find your way back home

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/79005701.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Hayden Pike, Svetlana Vetrova, Yuna Hollander, David Hollander, Farah Jalali, Gilbert Comeau, Jean-Jacques Boiziau | J. J. Dagenais, Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau
Additional Tags:	Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander, Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov, Friends to Lovers, Idiots in Love, Implied/Referenced Homophobia, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Fluff and Angst, Happy Ending, Not Beta Read, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, POV Shane Hollander, POV Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov is Obsessed With Shane Hollander, Soft Ilya Rozanov, Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug, Anxious Shane Hollander, your honor they are in love, Childhood Friends to Lovers, BAMF Shane Hollander, Loverboy Ilya Rozanov, Homophobia, Shane Hollander Calls Ilya Rozanov "Baby"
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-03-06 Completed: 2026-06-01 Words: 112,340 Chapters: 22/22

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by strange_ghost

Summary

"Hi, solnyshko."
The Russian pet name set a firework off inside Shane's mind as he heard it cooed from behind him. The intonation was just as he remembered, but the voice was much deeper.

He turned and felt himself short circuit. It took every ounce of willpower to not let his jaw drop cartoonishly to the floor. Shane would recognize his individual features anywhere, even after 5 years. But it was as if someone had snapped their fingers and the smug, silly Russian boy who had been attached to Shane's hip for 3 summers was transformed into some sort of fucking Adonis right before his eyes.

“Ilya-” was all Shane managed before strong arms were wrapped around his waist and lifting him off the ground in a greeting all too familiar from years ago.

OR
When Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov spent their summers as teens in an elite hockey camp, they quickly became inseparable friends. But they lose touch when Shane moves on as a prospect for the NHL and Ilya for the KHL.

Years later, Montreal makes a bold move to take the hottest player in the KHL. After hearing of the Russian's reputation, the Montreal Captain is tasked with keeping his old best friend and new teammate out of trouble.

Chapter 1

August 2012

The sparkling lights of the city skyline were softened and blurred through sheer curtains lining tall windows, safely filtering Shane's bedroom from the outside world.

As he turned over in his bed yet again, for maybe the tenth or the hundredth time, he wished he could put a similar filter on his brain. Something to soften the sharp edges of memories that scraped around on the inside of his skull on nights like these and refused to let sleep come.

The worst part was that Shane truly couldn't decipher if these memories were unwelcome thoughts meant to darken his mind with things he couldn't control, or if they were a comforting blanket coming to cover him with the warmth of things he was happy to have once had.

Even being wrapped in the most expensive luxury sheets atop the most expensive luxury mattress was completely meaningless when Shane couldn't quiet his mind enough to let himself sink into them and sleep. Tonight was one of those nights where the noise was so deafening and sleep so fleeting, he felt he might as well peel himself out of bed and do something useful.

Instead, he clutched the sheet to his chin, allowing his mind to wander to where it so clearly wanted to go.

Earlier that day, on his walk home, Shane had heard a sound that made him pick his head up so quickly, he almost gave himself whiplash.

Russian. Someone was speaking Russian. Not anyone he knew or recognized; just a stranger on the corner, phone clutched against his cheek as he spoke. But the sound of the words made something reboot inside his brain. The short, clipped tones and throaty noises tumbled around in his ears. The man sounded happy as he spoke, his eyes crinkling in the corners with a smile. Then he fondly cooed out words that made Shane's whole body uncoil like a loaded spring.

“*Da, solnyshko*.”

June 2007

Shane tipped his head back and groaned, the afternoon sun white hot over his skin. “Goodbye.” He lilted in an aggravated and overexaggerated tone, letting his bag scrape against the pavement where he dragged it along beside him. Always with the long goodbyes, his parents. They both only smiled in response to his annoyance, waving furiously from the car as it pulled away.

The first year they had dropped Shane off for the elite six week camp, his mother had been beside herself to let him out of her sight for that long. He'd had to console her for twenty minutes before she would actually detach herself from him. It had been mildly embarrassing, especially for a 14 year old boy. But now in his third and final year of the camp, and knowing just how much Shane enjoyed it, they were happy to set him free for the summer.

He entered the familiar hotel lobby, shoes squeaking across the marble floors as he lugged his tired body through hurried steps. Shane almost immediately spotted Coach Bernard near the check-in desk, clipboard in hand.

“Coach.” Shane said with a smile, but instead of waiting for a reply, he went right to the paper sitting on the desk behind him, scanning over it with a finger. Rooming assignments.

“Don't worry, kid. I wouldn't dare separate you two.” Coach Bernard said, clapping Shane on the shoulder. Shane beamed up at the Coach as he was handed his key card. For the third year in a row, he would be rooming with Ilya Rozanov.

That first year of camp, Shane's mother hadn't really been at all worried about how he would perform on the ice. She knew her son was a force to be reckoned with, a generational talent, Shane had heard some people say. What she truly worried about was his ability to make friends. He didn't really have many to speak of in his everyday life, and talking to new people didn't come easily to him. He was shy, and a bit awkward. But when Shane's assigned roommate showed up, all bright eyes and smug smile, those worries wilted away in the summer sun.

Even with his very broken English, Ilya Rozanov had been a bold one from the very start. On their first day of practicing, the curly headed Russian boy had been watching everyone around him very intently. But he was particularly keen on Shane. And when they made their way back to their shared room that night, the first thing Ilya blurted out through a heavy accent and wolfish grin was “You and me, we are best. Others should just fucking go home, *da*?”

And Shane had blushed and broken into an uncontrollable grin of his own, and that was the beginning of what would become the closest friendship Shane had ever had with anyone.

What surprised Shane first was just how well matched they were in their skills on the ice. Shane had yet to meet anyone that could keep up with him, anyone that really kept him on his toes. But Ilya was always right at his heels, with skills that actually excited Shane to watch.

What surprised Shane even more was just how easy it was to talk to the other boy. After spending all day tearing up drills on the ice, they would spend all night talking. About hockey, about home, about anything and everything. It was something Shane had never experienced with any friend before. No awkward silences or forcing words out that Shane

thought would impress the other boy. They shared something genuine that made Shane feel less like a broken thing that needed to be studied by a therapist or coaxed into being someone else.

The best part of it was how much the two truly looked out for each other. Ilya helped to empower Shane to be more confident. He constantly encouraged Shane, reminded him how skilled he was, and never let anyone mess with him. Shane worked as a pseudo interpreter for Ilya. Where many people often struggled to understand Ilya's accent, Shane had been able to pick up on his speaking easily. And anytime he found Ilya pausing mid sentence, desperately trying to come up with a word, Shane was always able to jump in and provide exactly what he was looking to say. He found particular joy in teaching Ilya slang or new curse words, which Ilya would always adopt immediately to chirp at their camp mates.

On the ice, they were a force to be reckoned with. Always either competing so hard against the other to prove who was best that they left everyone else on the ice stunned, or working so seamlessly together that no one else stood a chance. And off the ice, they were an inseparable pair. You never saw one without the other.

Their dynamic only grew stronger the following year. Ilya had been so ecstatic to see Shane that first day that he lifted him up off the ground in a hug that almost knocked them both over. Ilya only had a Russian phone, so they had no way of communicating that whole year in between. Seeing each other again left them breathlessly giddy. Shane had begged Coach Bernard to let them switch rooms the second he saw he wasn't with Ilya. The two made such a fuss over it that the Coach had no choice but to cave.

And so they fell right back into their routine of staying up all night, talking and laughing until their ribs were sore. But somehow, even with no sleep, they were still by far the biggest standouts on the ice.

Something else that apparently stood out about them, that Shane had not even considered until the other boys started whispering about it, was the way that Shane and Ilya always needed to be touching each other in some way.

An arm slung around the other on the bench, sitting hip to hip at lunch, arms hooked together as they walked through the hotel. Shane never saw the big deal about it. Ilya was European and a bit eccentric in the way he showed affection, and anyway, they found comfort in each other. They were best friends, who only got to see each other six weeks out of the year. Of course they wanted to spend every second being as close to the other as possible.

Typically, Shane was the type to shy away from touch. Even from his own parents, sometimes. He had never been much of a hugger, and he liked his personal space. But something about Ilya's presence was soothing to him. Sometimes, Shane got so overwhelmed with his surroundings that his brain felt like it was detaching from his body. But being close to Ilya felt like an anchor that kept him from spiraling away into a chaos of his own making. There wasn't a way to explain it. Only that he felt safe. He didn't feel that their friendship needed to make sense to anyone else, because it was something special that existed just for them.

His favorite thing of all was the way Ilya would grab his face and call him “*solnyshko*”.

“Like sunshine.” Ilya had clarified with a grin the first time he used it and caught Shane's face scrunching up in confusion. “That is what you are like to me.”

He knew he would never have another friend quite like Ilya Rozanov.

Shane found himself presently lurking around the hotel lobby like a trapped animal, waiting rather impatiently for Ilya's arrival. All of the other boys who arrived immediately joked that they knew Rozanov must not be here yet, because Shane wasn't latched onto him like a baby koala. They all had mostly grown accustomed to their dynamic, though there were still the odd few who hurled homophobic comments at them. But they shut up quickly when Ilya squared up with them.

From the large doors of the lobby, Shane could see a figure sauntering from a cab, gold curls shining in the afternoon sun. He felt a smile immediately spread across his face.

He could see that Ilya had gotten taller, and even started to fill out a bit, though he was still rather lanky. But his shoulders looked a bit broader and his legs stronger. It was always so interesting to see how much each of them had grown in the time they'd spent apart.

They were both 16 now, and well on their way to being professional hockey players. Shane knew some scouts would even be paying them a visit this summer.

When the doors opened and Ilya stepped inside, Shane bit his lip, trying to bite back the enormous grin on his face. But Ilya dramatically threw his bags to the floor and flung his arms around Shane's waist, hauling him off the floor as he gushed something in passionate Russian. He had no idea what Ilya was actually saying, but he was pretty sure he understood the sentiment.

Shane was giddy with laughter as Ilya put him back on the ground and planted a loud kiss on his cheek. Coach Bernard was in the corner, groaning and rolling his eyes. “The twin flames have been reunited at last.” He said flatly, handing Ilya his key card.

Ilya only gave him a big flashy smile, the same kind he used to taunt opponents on the ice. Shane helped grab his bags, hooking their arms together as he spirited Ilya toward the elevators.

Once they were in the room, Ilya immediately pressed himself chest to chest with Shane, warmth radiating off of him in waves. “Ha! I'm still taller.”

Shane pushed him back with a smile “Fuck off.”

“You will catch up one day, *solnyshko*.” He cooed, pinching Shane's cheek with calloused fingers. Shane grabbed at Ilya's wrists to push his hands down, but Ilya threw him onto the bed and pinned him there.

“But you will never be stronger. So don't even try.” He laughed, holding Shane's arms down at his sides and pinning his body down with his legs as Shane desperately tried to wriggle free. “Say it!” Ilya yelled through a laugh, pushing into Shane with all his weight.

“Okay! Okay, okay okay. I'll never be stronger.” Shane could barely get the words out between laughing and trying to wrestle Ilya away.

Ilya rolled off of him with a grin.

“You're still an asshole.” Shane panted.

“I know this.” Ilya was still beaming, patting at Shane's knee.

Shane cocked his head, now taking Ilya in a bit more. His hair was shaggier than Shane was used to seeing. The top was full and tousled, and it curled up at his ears and the base of his neck. Shane's own hair was bone straight, black, and silky. It was in stark contrast to the thick, golden curls tumbling from Ilya's head. Shane reached out and sank his fingers into the top. “Your hair is getting long. I like it like this.”

When Ilya didn't immediately respond, Shane shifted his gaze from the top of Ilya's head to meet his eyes.

Ilya stared back, with a look that Shane had never seen him wear before. He couldn't place exactly what it was, only that it was…new. He watched as Ilya's eyes slowly tracked over his face, before snapping back up to Shane's eyes. Shane felt his own brows knit in confusion as Ilya swallowed hard.

“What?” Shane huffed out a small, confused laugh. “What's wrong with you?” He tousled his hair roughly. “Oh my god…are you…are you *blushing*?”

Ilya smacked his hand away. “Fuck you, of course I am not blushing. You confuse me with yourself, Shane Hollander. Blush at everything I say. Blush when I tell you I like your shoelaces.” He tutted dismissively.

Shane laughed, incredulous. “Okay. First of all, you were definitely blushing. Second of all, I don't blush at everything you say. I blush when you do your weird flirting thing because you're insane and a menace and all you do is terrorize people. Mainly me.”

“Ah ha. So you admit. You blush.” He poked Shane in the chest.

“Yeah, I probably do when you say ‘so pretty Hollander, pretty just for me’.” Shane did his best impression of Ilya's thick accent and the way he would coo at him with that sly tone. “You're a weirdo. You like, get off on it or something.” He grabbed a pillow and smacked it over Ilya's head.

Ilya grabbed the pillow and yanked it hard from Shane's grasp. “Terrible impression. And you are pretty boy, you know this.”

“Oh, yeah, and you aren't?” Shane shoved at his shoulder. They had both been called pretty boys by their teammates by way of an insult. Shane with his flushed, freckled cheeks and dark lashes and pouty mouth. Ilya with his bright eyes and high cheek bones and golden locks. Shane hated the way he let them make him feel smaller, less than. Ilya always hurled it right back at them and asked if that meant they wanted to suck his dick.

“Yes. We are both very pretty and very good at hockey. Whole world will know us, Hollander. Just wait.” Ilya beamed at him, and Shane smiled right back.

They spent the next few hours talking tirelessly about life since the last time they had seen each other. They always had so much catching up to do, and yet, it seemed like no time had passed between them at all. Shane could never understand how he had such a hard time talking to people he saw at school every single day, how awkward it always felt, but he could pick up where he left off with Ilya an entire year later without missing a beat. Being around Ilya came as easily to him as playing hockey. It was a second nature that his teenaged brain didn't care to dig too deeply into.

The first few days at camp were always filled with such boring, ceremonious activities that Shane felt spring loaded by the time they stepped onto the ice for their first scrimmage.

During warmup, Shane had watched with a proud smile as Ilya carved circles into the ice, making clean, hard turns that he had seemingly perfected. He made slapshots so hard to the corner of the net that the crack of the puck on the goal post rang through the entire building. He exploded off the line and skated almost twice as fast as his other line mates. He was mesmerizing to watch.

Shane knew the two of them would always be compared. They were both very good. Good enough that they had the major leagues buzzing, and multiple scouts would be hawking over them for the entirety of the camp, analyzing their every move. Good enough that they were both all but guaranteed to be drafted first round as soon as they turned 18.

Shane had overheard these comparisons many times now. Shane would be described as a cerebral player. Extremely high hockey IQ. He was fast, clean, and could see the plays unfolding before they even happened. He could recognize patterns, and analyze other players on the fly without ever missing a beat. He was always two steps ahead of everyone else on the ice, which made it hard for anyone else to even hope to keep up.

Ilya, on the other hand, would be described as strong. He was a strong skater, which made him just as fast as Shane, but in a more dangerous way. Dangerous for his opponents, that is. He could barrel through anyone, and his hands were so strong that he could fight the puck away from anyone, too. And he could bury the puck into the net with so much force that it was almost impossible to defend.

As much as they got along, their personalities and play styles on the ice were two entirely different beasts. Shane was quiet and calculating, his face always set in sheer determination. He didn't take unnecessary risks. His brain took the lead and his body followed. In contrast, Ilya moved around the ice with wild abandon. He was fearless. And he loved to get in the heads of his competitors with his constant chirping and the shit eating grin he seemed to always be wearing.

As they got set for their first face off, Ilya wore that exact grin, his mouth guard dangling between his teeth. “Oh, my sweet *solnyshko*. Do not worry. I saw scouts on the bench, too. I will not embarrass you too badly.”

Shane huffed. “Fuck off, Rozanov. You'll be lucky if you win a single face off.”

That made Ilya's grin turn up even more. The puck dropped. Shane won the face off, dropping the pass back and making no hesitation as he chased it down. Ilya, of course, was in stride with him. When the puck got passed back to Shane, Ilya was immediately slamming him to the boards, wrestling it away with a grunt.

“This is fun!” Ilya yelled gleefully as he sped away with the puck. Shane groaned in frustration, chasing him down, moving quickly to cut off the shooting lane. But at the last second, Ilya carved sharply around him, took his shot, and buried it in the corner just as he had during warm up. He turned to smile at Shane.

“Read me better next time, Mr. Hockey IQ.”

“Asshole.” Shane shoved at him playfully.

For the rest of the game, they took turns out running each other, scoring back and forth like a maddening game of ping pong.

During the last moments of the game, Ilya threw a strong shoulder into Shane's linemate, who had foolishly tried to take Ilya one on one in a battle for the puck. He was very much outmatched by the Russian, and got sent flying off his skates by sheer force and horrible coordination.

This one had a bad temper, Shane realized as the boy jumped up immediately, but was too late to defend Ilya taking one final shot. Ilya smirked as the puck slammed into the back of the net, his face smug and taunting.

The boy grabbed Ilya roughly by the jersey. “Fuck you, dirty Russian piece of shit.” The words flew out in a rage. Shane watched eagerly, leaning on his stick.

Ilya grabbed the other, two fists twisted in the front of his jersey, and slammed him back. “I know you would like to fuck me. But listen, Drake. Is Drake, yes? If you do not want to be on your ass, stay out of my fucking lane. Is not my fault you cannot defend for shit.”

Drake went to raise a hand, but the coaches flew in immediately to break it up. Fighting on the ice was strictly forbidden at camp. Ilya grinned at the other as he got dragged away. “Do not worry. Scouts were not watching you, anyway.”

Shane laughed behind his glove, shaking his head. When they returned to the bench, Ilya threw an arm around Shane's shoulders. Shane immediately leaned into him. “You think the scouts will like that mouth of yours?”

Ilya shrugged. “They should. Is very talented, can do many things.”

“Ugh. You're so gross.” Shane laughed and pushed Ilya away by his head.

As they all filed into the locker room, Ilya's arm still slung around Shane, Drake appeared with his face still twisted and red with anger.

“You're lucky they don't let us fight, Rozanov.”

“Hm. Is this so.” Ilya seemed amused.

“Yeah. Cause I would've knocked your teeth out.”

“Ah. Well, I would not want you to miss chance. Meet me behind hotel tonight at 9, after dark.” Ilya said casually.

Drake swallowed. “You serious?”

“*Da*. Very serious.”

Shane's eyes danced between the two, taking stock of the cool expression on Ilya's face in comparison to Drake's stunned stillness.

“Fine then.” Drake finally conceded, turning on his heels and storming off.

Shane grabbed Ilya by the shoulders. “You're gonna get yourself in trouble.” He said, but he was smiling, eyes bright, and his words came out in an excited whisper.

“You know me. I like trouble.” Ilya grinned, gently bumping his forehead against Shane's. “Come now. Hurry and get changed. I am starving.” He grabbed Shane by the wrist, dragging him further into the locker room.

Shane was spinning around idly in the desk chair in their room, feeling overly full after eating his weight at the team dinner.

Outside, the sun was dipping low, bathing the room in a pinkish glow. Ilya was reclined on his bed, a book on his chest. Shane crooked his head to look at the cover, eyes scanning over the Cyrillic characters scrawled over it.

“What are you reading?” He asked, still spinning back and forth. He had brought a few of his hockey books with him, but the post-dinner haze left him too foggy to pick one up at the moment.

“Is called идиот.” Ilya said, not looking up. He pronounced the word with Russian flourish, but it sounded an awful lot like the word ‘idiot’.

“Idiot?” Shane tilted his head.

“Ah, yes. Is same in English.” Ilya smiled a bit as he looked up at him. “Famous Russian author. Dostoevsky.”

“Oh. What's it about?” Shane moved to perch at his side.

“Mm. Prince who returns to Russia after being in…I do not know in English. Crazy hospital? He is good. But world around him is evil.” He folded the book over his chest. “Sorry. My English is not so good to explain it more. I probably sound like…idiot.” He grinned.

Shane could tell that Ilya was still self conscious about his ability to speak English, though he had improved exponentially since the first time they met. He could also tell that Ilya was very, very smart. He wondered what a conversation would be like with Ilya in his native language. How intelligent beyond his years he probably sounded.

“You don't.” Shane flopped down next to him. “Your English has gotten really good.”

Ilya patted the top of Shane's head. “You are too sweet for me.”

Shane turned to face him. “Are you…good at school?”

Ilya grinned. “Behavior? Maybe not. But grades, yes. I am in..” he looked up, lips twisting the way they always did whenever he was searching for a word. “Advanced classes.”

“Really?” Shane couldn't help the feeling of pride, mixed with jealousy, that spread in his chest. Of course Ilya was one of the best young hockey players in the world, and was also smart as hell.

Shane had never been particularly great in school. Not bad, either. But it certainly didn't come easy to him. And he certainly wasn't spending his spare time reading philosophical novels.

“Ah, is nothing. It doesn't matter anyway. Me and you will not even be going to university.” Ilya waved a hand.

That much was true. Being as good as they were, they didn't need to compete at a college level before entering the major leagues. But it was sort of cute to him the way that Ilya was secretly so humble. On the ice, he was so brash and cocky. Shane felt special that he got to see the Ilya that existed outside of playing mind games with people for sport.

“It's not nothing. My best friend is smart.” Shane poked his arm.

“And my best friend very much impressed scouts today with high IQ.” Ilya retorted.

“High *hockey* IQ.” Shane argued, looking down.

“Ah, no. Do not down play yourself Shane Hollander. I will never allow.” Ilya threaded his arm through Shane's to pull him closer. Shane allowed a smile, settling against Ilya's side. He nodded to the book that was still laying on Ilya's chest.

“Read to me?”

“In Russian?” Ilya cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Sounds cool.” Shane shrugged.

“If you say so.” Ilya said, plucking the book from his chest. As he began to read, Shane let the sound wash over him.

The words rolled so freely from Ilya's mouth. Shane watched the way his mouth curved easily around each word, seeing how it was clearly created to speak this language. It was fascinating. It was also nice to see how open Ilya's face was, the tension dropped from it, as he didn't need to constantly volley translations back and forth in his brain.

Shane plopped his head down on Ilya's shoulder and let the rolling sound of Ilya's Russian words lull him into sleep.

The feeling of Ilya poking his cheek awoke him with a start. He straightened up quickly, bumping into Ilya who had been hovering just above him.

“Shit. Sorry.” Shane grumbled, rubbing his eyes. “What are you doing? What time is it?”

