleep and he regretfully opened his eyes.

Shane looked a bit sheepish at the realization he should’ve told Hayden much sooner. “Sorry, Hayd. Ilya and I decided to name Cliff Marleau as David’s godfather and Svetlana as his godmother.”

Hayden looked crestfallen and Shane immediately felt the need to fix this. Despite having always been confident in their final decision. The guilt over upsetting his best friend was strong in his moment of vulnerability.

“Look, Ilya and I figured, if something happened to us, you and Jackie had enough kids to deal with. Besides, Ilya doesn’t have a family like I do. Cliff and Svetlana are his family.”

“So, you have a kid with him and all of a sudden it’s what he wants?” Hayden’s frustration took Shane by surprise.

“Hayd,” Jackie put her arm out to try and stop him. “It’s nothing personal.”

“I guess I’m just hurt that you had this whole double life that you never told me about. I’m your best friend, Shane. And you didn’t tell me about Ilya until you’d been together for almost 8 years. It’s like you don’t actually trust me.” Hayden’s frustration calmed to a simmer, but the hurt behind his words was actually ten times more gut punching.

“Hayd, buddy, I’m sorry. I was scared, okay. I thought if I told you somehow people would find out. Not because I thought you would tell, but because I thought just putting it out into the universe in even a small way would make it spread like fire. I couldn’t risk my career. I even tried to break things off with Ilya and date Rose, but I couldn’t stop how I felt about him. I love him, Hayd. He’s the only person I’ve ever loved. Until our son was born.” Shane reached his arm out in the hopes of being able to physically reassure his best friend.

“We totally understand that,” Jackie spoke up, silencing Hayden’s protests with a squeeze of her hand on his, “Hayden is just going to take a little time to adjust. Why don’t we go, give

you time to rest. Maybe soon we can get together with all the kids and have a cookout or something.”

Shane nodded gently, “Sounds like a plan.” Then, he turned to Hayden, “I really am sorry. I hope you know and understand that you are my brother, I will always love you. I should’ve trusted you more than my own fears.”

Hayden gave a small nod and then he and Jackie left. In the silence they left behind, Shane cried. He had never meant to fuck everything up so royally. He’d naively thought that because Hayden had been so good during Ilya’s initial injury and Shane’s subsequent pregnancy announcement and release from Montreal, that his best friend didn’t have any hard feelings. He should’ve been more attentive to what Hayden wasn’t saying.

By the time Ilya returned with Cliff, both sporting conspiratorial grins on their faces, Shane was sobbing. His emotions are closer to the surface these days due to the pregnancy hormones. Ilya’s smile dropped off his face the moment he clocked Shane and rushed to his bedside, throwing a quick glance at their sleeping son before focusing on Shane entirely.

“Moy lyubimyy, what happened?” Ilya’s hands were immediately cupping Shane’s cheeks, wiping away his tears.

“I fucked up. Hayden hates me.” Shane knew he was catastrophizing, but he couldn’t stop feeling like Jackie had simply placated matters.

“What the fuck did Pike say,” Ilya went into protective mode, his eyes blazing.

“He’s upset that I didn’t name him the godfather because he named me the godfather of his kids. And I guess he’s been upset this whole time that I didn’t tell him about us for almost 8 years.” Shane sniffled and leaned into Ilya for the hug he knew would make him feel better.

Ilya squeezed him against his chest and rubbed his back. “Sweetheart. I doubt he hates you. He’s just...upset. It’ll smooth out soon enough. I’m sure you guys will talk and you’ll make him understand why we kept it a secret from everyone.”

“Maybe.” Shane whispered through his snot and sniffles. “I’m sorry. I’m such a mess.”

“No, you are beautiful. You just gave birth to our child. Our beautiful boy. You’re allowed to be, as you say, messy.” Ilya planted a kiss to the side of Shane’s face. “I think what you need is a nice, long nap. You’re exhausted which isn’t helping your feelings about this.”

So, Shane settled back and fell asleep.

—

The next time he woke up, Ilya and Cliff were still there, this time they were watching a soccer game on the TV and chatting in whispers. Ilya was holding their son against his chest, a burp cloth underneath the baby, meaning he had recently been fed. Shane stared fondly at the sight before making the two men aware of his wakefulness. The moment Ilya realized he was awake, he moved closer to the bed.

“Hey, sonya,” Ilya whispered. “David is looking for his daddy. If you’re up for holding him.”

Shane shifted so that he was sitting up a bit more. “Of course. I see you fed him.”

“Yes, he woke up hungry a little bit ago. Then, he stared at Cliff being a bit too enthusiastic about stupid soccer. I think he also doesn’t care for soccer and thinks Uncle Cliff is crazy.” Ilya smirked and handed the baby over to Shane for his moment of bonding that was long overdue.

“Ilya.” Shane sighed, the exhaustion still lingering, but no longer overpowering like it was before. “He’s only a day old. I doubt he’s thinking anything besides where his next meal and cuddle is coming from.”

“You underestimate our boy’s genius.” Ilya smiled at Shane and then leaned closer to David and whispered, “That’s okay. I know the truth.”