“Just time for me to go beat Drake's ass. Wanted to let you know in case you wake up and I am not here. I will be right back, should not take long.” Ilya stood up, stretching his long arms out above his head.

“Wait. I wanna come.” Shane sat up quickly, smoothing out his hair where it had been tousled from sleep.

“You sure? You don't have to-”

“I want to!” Shane jumped up, smiling brightly. “Sounds like it's gonna be fun.”

Shane was curious to see Ilya in a real fight. He knew Ilya was scrappy. He was a city boy, after all. Last year he had shown up to camp with the shadow of a black eye ghosted over his face, and when Shane asked him about it, Ilya beamed as he explained that the boy who gave it to him currently had a broken jaw and two missing teeth.

After that, Shane had begged Ilya to teach him how to throw a proper punch. They spent every evening in their hotel room, using a pillow as a punching bag, until Ilya was satisfied that Shane had perfected it.

‘*Only use when you must, solnyshko*.’ Ilya had urged him. ‘*Do not go picking any fights. I will cry to see any damage to your pretty face*.’ And Shane had blushed and told him to fuck off, but he was pleased to know that he learned to punch from a Russian menace who had apparently been in his fair share of street brawls.

Shane trailed behind Ilya as they snuck through the hotel, snaking their way through the corridors to get to the back entrance. It was past curfew now, which was bad enough in itself, let alone the fact that they were breaking curfew to go have a fist fight in the parking lot.

“Come on. Keep up.” Ilya urged, pushing through the doors. Shane clung to the back of Ilya's shirt, staying as close as possible.

When the doors to the back parking lot swung open in front of them, the humid summer night air washed over them in a rush. Shane stayed clinging to Ilya's back, both of them stumbling out into the night, almost tripping over each other's feet.

Drake stood out by the curb, arms crossed over his chest, with two other camp goers flanking his sides. Friends of his, Shane presumed. The harsh streetlights bathed the scene in an ugly fluorescent glow, humming dully over their heads.

“Should have known you were gonna bring your boyfriend.” Drake called out. Shane instinctively unclenched his hand from the back of Ilya's shirt, but Ilya made no move to separate himself.

Instead, he tutted in faux sympathy. “I knew you were jealous.”

Drake scoffed. “You're fucking sick.”

“You bring your friends as well. What do you care who I have with me?” Ilya took a few steps toward him.

“I don't. I just know now I'm gonna have to beat both your asses, I guess. Since you guys are, like, a package deal. Can't stay off each other's dicks for five seconds.” Drake smirked at what he clearly felt was his own cleverness.

Ilya stepped even closer. “Let me make something clear. I will say one time. You are here to fight me. I will break your face open, but, I will let you get up and walk away. You raise a hand to him?” Ilya gestured backwards toward Shane. “I will let him break your face open. Then I will snap your ugly neck.”

Shane felt his own lips curl up into a smirk.

Drake opened his mouth to retort, but Ilya carried on. “Let us get on with it, yes? I do not have all night.” He started to stalk around Drake, eyes flashing something dark and animalistic. Shane watched intently.

Drake circled along with him, his hands looking a bit unsure, until Ilya laid the bait for him. “You look so much smaller not in pads. Like little boy. I almost feel bad for fighting you.”

Drake lunched forward with his fist, connecting it with Ilya's mouth. But Ilya reeled back in time so that he didn't get the full force of the blow, and the follow through sent Drake stumbling. In one swift motion, Ilya grabbed Drake by the front of the shirt, hauled him forward, and punched him square in the nose, once, then twice. The sound of a sickening

crack echoed through the parking lot as Drake's nose seemed to crumble under Ilya's knuckles.

Drake started to buckle at his knees, stumbling backward now, hands over his nose as it dripped blood like a faucet. Ilya surged forward again, kicking Drake down to the ground completely before standing over him. Ilya pulled his arm back, as if to go for another punch, which made Drake flinch violently, his eyes wild with fear.

“You will tell no one about this. And if you do, I will say you hit me first. Which is true. Do you understand?” Ilya kept his fist reeled back. Drake nodded silently.

Ilya stood up straight, spitting blood onto the ground next to where Drake laid.

Suddenly, a flash of movement caught Shane's eye. One of the other boys, who had been standing sentry, came leaping forward, grasping Ilya by the back of the shirt, attempting to turn him around. Shane closed the gap with quick strides, slamming into the other boy with a force that sent his back hard into the dumpster behind them.

Before the other could react, Shane punched him hard in the mouth. The other boy buckled, hands flying to where the damage had been dealt. From behind him, Shane heard Ilya laughing wildly, followed by hands grabbing at his shoulders.

“Come! Before someone comes out, come on!” Ilya grabbed Shane by the arm, running back inside, breathless and giddy. They ran quickly to the elevator, Ilya shoving Shane inside, then shoving him back against the wall, smiling wide at him. His eyes were bright and wild, his mouth still a bit bloodied. He put his hands on either side of Shane's face.

“You were perfect. That was so hot, Hollander.” He said excitedly.

A sudden feeling flooded Shane's gut. It took him half a second to register it. Butterflies. Ilya was touching his face and staring happily into his soul and Shane was having…butterflies? That one was new. He decided to chalk it up to the adrenaline from bum rushing that kid and sucker punching him. That had to be it.

“I learned from the best.” Shane smiled, wrestling Ilya's hands away playfully before putting an arm around his waist as the elevator door opened. “Now come on. You're all bloody and gross.”

They laughed in hushed tones all the way back to their hotel room, shoving at each other to be the first one to get back inside. Shane had never felt more alive.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Warning: this chapter contains references to child abuse and suicide.

July 2007

The first few weeks of camp flew by in a cool flash of some of the best hockey Shane had ever played. He wasn't exactly sure what it was that was propelling him so far forward; his skills just generally progressing, the scouts watching him, or his constant competition with Ilya. He supposed it could be all three.

Today, a reporter with the biggest hockey magazine in the media had come to interview and photograph both Shane and Ilya. Shane was not deaf to the whispers about the articles they were writing; he and Ilya were the best young prospects in the entire world.

They were hardly the first prodigies to come out of this camp. That was exactly why they were here. But the pressure and the excitement were mounting at levels that Shane's brain was having a hard time keeping up with. His only solace was that his best friend was at his side, feeling the exact same way.

They sat side by side now, out on the balcony of their hotel room, their sweat dampened arms brushing where they met on the arm rests of the chairs they had pushed close together. The sun had just set, painting the sky in a dusky haze that stretched out in front of them.

“What did they ask you?” Ilya was asking, shoving the last of his second candy bar from the vending machine into his mouth. The amount of sugar this kid ate was unbelievable sometimes.

Shane shrugged a bit. “Just all the normal stuff, I guess. Asked about my life, my family. What team I would want to be drafted to.” Shane kicked his feet idly against the metal railings that flanked the edge of the balcony. “You?”

“Same.” Ilya picked at the skin around his fingers distractedly.

“You okay?” Shane turned to him a bit. He could always feel when Ilya's mood shifted. It was like a bright flame suddenly flickering low, threatening to snuff out at any second.

Ilya shifted a bit in his seat. “They ask about home and family. It makes me…think too much. About everything.” He moved his fingers to grasp around the gold Orthodox cross he wore on a chain around his neck, and Shane was suddenly reminded that this boy had already faced more horrors in his life at the age of 16 than anyone should ever have to experience.

His mind wandered back to the first time he asked Ilya about his necklace. He had never seen one like it before, and Shane was infamously curious about basically everything.

'*It belonged to my mother*.' Ilya had told him, a weight and sadness dampening his words. And in the darkness of the hotel room, lit only by the glow of the hallway light spilling in from under the door, Ilya explained to him how he had found his mother's lifeless body only two years prior. Shane's 14 year old mind could hardly grasp the concept.

Ilya's mother had taken her own life, and Ilya had been the one to discover her. It was unimaginable to Shane, whose own family was so warm and whole. Ilya could hardly talk about it, Shane noticed. The words came out like Ilya was being strangled by his own grief. He probably was.

And as if this wasn't enough for a young boy to go through, Shane had also learned through many conversations that Ilya's father was abusive. Talking about his father always seemed to fill Ilya with cold dread and fear. One particular story still filled Shane with his own feelings of dread and fear when he recounted Ilya's telling of it.

Ilya's father had apparently been very quick to rid their house of his mother's things soon after her passing. But Ilya, scared and sad and stricken with grief, had tried to cling onto any little piece of his mother that he possibly could. So, under the cover of night, he had snuck into his mother's jewelry box, and pocketed a pair of her earrings. Shane remembered how Ilya's eyes brightened when he described them.

'*I loved when she wore them. They were so sparkly and match her eyes. Emerald and gold*.' He'd explained, and the fondness in his voice made Shane smile. But that smile was quickly snatched away with the rest of the story.

Ilya's father discovered the earrings nestled in a dresser drawer. He, apparently, felt that Ilya had no right to them. That he was no more than a thief and a disobedient, petulant child. He took the earrings away and sold them, but not before he bruised Ilya's face with a belt buckle and told him he was weak and an embarrassment.

Now, Shane could see the way Ilya was trying to mask the fear clearly rising inside of him. Shane slowly reached out and pressed a hand to Ilya's forearm, patting it a bit. Ilya exhaled a deep breath.

"Can I tell you something?" Ilya said quietly, nervously chewing at his own bottom lip.

"Always."

"I-" Ilya started, but stopped himself with a sharp inhale. "Fuck. I wanted to say this before, but…I am afraid to tell you, Shane." Ilya turned to him, and Shane could clearly see the fear in the other boy's eyes. "I am afraid…you will not see me the same anymore."

Shane's brows knitted together. "Ilya. You're my best friend." He grasped at Ilya's hand and squeezed it firmly. "You're not gonna scare me away."

Ilya swallowed hard. “Do you promise?” He said, in a tone so soft that it was almost surprising.

Shane lifted his hand up and held out his pinky. “Promise.”

Ilya gave him a hint of a smile, hooking their pinkies together before placing his hands back into his lap to steel himself.

“I know we talked before last summer about…doing things. With girls.”

Shane nodded a bit. They had discussed how they, both newly 15, hadn't had those types of experiences yet. In truth, Shane hadn't really thought about it much. He still hadn't, since then. His mind was always otherwise preoccupied with hockey and school. He didn't have time to think of much else.

“Well…since then…I have.” Ilya kept his gaze pointed down. Shane nodded again. Ilya had always seemed more mature than he was. He wasn't at all surprised that Ilya, ever the charmer, had beaten Shane to the punch. Shane only wondered if he was the one who should be confessing instead. Telling Ilya he still didn't have those types of feelings or urges yet. But Ilya's voice broke through his inner monologue.

“But not just…not just with girls.” Ilya continued.

Shane felt his eyes widen and jump to meet Ilya's. “What do you mean?” He asked, stupidly.

“I mean I have…I did things. With a guy.” Ilya started to chew his fingers nervously.

Shane felt his mouth drop open involuntarily. “You…really?” He asked in a hushed whisper. “Like…just once?”

Ilya shook his head. “Not just once. Shane…I…think I am bisexual.” Ilya clenched his jaw. “Not just think. I am sure.”

Shane felt frozen, his mouth snapping back shut. He had no idea what to say. It was the farthest thing from what he expected this conversation to be. “Really?” Was all he could squeak out, his teenaged brain turning Ilya's words over and over again.

Ilya looked down and away, his face a mixture of fear and shame. He cursed under his breath in Russian.

“Hey.” Shane said quickly, grabbing Ilya's hand and squeezing it. “It's okay. Really. I…it doesn't matter. I'm just surprised is all.”

Ilya shrugged a bit, still not meeting his gaze.

“Ilya.” Shane urged. “I mean it. This doesn't…it doesn't change anything. Not for me. You aren't gonna scare me away. I promised, remember?” He squeezed Ilya's hand again.

Ilya slowly met his gaze then. “Are you sure?”

Shane offered him a small smile, entwining their pinkies again. “I'm sure. You're my best friend. It's you and me, nothing is gonna change that. Okay?”

Ilya squeezed their pinkies together, nodding. Shane noticed the way Ilya's bottom lip and chin were trembling. It made an ache bloom in his chest. He quickly gathered Ilya into his arms, leaning over the arms of their chairs, hugging him tight. He put a hand on the back of Ilya's head protectively, holding him close.

“Thank you, Shane.” Ilya whispered into Shane's shoulder. Shane nodded, his chest tightening further. The world had already been so unkind to Ilya. He could only imagine how much more complicated that would become now. It was scary to think about. But Ilya was so strong. So resilient. The strongest person Shane had ever met.

“Is not safe to be this way in Russia.” Ilya was mumbling now. “No one can know. Or I..I do not know what would happen to me.”

Shane clutched at the back of Ilya's shirt. “Well no one is gonna find out from me. And if you ever need to run away from Russia, you can just come back here. To me. I wouldn't let anything happen to you.” Shane felt the pain in his own voice, strained from how badly he wanted to protect his best friend. He felt himself start to break, a sob trying to wrench itself free from his chest, tears stinging at his eyes.

Ilya pulled back, placing a warm palm to Shane's cheek. “Sweet *solnyshko*. I know you would not. Please do not worry about me, okay?” Ilya's thumb gently stroked over Shane's cheek bone. “No tears. Is okay. I promise.”

Shane could only nod, his cheek leaning into Ilya's touch. Of course Ilya would abandon every fear he had in this moment to comfort Shane. That was the type of friend he was. And Shane couldn't be happier for it. He knocked their foreheads together gently. “You and me?”

“You and me.” Ilya confirmed.

After a long while of soaking in the last of the heat that the summer night had to offer, Shane had padded off the balcony to shower before bed. He stood under the stream of water for much longer than was necessary, contemplating the weight of what Ilya had confessed to him.

It was not safe to be that way in Russia, Ilya had confirmed. But Shane knew it also wasn't really safe to be that way in major league sports, either. Slurs and homophobic comments got thrown around as easily as discussing what was eaten for breakfast that morning. He could only imagine what sort of reactions the locker room would have to a player in their ranks being attracted to men. They would probably all shield their bodies as if eyes could somehow spread their ass cheeks through some sort of queer telekinesis.

It made Shane ache for Ilya, knowing he would either have to spend his life hiding his true self, or accept all the hatred that came with being out. He didn't even want to begin to think about what would happen if Ilya's father ever found out. The images that played out involuntarily in his mind sent shivers through him, even under the stream of scalding hot water.

Shane eventually emerged from the bathroom, dressed in a fresh pair of sweats, to find Ilya laying in bed with Shane's laptop sprawled across his lap.

“Hey!” Shane exclaimed, tossing his damp towel in Ilya's direction. “I was gonna use that.”

“Ah. But now I am using it.” Ilya grinned, swatting the towel out of mid air.

“What are you even doing, anyway?”

“Looking at cars I will buy when I am rich.” Ilya said, eyes glued to the screen.

“Let me see.” Shane crawled across the bed on his knees, plastering himself against Ilya's side. Ilya adjusted the laptop so it rested on both their legs. “You'll end up killing yourself in one of these.” Shane said as his eyes tracked over various ridiculous sports cars.

“Ah. Oh well.” Ilya shrugged.

Shane wrapped an arm tightly around Ilya's waist. “Not oh well.”

He felt Ilya stiffen under his touch, his body seeming to jump away where Shane's fingers wrapped around the top of his hip.

“What?” Shane scrunched his brows.

“I…you are…” Ilya seemed a bit flustered, which was something entirely uncharacteristic.

“I'm what?” Shane urged.

“I did not know if…you would be okay. To be so close. Knowing that…” Ilya trailed off.

It took Shane a moment for his brain to catch up. “Knowing that you…like guys?”

Ilya simply nodded, looking down and away.

Shane rolled his eyes hard, scoffing as he pulled Ilya impossibly closer, their cheeks squishing together. “Ilya Rozanov, you asshole. I don't care. I'm not gonna stop hugging my best friend. So get over it.”

Ilya let out a relieved sigh, nuzzling his cheek against Shane's before turning to plant an obnoxious kiss to it. “I will buy you fancy car too, *solnyshko*. But boring fancy car. One for rich mom with many children.”

Shane pinched Ilya's side. “I don't need you to buy me anything. We're both gonna be rich, remember?”

“Ah, yes. We will need to be, to afford private jet. So we can fly to each other on days off. *Da*?”

“*Da*.” Shane agreed, laying his head against Ilya's shoulder with a smile. It excited him to think about their future. To imagine him and Ilya both living out their dreams as the biggest stars in the NHL. Maybe they would even be on teams close enough to each other that they could hang out during the season. Ilya would finally be in North America, too, and they could call and text all they wanted. Excitement coiled tight in Shane's belly. Hockey and Ilya were so tightly woven together in Shane's idea of his perfect future, he wasn't sure where one ended and the other began. He wanted nothing more than to have his best friend at his side as they laughed together at the top of the world.

August 2007

Shane was only two steps off the bus in front of the rink before Ilya had both arms around his neck from behind, hanging off of his back with an exaggerated groan.

“Hollander, I am exhausted, you must carry me.” Ilya whined, his words drawn out.

“No, you big baby.” Shane jutted out an elbow to catch Ilya in the ribs, but moments later ended up squatting down enough for the other boy to climb up onto his back. He was heavy, and Shane's legs and back wobbled in protest. But Ilya was giggling wickedly, waving at their campmates who all rolled their eyes at the sight.

“Ah, do not be jealous I have valet into rink. I will have fresh legs for scouts. This is my master plan.”

Shane was now rolling his eyes, and pinched at Ilya's calf where it rested along his mid section. Camp was nearing its end, and today was the last day the scouts would be out. A large group of adults who Shane could only assume were league and individual team representatives huddled near the entrance of the rink.

Ilya laid his head on top of Shane's with a dreamy sigh. “What would I ever do without you?”

“I don't know, probably find someone else to torture.” Shane grunted out, struggling to keep on carrying Ilya before depositing him on the ground as they walked inside.

Ilya smacked him playfully on the back of the head. “Would be no fun.”

Shane hooked their arms together with a grin, walking in stride with him to the locker room.

Ilya was being particularly difficult, but Shane was not relenting. Every time he had the puck, he could feel Ilya crowding him, but he was steadfast in his refusal to let the other boy win.

As always, they volleyed back and forth, a pendulum of momentum swinging from one to the other. Shane could practically feel a hole being burned on the side of his helmet from all the intense stares of the scouts, who seemed to be chomping at the bit over the impressive show.

There was a distinct burn in Shane's legs, the exhaustive ache building in his bones, but he had seen his opportunity to win and he was going to take it, even if that meant collapsing onto the ice in a puddle when he was done. Ilya was getting showy. Wrapped up in making impressive looking moves, rather than calculated ones. Shane was reading the other boy loud and clear, practically laying in wait for Ilya to make the mistake that Shane could see coming from a mile away.

And then there it was. Ilya had broken away with the puck, striding fast to the shooting lane. He pitched himself forward, as if to make a shot, but Shane knew it was happening before the action could be finished. Ilya faked the shot to switch to his backhand. But in that nano second of hesitation, Shane broke through and blocked the backhand shot, batting it away and sending it sliding down the perimeter of the boards. Shane moved with blurring speed across the line, putting himself into position to accept the pass from his teammate. He buried the puck into the corner of the net with seconds to spare, his face splitting into a grin as his teammates dog piled him.

Once he broke from the celebration, he could see Ilya standing by the net, shaking his head with a smile. He pulled his helmet off, shaking the sweat from his curls before skating over to plant a kiss on Shane's helmet. “Beautiful. I hate you so much. But it was beautiful.”

Shane beamed, ripping his own helmet off now, chest still heaving as he tried to catch his breath. “I know you too well, Rozanov.”

“Ah. That you do.” Ilya ruffled a hand in Shane's hair.

Shane let his eyes wander to where the scouts were all furiously taking notes. A few of them had broken off to have a discussion, and over the sound of the chatter, Shane could just barely hear their voices.

Russian. They were speaking Russian. Shane cocked his head, grabbing Ilya by the jersey before he could skate away.

“What?” Ilya whipped his head around. Shane pointed to the men. Then he saw Ilya's face drop, a stricken look pasted over where he had just been smiling and bright.

Ilya cursed under his breath in Russian.

“Who are they? Is that…?”

An older man with piercing blue eyes now had his gaze locked on Ilya.

“My father. Fuck.” Ilya turned his face away, fists curling in frustration. He started to string out Russian between clenched teeth.

“Ilya-”

“I have to go. I'll…I'll see you back at the hotel.” Ilya skated off quickly, pushing past everyone on his way to the locker room.

Shane swallowed hard as he watched him, then turned back to find Ilya's father staring daggers at him.

“Shit.” Shane muttered, then quickly ducked his head and skated off.

Hours later, Shane was alone in their hotel room, leg bouncing uncontrollably as he tried to temper his nerves. Why had Ilya been gone for so long? What did it mean? Why the hell was his father there? And who were those other men? And-

The sound of the door latching open snapped him from his spiral.

Ilya stalked in and sat down stiffly on the edge of his bed, eyes fixed forward, not meeting Shane's own. Through the soft light of the bedside lamp, Shane noticed a shadow over Ilya's cheek bone, blooming various shades of red and purple. Shane drew slightly closer, his brows furrowing at the sight of dried blood now visible at the corner of Ilya's mouth. Ilya's eyes flitted up momentarily, taking notice of the way Shane was studying his face.

“That's not from the game.” Shane crossed his arms, his mind quickly rewinding through the day's events. And no. It couldn't have been. Though he fully expected Ilya, stubborn as they come, to tell him he was wrong. To roll his eyes and wave him off and tell him to stop being so annoying. To say of course it was from the game, how else would it have happened?

But when Ilya didn't speak, Shane felt his chest start to tighten. The reality of it sank over him, slow and dreadful. Ilya looked back at him, his usually bright eyes now darkened by pupils blown wide and swallowing the color whole. They were filled with unshed tears, leaving them glassy with liquid pooling in the corners.

“Hey..” Shane said softly, moving toward him, reaching his hand out. But Ilya winced hard, his whole body lurching back and turning away simultaneously, eyes blinking rapidly. Shane gasped softly, frozen in place.

Ilya looked like a cornered animal, chest heaving softly, his whole body tensed. Shane felt a hot panic rising inside of him, tears now stinging in his own eyes.

“Ilya…” His voice wavered, barely above a whisper. “God, what happened?”

Shane slowly sank down onto the edge of the bed, still keeping a small bit of distance between them. He could see that Ilya's whole body was trembling. “Ilya.” Shane started, gingerly. “You're safe here with me. Okay? Always.”

At that, Ilya let out a shuddering breath, his head tipping forward to press into Shane's shoulder. Shane carefully put a hand on the back of Ilya's head, cradling it there. Ilya grasped onto Shane's shirt, balling the hem into his fist as he took ragged breaths.

They stayed like this for a while, until Ilya eventually started to murmur in Russian.

“What's that?” Shane asked, quietly.

“I want to lay down now.” Ilya said, his voice heavy with exhaustion.

“Okay. Come on.” Shane sat them both up straight, before kneeling down on the floor to untie and remove Ilya's sneakers. He stood again, grasping at Ilya's track jacket and pushing it off. Shane winced when he saw fresh bruises pressed into the flesh of Ilya's upper arms. He took a steadying breath, pulling the blankets back as Ilya crawled in.

The sight was horribly confusing for Shane. Ilya, this bold, bright, wild boy who seemed bigger than life itself. Now cowering and bruised, trying to shrink himself away as small as possible.

Shane did not consider himself a violent person in the slightest. Sure, he had dropped gloves on the ice. He had punched that boy, to keep him off of Ilya. But none of those things were serious. They didn't leave him shaking with anger. This feeling, however, was something new. A resolve that he would kill Grigori Rozanov with his bare fucking hands.

Shane pulled the blankets up over Ilya carefully, taking one last look at him before he switched off the bedside lamp and turned toward his own bed. Ilya's clammy hand caught him by wrist before he could take a step.

“Stay.” Ilya said, his voice quiet and hoarse.

Shane nodded at him, taking his place at Ilya's side, nesting himself under the blankets. He felt Ilya's body curl up next to him in a tight ball. Shane reached out a tentative hand to place on the side of Ilya's arm, then let it rest there when he felt Ilya's muscles loosen slightly beneath his touch.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains use of a homophobic slur and implied child abuse.

Early the next morning, while the sky was still a dark inky blue, Shane was awakened by an abrupt sound.

He could barely make out Ilya's form huddled at the end of the bed in the darkness, but the sounds coming from him jolted Shane to his core.

Guttural sobs ripped their way from Ilya's chest, the whole bed heaving under him. Shane jumped up, surprisingly nimble for having just been pulled from sleep, and anchored himself quickly at Ilya's side.

Ilya had his head in his hands, sobbing into them, his whole body shaking. Shane felt his whole mouth go dry, his own hands trembling as he moved to crouch in front of the other boy, hands on his shoulders.

“Ilya, what's going on?” He said, and his voice felt so feeble and scared. He was too worried to be embarrassed by it. “Please. Please talk to me, okay?”

Ilya eventually composed himself just enough to pick his head up, sinking his hands into his own hair. He sniffled hard, clearing his throat before he spoke.

“My father, he…” Ilya took a shaky breath. “He is not going to let me go to NHL, Shane. He is going to make me stay in Russia. I can't-” He tugged at his own hair. “I can't fucking believe this.”

Shane furrowed his brows, squeezing Ilya's shoulders. “What? What…what are you talking about? What do you mean?”

“I mean he is not going to let me go to NHL!” Ilya exploded, jumping up off the bed. He started to pace the room, hands still in his hair. “This is my fucking nightmare, Shane! He is going to force me into KHL, I will never fucking come back here again, I will never-”

“Okay, wait. Wait, wait, wait. Slow down. Tell me what the fuck happened. Please.” Shane felt desperation making his own voice ragged.

Ilya took a few shuddering breaths, then perched himself on the edge of the desk, head hung low. “He came here. With scouts from KHL. They watched whole game. All of it. From time we get off the bus until we saw them at the end.”

“When I went to my father after game, he was so…so angry with me. He tells me I am lucky they still want me, after what an embarrassment I am. Tells me he will never allow me to be in this country again where they make soft boys. He saw…” Ilya clenched his jaw so hard Shane could hear it. “He saw me on your back and holding your arm and kissing your helmet. He spoke to coaches and they told him how me and you are always doing things like this, always together. He says this camp has turned me into faggot and NHL will do the same. He says I show off because I am lazy and have no discipline, only tricks. That I let you beat me. Embarrassing, embarrassing, embarrassing. I embarrass whole family. Whole country. I am so lucky KHL scouts are stupid enough to still want me.”

Ilya was crying again now, chest and shoulders heaving. “I am fucked. I am so fucked. This so fucked, Shane.”

Ilya looked up at him then. By now, a hint of pre dawn light was filtering through the windows and Shane's eyes had adjusted to the dark. The bruise on Ilya's cheek had darkened and spread. His eyes were red and his cheeks were rubbed raw from wiping at his tears.

Shane felt his own lip trembling as tears spilled down his face. “Ilya…he can't…he can't just make you. He can't make you do anything. By the time you're able to get drafted, you'll be 18 and-”

“And what?!” Ilya exploded. “You do not understand. It is not so simple, Shane. Not with my family. Not where I come from. I cannot just stomp my feet and tell my father no. I cannot just run away.” Ilya's voice was shaking. Shane was starting to feel himself panic. “He will make sure I never…” Ilya trailed off, not finishing the sentence.

But Shane filled in the blanks on his own. *He will make sure I never see you again.*

Shane tried hard to hold it in, but it was useless. He felt his own breath start to come in short and heavy. “He can't. You can't.” Shane was crying through his hyperventilating. “Ilya, you can't-”

Suddenly, hands were on his face, grounding and warm.

“Hey. Look at me. Okay? Breathe.” Ilya's voice had shifted into something gentle and calm. Shane nodded weakly, breathing along with Ilya, deep and slow.

“I am sorry, *solnyshko*. I did not mean to upset you.”

Shane shook his head, sniffling. “No. It's not your fault. I just…fuck. I don't even know.” Shane could feel himself trembling like a leaf, just barely clinging onto its branch. His mind was racing, unable to stop long enough to grasp onto a coherent thought.

Ilya wouldn't be coming with him to the NHL. Ilya would be stuck in Russia. Ilya might not ever even get to speak to him again after he leaves here. Ilya would be unsafe. Ilya would be afraid.

Every thought merged and collided and morphed into a hulking monster in Shane's brain. He felt helpless. He felt paralyzed. He felt all of his silly, boyish dreams turn into ash and carry

away in the wind.

Through the fog of his chaotic mind, Shane felt Ilya hook their pinkies together. His voice came through, soft and feather light. “I know. It's scary. But we are brave, *da*?”

Shane pressed their foreheads together, nodding weakly. “You and me?” He curled his pinky harder against Ilya's.

“Yes, *solnyshko*. You and me.”

August 2012

The cool glass of the window as Shane's forehead pressed against it did little to quiet his mind. A wave of nausea surged from deep in his gut as that day played out so unhelpfully vivid in his mind.

Shane had cried so hard as he clung to Ilya that his tears soaked the shoulder of the other boy's shirt. He couldn't bring himself to let go. To say goodbye. He knew Ilya was going to get in trouble with his father for taking too long. But Ilya's packed bags were at the door and there was still a bruise on his face. Physical reminders that when Shane let go, he would be letting his best friend walk straight into the wolf's den and may never, ever see him again. Ilya's father seemed very keen on that.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing them hard, as if that would scrub the images from his brain.

It didn't.

He could still feel the way Ilya pulled him close and kissed the top of his head. How he told him to be brave. How his hands trembled when he reached for the door, and never looked back.

Shane had gotten quite good at blocking Ilya Rozanov from his mind. Not because he wanted to forget him. But because he was incapable of thinking only about the happy memories. He instead thought of that poor, sweet boy and all the horrors he went through. All the pain he likely continued to go through.

He thought back now to the book Ilya had been reading. That brief description, for whatever reason, stuck so clearly in his mind. ‘He is good. But world around him is evil.’

That was exactly how he pictured Ilya. Smart, kind, bold Ilya with his big heart and goodness in his soul. Stuck in a place where evil was all around him, desperately trying to claw him down. He wondered what Ilya looked like now. His mind could only produce images of him exactly as he was the last day he saw him; still lanky and smooth faced.

Shane dragged himself to the bathroom, taking a deep breath as he faced himself in the mirror. He was hardly the boy he had been then. His baby face had disappeared into a sleek, hard jaw. His frame was solid. Arms and thighs thick with muscle. His stomach defined. He had grown up. He mourned the fact that the Ilya in his mind's eye couldn't.

Maybe sometimes he mourned too much for someone he hadn't spoken to in 5 years. But it was also for someone who had made Shane feel seen. Made him feel normal. Listened to him earnestly and protected him fiercely.

Now that Shane's brain was no longer stuck in the stunted condition of being a teenager, he could see how rare of a person Ilya Rozanov really was. Sure, he was cocky and a show off and kind of an asshole. But those things had been surface level. A shield that guarded the softness inside of him, blocking it from the rest of the world. Because he was taught that his softness was weakness. That the kindest parts of his soul were somehow tarnished and wrong.

Shane hadn't been able to comprehend the depth of that at the time. Maybe he still couldn't process it fully. But his chest ached with it now. The world was unkind and unfair and ugly in many ways. It was out of his control. That was the worst feeling of all.

Heaving a sigh, Shane resigned himself to getting ready for the day. His coach had texted him last night, informing him that they were having a captain's meeting this morning. The suddenness of it had caught Shane off guard, but he didn't have the energy to think too much about it now.

He moved through his routine robotically. There was safety in turning off his brain and turning on auto pilot. His own thoughts couldn't drown him here. He steeped himself into his actions, a step by step measure of control. He allowed it to slowly untie the Ilya Rozanov shaped knots in his stomach until his nerves cooled enough to drag himself to the arena.

The proximity of the arena to his condo had made life exponentially easier. It was easily within walking distance, so he never had to worry himself with traffic or getting his car out of that god forsaken garage. The heat of the August sun still radiated off his skin as Shane entered the facility, quietly making his way to the film room, as requested.

He wasn't really sure why they were having a captain's only meeting to review film in August when they didn't even have their schedule yet. But Shane had always been the type to sit back and listen rather than question.

“Hollander.” Coach Theriault rose from his seat to give him a firm handshake, the lights in the room already dimmed and paused video lighting up the projector screen.

Shane took a seat by his side, taking note of the fact that there were quite a few higher ups in the room as well. He swallowed back a surge of anxiety, clutching a bit at the hem of his shirt under the table to calm himself.

“So. I know this meeting is a bit…out of the ordinary. But we felt it was important to get you up to speed before any news breaks.” Theriault started.

“I'm sure you're aware that we're looking for more depth at Center. Your line is as solid as they come. But we could use, frankly, another you out there. If at all possible.”

Shane huffed out a bit of a laugh at that.

“We've been researching since late last season. And we had a rare opportunity come up over the summer.” Theriault pressed play on the video.

On the screen, uniforms that Shane didn't recognize moved across the ice. Shane tried to track exactly what he was supposed to be following here.

“This.” Theriault gestured at the screen. “Is the KHL. Specifically Spartak Moscow.”

Shane cocked his head, his interest very much piqued.

“And that.” Theriault said pointedly, just as the video zeroed in on a single player. “Is our new center.”

The clips were coming in short succession, but they were enough to be impactful. The player was deadly fast, and barreled through defenders like they were nothing more than a minor inconvenience. He hooked the puck away with ease, and buried his shots with so much strength that it was, frankly, a little scary. Shane felt momentarily mesmerized.

“KHL, huh?” He repeated, eyes glued to the screen.

“Yup. And he's one of their top dogs.”

“And he wants to come here?” Shane furrowed his brows in, trying to focus his attention on the player.

If Theriault answered, Shane didn't hear it. Because all the blood felt like it was rushing through his ears like a geyser. He had finally caught a full shot of the back of the players jersey.

ROZANOV, in bold, red letters.

He felt his mouth go dry. It couldn't be. There was no way. It had to be a common last name. A coincidence.

“Rozanov?” Shane felt himself croak out.

Theriault hummed. “Ilya Rozanov. Got drafted at 18, same year as you. Has been with Moscow ever since.”

Shane felt like his stomach had dropped through the bottom of his chair and straight to the floor. He let out an involuntary, incredulous laugh.

“What?” Theriault turned to him. “You know of him?”

“I…” Shane laughed again. “I'm pretty sure. I don't know how common the name Ilya Rozanov is, but. I'm pretty certain this is the same guy I went to camp with as a teenager.” Shane felt like he had stars in his eyes. Or maybe they were tears. He hoped not. “And he was really fucking good.” Shane added, trying to be helpful.

“Oh wow. Well good. That's good to hear. Hopefully you two will have some kind of rapport, then.”

“When does he come?” Shane asked, entirely too eager.

Theriault shuffled through his papers. “We didn't want to tell you until everything was finalized. He'll be here in 3 days.”

“3 days?!” Shane sputtered, unable to control it. He widened his eyes at himself, then sank back into his chair. “Sorry…I just wow. That's so soon.”

“Right.” Theriault shot him a strange look. “You and Pike both have units in that building a few blocks away, right?”

Shane nodded in response, not wanting to open his mouth again in fear that he might explode.

“Good. There was an empty unit, the office is getting him set up there. I trust you'll be able to show him around.”

Shane nodded. Again, too eager.

“And one more thing.” Theriault leaned in a bit. “He apparently has garnered himself a bit of a…reputation. He doesn't have the cleanest image back in Moscow. I guess he has a penchant for trouble. I'm gonna trust that you can help keep him away from that here. We don't need any PR nightmares right now.”

Shane stilled a bit at that. A penchant for trouble. He wondered what exactly that entailed. And was Theriault really asking him to be a babysitter?

“Of course.” Shane said, despite his confusion.

“Good. That's everything, then. I'll text you the details for our next meeting.” Theriault stood abruptly, clapped Shane on the shoulder, and everyone else filed out of the room clerically.

Shane was left feeling almost dizzy, clutching to the edge of the chair like he needed to cement himself to the surface of the earth. He wondered what fucking universe he was in that this could possibly be happening. But then he decided that he really didn't care.

Instead of knots, butterflies stormed his stomach in a great rush. He placed his hand there, as if he would be able to feel it bursting through his skin. All he could feel was his heart hammering inside his chest. A steady thud thud thud that threatened to knock him off his axis. 3 days.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane was pacing. He was pacing laps around the gym and the locker room like some sort of exasperated animal stuck in an enclosure. But he couldn't make his legs stop moving. Ilya Rozanov was due to arrive at the arena any time now. The driver was bringing him straight from the airport to go over paperwork while the movers set up his condo. Shane knew this, because just as he couldn't stop his legs from moving, he couldn't stop his mouth from asking questions about Ilya's arrival.

“Dude.” Hayden called over his shoulder, slowing the treadmill he was on to a walk as he pulled out one ear bud. “You're killing me.” He spoke through his panting, hands on his hips. “Can you just please do anything other than…that?”

Shane groaned, dropped his head as he leaned on the treadmill next to Hayden. “I'm sorry. I'm just…I don't even know. Nervous? Excited?”

“Try dramatic.” Hayden muttered.

“Oh, fuck off, Hayden. He was my best friend and I haven't seen him in 5 years. Cut me some fucking slack.”

“Ugh. Fine.” Hayden conceded. “You haven't told me much about him.”

Shane shrugged a bit. “I always tried not to think about him too much. Kinda makes me sad to.” He scuffed the toe of his shoe back and forth across the floor lightly. “But. He was great. He was really the first person I ever really connected with, you know? I had a hard time making friends. But with him, it was easy. He was so funny and confident but he was also really sweet. He was a great listener. Really fucking smart, too. He taught me a lot.”

“Damn.” Hayden climbed off the treadmill. “I hope this is how you gush to other people about me.”

Shane felt a slight blush spread across his cheeks. “Fuck you. You asked.” He crossed his arms defensively.

“I know, I know. I'm sorry. I'm fucking with you. I'm sure he was cool.” Hayden leaned back against the frame of the treadmill. “So what happened with him?”

Shane took a deep breath. “Well. He was really good at hockey. Like, one of the best in world good. The scouts were there at the camp for me and him, pretty much. We were convinced we would both be drafted to the NHL. But then his father….kinda forced him into the KHL. Wanted to make sure he never came back here.”

Hayden screwed his face up. “Why? What do you mean he made him?”

“I know. That was my reaction too. But I think the situation was…complicated. Let's just say his father was a piece of shit and not fit to be a father.”

Hayden nodded solemnly. “Well. At least he's coming here now, right? Better late than never. From what I overheard, Rozanov is a beast. Will be good to have him on the team.” He sighed a bit, for dramatic effect. “And I guess I'm glad you'll have another friend around.”

Shane smiled a bit. “Thanks, Hayd.”

“Anyway. I'm fucking starving. I'm gonna head back. You good?”

“I'm good.” Shane stood up straight. “I'll text you later.”

“Later!” Hayden called over his shoulder.

Shane blew out a breath, looking down at his watch before wiping the sweat from his palms onto the front of his shorts. He felt like he was practically vibrating. He decided a cold shower to wash away his workout and his overbearing nerves would probably be for the best.

Shane stood with one shoulder against his locker room stall, running a hand through his still shower damp hair as the other scrolled through the emails on his phone.

He was trying to stave off the inclination to roll his eyes at how aggressively his mom was negotiating his latest brand deal via email chain when a sudden sound filled the air of the otherwise silent room.

“Hi, *solnyshko*.”

The Russian pet name set a firework off inside Shane's mind as he heard it cooed from behind him. The intonation was just as he remembered, but the voice was much deeper.

He turned and felt himself short circuit. It took every ounce of willpower to not let his jaw drop cartoonishly to the floor. Shane would recognize his individual features anywhere, even after 5 years. But it was as if someone had snapped their fingers and the smug, silly Russian boy who had been attached to Shane's hip for 3 summers was transformed into some sort of fucking Adonis right before his eyes.

“Ilya-” was all Shane managed to choke out before strong arms were wrapped around his waist and lifting him off the ground in a greeting all too familiar from years ago.

Shane let out an involuntary sound that was half laugh and half gasp as Ilya squeezed him tight before planting him firmly back on the ground.

Large hands placed themselves on either side of Shane's face. They were warm and calloused against his cheeks.

“My god! Look at you. My Shane, so handsome.” He beamed, then let his hands drop to Shane's arms, squeezing at them a bit. “I cannot believe.”

And Shane was right there with him. He could not believe it, either. But he felt like he was actually malfunctioning, because his brain could not process what was in front of him at the moment.

Those cool blue eyes were staring at him so adoringly and his mouth was twisted up into that smug grin. A dark blonde curl was falling onto his forehead. And fuck, he was *beautiful*.

“I can't believe it either.” Shane managed, feeling the way his cheeks were practically radiating heat like a stove. But he smiled when his eyes reached Ilya's again, and he couldn't help but surge forward and gather the other man into another hug. “Holy shit, Ilya.”

Ilya laughed brightly, rubbing the back of Shane's head. He stepped back again, and Ilya's eyes raked over him.

“You are not baby anymore.” He mused.

“Neither are you.” Shane noted as he gave Ilya his own once over.

He was broad shouldered and just as tall as Shane. Shane's eyes fell to the curve of his bicep where it peeked out from under his sleeves. To the visible vein running down the center of it.

God, why was he looking at that? Why was he noticing it? He needed to file these thoughts away for later. Now was certainly not the time.

His unhinged train of thought was broken when Ilya reached out a hand, using the pad of his thumb to swipe gently across the top of Shane's cheek, where he knew his freckles were scattered. “You are real?”

He was surprised Ilya's finger didn't burn where he touched him; he was blushing like an absolute fool. “As far as I know.”

Ilya grinned at that, then pulled him in to place a firm kiss to the side of his head.

Shane had been wondering the same; if this was real. If Ilya was really in front of him, whole and unharmed and smiling brightly. It was too good to be true. And yet, it was.

“Ah. So many things to discuss, *solnyshko*, but I must go sit in boring meetings. Had to come find you first, though.”

Shane smiled at that. “Obviously. What could be more important than me?”

Ilya pinched his cheek, then patted it. “Ah, there is my Shane. Still a little brat.”

Shane kicked at his shin. “Shut up. I'd bet my life you're still an asshole.”

“And you would be right, thank god. Can't have you dying now. I've waited 5 years for this day.” Ilya poked him in the chest. “We live in same building, yes? Paperwork lady tells me

this.”

“We do.”

“Perfect.” Ilya immediately held his hand out. “Give me your phone. I put my number in.”

Shane handed it over, then rolled his eyes with a smile when Ilya handed it back, the thread open where he had texted himself from Shane's phone. “Really?”

Scrawled across the top of the thread was his contact name, which he had saved as **ilya** 💕😍👅

Ilya looked up at him and winked. Shane felt his stomach do a small flip.

“I will text you when I get back. You come to my condo and keep me company while I unpack, yes?”

“Yes.” Shane couldn't stop the big smile that split open his face.

Ilya gave him one last tight hug before trotting off in the direction of the offices.

None of this seemed possible. Ilya was real, and he was here, and he was safe.

His mind could finally think of Ilya how he is in the present, instead of being perpetually stuck as a teenager.

The confusing part about that was the Ilya now was making him…feel things. He wasn't exactly sure what. He really wanted to chalk it up to being overly excited to see his friend. But it certainly felt different than that.

He could barely look him in the eye without feeling his stomach somersault and his cheeks go pink. It didn't help that Ilya always had, and still did, look at him with such genuine fondness in his gaze.

Though he had just showered, Shane decided as he stepped out of the building to go for his second run of the day to try to burn away the cascade of nonsensical thoughts chattering in his brain.

Chapter End Notes

One thing is guaranteed in every universe, and that's Ilya causing Shane's gay panic 😭

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya pulled the door open with a grin. “Captain.” He said by way of greeting, stepping aside to allow Shane entry.

Ilya was clad in a Montreal team t-shirt that was starkly new and hugged the broad expanse of his chest, his hair damp. Shane carefully toed off his shoes. “Looks good on you.” he gestured toward the shirt.

“Will take some getting used to.” Ilya shrugged.

“I feel like all of this will probably take some getting used to.” Shane huffed out a small laugh. “I mean, fuck. I can't believe you're here.”

Ilya smiled at that, reaching a hand out to palm Shane's cheek. “Come sit with me, pretty boy.”

Shane felt himself flush immediately. Well, at least he had lasted a whole 30 seconds without getting red in the face.

“Ah, *solnyshko*. You keep blushing so much, your face will be stuck this way forever.”

“Fuck off.” Shane lightly shoved at Ilya's shoulder, trying to hide his smile. He failed.