“Hey, Roz, look I love my nephew as much as the next guy, but I really should head out soon.” Marleau stood up and stretched.

“Okay, Marley, thank you for your help.” Ilya gave him a wink and Cliff returned it with a smile.

“Don’t mention it. I’m happy I could do that for you, man.” Marleau clapped Ilya on the shoulder and then addressed Shane, “You did good, Hollander. Hell of a kid you got there.”

Then, to Shane’s surprise, he leaned down toward the baby and whispered, “Don’t worry kid. In five years you’re going to be the biggest New England Revolution fan in the world.”

“Get out of here with your blasphemous soccer talk, Marley!” Ilya chirped, but there was a love in his eyes that told Shane all he needed to know about how his boyfriend really felt.

“Just sayin, they play in the off-season, Roz. David is allowed to love both.” Marleau threw up his hands and chuckled as he walked out of the room.

Shane returned his attention to the baby in his arms. He and Ilya truly had created the most beautiful child he had ever seen. He still had insecurities about what the pregnancy had done to his body and what returning to hockey would look like in six months time. But for now, all he could think about was the child he loved more than he ever thought possible.

“Moy lyubimyy.” Ilya pulled Shane’s attention to him once more.

The sight that Shane was met with almost took his breath away. Ilya was on one knee and holding a box in one hand. Even without his boyfriend opening it, Shane knew it was a ring. He could feel the tears holding in his eyes as his heartbeat picked up and he hugged David a little more securely in his arms.

Ilya smiled up at him, his own eyes glistening with tears, “Meeting you that cold December day in Saskatchewan when we were 17 changed my life forever. I couldn’t believe this nice, Canadian boy with beautiful freckles was talking to me. As if we could ever be friends. Then, over the next 9 years I slowly and all at once fell in love with you. I couldn’t imagine my life without you in it.”

He paused to get control on his emotions, and Shane felt his own tears completely spill down his cheeks. He couldn’t believe this was happening to him. All those months ago he’d lived in fear that Ilya would want nothing to do with him ever again if he found out about the baby. Now, here he was practically tethering himself to Shane for the rest of their lives.

“Will you marry me?” Ilya finally croaked out, his voice breaking on the tears now spilling down his own face.

Shane couldn’t get his voice to cooperate so he audibly sobbed and nodded his head. Then, his brain finally caught up with his emotions as Ilya stepped forward and placed the ring on his finger, careful not to jostle David too much.

“Yes. I couldn’t imagine my life any other way. Yes, I will marry you, Ilya.”

—

Almost Five Years Later

Cliff Marleau

Breaking his femur in half during an especially brutal game against LA back in January had turned out to be the best thing for Cliff. At 33 he was nearing the end of his prime hockey years anyway. So, he took the injury in stride and announced his retirement from the game not long after. He’d had a great run, spending his entire career with the Boston Bears. Now, he was able to recover in peace, and focus on his favorite person, David Hollander-Rozanov.

His nephew was almost 5 years old now and loved spending all his time with his Uncle Cliff. Or at least as much of it as he could. Cliff’s injury had been a blessing in disguise. The

minute he'd been released from the hospital in Boston, he had transferred his care to a specialist in Ottawa and moved into the Hollander-Rozanov house to recover and help out with the kid. Shane and Ilya were the top players on the Centaurs ever since they'd moved teams the year their free-agency came up.

Living in Ottawa had been a better choice for them as a family and made traveling for away games a little bit easier. During their time in Boston, Shane had a contract that allowed him to pick and choose which games he participated in during the season and which ones he stayed home with David for. And the ones he chose to play, they would travel with David and his nanny, Raina, to play. It was messier, but they made it work for the first two years of David's life.

Then, when free agency came, Ilya and Shane both took pay cuts to meet the cap for the Ottawa Centaurs and moved back to Hollander's hometown. Now, when they had away games, David stayed with his grandparents or Cliff if he was available.

Which was why, by the time the playoffs rolled around and it was Ottawa vs. Montreal, Cliff made sure that he was present to keep an eye on David at every single game. The kid loved watching his dads out on the ice. He knew hockey terms better than he knew regular conversation. It was funny actually how well-versed the child was in proper hockey etiquette and the lingo. Cliff thought he was a passionate hockey fan, but he had nothing on the pint sized David.

"Uncle Cliff, do you think Ottawa is going to win tonight?" David asked Cliff as he helped the kid into his custom jersey.

It was in the red and black of the Centaurs with the number 24 on the front and 81 on the back with Hollander above the 24 and Rozanov above the 81. It was a point of joking contention between his dad and his papa that David had wanted Rozanov to be the number and name on his back, aka the typical jersey placement for hockey players.

"I think so, kiddo. This is game 5 and we've already won 3."

David stood before Cliff and rolled his eyes, placing his hands on his hips, "You didn't do anything, who's this we?"

“Fuck you, Hollzy Roz,” Cliff smirked and ruffled the hair on the top of the kid’s head. It was a spitting image of his papa’s hair that, if it weren’t for Shane’s eyes and nose making an appearance, Cliff would think David was a clone of Ilya.

“Swear jar.” David sing-songed as he skipped out of his room and down the hall toward the kitchen.