“No, no. I like it this way. Is very cute. Makes me want to bite you.” Ilya said casually as he strode over to the couch.

“Oh my god. You're so strange.”

“You missed it.” Ilya patted the seat next to him.

And yes, he really did miss it. There was some sense of comfort in the familiarity of Ilya's strange ways.

Shane sat down, the two of them caddy corner from each other in the crook of the sofa. Ilya was looking at him again with that unbelievable fondness in his eyes. His eyes bounced lightly back and forth, sparkling in the low evening light that spilled through the large picture windows. He looked like he was studying something precious.

Shane nudged Ilya's leg with his knee. “So. Are you gonna tell me how the hell you're here right now?”

Ilya hummed a bit, his hands fidgeting in his lap. Shane's eyes caught on a jagged scar in the palm of Ilya's hand. They trailed down to a few more marring his forearm. When Ilya saw

where Shane's eyes had gone, he quickly turned his arm over to lay his palms flat on his knees. Shane decided it was best not to question it. At least not now.

“Well. Is what I have wanted for long time. To come to NHL. Is really not a very exciting story. Just…opportunity came. And I took it. And maybe universe does not hate me as much as I thought it did, because now I play for best team with prettiest captain, hm?”

Shane rolled his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips. “Was that one of your conditions to come over to the league?”

“Ah, yes. Obviously.”

Shane leaned forward a bit. “Well. Want to explain why I was told I need to be your babysitter?”

Ilya tossed his head back with a laugh. “They did not say this. Did they?”

“I swear!” Shane laughed, and he felt his body move closer to Ilya's, ever in his orbit.

“Oh, wow. They want you to leash me.” He leaned in close to Shane. “Should I bark for you?”

Shane put a hand over Ilya's face, pushing him back with a laugh. “God. Please don't.”

Ilya grinned, leaning back.

“They said you liked trouble. That we didn't need any PR nightmares.”

“Well, I have always liked trouble. You should know this.” He reached a hand over to poke the tip of Shane's nose.

“What the hell were you doing for them to even say this?” Shane batted Ilya's hand away.

“Mm. Nothing too serious. Just…you know. Clubs. Women.” He shrugged. “Paparazzi love me. Especially when I have models following me to hotel. Apparently drunk threesome is big news.”

Shane felt his stomach twist slightly. An uncomfortable pang that felt an awful lot like jealousy, which was absurdly insane.

“I suspect Montreal does not like bad boy image. Only want good role models. So I need polite Canadian boy to hold my leash.”

“Right. Well. I'll do my best to cockblock you from any models.” Shane muttered.

Ilya laughed brightly. “Cockblock. I like this word.” He leaned back in. “And how would you do this, Shane Hollander? Hang on my arm like boy toy so they stay away?”

“You are impossible.” Shane put his face in his hands. “Maybe I'll just tell them all how fucking annoying you are.”

“I do not think they want me for my personality, sweet *solnyshko*.”

Shane shrugged at that.

“And what about you? You have girlfriend?” Ilya scratched at the side of his nose.

Shane blanched at that. “I…no.” He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Ah. Good. Girlfriend take up too much time, anyway. I need your attention or I will die. Like house plant.” Ilya poked at his side, and Shane couldn't help his smile.

After a few moments, Ilya put a hand on top of Shane's. “You seem happy. I am glad. I told you things would be okay.”

Shane felt a swell in his chest. Brave Ilya with all the strength his 16 year old self could muster had assured him of this. It was not lost on him how insane it was that Ilya had been the one consoling and comforting and promising everything would be fine, when Shane would be going back to his normal life and Ilya would be walking into a nightmare.

Shane moved his hand to cover Ilya's. “I wish it could have happened differently. I felt…so fucking guilty, Ilya.” He confessed.

“No.” Ilya knitted his brows and squeezed Shane's hand. “Why would you feel guilty? You did nothing.”

“I got to live my life how I wanted to and you didn't.” Shane swallowed. “And a lot of that was because your father didn't like our friendship. I felt like if…I don't know. If maybe we had toned it down, or-”

“Shane.” Ilya took both of his hands now. “Look at me.”

Shane slowly looked up to meet his eyes, like two perfect pools of water.

“You did nothing wrong. I am glad you got to live how you want. I remember reading the news the day you were drafted first. I was so fucking proud of you.” He squeezed both of Shane's hands.

“Really?” Shane said softly, eyes stuck on Ilya's.

“Really. And fuck toning it down. Our friendship was special because it was us, yes?” He reached up and pushed Shane's hair away from his face.

“Well, I've never met anyone else like you, that's for sure.” Shane nudged his knees against Ilya's.

“Can I show you something?” Ilya leaned in. Shane nodded.

Ilya held out his hand in a fist, then raised his pinky finger. On it was a small tattoo in the shape of a sun. “In Russia, *solnyshko* is common name to use. But since I start calling you this, I do not ever say it for anyone else. It felt…” he searched for the word. “Reserved. For

you. And I wanted to have reminder of you with me. Little sunshine for when I feel sad, hm?"

Shane felt his heart and then his bottom lip wobble in short succession. Ilya hooked their pinkies together, just as they had as teenagers. "Ilya.." was all he could whisper before tears spilled onto his cheeks.

"Oh, Shane." Ilya pouted, bringing his thumb up to brush the tears away as they fell.

"You're so sweet. What the fuck." Shane laughed through his cries.

"Sweet for you only. Is exclusive deal." He smiled, patting Shane's cheek. "Do not tell anyone."

Shane felt like his chest was going to burst. And he hoped Ilya was sweet only for him, because he wasn't sure how in the world he could ever bear to share him. He wasn't sure how he lived the last 5 years without this ridiculous man at his side.

Shane lurched forward to wrap both arms around Ilya's neck. "You're never leaving again. Okay?"

"Okay." Ilya whispered.

Shane woke to the sound of rhythmic breathing pressed close to his ear, his body pleasantly warm. He realized he was still on Ilya's couch, tucked closely into the other man's side with his cheek pressed into Ilya's chest. A strong arm had Shane pulled in close, wrapped around his middle with a hand draped over his hip.

Shane took the opportunity to nuzzle his cheek softly against the strong muscle of Ilya's chest through his shirt. The feeling of it made his stomach flutter and his spine tingle. He wondered if he ever got this feeling when he was close to one of his girlfriends.

No. Of course not.

But that answer was too definite and too real and Shane didn't feel brave enough to face it right now. Instead, he brought the tips of fingers to lightly touch the curve of Ilya's bicep, just as if he were skimming the surface of bath water to feel the temperature. Testing.

He tipped his head up, eyes meeting the strong line of Ilya's jaw. His heart shaped lips. The mole on his cheek. Eyelashes that matched his dark gold curls. The room was only lit by the night coming in through the large windows that had yet to be draped by curtains. It made Ilya look so soft and serene.

He wanted to crawl up under Ilya's shirt and burrow himself there. To feel warm skin and solid muscle and hear how Ilya's laugh would sound with his ear pressed to his chest.

Shane knew he was a late bloomer. He didn't have his first girlfriend until he was almost 20, and even then, he wasn't entirely sure it felt like what he wanted. He just knew he was supposed to want it. He was supposed to see a pretty girl and feel his heart swell. He was supposed to be excited by the feeling of her soft curves under his hands. He was supposed to want her hands to roam every inch of his body.

Shane had wondered if maybe he was just too distracted. Wound up too tight, as he had always been told. Because those feelings were all foreign to him. As much as he wanted to feel them, they just wouldn't come. And so he forged on with his life and chalked it all up to being preoccupied with his life as a hockey superstar.

But now, something horribly complicated was blooming inside of him. All that suppressed want that had been looming under the murky surface of his confused body was making itself known. Only, it wasn't a want for a pretty girl with soft curves.

His heart raced at the thought of Ilya's solid body and big hands. He suddenly ached to hear the other man's deep voice and the way it rattled through him when he leaned in close. He wanted to feel stubble etch roughly into his skin underneath a kiss.

Every thought was equal parts thrilling and terrifying. He didn't understand what the fuck was happening in his mind. But he knew he couldn't let it out of containment.

Ilya was his best friend. Just these past few hours had solidified that for him. The years they spent apart melted away as if they had been set out in the August sun. There was no way he was going to risk ruining that by letting his sudden and bewildering horniness make him do something stupid.

All it would take is one uncomfortable gesture; one unwanted action to turn into a bell that couldn't be unrung. The thought alone made something inside of him still. He needed, quite frankly, to chill the fuck out.

Ilya started to murmur something sleepily in Russian. The sentence was capped off with a fond "*solnyshko*", and a kiss to the top of Shane's head.

Well. It was sort of hard to chill out when Ilya was so syrupy sweet to him, as if Shane were his most prized possession. Shane nuzzled his cheek back into his chest and heard Ilya hum happily.

"You are comfortable?" Ilya asked, his voice deep and gruff with sleep. He tightened his grip around Shane.

"If I said no, you wouldn't let me move, anyway." Shane laughed a bit.

"Mm. I would let you move, only little bit. But not leave." He ruffled Shane's hair, then stretched his arms above his head. Shane watched as his muscles tightened and flexed. Fuck.

Ilya flopped over, reclining himself to a laying position over the wide expanse of cushions on the sofa, throwing and arm over his eyes. Shane mirrored his position on the other half of the L shape, their feet touching slightly at the bend in the corner. Shane tucked a pillow under his

chin, turning his head slightly to gaze at Ilya again before a second wave of sleep dragged him under.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when a horrific sound lurched him from sleep. A gasping sob from the other side of the couch bolted him upright.

"*Nyet. Nyet*." Ilya was gritting out gruffly in his sleep. His breathing was shallow and wrong. "Shane!" He cried out, writhing. "Shane." He repeated, and it escaped his mouth almost as a sob.

Shane quickly jumped up and to the other side of the couch, putting both hands on either side of Ilya's face. It was hot and damp with sweat, twisted in a look of pain and fear. "Ilya. Ilya, wake up." Shane urged, patting his face lightly. "Wake up."

Ilya gasped a bit, eyes opening. His hands came up to grip at Shane's arms, then scrambled for purchase over his face as he tried to catch his breath. "*Solnyshko*." He breathed out. His eyes were crowded with unshed tears.

"Shh. It's okay. You're okay. I think you were having a bad dream." Shane's brows knitted with concern as he pushed the sweat-dampened hair from Ilya's forehead.

"Fuck." Ilya exhaled shakily. "Sorry…I'm sorry." He clutched onto Shane's sleeve. Shane couldn't keep his eyes from going to the jagged scars that marked the other man's arm. It flooded his stomach with dread.

"Don't be sorry." Shane said softly. "Are you okay?"

"Lay with me?" Ilya asked, his eyes flicking up to meet Shane's.

"Well. I think we're too big to both fit." Shane laughed a bit. "Unless you want me to lay on you."

"Yes. Like big, handsome, muscular blanket." Ilya smiled back lazily.

Shane rolled his eyes, then climbed on top of him. "I feel like I'm gonna hurt you." He laughed, but Ilya pulled him down close.

"No. Could never hurt me." He wrapped both arms around him and squeezed. "Not my Shane."

Shane pressed his cheek into Ilya's chest and breathed him in. "You know, none of my other friends ever hold me or call me pretty. What's up with that?" Shane teased.

Ilya tutted. "Horrible friends. And if they did, I would strangle them. Because this is my job to do. They can get different friend. You are mine."

Shane closed his eyes with a smile. He was perfectly okay with being Ilya's. Being with him in this moment felt inexplicably like being home.

Chapter End Notes

when you go to enter the Shane Hollander's biggest fan contest but Ilya is already there 💔

Chapter 6

September 2012

The sheer force of anticipation had wrenched Shane out of bed and into the Voyageur's gym hours before their first mandatory practice of the season was even scheduled to start.

Both Hayden and Ilya had agreed to join him for a morning skate, but Shane ended up jogging to the arena before he suspected either of them were even awake. Before the city itself was even awake. He knew he was a bit neurotic. But hockey was what made him whole. And every piece of his rigid routine was worth its weight in gold if it meant he got to keep being the best.

He was sprawled out on a yoga mat, soaking in the rare serenity of the quiet morning, when he heard the rumble of bickering approaching the door.

Well. His two best friends were most certainly here. Hayden and Ilya couldn't be more opposite if they tried, and they drove each other insane over it. Yet, somehow, they couldn't seem to leave each other alone. They reminded Shane of two siblings, constantly at odds and trying to outdo the other, but there was a secret fondness and comradery under it all.

It had initially been nerve wracking for Shane to let his two worlds collide. But he was glad to see the two of them together, even if he was sometimes afraid someone was going to end up in jail.

The door flung open, Ilya's voice echoing harshly off of every surface. “You know nothing, Pike. You-”

Shane turned to look up as Ilya paused mid sentence. Ilya's eyes were locked on him, raking over him slowly. Shane suddenly felt far too exposed in his cut off shirt and high inseam shorts, legs sprawled wide over the mat. “What?” He huffed a laugh. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Shane Hollander.” Ilya said slowly, and something about the way he was approaching reminded Shane of a stalking predator. His eyes wandered to Shane's lower half. “If I could choose how I die. I would choose to be suffocated by your thighs.”

Shane's mouth dropped open. “*Jesus*, Ilya.” He sputtered, feeling his face blaze.

“Dude!” Hayden shouted. “Seriously. What the fuck is wrong with you. I'm scheduling a lobotomy so I can forget you said that.”

Ilya waved a hand at him dismissively. “Whatever. I will say differently.” He cleared his throat. “Good morning, *solnyshko*. I love your shorts.” He smirked. “Better? Everyone is happy?”

“Are you gonna behave yourself in front of the team?” Shane crossed his arms.

“I make no promises.” Ilya smiled. “Come on. We skate now.” Ilya pushed Hayden backwards out of the gym door.

Shane laughed to himself, shaking his head. He knew Ilya got some sort of sick satisfaction out of making Hayden uncomfortable, and the easiest way to do it was through his unhinged, flirtatious comments. He wasn't sure anyone would believe how incredibly sweet Ilya could be, considering he seemed to thoroughly enjoy being a menace to society.

When Shane reached the locker room, he could hear the two men still going at it.

“You can't just say shit like that in front of everyone, okay? Not everyone on the team is gonna be cool about it.” He could hear Hayden's voice as he entered the room.

“Why should I care if they are cool about it. Is not my problem.” Ilya's voice chimed in.

Shane rounded the corner, and felt like he got immediately slammed by a freight train. Because Ilya was standing in front of him, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs.

Though his imagination had admittedly conjured up several images, Shane had yet to actually see what was going on underneath Ilya's shirt. He felt his brain go momentarily offline as he took in the sight, his eyes not quite certain where they wanted to settle. The ample swell of pecs with the gold chain nestled between them, glistening under the harsh overhead lights. The toned stomach with the trail of dark hair leading down it. The almost obscene sculpt of his pelvis that formed a suggestive V, pointing straight down under his waistband.

He really was not sure how the fuck he could ever convince himself he was straight after this. Thank fuck Ilya was busy looking down at his phone, because Shane was certain he looked like an absolute gawking fool.

He quickly cut his eyes away, turning his back to start shedding off his own clothing. He was suddenly starting to feel a warm panic flood his senses. He was going to have to share this locker room with Ilya. Share the gym. The showers. The ice. All of it. In front of everyone.

They had spent the past few weeks in this blissful, contained bubble where no one was there to judge or misconstrue. No extra eyes to investigate the way he looked at Ilya for maybe a beat too long, with a touch too much heat. Now that bubble was about to burst. “Hayden's right, Ilya. You're gonna have to tone it down, okay? All of it.”

He heard Ilya make an indignant sound behind him. “Yes, I know, Shane.”

“I'm serious. You get way too comfortable.”

“You really think I cannot control myself to say these things?” Ilya snapped. “I do it in front of you and Pike because is funny to watch you both squirm. I understand how to not do it in front of whole team. You may have forgotten where I come from. What can happen to people like me there. So yes. Of course, I will tone it down, Captain.” The last word left his mouth like a curse.

Shane froze where he stood. He had very clearly struck a deep nerve. He could hear the clear annoyance in Ilya's voice, but it was also laced with hurt. Ilya walked past him wordlessly, now dressed in his base layer with his skates in his hands.

Once he was out of the room, Shane dropped his head. He thought about 5 years ago. About Ilya's father. About the bruises and the dried blood he'd left on Ilya's innocent face.

It's not safe to be this way in Russia.

Shane felt horrible. Or like an idiot. Maybe both. Ilya, of all people, didn't need to be reminded how to temper himself. The world they lived in had done its fair share of that, clearly.

“Woah. What was that about?” Hayden moved to stand next to Shane. “What did he mean, “people like me?”’

Shane realized that Hayden had no idea Ilya was bisexual. He also had no idea the things Ilya had been through. In truth, neither did Shane. He had no idea what had happened in these past 5 years.

“Just drop it, okay? Don't bring it up to him again. He knows how to control himself.” Shane said quietly.

Shane and Hayden made their way to the ice, where Ilya was already skating. Shane took a beat to take him in.

He was all legs, powerful yet graceful, his strides long and even. There was an effortlessness to the way he moved. His face was set with tension in his jaw, in a way that made him look very closed off.

Shane lingered near the boards, toeing at the ice with his skate before eventually skating out to Ilya, who slowed a bit for him.

“Hey. Look. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I just-”

“I know. Is okay.” Ilya said, with a surprising gentleness that seemed to betray the look on his face.

“You're not mad at me?” Shane let their shoulders brush.

“No. Never at you, *solnyshko*.” Ilya patted his shoulder before letting his hand drop.

But Shane could still see an underlying pain behind Ilya's eyes. Something biting at him from the inside. It crushed Shane to know that he had caused whatever this was to bubble up to the surface.

Ilya was always so strong in his eyes. But maybe being strong all the time got tiring. Shane ached to ask him for the truth about what had happened in his life in the last 5 years, and what exactly led him back here. Why now? What were those scars?

For now, he let Ilya skate away in silence.

Practice brought out the side of Ilya that Shane had yet to see since they reunited. On the ice, he transformed into something that could not be ignored, and the rest of the team took stock very quickly.

He was bold, confident, commanding, and aggressive. But somehow, he made it all look easy. He would snipe the puck with so much force that it was startling, then skate off backwards with a shrug and a smirk. He would chase you down with all the speed and cold determination of a starved predator, then shoot a witty chirp at you while looking infuriatingly unbothered. And this was only practice, and with his own teammates.

Shane was starting to see why he had apparently garnered a reputation as the Terror on Ice in the KHL. His stats alone spoke for themselves, but seeing the way he moved in person was an entirely different beast.

And the moment Shane decided to run a drill with Ilya on his wing, they stunned the team into shocked whispers. That undeniable chemistry was still there, still right as rain, like they hadn't missed a single beat.

When Shane found the net off an assist from Ilya, the other man came skating toward him, placing both hands on either side of Shane's face. “Fucking beautiful.” Ilya grinned. Shane met Ilya's eyes, bright and excited and so fond.

He swallowed hard. He suddenly felt horribly exposed here. Like the eyes of every team mate had honed in on them. Like they were judging. He skated backward, away from the touch, offering Ilya a tight smile.

A wounded look flashed on Ilya's face, almost imperceptible, before he gave Shane a curt nod and skated off in the other direction.

Shane immediately longed to have him back. To grab him by the wrist and keep him at his side. But every alarm in his mind was telling him ‘*Not here. Not now.*’ Because last time they acted like that in front of everyone, Ilya got hurt. He got hurt and he got taken away. Maybe it was childish of Shane to compare the situations. Childish to still carry that fear and guilt. But it was there, nonetheless, and he wasn't sure how to make it stop.

So he made his way back to the locker room, watching Ilya's back as he pointedly stayed ahead of him. When he brushed past Ilya on his way to the showers, their eyes met briefly, and Shane tried to give him an approximation of an apologetic smile. Ilya dropped his gaze, patted Shane on the shoulder, and turned away.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya Rozanov, you are so totally fucked.

The thought occurred to him the first time 5 years ago, sitting in a hotel room with Shane Hollander's hand buried into his curls.

Many things had changed for him in the year leading up to that moment. The most notable of them being discovering his own sexuality through probably an unhealthy amount of practice for his ripe age of 15 years. But once it had started, he felt powerless to it.

In the two previous summers that he spent with Shane, Ilya could admit that he always found his best friend to be rather cute. In an endearing and harmless sort of way. And yes, that did eventually develop into a sort of crush, he could admit. He liked flirting with Shane and calling him pretty, because it was true, and because it was funny to watch him blush and squirm and stumble.

Shane was effortlessly adorable, and Ilya was charmed by him. However, it was never a distraction. It was never anything serious or confusing that would make him scared of lines getting blurred and crossed in his head.

That is, until things had awakened inside Ilya's body that he couldn't control. And suddenly Shane's hand pushed into his hair, and the feeling made him shudder, and their faces were so close together. Shane's eyes were such a beautiful shade of brown, framed by those dark lashes. His freckles were so perfect across his smooth skin. And his mouth, my god, had his mouth always been that pretty?

Ilya felt himself freeze up. Then Shane's eyes met his, and he felt his teenaged heart do something incredibly complicated in his chest, and he tried to swallow it down. But his pulse was thundering in his ears, and he realized he was staring and his cheeks felt warm.

And that's when he knew he was so totally fucked, because he was absolutely about to fall in love with his best friend.

It had made that whole summer feel complicated. Every time he looked Shane in the eyes for a beat too long, every time Shane smiled at him, it made Ilya's heart hammer against his ribcage so hard he was afraid Shane might hear it. He forced himself to play it off, even when it got so bad he felt his palms start to sweat.

His only saving grace was that Shane seemed particularly clueless to the whole thing. Even after Ilya had somehow gathered up the courage to tell Shane that he was bisexual, Shane didn't seem to bat an eye at anything Ilya did. It was comforting, in a way, because Ilya was terrified of ruining their friendship. All he truly understood was that he needed Shane.

And then his father decided to ruin his entire fucking life, because of course he did. He caught one glimpse of happiness on Ilya's face and backhanded it right off of him. Literally.

The day he had to leave Shane behind, he had locked himself in the bathroom because he couldn't work up the nerve to actually walk out of that door knowing what it meant. He needed to calm down, to be strong for Shane because Shane would only get more upset if Ilya was, too.

Ilya would do anything to protect Shane. So he swallowed his own fears whole and let them claw his stomach raw just so Shane didn't have to see them. So he could hold them both upright while Shane cried into him, though he felt moments away from buckling at the knees under the weight of his dread. So he could assure Shane that everything was going to be okay, even though he didn't believe that himself.

He had walked out of that hotel room and bit down on his own fist so hard to keep from screaming that he drew blood.

Whenever Ilya thought about that day, it made him sick to his stomach. But he didn't need to think about that day anymore.

Because Shane had been placed right before his eyes like someone plucked him straight out of a dream. And when Ilya held Shane's face in his hands in that locker room and looked into those brown eyes for the first time in 5 years, all he could think was *Ilya Rozanov, you are so totally fucked.*

The first day of practice also meant the first day of media, so Ilya was helplessly resigned to buttoning himself into his suit in preparation to sit in front of a room full of reporters and answer 50 boring questions.

This was going to be especially fun now that he felt a little bit like a kicked puppy. Pathetic and hurting and hiding in the corner with his tail between his legs.

If he had thought he was fucked before, he wasn't even sure what to call this now.

Before, he could have convinced himself it was just his teenaged hormones in overdrive that had made him believe he was in love. That he would see Shane again, and be able to just be his friend and not make it weird, and everything would be fine.

When he saw Shane again, he could have convinced himself what he was feeling was simply an attraction. Because Shane was attractive, and Ilya was attracted to men, and it didn't have to mean anything.

But it was too late for all that now. The moment Shane sat next to him on his couch that first day, it all came crashing back down on top of him like a goddamn anvil.

His heart ached for Shane Hollander, in an all encompassing way. In a way that made his body ignite when they touched, and made his insides feel hollow when they were apart. In a way that made Shane's smile look brighter than the fucking sun in his eyes, and his laugh sound like the most beautiful song he'd ever heard. He wanted to burn Shane's whole face into his retinas so he could see him even when his eyes were shut. He wanted to crack open his chest and tuck Shane inside, right next to his heart, so he could hear how it beat just for him.

He was presently watching Shane dress into his own suit, his button down shirt rumpled and undone as he spoke with Hayden, leaning on his stall.

He was the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever seen. His dark hair against his lightly bronzed skin. Brown eyes that shine amber when the light hits them. A sharp jaw and perfectly straight nose. Pouted lips that were somehow naturally the most perfect shade of pink. And of course, those damn freckles dotted over his cheeks and the bridge of his nose.

He also had a perfect body. Solid and toned, with perfect abs and a perfect ass and the most deliciously thick thighs that made Ilya feel feral.

Perfect, perfect, perfect. That's all Ilya could think when he looked at Shane. His Shane, who had always seen him in ways no one else did. Who made him feel like he was worth something. Who he could talk to for hours on end and never get tired of it. Who made the rest of the world simply melt away with a single look.

There was no question in his mind anymore. He was watching Shane from across the room and it might as well have been from across an entire ocean, because all he wanted was to be plastered to his side. He was in love, and it was remarkable and terrifying and horrible.

The insane part about it all was that he was almost certain that Shane was sexually attracted to him. Ilya had a sense for these things, and he was rarely ever wrong. But what if he *was* wrong this time? What was he supposed to do, walk up to him and ask?

Hey Shane, any chance that you're gay and also in love with me? No worries if not.

And that was the other thing. Even if Shane was attracted to him, Ilya could never let them act on it unless he was sure it would lead beyond that. He couldn't stomach the thought of being Shane's…what? Fuck buddy? Friend with benefits? It would never work. He would fall in so deep that if Shane ever wanted to stop, Ilya would probably need to be institutionalized.

So no. No assumptions could be made. It was either real, or it wasn't.

And the only way to know if it was real would be for Shane to meet him somewhere in the middle. Ilya wasn't really sure how much more obvious he could be without actually saying '*I'm in love with you, please kiss me.*'

If he were to say that, now hardly seemed like the time. Because Shane had suddenly decided that their brand of friendship, which they had never balked at, now needed to be toned down expeditiously. Shane had told him as much, and then put an exclamation on the point when he reared away from his touch.

So now, Ilya felt like shit. Pathetic, confused, and like shit. But he straightened out his collar and pushed back his curls and swallowed it all down as he walked past Shane and out the door.

Ilya was much more confident in his English than he used to be, but it wasn't lost on him that this would be his first time addressing the media not in his native tongue. He could only hope that the reporters had enough awareness to give him a little grace. He took his seat in front of the microphone, taking a deep breath. The media person had already informed him that this was being recorded and would be posted online immediately after. No pressure.

He went through the motions of the stock questions he already knew they would ask. About his time in the KHL, what drew him to transitioning to the NHL, and so on. He only had to pause a few times to allow his brain to catch up with the translations. And by the end, he had the whole room laughing. He certainly knew how to use his charm to his advantage. He wanted this media room to eat from the palm of his hand by the end of the season.

By the time they got to the last questions, his other teammates had filed at the back of the room to wait their turn to take the mic. Ilya's eyes, of course, drifted right to Shane. He felt his heart squeeze.

When the reporter started to speak, he slowly drifted his attention back.

“Ilya, we heard you know Shane Hollander personally. Can you speak on that?”

“Ah, yes. We actually met many years ago as teenagers in a hockey camp here in Montreal. We became close friends after this.” Ilya clasped his hands in front of him.

“How is it knowing that he'll be your captain now?”

He allowed a smile to play at his lips. “Shane is truly my best friend. So getting the offer from Montreal was best news of my life. I am very excited to play with him. This team is lucky to have such wonderful captain.”

Ilya found Shane again, letting their eyes lock. He gave him a soft smile, the kind that only Shane could pull from him. Shane looked at him like he might cry.

Ilya left the media room quietly, hands in his pockets, already missing Shane's face.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya never beating the lover boy allegations 😭

Thank you for reading so far!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane is fairly certain he's ruining everything. He suddenly very much regrets his earlier choice to walk to the arena, because the evening sun is too warm on the back of his neck, and his dress shirt feels like it's strangling him, and his bag keeps sliding off his shoulder, and he sort of just wants to die.

When he was finished with his media, Shane had returned to the locker room to find a few of the guys still milling about. He had stopped to talk with J.J., something about a new video game he wanted Shane to play with him, when he felt the unmistakable strong arm of Ilya wrap itself around his waist.

J.J.'s eyes bounced between them for a moment before he kept talking. And Shane felt himself go rigid. Typically, Shane would have leaned into him. Threw an arm around him. Anything but ignore him and go stiff under his touch. But J.J. was looking at them and Shane could feel Ilya's fingers on his hip, so familiar and close. So he ignored Ilya, and went stiff under his touch, and even took a small step away from him. Ilya ended up dropping his arm and walking off wordlessly.

He didn't only walk off. He left completely. Didn't wait up, didn't say goodbye. And Shane felt sick to his stomach. What the fuck was he doing? Why was he treating Ilya like his touch was some sort of contagion? His anxiety was spiraling out of control, and it was looking an awful lot like it was going to be the downfall of Ilya's closeness with him.

Shane went home. Checked his phone. Changed. Checked his phone. Ate dinner. Checked his phone. Paced around his bedroom. Nothing from Ilya. It made his chest tight with ache and worry.

He eventually tried to sleep, but after 45 minutes of alternating between sides and tangling the sheets practically into a ball, he shoved himself onto his feet with a groan.

The path to Ilya's place seemed to stretch for miles, like he was a starving man in a desert clawing his way to an oasis on the horizon. In truth, it was only down a floor and a few paces down the hall.

He rapped a few sharp knocks on the door, feeling his anxiety ricochet off of every nerve in his body. After 30 seconds, he knocked again. He rocked on his heels, trying to quell his jitters. When another 30 seconds had passed, he felt like he might throw up right onto the hallway floor.

But the door suddenly swung open, and Ilya was in front of him, his eyes barely open and his hair tousled with sleep. His shirt was rumpled and his joggers were pushed up at uneven lengths around his calves. He blinked at Shane a few times through bleary eyes.

“Hi. Um. Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up, I just-”

Ilya's hand gently grabbed his wrist and pulled him inside, shutting the door behind them. He rubbed his eyes a bit. “What is it? You are okay?” He asked gruffly.

“Yeah, I'm fine. I just wanted to…look. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you upset, I really didn't. I don't want-”

But Ilya snaked his arms around Shane's neck, putting one hand on the back of his head. “I know, *solnyshko*. Is okay.” He said softly, fingers brushing through the back of Shane's hair.

Shane felt tears stinging at his eyes. He tried to respond, but ended up sniffling wetly instead.

Ilya stepped back, cradling Shane's face in his hands. “Shane. What is wrong?” His thumbs stroked Shane's cheeks so tenderly, and his voice was so gentle. Shane wondered if there was ever anyone so careful and caring.

“I feel like I hurt you and I didn't want to. I never wanted to. You just left and I felt like I fucked it all up.” Shane felt a bit pathetic, but he couldn't stop the tears from falling.

Ilya swiped at his tears.“You did not. Okay? I just figure probably you want space.”

“But I made you upset.” Shane insisted.

Ilya sighed. “I was little bit sad, yes.”

Shane whined and pressed his face into Ilya's shoulder. “I couldn't even sleep because I feel like such an asshole.”

“Do you want to come lay with me?” Ilya asked quietly, his fingers working gently through Shane's hair. Shane nodded weakly against his shoulder.

“Come.” Ilya grabbed his wrist again, leading him sleepily to the bedroom. The room was cool and dark, with clothes strewn about in little piles on the floor and dark navy bedsheets that were wrinkled and askew. The nightstand was in a cluttered disarray. There was an overflowing laundry basket sitting at the foot of the bed. In any other circumstance, the room would make Shane itch with discomfort. But the darkness and cool blues and imperfections of it all felt so much like Ilya.

Ilya's carefree nature was the perfect counter to his own neurotic mind. He wished he could siphon just an ounce of it for himself.

Ilya threw himself on the bed, which groaned slightly under the mass of his body. He sprawled out on his back in the center of the bed, long limbs stretching across the mattress.

“Jesus. You take up the entire bed.” Shane sat on the edge, taking in the sight of Ilya, his eyes half lidded and his curls falling around his face. “Feel sorry for whoever decides to marry you one day.” Shane added, and he wasn't really sure why. The thought of Ilya marrying someone made him feel slightly nauseous.

Ilya fisted his hand into the back of Shane's shirt and yanked him down. “Hopefully person who marries me likes to cuddle.” He pulled Shane into his side. Shane laid his cheek to Ilya's chest with a sigh.

“What if they don't?” Shane mumbled against him, closing his eyes.

“Hm. Then I suppose I would just need to marry you since you seem to like it so much, *zaichik*.” Ilya patted the top of his head.

Shane felt his cheeks warm. “What's that one mean?”

“Bunny.” He could hear the smile in Ilya's voice. “So soft and…”

“Snuggly?” Shane offered. Ilya laughed, and the sound rumbled through his chest where Shane's face was pressed. It made his own chest feel warm.

“Snuggly.” Ilya repeated. “I like this word.”

Shane nuzzled his cheek to the soft fabric of Ilya's shirt, listening to his breathing slow. His whole body felt like a loosened muscle; warm and pliant and soothed. It was something he only ever felt with Ilya.

He knew that, at some point, he was going to need to face whatever the hell this was. He knew that a large portion of his panic from earlier in the day was the fear of his true feelings for Ilya being perceived, though he hadn't actually yet perceived them for himself.

He was right here. Shane felt his own hand twitch with want. He wanted many things. To push his hand inside Ilya's shirt and feel the expanse of hard muscle against his bare hand. To press his hand between Ilya's legs and hear what kind of sound he would make. To put his hands on Ilya's face and kiss him in a way he had never kissed anyone before.

He instead kept his hands as still as possible and allowed sleep to take him.

Shane woke before sunrise, the room still draped in darkness. Ilya was turned away from him, legs bent up in a mountain climber position. His ass was sort of astounding. Shane filed that thought away to go live with the many other inappropriate thoughts he had about his best friend.

He opened his phone, brows furrowing as his eyes adjusted to the brightness. A text from Hayden sat at the top of his notifications.

Hayden: dude. twitter is having a field day over ilya, lmao *[link]*

Shane furrowed his brows even further, opening the link, which took him directly to a post from the Voyageur's official account.

@MontrealVoyageurs ✔️
We're excited to announce that we've signed Ilya Rozanov, Center, to our roster for the upcoming season.

The post included the recorded video of Ilya at the press table, where he had effortlessly charmed the entire room. Because of course he had.

Shane scrolled down to read through the long string of replies.

@puckkoffff
EXCUSE ME WHO??? 🥵 girl someone drop his @ RIGHT NOW IM SO SERIOUS

@hollzygirl
“Shane is my truly best friend so getting the offer from Montreal was the best news of my life” im sorry do we all need to die??

@montreallthat
did you see the look on his face when he said *@shanehollanderofficial* is his best friend omfg that man is PROUD im gonna be sick

@pikeinthenet
insane Wednesday morning lore drop

@stvoyageur
ok I am from Moscow and i dont think you guys understand how funny this is 😭 Rozanov is known for being a terror. like most hated man in the league. Why is he smiling and being cute talking about his bff i can't lmao

@littlevoyage
now why the hell did *@shanehollanderofficial* gatekeep his sexy Russian boyfriend from us like what did he gain from that

@shanesprincess
yall I see a new ship on the horizon jfc the moment I see a photo of him and *@shanehollanderofficial* together it will be over for me I fear

@slapshotme
im about to make this man my entire personality sorry everyone

@pikesssplace
I need him in ways that are concerning to feminism

He shook his head, laughing softly. He couldn't say he was surprised. Ilya was handsome. He was hot. He oozed easy confidence. And he was so witty with his humor. When he wasn't being an asshole, he really was a catch. It made Shane wonder if he'd had a girlfriend back in Russia. Or how long it would be before he had one here. He bit the inside of his cheek and kept scrolling.

The next set of replies weren't so charmed.

@hellomila
You guys do realize he's a fuckboy right lol

Attached were several images. Ilya standing outside a club, his arm around the waist of a platinum blonde girl in an impossibly short dress, holding a cigarette to her lips. Ilya leaned back and smirking in a velvet lined booth, a girl with curly red hair sat fully in his lap. Ilya drinking straight from a bottle of what Shane could only assume was vodka, a brunette girl plastered to his front, his large hand gripping her ass. Ilya on the dancefloor of a club, and though the picture was dark and grainy, it was enough to see his tongue shoved in the mouth of a blissed out looking girl who was grasping at his curls.

Something hot and ugly twisted in Shane's stomach.

@montaddie
your fave is problematic 101

@intothesinbin
Just woke up to see we're simping for a womanizer lmao yikes

@haydengirllll
The bar is literally in hell 😐

Shane swallowed, biting hard at the inside of his cheek. He was having a hard time plugging the Ilya he knew into these pictures. The sweet, soft Ilya who called him pet names and stroked the freckles on his cheeks. He felt a little dizzied by it. Next to him, he felt Ilya stir.

“You are up so early.” He groaned. “What you are looking at?”

Shane tried and failed to not be endeared by how Ilya's English got hazy when he was half asleep. He was going to dismiss him, but Ilya was already pressed into him, looking over his shoulder at the screen.

“Ah.” Ilya said quietly. Shane felt him go still. “Well.”

Shane chewed at the inside of his cheek. “Well what?”

“I am…not shocked people find these. Popular topic back in Moscow.” He laid back down. “Is not a big deal. A man has needs.”

Shane took a deep breath and closed his phone, setting it face down. “Well. You haven't gone out since you came here. Not that I know of, anyway.”

“No. I have not.”

“Why not?” Shane kept his gaze on the wall.

“I am with you whole time I have been back, *solnyshko*. When would I have time to do this?” Ilya put his arm over his face.

“I mean. You could have. Do you not still have…needs?” Shane crossed his arms.

“I have many needs.”

“Like what?” He turned to look at Ilya now.

Ilya sighed, sitting up. He stretched his arms over his head. “Like you.” He said casually, before standing up and striding to the bathroom.

Shane's chest and stomach worked in time to do something complicated that he couldn't quite understand. What exactly was Ilya trying to say? Was he seriously choosing to spend all his time huddled up against Shane instead of trying to fuck every woman in Montreal, which would apparently be very easy and on brand for him?

Shane wished he could scrub those images from his mind. He didn't want to think about Ilya's hand on someone else's ass or his tongue in someone else's mouth. He also no longer wanted to be the type of person who couldn't read people very well, because it was killing him. Actively tearing his mind into frayed little shreds. He couldn't afford to be feeling all of these things; not with the season rapidly approaching.

He stood and pressed his hands into his eyes. It was all too much. Too much feeling. Too much thinking. Too much wanting. Too much unknown.

He wished the darkness of Ilya's bedroom would swallow him whole.

Chapter End Notes

ok ok I know the language being used in the tweets is not really timeline accurate but I have no wish to revisit what we were saying as chronically online people back in 2012 SORRY

thank u so much for reading so far! I sense another Ilya POV on the horizon 👀

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sound of the arena pulsed through the locker room door and straight through Shane's body, reverberating through his spine. It was their first game of the season, at home, and the fans were clearly ready for a show.

As the team got ready to file out, Shane's eyes scanned the room, snagging on Ilya immediately. Something about seeing him in full gear was making Shane's stomach tumble. The look on his face was dangerous. Shane would have thought that maybe he would be at least a bit nervous to play his first game here. If he was, it didn't show in the slightest.

Shane watched as Ilya pushed his curls back and grabbed his helmet, falling in line with the rest of the team. He crossed the room, smiling when he stepped in front of Shane.

“Ready, captain?” Ilya asked with a smirk.

Shane felt his heart swell. God, Ilya looked good. He reached a hand up and buried it in those dark blonde curls that he had adored since they were teens, tousling them. “Ready. You gonna show ‘em what you're made of?”

Ilya's gaze intensified, blue eyes piercing straight through him. “They have no idea what is coming, *solnyshko*.” He grinned.

And apparently, no, they didn't.

Shane's line had been an efficient machine, as it always was. Shane scored first and quickly, earning an ample roar from the crowd and his own bench. His eyes had automatically found Ilya, who was slapping the boards in excitement, his grin wild.

The next score came off an assist from Shane, who sent the puck straight through a defender's legs and onto the edge of J.J.’s stick. Clean and precise. The sound of the crowd thundered in his ears and rattled through his brain and he felt like he was flying. He felt like he was home.

By the time line change came, Shane was thoroughly worked. His face was sweat slicked and his legs burned. His chest heaved as he hit the bench with a dull thud, watching with a smile curving over his lips as Ilya and his line hit the ice.

Shane leaned forward, watching intently, and he felt a shift in the air so distinctly that he almost shivered. Ilya took to the ice like a predator. His whole face sharpened; his chin tipped down and his intense eyes gazing up from under his brow. He took to the face off in a cold, calculated confidence that made the base of Shane's spine tingle.

What the D.C. team certainly had been unprepared for was Ilya's unpredictability. Where Shane's power came from his pinpoint accuracy, Ilya's came from his ability to overpower

and overwhelm. He was everywhere; flying around the ice with what could be mistaken as recklessness. But Shane could see the intention behind it. He was faster than everyone else out there, and he knew it. He reminded Shane of some kind of wild cat the way he hunted the puck; fast, strong, and frightening.

This was where their advantage was, Shane realized all at once. Other teams were going to need to adapt to two entirely different types of powerhouse players if they had any hope to beat them. Shane had exposed their weak spots and drove straight through them with precision. It left them faltering, trying too hard to tighten up. And now, Ilya was going in for the kill.

While they were scrambling to fill the gaps, they wouldn't see Ilya coming. Wouldn't see that he wasn't going to follow the patterns Shane had set to unmask their flaws. He saw it unfolding in real time. They were overcorrecting; trying now to solve for an equation that was about to become irrelevant.

Ilya was currently flying down the ice with the puck, a defender flanking him closely and trying to force him to the boards. But Ilya threw a particularly nasty check, all elbow and shoulder, that sent the opposing player stumbling behind. It left Ilya wide open to the net, where he sent a wrist shot that looked like it had been fired out of a cannon. Score. Shane felt his heart hammer out of control.

Ilya's first goal in the NHL, and it was perfect. The crowd exploded. Ilya soaked it in, head tipped up to the stands with that wolfish grin. Then skated backward toward the bench, locked eyes with Shane, and winked.

Shane wasn't sure he had ever been more turned on in his life. Ilya's face was flushed and sweaty, his chest was heaving, and his hockey was beautiful.

Realizations came crashing into him like waves breaking on rocks; loud and unstoppable. For a long time, Shane had resigned himself to the fact that when he did finally find a partner someday, they would exist separately from hockey. That he would have to sever his life into halves and learn to be content with that.

But maybe that didn't have to happen if the person he wanted was currently tearing down the ice in front of his eyes like hockey was part of his DNA.

Shane was letting himself imagine. Letting himself want. This was going to be dangerous.

Ilya ripped his pads off with a grunt before dropping himself down onto the locker room bench, pulling at the sweat soaked compression shirt that was currently plastered to his torso.

He looked up and scanned the room until his eyes landed on Shane, who was beaming brightly as he pulled his jersey off over his head. His face was flushed pink and his eyes were

shining. He was wearing the look of a proud captain who was thoroughly satisfied with their win.

It made Ilya's own face split open wide with a grin. Shane looked so beautiful and unguarded. Sometimes, it was hard to look at him; like looking directly into the sun. Only instead of burning his eyes, it made his heart squeeze painfully. And it wasn't only like looking into the sun. It was like looking at the whole universe, every single star, compacted and shaped into this beautiful boy who Ilya couldn't bear to be away from.

His attention was diverted when a few teammates came to clap him on the back or jostle his shoulder. He supposed he had, in fact, made a good first impression. Just as the thought passed through him, he felt a body thump down onto the bench next to him. Shane bumped their shoulders together, then rested a hand on the back of Ilya's neck. “You were on fucking fire.”

Ilya felt the skin under Shane's hand tingle. “Ah. You like what you see, hm?” Ilya smirked, bumping their shoulders together again.

“Shut up.” Shane put his fingers into the curls at the base of Ilya's neck and gave it a playful tug. Ilya tried his best to pretend like it didn't feel as though he had been struck by lightning. Even worse, Shane decided to keep his fingers twined into his hair, playing with it ever so slightly as they spoke with their teammates.

Ilya leaned back slightly into the touch, smiling to himself when Shane twisted a curl around his finger.

J.J. and Hayden came around the corner from the showers.

“We're going out tonight, no excuses!” J.J. yelled out, which was met with several enthusiastic sounds from the rest of the team. “I know you will be there, right Rozanov? We all saw those pictures, we know how you get down.”