“Uh-oh, what did Uncle Cliff say this time?” Yuna’s voice greeted David some distance away.

“The f one.” David shrugged and looked back at Cliff with a smirk on his face as the older man limped into the kitchen behind him.

“He chirped me. It was deserved.” Cliff shrugged, shoving a 20 into a jar labelled “Swear Jar: David’s College Tuition or Hockey Sponsorship.”

“Cliff, he’s five.” The elder David smiled at him from across the room. “Now, who’s ready to head to the game?”

“ME!” Little David jumped up and down in front of his grandfather.

“I’m just glad we are back at the Bell Centre for this one.” Yuna muttered, gathering her bag and glasses from the kitchen table. “The boys left for the arena some time ago.”

Cliff nodded in agreement, “My leg much prefers shorter commutes.”

“Uncle Cliff, can we go into the locker room before the game?” David skipped over to stand in front of Cliff and looked up with an innocence that hadn’t been there ten minutes prior.

“Sure, I think we can manage that.” Cliff smiled down at the young kid.

He never imagined his life would become this. In fact, Cliff had never really imagined his life past playing hockey. But, now that he was in it, he loved every second of the time he got to spend with his friends and their son.

“You need a girlfriend.” David said to him as they walked down the hallway toward the Centaurs locker room. “Papa said you’re using us as an excuse to not be lonely.”

“Fantastic, I’m so glad Roz is gossiping with his child about my love life.” Cliff muttered in general, not directly at David, but the child chose to respond either way.

“Actually he told Daddy and I heard him because I was hiding under the table.” David slipped his hand into Cliff’s and the older man smiled.

“Ahh so you were eavesdropping?”

“What’s that?” David might be a precociously intelligent child, but he was still five.

“It means you were listening to stuff you weren’t supposed to be.” Cliff raised his eyebrow at his nephew who shrugged, completely unaffected.

“Not my fault you grown ups are more fun.”

“Let’s go see your dad and your papa.” Cliff shook his head and scooped David into his arm so they could approach the locker room more quickly.

“Myshonok!” Ilya’s voice greeted them the moment they stepped inside. David wiggled from Cliff’s arms and took off like a rocket toward his papa.

“PAPA! Uncle Cliff had to pay the swear jar!” David exclaimed the minute he was in Ilya’s geared up arms.

“Is that so, malysh?” Ilya winked at Cliff knowing full well the child probably said something out of pocket to cause it since Cliff was the least likely offender of the swear jar.

That honor went to Hayden Pike whenever he came over for a visit.

“Yes, he said the f word. Then he called me Hollzy Roz.” David’s words were drowned out by Shane’s laughter as he came over and rubbed his hand on the back of his son’s head.

“So, not only did you say the f word, but you said it to my kid?” Shane looked at Cliff, a level of fake petulance in his eyes.

“He chirped me.” Cliff argued, but looking around at the other guys in the locker room and the amusement on their faces, he knew he’d get no sympathy here. “But, I did walk myself into it. So, let’s call it an even ‘we both deserved it.’”

Ilya shook his head, but his eyes were mischievous. “Now I really need to know what kind of five-year-old chirp could make you so upset, Marley.”

“I’m not upset. It just wasn’t necessary.” Cliff needed to shut up, he was playing right into his best friend’s hand, but his stubbornness prevented him from self-preservation.

“Papa, he tried to say we would win tonight. I just pointed out he didn’t play so he can’t win.” David gave Ilya his most innocent face, with a smidge of mischief in his smile.

“Damn, Roz, you truly did create your own mini-me” Troy Barrett hollered from across the room. “Brutal and only five.”

“You can’t be mad at that, Marley, he only speaks the truth.” Shane shrugged and stepped back to his stall to finish putting on his pads and jersey for the game.

Cliff smiled because, as much as he hated to admit it, they all had a point.

“Come on kid, let’s let the guys finish getting ready for the game. You can see them again after.” Cliff reached for David, but Ilya stopped him.

“Wait, David, will you give the team the Captain’s speech tonight?” Ilya winked at his son and then set him on top of a chair that was now placed in the middle of the room.

“Quiet everyone! Your captain has a few words!” Ilya hollered out to the room at large. All of the guys went silent immediately and turned to face Roz, expecting him to speak, but then realized it would be David instead.

David smiled wide at the guys around him and then looked to his dad and papa for permission to start. Shane and Ilya smiled, their arms around each other, and nodded in unison.

“Okay, you sorry suckers! We are up 3 games to their pathetic 1. Is time we get our heads in the game and win the whole thing! Go out there and SHOW NO MERCY!”

The locker room erupted into cheers and whoops and hollers. But, Cliff’s eyes were on the family of three in the center of the room. Shane and Ilya were now both holding David in their arms and whispering proud words to him.

The team would go on to win the Stanley Cup that year. And when families erupted onto the ice to celebrate, David was held on his dads’ shoulders, half hidden behind the cup they held together.

End Notes

I am curious what you guys think Shane should do about his pregnancy. I have already made my decision, but I am a bit unsure about it so, let me know. Also, comments and kudos are much obliged. Thank you!

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