“Yeah, fucking hell, man. Maybe not. Save some pussy for the rest of us.” Mitka remarked with a laugh. “You're a straight up dog.”

Ilya felt himself still a bit. The mention of his lifestyle in Moscow since he'd arrived had left him feeling uncomfortable. The pictures being plastered all over the internet only pressed down harder on that bruise.

It was true, he liked going out. He liked sipping vodka, dancing, and music. But those were not the things that snagged the attention of the rest of the world. They were only fixated on the parts that left pangs of guilt burning in his gut like bile.

The videos of him absolutely wasted and stumbling, the many pictures of him with countless different women. This is what got dredged up to the surface and stamped as part of Ilya Rozanov's bad boy image.

It was a monster of his own making. But he couldn't very well tell everyone the truth of how he got himself there. He couldn't say that he had been trying to drink and fuck Shane

Hollander out of his head. To escape the ugly truths of his life and feel something other than grief, pain, sadness, emptiness, and every other fucked up state of mind under the sun.

It started soon after he returned to Russia with his father, still sick and in shock over the decisions that were made for him about his own future. He felt lost. Like someone had cut his string and he was floating off into an abyss. Or like an anchor had been tied to his legs, and he was being dragged to the bottom of a trench, never to see the light again.

His mother was gone; plucked from the earth so quickly and cruelly. His Shane was gone, too. Still living and breathing, but on the other side of the world, where Ilya would never be able to reach him.

It was maddening. It filled his head with everything and nothing all at once. He felt too little, and too much. He couldn't escape from his family. Couldn't escape from his country. All he could do was escape from the chaos and darkness of his own mind.

And so he drank and he fucked and he left a path self destruction in his wake. Unfortunately, that path was meticulously recorded and flashed back into his face, like a mirror designed to show him only his flaws.

So yes. He would love to go out. But no, he would not like to do it for the same reasons he used to. He *had* escaped. And now the only thing he really desired was currently sat right next to him, fingers curling into his hair. He leaned into Shane's side.

“Only if captain comes.” He answered, ignoring the other comments.

Shane groaned next to him.

“Oh, come on. Will be fun. You deserve to have fun sometimes.” Ilya slid an arm around his waist.

Shane sighed. “Whatever. Fine.”

J.J. let out an exaggerated gasp. Hayden's eyebrows shot up. “Dude. Are you actually agreeing to come?”

“Don't make me regret it.” Shane mumbled.

“You will not regret. I dress like slut for clubs. Very nice to look at, hm?” Ilya squeezed Shane's side. Shane gave him a hard tug to his hair.

“Shut up, Rozanov.”

Ilya smirked, then in a moment possessed by his true menace spirit, he leaned in and put his lips to Shane's ear. “I like when you pull my hair, *solnyshko*.” He purred softly.

Shane's hands immediately flew to his lap, his face going red. “*Cut it out*.” He said between gritted teeth.

Ilya loved how flustered he got. He simply couldn't help himself. He hopped up from the bench, patting Shane on the cheek. “Come. Is getting late. Don't want to keep you out too much past your bed time.”

Shane groaned, but allowed Ilya to take him by the wrist and drag him along, like always.

The club was, as Shane expected it to be, entirely overwhelming. The music was too loud, the air was too thick and sweetly scented, and it was impossible to move an inch without touching someone.

Ilya had at least reserved them a private booth, which Shane silently added to the growing list of reasons why he wanted very badly to kiss him.

Ilya and Hayden had both left for the club before Shane, complaining that he had been taking too long. Which, he admittedly, had been stalling.

It wasn't difficult to spot where his team had gathered; the hulking bodies and overly loud voices of hockey players crowding one space were like an obnoxious beacon in the storm.

Shane approached, immediately drawn to the sound of Ilya's voice as he held court for the other players. He was leaned backed against the table, half the team in the surrounding booth and the other half standing in front, capturing their attention as he told a story with a glass of vodka dangling from one hand.

Shane felt his breath stall. Ilya was dressed in a black button down shirt that was too sheer to be decent and unbuttoned much too far to be appropriate. Black jeans hugged his strong legs. He really was dressed like a slut. Fuck.

“Is that my sweet *solnyshko*?” Ilya called over the crowd. “Move your ugly asses out of the way. I do not wish to see you anymore. Prince of hockey is here.”

Shane laughed, stepping around a few teammates to stand in front of Ilya. He raked his gaze over Shane slowly.

Shane had raided his own closet for clothing he'd been given to keep by designers from some of his deals. Most of them were buried and far forgotten, but he had pulled together a tight fitting and semi sheer white shirt that hugged at his chest and arms almost uncomfortably. He paired it with dark jeans that had been slightly tailored.

Ilya seemed to be a fan of the outfit, judging by the look on his face.

“Okay.” Ilya clapped his hands together. “All ugly barbarian hockey players must leave. Only sexy players allowed. Yes, this means just me and Shane. Goodbye, everyone.”

There were a few groans from the crowd. Shane put a hand over his face, but Ilya grabbed his arm and pulled him close. He reached behind himself to a tray of filled shot glasses, handing one to Shane.

Shane stared at it hesitantly. “I don't usually…”

The group of players all let out a collective groan. He could hear a chorus of ‘*come on, Cap!*’ and ‘*live a little*’ jeering him as he stared at the glass.

Ilya raised his eyebrows at him expectantly. Shane huffed out a sigh before tossing it back, earning a horrible cacophony of cheering from his team.

“Good boy. You see? Little fun will not kill you.” Ilya patted his cheek before snaking an arm around his waist. He let the warmth from the shot settle over him.

The sound of the club around him was thankfully starting to dull as his senses slowed down.

Shane was presently nursing a cocktail that Hayden recommended he get, because it was almost like an alcoholic ginger ale. Ilya slid into the booth next to him.

“What is this?” He asked, pointing to Shane's drink.

“Uh. Moscow mule?” Shane pushed the cocktail straw around with his finger.

Ilya tutted. “If you wanted to swallow something from Moscow, you could have just met me in the bathroom, Hollander.”

“*Ilya*!” Shane kicked him under the table. Ilya grinned wickedly.

From across the table, Hayden and J.J. both looked particularly disturbed.

“Ignore him.” Shane pushed at Ilya's shoulder. “He's a fucking menace.”

“You fucking love it.” Ilya crooned, taking a long sip of vodka before placing a hand casually on the back of Shane's neck.

“Surprised you don't have a girl hanging off your arm yet, Rozanov.” Hayden said, leaning back in the booth. “No takers?”

Ilya huffed out a laugh. “Hayden Pike. There are always takers. Some of us actually have game.”

Hayden rolled his eyes. “Sure.”

Shane took a deep breath, knowing that Ilya was now going to treat this as a personal challenge.

Ilya leaned his elbows forward on the table. “I bet I walk out into crowd and have at least one girl hanging off of me within two minutes.”

“Seriously?” Hayden scoffed out an incredulous laugh.

“Seriously.” Ilya downed the rest of his vodka and stood. “Time it, Pike. Two minutes.” He said before disappearing into the crowd.

“That guy is unbelievable.” Hayden muttered. Shane decided to use their two minute delay to go grab some water for the group.

He returned a few minutes later to find Hayden and J.J. looking stricken with disbelief.

The music was thumping loudly. Shane leaned back against the table, chewing the inside of his lip as he watched the bodies ebb and flow with the beat. He followed his teammates' line of sight until his eyes caught on the familiar form.

Ilya was in between two beautiful women, both of whom had their hands roaming over his body greedily. The three figures moved with the music, hips swaying and grinding. Shane felt a surge of nausea, gripping the edge of the table hard. He suddenly and very badly wanted to be the one touching Ilya's bare chest. He wanted to leave this stupid club. But just as one of the women went to press her open mouth against Ilya's, he turned his head, and locked eyes with Shane.

Shane swallowed hard, feeling the heat crawling uncomfortably up his neck. Ilya licked his lips, not breaking eye contact as he slowly extracted himself from between the two women.

Hayden and J.J. glanced sideways at each other.

Ilya's lips quirked up into a smirk as he tilted his head to gesture Shane to join him. Shane took a breath, shaking his head.

Ilya closed the distance, putting one large hand on Shane's hip, the other grasping him by the wrist. He leaned to put his lips to Shane's ear. “You are the prettiest one here, you know that?”

Shane felt heat pool low in his stomach. “Shut up.” He said, weakly.

“No.” Ilya growled. “I am serious. You are.”

Shane swallowed, his brain unable to formulate a coherent thought.

“What, you are scared to dance with me?” Ilya's mouth stayed close to his ear, his voice steady over the music.

“I'm not scared.” Shane went to cross his arms, but Ilya's hand was still gripped to his wrist, and pulled it down firmly.

“Good.” He said, pulling Shane further into the crowd. Shane could feel his pulse quickening. The combination of alcohol and Ilya's touch was making every nerve in his body flood with a buzzing warmth.

Once they were nestled into the sea of bodies, out of sight from their team, Ilya turned himself to face Shane again. He stepped in, impossibly closer, and let their noses brush as he grinned, his eyes roaming Shane's face at close distance.

The music was almost sinister to Shane's ears, in a way that felt oddly exciting. Something about it felt distinctly erotic. The warmth had spread through his limbs, and he started to feel incredibly light. Almost like he was floating. He could feel the heat radiating from Ilya, who settled one hand on Shane's hip and the other on the back of his neck.

Ilya angled his hips closer to Shane's, their faces so close together as they moved that their noses brushed and Shane could feel the heat of Ilya's breath against his own mouth. He moved one hand to Ilya's ribs to pull his body even closer. The bass of the music and his own heartbeat thundered in his ears, rattling him as his mouth dropped open slightly and his breathing quickened.

His other hand grasped the back of Ilya's neck, then trailed its way around to his shoulder. He felt completely uninhibited, though the word *dangerous* kept prickling in the back of his mind. His hand trailed its way to Ilya's bare chest where it was exposed from his unbuttoned shirt, his fingers splayed across hot skin and firm muscle.

He felt Ilya gasp out a small laugh, followed by the feeling of Ilya's hand pushed underneath the hem of Shane's shirt. The large hand rubbed across Shane's side and down to his bare hip. He felt his own breath hitch as his hips bucked forward involuntarily at the sensation.

They both continued to move in time to the music, mouths only barely apart as they panted into each other. Ilya ducked his head down, moving his mouth to brush against the flushed skin on the side of Shane's neck. Shane threw his head back with a shiver.

Ilya's mouth ghosted over the column of his throat, their hips now almost flush against each other. Shane grasped hard at the back of Ilya's shirt.

Suddenly, he felt Ilya's hands on both his hips as he turned Shane sharply and positioned himself against Shane's back. He pressed his hips into Shane's ass as his hand found its way back inside Shane's shirt where it trailed up and down his stomach.

Shane clutched at Ilya's forearm as his own breathing turned ragged. It was almost too much, and yet, he wanted more. He wanted Ilya's mouth fully against him. He wanted the barrier of clothing to be ripped away so he could feel the full heat of Ilya's skin against his own. He also wanted to bolt away, lock himself in a bathroom stall, and pull himself the fuck together.

“You are better dancer than you think.” Ilya's lips were just barely against his ear.

Shane felt a shy smile cross his lips.

“Is this how you make sure I behave? Distract me?” He could hear the smirk in Ilya's voice.

Shane pulled Ilya's arm down and turned to face him, though not as closely as before. “Hey. This was your doing, not mine. You pulled me out here.”

“Ah. But you did not run away.” Ilya poked the tip of his nose.

And maybe he should have run away. Because now his entire body felt like an inferno. *Dangerous*.

“I'm gonna go get some water now.” Shane said reluctantly. Their eyes met briefly, and Ilya smiled. Shane felt himself melt, which hadn't felt like it would even be possible, considering his current state.

He pressed his forehead to Ilya's and smiled back before peeling himself away. He weaved through the crowd, a relief washing over him immediately at the slightly cooler air back near their table.

Hayden looked up from his phone, eyes narrowing at Shane as he sipped his drink.

“What were you doing? You look…sweaty.”

“Nothing.” Shane said, too quickly. “Dancing.”

“You were dancing.” Hayden's words came out less as a question and more like an unbelievable statement.

Shane shrugged. “Yes.”

“With Ilya?” Hayden's tone shifted into something slightly accusatory.

Shane shifted. “I mean. Yeah. Is that okay?” He crossed his arms.

“Sure. I just feel like usually that's not something you would ever do.”

Shane huffed out a humorless laugh. “Okay. Well. I don't know what you want me to say to that.”

“I'm just saying.” Hayden put his hands up. “I feel like he's pushing you to do stuff you aren't comfortable doing. Just because he wants you to doesn't mean you have to.”

Shane knitted his brows together. “What? He's not-” He let out a breath of frustration. “It's not like that. He isn't making me do anything. If I didn't want to do it, I wouldn't do it. What, you think I'm like…scared of him or something?”

“No.” Hayden shrugged. “Maybe enamored with him. Enough to follow him around like a puppy or some shit.”

Shane felt his jaw drop open as he scoffed. “What the fuck, Hayden?” He ran a hand through his hair. “Seriously, what the fuck is your problem?”

“There is no-”

Shane cut him off, holding out a hand. “No. *Clearly* there is. You're what, jealous that I have another friend?”

Hayden put his hands up again, defensively. “Dude. Chill out. I'm not-”

“Then what, Hayden!” Shane threw his hands up in defeat.

“It's just…you act different around him, man. I don't know. Your friendship is…a lot.” Hayden studied him carefully.

Shane felt his cheeks burning. “Yes. Our friendship is probably…different. But Ilya is…he's Ilya. He's eccentric. And I've always felt comfortable with it. We trust each other. We care about each other. We went through some intense shit together, okay?”

Hayden sighed. “Look, dude. I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to call you out. I just don't want you to do shit for him just because you want to make him happy. Like, push yourself to do things you wouldn't normally do. That's all. I get he's a weird dude.”

Shane shook his head. “Well. I'm not doing anything just to make him happy. So don't worry about it. Okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.” Hayden conceded.

Enamored. The word stung at Shane's mind, annoying and unbidden. He slid into the booth wordlessly.

The implication was insulting, to both him and Ilya. Like Ilya was dragging Shane along purposely into things he was uncomfortable with, and like Shane was too chicken shit to stop it. He sipped at his water, the ice now melted and the cup sweating.

Maybe it was a good thing Hayden had pissed him off so much, because the feeling had replaced the overwhelming sensation of wanting to rip Ilya's clothes from his body.

He felt insane. He was starting to realize that if anyone had saw them in that crowd and recognized who they were, they would have a very hard time explaining what they were doing. He knew, distantly, that friends *could* of course dance with each other. Even get a little wild.

But they were professional athletes in a sport that thrived on masculinity. They also had a little too much heat between them for it to be brushed off, he knew. There was something there, brewing under the surface, threatening to erupt at any moment. *Dangerous*.

Chapter End Notes

1. Ilya's angsty inner monologues live rent free in my mind

2. In case anyone cares, the song I had in my mind for Shane and Ilya's heated dance is "Image (Grimes Special)" by Magdalena Bay & Grimes

Note that this song is NOT timeline compliant and not necessary to listen to, but just though I would supply my inspiration for that scene!

3. Thank you all so much for your comments and for reading so far!!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The mound of blankets that cocooned his body could not be kicked off quickly enough as Shane woke, his skin hot and covered in a layer of sweat.

There was a dull throbbing in his head, the inside of his mouth tacky. He groaned slightly, reaching over to the nightstand to grab a half drunken bottle of water, gulping down the rest of it in one go.

He rubbed at his forehead, as if that would soothe the ache somehow, as his brain came back online.

He started to recount the events of the night in his mind, and suddenly, he felt his stomach turn to stone.

What the fuck had he been thinking? Well, he knew exactly what he had been thinking. He wanted to climb Ilya like a fucking tree. But he was now horrified by his own choice to turn feral for his best friend in the middle of a night club.

He felt the contents of his stomach surging up as every horrible scenario carded through his mind like a rolodex of catastrophe. What if someone recognized them? What if there were pictures?

Jesus Christ, they had been so stupid. He reached for his phone, and immediately searched for his own name on Twitter as he tried desperately to get his eyes to adjust.

The first thing he landed upon was from a fan blog that followed hockey players' every move.

> **@HockeyNet**
> Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov spotted at club after Voyageurs win 👀 *[link]*

Shane felt panic seize his throat. He quickly tapped the link, beginning to scroll through the blog with accompanying paparazzi photos.

He felt the panic slowly begin to loosen its grip.

Every photo appeared to be of their group exiting the club and walking down the street, with Shane and Ilya leading the pack.

One photo showed Ilya's arm slung loosely around Shane's shoulders as they walked, his other hand holding a cigarette up to his lips, his cheeks hollowed as he took a drag.

The next showed them in the same position, their heads now angled towards each other, both of them laughing.

The third showed Shane with a hand on Ilya's shoulder as he turned to look behind him, where J.J. had an arm around a very drunk Mitka, Hayden beside them talking animatedly.

He breathed out a long sigh of relief. No pictures from inside the club. No mention of anything that happened inside, either.

He exited the blog and decided to scroll through the replies, just in case any clubgoers happened to be there recounting their experience of seeing Shane groping Ilya's chest as he breathed practically into his mouth.

@hollzygirl
the camera flash is a paid actor because holy shit their shirts are both sheer oh my god oh my god oHMY GOD

@kayytea
I never wished I was a cigarette more in my life 😔

@puckkoff
Shane Hollander this is my formal proposal pls i need him so bad i am on my knees begging

@urownpersonaljane
can a girl get a warning the next time the whole team decides to step out looking like a royal feast holy mother of god

Well. All of that only served to make Shane blush furiously and tuck his phone face down under the pillow.

He felt most of the panic begin to quell, though he still felt completely out of his mind for the goings on of the previous night. He was going to need to learn to control himself, and quickly.

Whatever this was between them, it was heating up at levels that Shane wasn't sure he could even comprehend. It was turning quickly from a candle flame into a full blown nuclear meltdown.

He closed his eyes, trying to steady himself as he came down from his spiral. But all he could feel was Ilya's hands on his skin. Ilya's mouth brushing against his throat.

Shane realized then that he was painfully hard. “Fuck.” He muttered into the darkness, burying his hands into his hair as he willed himself desperately to not get off thinking about this.

But before he knew it, his hand was under his waistband, and he groaned with relief. He recounted the feeling of Ilya's chest under his palm. Of hips digging into his ass. Of the way he could have moved forward just an inch and let Ilya take his mouth.

He felt like a teenager the way he was bucking up into his own hand, desperate and uncoordinated. He came into his fist with a long groan and Ilya's name on his tongue, his whole body warm and flushed.

"*Fuck*." He muttered again, though this time it came out more exasperated. He wiped his hand off on the inside of his boxers, cringing at the feeling. It was still early. Too early. They had all of today off, and Shane was still too wound up to sleep in.

Instead, he hauled himself to the shower, resting his forehead against the tile wall as the hot water fell over him.

He was trying to understand what all of this meant for him. The panic swelling in his gut transported him back to his 18 year old self, desperately horny with his laptop perched on his knees. He hadn't usually been one to watch porn. But there was something pent up inside of him, driving him to the brink of neediness.

He had convinced himself it was completely by accident that he ended up in the section where no women were present. And after it was over, he slammed his laptop shut with so much shame and horror in himself he thought he was going to be sick. He didn't understand what he had just done, or why. He was not *gay*. It was not possible.

So he pretended it was nothing. That it never happened at all. He filed that moment away, tucked tightly in a hidden space where it should have never escaped confinement. That was, until Ilya strolled into the locker room and knocked it all loose with a single look.

He was very sexually attracted to his Ilya; this he could no longer deny. Not after multiple times getting himself off to the thought of him. And not just jerking off, because apparently, Shane now wanted more than that. Which is how he ended up on more than one occasion with three fingers in his own ass while he thought about his best fucking friend. What the fuck was he even doing? How did he get here?

Shane was starting to feel clinically insane. Like something had crawled into his brain and infected him. And he was horrified now that other people were dangerously close to catching on.

He was still pretty pissed at Hayden. But even more than being pissed, he was freaked out. '*Enamored*'. Was Shane being that obvious about it? Or was Hayden just not comfortable with two male friends showing affection?

Shane lightly thudded his forehead against the wall a few times. Unfortunately, it didn't do anything to quiet his thoughts. He was confused and scared and wanted so badly to crawl out of his own skin and exist somewhere else. He stayed in the shower until the water ran cold and left him shivering.

The dream was always the same. Ilya stepped gingerly through the doorway of a familiar room, shrouded in darkness and dramatic shadows from the light spilling in from the hallway behind him.

An unmoving hand was draped over the edge of the bed. He couldn't stop himself from moving toward it. He felt like he was magnetized to a track, being pulled rather than going willingly. The figure attached to the hand was buried beneath a sheet. Like the air around him, the figure was completely still.

He knew what he was supposed to find. The same thing he found when he was twelve years old. He was supposed to peel back the sheet, and see his beautiful mother's slack face that had gone ashen gray; the empty bottle of pills turned over beside her.

But when his hands pulled the sheet away, the figure had morphed into someone else entirely. Ilya felt himself recoil as if he had been burned. Shane laid before him; his face bloodied and bruised. He was so still. Ilya felt like he had been stabbed through the gut. He lurched forward and grabbed Shane by the shoulders.

'*No.*' He cried out. But Shane's skin was so cold. '*No.*' He repeated, but the sound came out more like a sob that had been ripped from his chest. He cradled Shane's broken face between his trembling hands. '*Shane!*'

The sound of his own voice ripped Ilya violently from sleep. He bolted upright, feeling the tears still wet on his cheeks as his chest heaved. He dropped his head into his hands, trying to take a deep breath.

The same dream, or nightmare, had been plaguing him for years now. But it still never got any easier. He still couldn't bring himself back down from his panic, or rid the horrible sick feeling that took root in his stomach. He cursed under his breath, leaning his head back against the headboard, looking down at his hand. The scar was an angry and jagged bolt of lightning striking across the length of his palm. He ran a finger down the discolored plane of it, then across the one wrapped from underneath his wrist around to the hinge of his thumb. A smaller one streaked its mark higher up on his forearm. He sighed, turning his arm over again.

He could see from the light peeking through the gap in the curtains that it must be at least late morning. Ilya pressed a palm to his chest, feeling the steady thud of his heart still beating wildly. He felt a few more tears roll down his cheeks and over the edge of his jaw. There was only one thing he wanted right now. One thing that could calm him down.

In record time, he found himself at Shane's door, his hair still wet and dripping down the back of his neck into the hood of his sweatshirt. He absently ran a hand along the seam of his joggers in an attempt to calm himself. It was stupid. He knew Shane was fine, but he couldn't get the image out of his mind.

The door opened to a slightly surprised Shane. "Oh-" was all he got out before Ilya wrapped both arms around him tightly, pushing him back through the doorway with him. He heard the door latch behind him as he buried his face into Shane's shoulder, breathing him in.

He felt Shane take a moment to orient himself before his arms wrapped around Ilya and squeezed. “Ilya. Are you okay?”

Ilya took a deep breath, giving Shane one more squeeze before stepping back. “Yes. I am fine. I just…” he sighed. “Bad dream. I just needed to see you were okay. Is stupid.” He waved a dismissive hand.

“Oh.” Shane frowned, then pushed a wet curl back from Ilya's face. “It's not stupid. Are you sure you're okay?”

Ilya was convinced anything could happen to him and he would be okay as long as Shane was there with him, safe. He looked into those warm brown eyes and felt his heartbeat even out. He reached a hand out, using his knuckles to stroke the freckles on Shane's cheek. The feeling of Shane's warm skin grounded him back in reality. “Yes. I am now.” He smiled softly. “Thank you, *solnyshko*.”

Shane smiled back. “Did you have breakfast? I don't have Captain Crunch or pop tarts, but.”

Ilya pinched his arm. “Mm. I know you don't, you little brat.” He moved his hand to press into the ticklish spot on Shane's ribs, right under his armpit.

“Don't!” Shane yelled through a laugh, grabbing Ilya's forearm to force him away. “Fuck you, you can starve.”

Ilya feigned a dramatic gasp. “You would allow me to wither away to nothing, Shane Hollander? Big Russian man needs to eat. So I have strength to do this.” Ilya locked his arms around the back of Shane's thighs and hauled him up.

“Hey!” Shane protested, but allowed his legs to wrap around Ilya's waist. Ilya grinned at him.

“Ah. You love it.” Ilya walked him a few feet before depositing him on the kitchen island. He leaned in close to Shane's face from between his legs. “Now make me food. Or I will have no more strength for manhandling.”

Shane's cheeks went pink. He put his palm over Ilya's face to push him back with a laugh. “Who the fuck taught you that word?”

Ilya shrugged. “Is a good word. You love it, yes?”

“Love what? The word ‘manhandling'?” Shane's eyebrows pushed together in confusion. He was so painfully adorable.

“No. Being manhandled. By me.” Ilya grinned.

“Fuck off.” Shane blushed again, hopping off the counter. “You're so weird. Sit down. I'll make you a protein shake.”

Ilya plopped down on the bar seat at the island with a groan.

Shane sat next to him a few minutes later, sliding the glass to him. Ilya gave him a disapproving look before taking a sip.

“Good?” Shane turned to face him.

“Mm.” Ilya considered. “Edible.”

“Oh, shut up.” Shane reached out to smack his arm, but Ilya caught him by the wrist and held it there.

He felt his brain stall momentarily as his memory of the previous night shifted back into focus.

Now that he was no longer stuck under the dark cloud of his nightmare, he was allowing himself to relive it. Fuck. It was so hot, Ilya almost couldn't believe it actually happened. It was also completely maddening.

He wasn't sure how much farther he could push it without just actually going for it. Ilya didn't want to force himself on Shane, but, desperate times. Shane was clearly not willing to make the first move. But what if it was because he didn't actually want this to happen?

Clearly, there was extreme sexual tension happening. Shane wanted him. He knew this for a fact. But, that didn't mean he necessarily wanted to *act* on it. Maybe he wanted to ignore it. Maybe he wanted to stay only friends.

Ilya's eyes fell to Shane's mouth. He was so close. Ilya tugged Shane even closer by the wrist he was holding. He then moved his hand to Shane's cheek, his thumb stroking it gently. “You are good to me.” He said softly, and he could feel Shane's breath when he exhaled shakily.

Ilya saw Shane's eyes drop to his mouth. He heard Shane swallow. Then, Shane cleared his throat and turned away.

Fuck.

“You're good to me, too. The best.” Shane said as he got up, moving to the other side of the island. He was putting space between them. Ilya wanted to scream. He sipped his protein shake instead.

Shane watched him, fidgeting with his hands. “You sure you're okay?”

Ilya downed the rest of the shake. “Yes, *solnyshko*. As long as you are okay, I am okay.”

Shane gave him a small smile, grabbing the empty glass. “Oh. By the way, Hayden is about to come over. We were gonna watch the Boston Ottawa game.”

“Oh. Okay. Do you want me to…” Ilya stood.

“No! No. You can stay. I want you to stay. I was just letting you know. And also…warning you, I guess.” Shane sighed. “He was being super weird last night.”

Ilya looked over at him. “Weird?”

“Yeah. He's convinced that you're like…purposely corrupting me. Or something. And that I'm just following you around like a puppy too scared to tell you no.”

Ilya narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“Yeah. I know.” Shane crossed his arms. “I guess because I agreed to go out last night. And go dance with you. He didn't see us-” He added quickly. “He just knew I went with you and…yeah. He thought you forced me.”

“Shane.” Ilya stepped toward him. “You know that if you don't want to-”

Shane reached out and put a hand on Ilya's arm. “No, I know. I promise, I didn't do anything I didn't want to do.”

They shared a look between them, both clearly thinking about exactly what it was that they had done. Shane's face flushed.

“Good. And fuck him for saying this.” Ilya felt his mood darken. Fucking Hayden Pike. “I know he is your friend. But listen to me.”

Ilya put a finger under Shane's chin, gently tipping his head up to force Shane to meet his eyes. “If anyone ever fucks with you or says shit about you, you tell me. I will burn Montreal to the ground. I will burn whole world down. You understand?”

Shane nodded a bit, then moved forward to rest his head on Ilya's shoulder. “My very own Russian guard dog.”

“Mm.” Ilya ran a hand through the back of Shane's hair, then reached down to hook his pinky around Shane's.

Shane lifted their hands, looking at them carefully. “I still can't believe you got a tattoo for me.” He said quietly.

“Oh you can't? Shane Hollander, I would tattoo whole sleeve dedicated to you.”

“Shut up.” Shane said fondly, pressing his hand to Ilya's cheek.

God, the amount of love Ilya carried for this boy was unfathomable. He turned his head and pressed a kiss to Shane's palm, soft and sweet. When he turned back, Shane was staring, his lips parting slightly.

The sound of the knock at the door made them both jump, Shane's hand flying down to his side. “Fuck.” He muttered through a laugh. “That's probably Hayden.”

Fucking Hayden Pike. Ilya had to stop himself from seething with rage as Shane went to open the door. He moved to perch himself on the back of the couch, watching from up high like he was surveying the land. He knew he was being selfish, but he wanted Shane to himself. And Hayden clearly had an issue with how close he and Shane were. So, Ilya

decided then and there that he would test the limits. Because he was a menace, and because he could.

Hayden stepped into the living room, his expression dropping immediately. “Rozanov.”

“Pike. Glad you could join us. We were just about to turn game on.” Ilya grinned smugly. Hayden scoffed under his breath, moving to sit down on the corner of the couch furthest from Ilya. *Good*.

Shane came up behind Ilya, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You guys want something to drink?”

Ilya immediately moved his hand to cover Shane's. “I am okay, sweetheart. Thank you.”

Hayden looked physically pained. “I'll just take some water.” He said, tightly.

Shane reappeared a few moments later, tossing a water bottle to Hayden before settling himself right between Ilya's knees where they hung over the cushions, his feet now on either side of Shane's thighs. *Good boy*, he thought. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

Ilya bit back a grin, patting Shane on the top of the head. And for good measure, and his own satisfaction, he tugged on Shane's earlobe and crooned “*Such a good boy for me. You know where you belong*.” In Russian.

“Hm?” Shane asked absently, his eyes now glued to the screen where the game had started.

“Nothing.” Ilya patted his cheek. “Maybe someday I teach you.”

During intermission, Ilya had excused himself to the bathroom. When he returned, Shane was animatedly breaking down Boston's power play as Hayden nodded along. God. Shane was such a nerd. It made Ilya smile.

He plopped down next to Shane, snatching the remote from the coffee table and changing the channel.

“Hey! What the fuck-” Shane turned to him. “Ilya, the game's about to come back on.”

Ilya shrugged. “Boston will win. Ottawa is terrible. We should watch something more exciting, yes?” He smirked as he watched the irritation grow on Shane's face.

“No. Cut it out, Ilya. Give me the remote.” But when Shane reached for it, Ilya held it high above his head.

Shane scoffed, sitting up on his knees and leaning over Ilya's lap as he tried to wrestle him for it. “You're an asshole!” Shane laughed as he struggled.

Ilya looked over Shane's shoulder where Hayden was watching them with an unamused face. *Perfect*. Ilya moved his arm even further, causing Shane to practically crawl over his lap.

Ilya locked eyes with Hayden to assert his dominance, then smacked Shane hard on the ass, his hand curving around the swell of it.

Shane yelped. Hayden's mouth dropped open, then snapped shut. Ilya bit his lip with a grin. “*Ilya*!” Shane grunted, then grabbed a handful of his hair and tugged. *Beautiful*.

Ilya pushed the remote into Shane's chest in surrender. Shane collapsed across his lap with a sigh. “Fuck you. You're a child.” He laughed.

Hayden still looked dumbstruck in the corner. Ilya wanted to take a picture to commemorate his dumb face. “You guys know this is like, not normal behavior?” He sputtered.

“What isn't? Is very normal to me.” Ilya shrugged.

“I thought it was illegal to be gay in Russia?” Hayden said, looking like he was actually confused.

“Hayden, Jesus Christ!" Shane sat up.

Ilya rolled his eyes. “If only it was illegal to be stupid in Canada. You have been in locker room, yes? I only smacked him on the ass. I did not stick my dick in it.”

“Okay, enough.” Shane put a hand over his face. “Please. Both of you.”

Ilya patted Shane's knee. “I am sorry.” He said, still watching Hayden. “I will stop being so gay for you, Shane. I see it makes Pike upset.”

“Ilya.” Shane warned. Ilya leaned back in his seat with a smug smile. He was going to make Hayden Pike regret what he said to Shane in that club for the rest of his life.

As far as Ilya was concerned, his relationship with Shane was no one's business. It never had been. Not his father's. Not Hayden's. Not anyone's. He had so much love for Shane, people should be glad for how much fucking restraint he actually showed.

By the end of the game, he was so pent up that he could hardly stand it. He thought back to the way Shane practically flew to the other side of the kitchen when he had been sure they were about to kiss, and figured he should probably leave before he lost all control and shoved Shane into a corner.

The want had steeped into a need. Hungry and ever present. As Shane stood in front of him at the door, Ilya looked into his eyes and knew there was nothing he wouldn't do for Shane. He also knew he would combust if Shane didn't help him confront this thing they had been dancing around for two months now.

Ilya put one hand on Shane's hip, leaning in to brush his lips against Shane's ear as he spoke, soft and low. “See you at practice tomorrow, captain?”

He felt Shane nod, exhaling softly. Ilya stroked a finger along Shane's jaw as he pulled away from him and out the door. He was going to need a plan, and fast. He needed to kiss Shane Hollander in the next 24 hours, or he might actually lose the rest of his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the whiplash of emotions in this chapter LMAO~ I know the slow burn is SCORCHING yall but trust me when I say, that nuclear meltdown Shane referenced is IMMINENT.

Thank you for your comments and for reading so far!!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The crisp fall air breezed through the partially opened window as Shane took a beat to admire the shades of pink that the sunset had washed over the sky. His legs still had that distinct post-practice burn as he rested his elbows over the kitchen island, finishing off the last of his dinner.

He felt his stomach flutter a bit as he looked at the other end of the island, remembering the day before when Ilya had hauled him up and carried him like he wasn't a fully grown hockey player. Everything Ilya did was so effortlessly and frustratingly hot. He felt addicted to it.

He hadn't been able to stop stealing glances at Ilya during practice today. Those long legs working across the ice, his teasing smile when he chirped their teammates, the blaze in his eyes before he took a shot. Even if he wanted to look away, he couldn't.

And he noticed Ilya had been watching him, too. At one point, Shane turned toward the bench to see Ilya resting his elbows on the boards, helmet and gloves off. When their eyes met, Ilya raised his pinky finger where his tattoo was visible, and winked. Shane felt like the ice was going to melt beneath his skates.

As he started to clean up his dishes, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

ilya: come down and watch game with me? 😁

Shane couldn't help but smile dopily at his screen.

We have an early flight tomorrow.

ilya: so? is not that late. i miss you 😔

His smile widened.

We were just together at practice for hours, Ilya.

ilya: is not enough. never enough

ilya: your face is too pretty

ilya: your ass is too fat

ilya: i am greedy man, Shane

Omg. You're a depraved man is what you are.

ilya: i google this word. i disagree. i think i am DEPRIVED man. not depraved.

Oh yeah? Deprived of what?

ilya: that ass 😔

Jesus Christ. You're depraved AND deranged.

ilya: get down here or i start posting about your ass on twitter

Do you even have a Twitter?

ilya: i will make one

🙄🙄

Shane shook his head with a laugh as he finished cleaning up. Unfortunately, he loved this man to death. He felt his phone buzz again, only instead of a text, it was a Twitter notification. He furrowed his brows as he opened it.

@81rozanov
hi *@shanehollanderoffical* 🙂

He immediately opened the text thread back up.

Ilya, you better not.

Ilya

ILYA

He quickly pulled on a sweatshirt, not even bothering to change out of his running shorts as he made quick work of getting to Ilya's door. He knocked hard, then crossed his arms.

Ilya opened the door with a big grin on his face, holding a spoon in one hand and a pint of mint cookie ice cream in the other. “Oh. Did not expect company.”

“You're a fucking menace.” Shane pushed him out of the way to get inside and kick his shoes off. “I'm gonna take your phone away.”

Ilya pouted, then shoved a spoonful of ice cream in his mouth. He pulled the spoon from his mouth slowly, and Shane tried not to stare at the way the motion made the muscles in his shoulder move where they were bared from his too tight tank top. “Want a bite?”

“No. You eat so much sugar, I don't understand how you have that body.” Shane shook his head.

“What do you mean?” Ilya cocked his head with a lazy smirk. “Are you complimenting my body, Hollander?”

Shane felt his cheeks go pink. “Fuck off. You know exactly what you look like.”

Ilya hummed, eating one last spoonful before slowly approaching Shane. Stupidly, Shane felt his heart start to hammer against his ribcage.

“So. You do not want me to tweet about your ass?”

“No, Ilya.” Shane crossed his arms, watching as Ilya's gaze slowly raked over him.

“Fine.” He casually pulled his phone from his pocket, unlocking it. “I will tweet about your thighs.” He grinned wickedly as he started to type.

“What? Don't-” Shane lurched forward, only able to grab a handful of Ilya's shirt as he darted away. “Ilya!” Shane half laughed and half whined, chasing him through the living room.

He finally cornered him in front of the couch, the both of them roughhousing as Ilya kept the phone just out of Shane's reach. They were both laughing through their grunts as Shane finally pushed Ilya down onto the couch, climbing into his lap as Ilya held the phone high over his head.

“What? World cannot know I love your thighs, *solnyshko*?” He grinned.

“Ilya, stop.” Shane whined with a smile, now straddling Ilya's thighs as he reached for the phone, his other hand wrapped around Ilya's bicep.

Ilya tossed the phone to the other side of the couch, holding Shane in place by the hips. “There. Now neither of us can have.”

Shane settled down into Ilya's lap with an exhale, shaking his head as he smiled. Their faces were close like this, and the color of Ilya's eyes up close in this light was mesmerizing. They seemed like a million different shades of blue and green, sparkling and bright.

Shane swallowed, dropping his gaze slightly to where his hand was still wrapped around Ilya's bicep. He hesitated only for a moment before he allowed his thumb to slowly run the length of the vein that ran down the curve of the muscle. He felt Ilya's skin prickle under the touch.

As his thumb worked down the skin, Shane slowly raised his gaze back up to Ilya, who was gazing intently back at him, his lips slightly parted. He felt Ilya's large hand move from his hip to the side of his bare thigh, fingers grazing.

Shane's heart beat wildly, and he could tell now that they were both breathing a bit harder. He squeezed at Ilya's bicep, breath hitching at the feeling of it. Ilya let out a small breath,

fingertips dragging down the side of Shane's thigh. He couldn't run anymore. Couldn't hide. This is what he wanted. He needed to let go.

They both seemed to lean in at the same time, their lips pressing together in a firm but impossibly tender kiss. Shane's heartbeat thundered in his ears. They pulled apart, but only slightly, their lips still brushing as they breathed. He felt like he had taken a shot of vodka ten times over the way his whole body buzzed and flooded with warmth.

Shane moved a hand to lightly grip the curls at the nape of Ilya's neck, pulling back a bit more now to look into Ilya's eyes. Ilya dragged a knuckle across the top of Shane's cheek before leaning in to slot their lips together again.

Shane's eyes fluttered shut. He felt the tip of Ilya's tongue tease at the seam of his lips, and he immediately dropped his mouth open as Ilya's hand came to cradle his jaw.

Ilya licked into his mouth languidly, and the feeling made Shane shiver. He lightly tugged at Ilya's curls, his entire body feeling like it had ignited. Shane lapped his tongue over Ilya's, pressing their mouths together a bit harder.

He suddenly felt like he couldn't get close enough. His fingers threaded in Ilya's hair, his skin hot and flushed beneath Ilya's hand as it roamed from his jaw to the back of his neck. The kiss was slow and deep and made a fire burn low in Shane's belly.

When they eventually broke apart, their breathing had gone ragged. Shane looked down at Ilya's spit slick and plump lips, brushing their noses together. “Fuck, Ilya.” He said quietly, bringing a hand to grip Ilya's chest.

Ilya looked deeply into his eyes in a way that made Shane's heart stutter. He dragged a thumb across Shane's bottom lip before bringing his lips to Shane's ear.

“*Ya tebya lyublyu*.” He said in a feather light whisper. Shane closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He didn't know what it meant, but Ilya had whispered it like a prayer, and it made Shane melt. He laughed softly at the way Ilya's lips and breath tickled at his skin.

Shane felt a bit drunk. He had just made out with his best friend. And it felt like nothing he'd ever experienced before. All this time he spent thinking he was broken; that things like this weren't meant for him. It all evaporated the moment his lips touched Ilya's. It almost felt too good, in a way that was making him feel insatiable.

Ilya laughed, too, pressing a kiss to Shane's ear. “You make me crazy, you know this?” He traced a finger across Shane's jaw. “You are so beautiful.”

Ilya leaned back to take Shane's face in his hands, eyes studying him. Shane knew he was flushed over his whole body at this point. “This is…” Shane started quietly, unable to stop himself from smiling. “Fuck. I don't know. I don't …I've never…” He trailed off, letting out a small, nervous laugh.

Ilya only smiled at him. “You are very cute.”

“Fuck off.” He hid his face in Ilya's neck.

Ilya wrapped his arms around him. “Your thinking is very loud.”

“That doesn't even make sense.” He mumbled.

“Talk to me, *solnyshko*. Is only me.” Ilya rubbed up and down his back slowly.

“You just…you make me feel…a lot of things.” Shane took a deep breath.

“You make me feel a lot of things, too.” Ilya pushed his hand up the back of Shane's sweatshirt, his palm warm on Shane's skin.

Ilya pulled back to look at him again, and a new wave of desire hit Shane like a brick wall the moment he looked at Ilya's face. He needily pressed their mouths together, squirming in Ilya's lap as he grasped at him in desperation.

Every nerve in his body was humming. When they pulled apart again, Shane was practically panting against Ilya's mouth. Ilya lightly nipped at Shane's bottom lip.

Shane swallowed, trying to work up the courage to say what he felt. “I…I want you so bad. I need you.”

Ilya made a small sound that resembled a moan before he moved, putting a hand to Shane's chest and pushing him gently to lay back on the couch. Shane went very willingly, eyes fixed on Ilya, who crawled on top of him. Ilya pressed their hips together, and Shane felt himself gasp softly at the feeling of Ilya's hardness against his own.

Ilya brushed his lips to Shane's. “Is this okay?” He asked gently, and Shane could only nod breathlessly.

Ilya kissed at Shane's bottom lip as his hips slowly rolled against Shane's.

Even his own embarrassment wasn't enough to hold it in anymore. Shane was feeling himself unravel in real time. He pushed back up against Ilya, opening his mouth to him with a moan as Ilya pushed his tongue inside. They kissed for what could have been minutes or years before they pulled apart again, breathless, the heat building between their bodies.

“Fuck, Shane.” Ilya groaned against Shane's neck.

Shane pulled at the hem of Ilya's shirt. Ilya sat up, pulling it off as Shane did the same with his own sweatshirt.

Shane gaped at him, a hand lifting to run down Ilya's stomach. Ilya palmed at Shane through his shorts, which made Shane buck his hips up in response.

He was painfully hard, everything in his body screaming for more. “Ilya.” He breathed out. “Please.”

Ilya felt like a man starved. Shane was beneath him, squirming and flushed and breathing out his name like a plea.

He stood, pulling at Shane until he was standing as well. He then hauled Shane up from under his thighs, smiling when Shane immediately wrapped around him and pressed their mouths together.

Ilya carried him to the bedroom, laying him back on the bed. Shane stared up at him with pupils blown wide and lips glistening wet. “You are so perfect.” Ilya said, stroking his jaw. Shane's eyes fluttered shut.

Ilya leaned down and pressed a kiss to Shane's hip bone, then just below his belly button, his lips savoring the feeling of smooth, warm skin.

He moved down between Shane's legs to mouth at him through his shorts, the fabric darkening beneath him. He looked up again as he hooked his fingers beneath the waistband. “Is okay?”

“Yes. Fuck, yes. Please.” Shane breathed.

Ilya pulled Shane's shorts and underwear down in one swift motion. Shane groaned, seemingly in relief from being set free.

Ilya felt saliva pooling in his mouth. Shane was already leaking, the clear liquid spilling onto his belly. “Fuck, Shane. You are so fucking perfect.”

Ilya leaned down, licking a stripe up the length slowly before swallowing him whole. Shane's hands immediately found Ilya's hair, tugging as he squirmed and bucked beneath him.

“Fuck, Ilya, oh my god.” Shane moaned, and Ilya moaned at the sound of it, unable to stop himself from rutting against the mattress a few times.

Ilya moved off of him momentarily, letting a mouthful of his saliva drip down over Shane before he took him in his mouth again. Shane bucked his hips up, tugging at Ilya's hair. Ilya hummed in satisfaction. He felt like he could come just from listening to Shane like this.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, Shane began to tighten up under him. “Jesus. Fuck, Ilya, I'm-” and he tried to pull Ilya off, but Ilya only worked his mouth faster, digging his fingers into Shane's hips when he felt him spill into his mouth with a loud groan.

Shane was panting when Ilya crawled back over him, leaning down to kiss him. He almost gasped in surprise when Shane immediately shoved his tongue desperately into Ilya's mouth, where he knew Shane would taste himself. *Fuck*.

Ilya was so hard he felt like he had a bruise between his legs. Shane looked so beautiful like this; blushing and unguarded, completely undone.

Shane lurched up, pushing Ilya back. Ilya stared up at him, feeling his breath hitch at the hunger in Shane's eyes.

Shane leaned down and pressed his mouth against Ilya's pec, sucking and biting at it in a way that made Ilya gasp. He cursed in Russian, his hand threading in Shane's hair.

Before long, Shane was leaving open mouthed kisses all the way down Ilya's torso, panting in between. Shane pulled Ilya's joggers down, and honest to god *moaned*.

Holy fuck.

Shane stared down at him hungrily before giving him little kitten licks at tip. Ilya carded a hand through Shane's hair before Shane took him in his mouth properly.

Shane worked at him messily, drool sliding out of his mouth as he moved up and down. Shane was moaning against him, and Ilya felt like he was having some sort of religious experience. Shane was so determined, and clearly very turned on, and Ilya was already at the brink way quicker than he'd ever gotten there.

“Fuck, *solnyshko*. You're so good. Such a good boy.” He said through panting. He heard Shane practically squeak.

He let out a string of curses in Russian. “God. Shane, I'm-” and to his surprise, Shane gripped hard at Ilya's hips and took him even deeper. Ilya tossed his head back as he came into Shane's pretty mouth, biting down on his lip with a stuttering groan.

He sat up a bit, his mouth falling open slightly when he saw that Shane was completely hard again, his mouth slack and wet.

“Come here, *solnyshko*.”

Shane laid down at his side, turning into him. Ilya slotted his thigh between Shane's legs, kissing him deeply. Shane moaned weakly into his mouth as he began to roll his hips, rutting against him.

“Good boy. Go on.” Ilya said against his mouth. God, Shane was going to be the death of him. He was letting out needy whines that Ilya wanted to lock away in his memory forever. Shane was so gone and so perfect and Ilya knew he was forever ruined for anyone else.

It wasn't long before he felt Shane pulse against his thigh, the hot liquid spilling between them.

Shane buried his face deeply into Ilya's neck, panting and trembling slightly “Fuck.”

“Mm. Yes. I agree.” Ilya pinched Shane's ass, making him yelp. “God. Shane, you are so fucking hot.”

He put a hand in Shane's hair to pull his head back and kiss him deeply. “Fucking perfect.” He murmured into Shane's mouth. “Was okay?”

“Fuck. It was way more than okay.” Shane laughed. “I just came twice in like 10 minutes. I didn't even know I could do that.”

And of course, he adorably blushed about it.

“Mm.” Ilya hummed happily. “Now I can tweet about how good that pretty mouth is.”

“Fuck. Off.” Shane pinched his arm. Ilya grinned at him, then pinched his cheek.

“I will never fuck off. You are stuck with me.”

Shane sighed, content, dropping his head back onto Ilya's chest. Ilya held him tight, pressing his nose into Shane's hair.

He wanted this forever. He would give up every single fucking thing he ever had if it meant he could have Shane. He felt his heart swell when Shane nuzzled his cheek into him.

Mine, he wanted to say. *I am yours. All yours. Please be mine.*

Instead, he whispered his confession again. “*Ya tebya lyublyu*.”

Chapter End Notes

OH YALL WANTED A KISS??

mwah. we live for Ilya's religious experience with Shane's pretty mouth amen 🙏

Thank you all for the comments and for reading so far!!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane's skin felt pleasantly warm; whether it was from the hot shower or the large mass of Russian dozing beside him, he couldn't say. Probably both. Ilya radiated heat like an oversized human furnace, and he took up far too much of the bed - all broad shoulders and long limbs. In any other circumstance, Shane would probably hate these things. He didn't like being too warm or too close. And yet, found himself nestled against his best friend like they were two cats napping in a tiny sliver of sunlight.

Shane ran a finger across Ilya's stomach, lightly tracing a path between the scattering of moles. The TV on the bedroom wall was playing the last period of the game; casting a flickering light and a soft hum of sound over the room. Shane was quietly willing his brain to catch up with the things his body had just done.

He had expected to feel some sort of panic wash over him once the heat had settled. He had done something that the Shane from two months ago would have considered unequivocally impossible. The Shane from two months ago did not have nearly enough courage to admit to himself that he could possibly be sexually attracted to men - let alone act on it.

But Shane wasn't panicking. Only thinking. Letting his mind move slowly in time with the rise and fall of Ilya's chest. He brought his fingers up to Ilya's jaw, touching it lightly.

“Ilya?” He said quietly, and the arm that was around Shane seemed to tighten instinctively.

“Hmm?” Ilya used his other hand to rub at his eyes before turning slightly to look at Shane. Ilya looked younger like this; his face sleepy and relaxed.

“Was it good? For you?” Shane asked sheepishly, and he could feel the soft heat bloom in cheeks.

Ilya looked at him for a moment, blinking as if he didn't understand what exactly Shane was asking. He then placed a hand on Shane's chest. “Of course. Was perfect.”

“Okay. I just…I haven't ever…”

Ilya leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to the hinge of his jaw. “I know, *solnyshko*. I liked. In case you could not tell by the way I shoot my load down your throat.” He smirked, pinching the flesh in the crook of Shane's armpit.

Shane laughed, batting his hand away. “Where do you learn this shit in English?”

Ilya shrugged. “Internet. Must learn useful phrases such as these.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Remind me again why I'm friends with you?”

Ilya out a scandalized scoff. “Shane!” He pulled his arm out from underneath Shane and scooted away from him, crossing both arms over his chest. “You are so mean to me sometimes.”

Shane tried to move closer, but Ilya held out a hand. “No. You stay over there. I am always very nice to you. Never mean. You hurt my feelings.”

Shane was grinning now, wrestling Ilya's hand down to scoot closer. “Shut up, you big baby. You know you're my favorite person.”

Ilya kicked his leg out, trying to push him back. “No. Is too late. You wound me.”

Shane was stifling his giggles, grabbing onto Ilya's arm as he tried to uncross them. “Well, what if I tell you a secret?” He said, sitting up on his knees to get more leverage as he tugged at Ilya's arm.

Ilya turned his body away roughly. “I am listening. It better be good.”

“You got hot. Like *really* hot.” Shane squeezed at Ilya's arm.

Ilya slowly turned to look at him. “Ah. You are calling me hot?”

Shane bit his lip through a smile and nodded emphatically.

“*Really* hot?” Ilya raised his eyebrows.

“Uh huh.” Shane looked down at him, blushing a bit as he smiled.

“Say it again. Like you mean it. Go on.”

Shane leaned down close to his face. “Ilya. You're really fucking hot.”

Ilya sat up and practically tackled Shane into the mattress, pinning him down. Shane wriggled beneath him, unable to hold back his giddy laughter.

Without warning, Ilya leaned in and bit Shane rather hard on the side of the neck, teeth sinking in and pulling at the flesh. Shane gasped, then moaned, then stared up at Ilya with his jaw dropped open and eyes wide in disbelief. “Fu-fucking Christ…” was all he was able to stammer out in shock.

Ilya smirked. “Do not be mean to me again.” He said before rolling off.

Shane brought a hand to the spot on his neck, touching it gently. It was tender and slightly wet with Ilya's spit. “I can't….did you really just fucking *bite me*?”

Ilya shrugged, laying back. “I think maybe you liked it.”

Well, he wasn't exactly wrong about that. Shane was a little horrified that he had very involuntarily and very loudly moaned. He was discovering many things about himself today, apparently.

“Ilya, what if it leaves a mark?” Shane pressed his fingers against the spot again. He clenched his whole body as he focused on not getting hard thinking about Ilya's teeth marks bruised into his skin.

“Well. Then it will be there to remind you to be nicer to your best friend.”

Shane kicked his leg. “Fuck you.” He laughed.

Ilya caught him by the ankle, then tutted. “Little brat.”

Shane shook his hand off then roughly crawled on top of him. Ilya put his hands up to push him away, but Shane pressed his hands into Ilya's, both of them struggling for leverage to push the other away as they laughed, arms locked.

Shane pressed his thighs against Ilya's hips, leaning down into him. “I could be way meaner, you know.” He said between grunts.

“And I can bite way harder. Now get out of my way, you are making me miss end of game.”

Shane scoffed. “You were sleeping!”

“And you wake me up to ask stupid questions, like if I like when you suck my dick.” He pushed back harder against Shane, grunting with the effort.

“That's not a stupid question, I've never done it before.” Shane said, not relenting.

“Shane. You have world's prettiest mouth and you moan on my dick like a pornstar. Please. Obviously I liked.” Ilya laughed.

Shane blushed. “Shut up.” He really had lost all control the moment he pulled Ilya's joggers down. It would have been horribly embarrassing if Ilya hadn't liked it so much. He pulled a hand away to pinch Ilya's arm before rolling off to collapse next to him.

“I still can't believe you bit me. There's something wrong with you.” Shane furrowed his brows as he rubbed at the spot idly.

“I know. Let me see.” Ilya tugged Shane's hand away, then pressed a gentle kiss to the spot. Shane had to fight off a shiver. It barely registered to him that he had tilted his head to give Ilya better access to his neck, his eyes fluttering shut.

Ilya leaned in closer, pressing his mouth more firmly to the tender skin. Shane drew in a breath, then let out a soft, breathy moan when he felt Ilya's tongue drag across his neck and up toward his jaw. He left open mouthed kisses across the span of Shane's jaw before bringing his lips to Shane's ear.

“Am I really your favorite person?” He asked, and the low, gravely tone of his voice made Shane's stomach coil tight.

“Yes. You know that.” Shane answered, his head still cocked to the side.

“Good boy.” Ilya gently nipped over the already bitten spot on his neck, and Shane's breath hitched. “You are my favorite, too. Always have been. Maybe this is why I bite you, so people can see you are mine.” Ilya scraped his teeth over the spot before he began to gently suck on it.

“Oh, *fuck*.” Shane felt the fire ignite low in his stomach again. The mixture of pain and pleasure and possessiveness rolled through him in a slow wave that made him feel like all his muscles were melting beneath his skin.

Ilya's hand began to slowly trail down Shane's stomach, and the loose feeling in his muscles suddenly contracted like a coiled spring. He felt himself inhale sharply as he caught Ilya by the forearm, stopping his hand just as it brushed his waistband.

Ilya immediately pulled back from Shane's neck. “Shane?”

Shane felt his breath catch in his chest as he tried to swallow back panic. Ilya gently removed his arm from where Shane was gripping him, moving his hand to cup Shane's face.

“Shane. If you do not want to, is okay. I will stop.”

“No.” Shane shook his head. “No, it's not that. It's…I do want to. I want to. And it scares me.” The panic that he was waiting to appear earlier had finally reared its ugly head. This was real. It was real, and it happened, and it was about to happen again. And Shane wanted it all.

“Why does this scare you?” Ilya asked, his thumb gently stroking Shane's cheek over and over. Shane closed his eyes and leaned into Ilya's touch, trying to ground himself.

“Because I'm just…confused.” Shane took a deep breath and opened his eyes. With all the courage he possessed, he let his eyes meet Ilya's. “Do you think I'm gay?”

Ilya's face did something very complicated; his look softening, his mouth settling into something that resembled a pout. “Oh, *solnyshko*. You know I cannot answer this for you.”

Shane nodded, casting his eyes back down. He could feel his heart thudding in his chest and a sick feeling churning in his stomach. Reality was peeling his skin back; turning him inside out and exposing everything about himself that he was afraid to see.

He thought back to how he felt when Ilya came out to him. He was afraid for his best friend, because the world was unkind. He knew that same unkindness was waiting for him on the other side of this door, should he dare to open it.

“Shane.” Ilya said, his voice gentle and even. “Do you like doing this? With me?” Ilya's thumb moved to brush over the side of Shane's neck that was still spitslick and sensitive.

“I do.” Shane said quietly. This he could not lie about, even if he wanted to. His body would certainly betray him, the way it so unconsciously yielded itself to every single touch from Ilya.

“Then I think is okay for you to do things without making label for yourself if you are not ready. You are allowed to want things. Try things.” Ilya's steady voice made something settle inside Shane's chest.

“I think,” Shane took another deep breath. “you're probably right.”

“And…you do not have to try with…only me. If you do not want.”

The tone in Ilya's voice had dropped into something small and sad, though Shane could tell Ilya was trying to be nonchalant. When Shane looked up at him, he could see the flicker of worry and doubt behind those ocean blue eyes.

He thought about Ilya's words, and he almost had to stifle a laugh. Would he really go find someone else to try this with when Ilya was right in front of him? Ilya, who Shane would trust with his life. Ilya, who was so sweet for Shane that it made his heart tumble. Ilya, who treated Shane like he was something precious. Ilya, who was so stupidly hot that Shane almost couldn't look at him sometimes. Ilya, who Shane now knew deserved some kind of gold medal for his various mouth skills.

Shane reached a hand up into those perfect dark blonde curls, so soft and now growing a bit shaggier. He placed the other hand on Ilya's broad chest, cupped over the swell of muscle, feeling the steady beat of his heart under his palm. To even think of going elsewhere was absolutely absurd.

“Ilya. What the fuck are you talking about.” He laughed a bit, tugging on his hair. “You're my best friend and also like…probably the hottest guy I've ever seen. I'm never gonna repeat that, by the way, so don't ask.” He smiled. “Why would I go look for someone else when you're literally right here ready to shove your hand down my pants?” Shane blushed at himself, but, it was true.

A smile creeped onto Ilya's face, and Shane felt his own smile grow.

“Besides.” Shane leaned in a bit closer. “I thought you were marking your territory?”

Ilya surged forward and pressed his open mouth to Shane's neck in a motion that made Shane fall onto his back, Ilya on top of him. Shane's shocked laughter quickly got swallowed by his moans as Ilya nipped and sucked at his neck, teeth scraping and tongue dragging.

Shane fisted a hand into Ilya's curls, his back arching under the sensation. “Ilya. *Fuck*.” He breathed out, tugging encouragingly at Ilya's hair.

It wasn't long before Shane had them both flipped; Ilya's solid body hot beneath him as their hips dragged together and their tongues fought for space in each other's mouths.

Shane was so spent after his third orgasm of the evening that he didn't bother to properly clean himself up. He only managed to peel his damp, sticky boxer briefs off himself and toss them onto the floor next to Ilya's before tucking himself against the Russian, feeling warm and sated.

Shane knew the sensible thing to do would be to go home and into his own bed, considering they needed to be at the airport at 7 tomorrow morning. But he also knew he was far past doing what was sensible tonight, and he was far too comforted by the feeling of a large hand wrapped around his hip and warm breath tickling steadily over the back of his neck. He listened to Ilya's low, rhythmic breathing and allowed sleep to wash over him.

The flight to San Francisco was long. The game the following day somehow felt even longer. Ilya's hips were so spent, he was sure that they would give out on him and that his legs would simply fold up to his ears like a Ken doll.

San Francisco was probably the top contender for the cup going into the season. But even just two games in, Ilya had a feeling those predictions would soon be swinging in favor of Montreal.

They were an unstoppable beast. Try as they did, even the top team couldn't stave them off. They especially couldn't stop Shane. Ilya hadn't been able to keep his eyes off Shane for a second, which made the fact that they played on different lines a very good thing. He moved like a machine; calculated and perfect and twice as smart as whoever was in his way.

His face was always so determined and serious while he played. A perfect mask that never faltered or showed his hand. It made a little fire light in Ilya's chest to know that he knew what Shane's face looked like when he genuinely laughed. The way his eyes crinkled and his freckles bunched up. He also now knew what Shane looked like when he came, which was an otherworldly experience that was dangerous to relive in the middle of a professional hockey game. Though it was hard not to think about; the way his brown eyes glistened and his lips pouted and his jaw went slack. The little whimpering sounds he made between moans. Ilya was doomed.

The entire NHL was also doomed, because having Ilya and Shane together on a power play had everyone else around them watching like they were witnessing the second coming of Christ. Their chemistry was, of course, no surprise to Ilya. They'd had it since they were 14 years old, tearing around on the practice rink like they were the only two people in the world.

Though, Ilya also couldn't help but wonder if the sex would only work to make that chemistry better. He did happen to feel an undeniable amount of heat when he assisted Shane on a goal with a backhand pass. They knocked helmets after the puck hit the net, and the look that flashed in Shane's eyes had been one of pure hunger. Ilya had always called Shane a little brat, but he possibly needed to add little freak to the mix, because my God was Shane Hollander horny. It made Ilya want to weep tears of happiness.

He only wished that everyone could know exactly who Shane was a little freak for. Shane's valiant efforts to hide the mark on his neck by keeping his hood pulled up turned out to be not so fruitful. Several people had gaped at the mark, leaving Shane's cheeks a beautiful cherry red. Ilya very badly wanted to open his mouth and let his teammates match his teeth to the

bruised in bitemarks on Shane's perfect skin. He had to settle for the silent glances he and Shane shared; where Shane would press his fingers over the bruise and smile sheepishly at him.

Ilya wanted to crack his ribs open and trap Shane inside of him forever.

He was presently stalking down the hallway of the team hotel, the convenient store bag in his hand rustling with each step. The stick from his blue raspberry lollipop hung lazily between his lips as he watched the numbers on the doors counting down.

Something felt innately wrong about being in the same hotel as Shane and not sharing a room. The Montreal staff clearly did not understand the arrangement. Ilya did not intend on idling around his room alone when he could be bothering Shane, which was exactly why he was banging on Shane's hotel room door at 11pm with a bag full of candy.

“What are you doing? Is that a lollipop?” Shane said as the door swung open, his brows furrowed deeply. Ilya elbowed him out of the way to step inside.

Ilya leaned on the wall next to the small desk, pulling the lollipop from his mouth with a wet pop. “Yes. You want to try? Is good. Blue.”

“I can see that. Your whole mouth is blue, dude.”

Ilya shrugged. “I am trying to quit smoking. You know. Is um…oral fixation. I just learned this term. Anyway, I got you snickers bar.” He tossed the bag onto the desk. “I will leave it there for you to pretend you do not want for an hour and then eat it anyway.”

Shane crossed his arms. “Did you really come here just to annoy me?”

“Of course I did, pretty boy. What else would I do?” He said, words muffled by the candy in his mouth.

“I don't know. Go to sleep?”

“Ah. Boring.” Ilya waved a dismissive hand. “Besides. You did not even give me goodnight kiss.”

Shane looked up at him, clearly trying hard not to smile. Ilya never knew why Shane bothered with this, because he could see right through him. The way his defined jaw tensed up and his lips twitched and pulled at the corners made Ilya want to kiss him senseless.

“You fucking wish.” Shane lightly kicked at the toe of Ilya's shoe.

Ilya smirked to himself. Little brat. He slowly pulled the lollipop from his mouth and tossed it into the small trashcan at his side before grabbing Shane's jaw firmly in his hand. “*Da*. I do wish.” He pressed his thumb into Shane's cheek as he squeezed. “So what?”

Ilya's smirk spread when he saw how Shane was attempting to glare at him. “Ohh, *kotik.*" He drawled. “What will you do? Go run and tell your other boyfriend?”

Shane huffed. “My *other* boyfriend?”

“This is what I said.”

“So what? You've just decided you're my boyfriend now?” Shane kept his gaze pointedly at Ilya's.

“Well. I am a boy. And I am your friend.” He shrugged.

“You're a pain in my ass is what you are.” Shane grabbed onto Ilya's forearm in an attempt to pull his hand away, but Ilya only gripped his face tighter. He felt Shane swallow.

“Mm.” He leaned in closer. “This is not what you were saying when you grind on my dick.”

Ilya immediately felt the heat in Shane's cheeks from beneath his fingertips. “Was more like - *fuck Ilya. You're so good. You're so*-”

Shane reached out and clamped a hand over Ilya's mouth, pushing at him as his blush deepened. “Shut up or I will never kiss you again, Ilya Rozanov, I swear to god.”

Ilya grabbed Shane's wrist and pulled his hand back away from his mouth. “Ah. So you were planning on kissing me after all, hm?”

“You are seriously the most irritating person I've ever met.” Shane kept glaring, but was no longer trying to wrench free from Ilya's grip. He still had that perfect hue of blush beneath his freckles, and the soft light of the hotel room made his eyes shine the warmest shade of amber brown.

“And yet.” Ilya ran his thumb over Shane's bottom lip, slow and dragging, before he let go and leaned back against the wall, arms crossed and head cocked to the side as he offered Shane a lazy smirk.

Shane stepped forward and buried a hand in the top of Ilya's hair, the way he always did. It made something warm buzz through Ilya's whole body.

“Maybe I should call my other boyfriend and have him come kick you out.” Shane said, tugging at Ilya's hair playfully. The feeling made his stomach coil tight.

“Oh, *solnyshko*. We both know I would never actually share you with anyone.” The thought alone made Ilya feel like he could probably make someone explode with his mind, if need be. He knew Shane was not actually his boyfriend. Not yet. He was working on it, but knew he needed to approach it the way you would approach a wild animal. Shane was the type to startle easily.

“Now, may I say goodnight to you properly?” Ilya placed a hand on Shane's cheek, watching as his teasing expression softened.

“Okay.” Shane said quietly, eyes warm and fixed on Ilya's.

Ilya leaned in, pressing their lips together in a kiss that was much different than the heated and fervent ones they had exchanged a few days ago. He let his lips cover Shane's in a way that was tender and sure; his fingers lightly dancing down the side of Shane's cheek. It was exactly the way he wanted to kiss Shane. The way you kiss someone when you're in love.

Their lips pulled apart slowly, but they stayed close, lips and noses brushing. His breathing had slowed almost to a halt. He was allowing himself to live in this moment. To want. To hope. To imagine a future where he got to kiss Shane like this every single night; pressed against him and nestled in their bed, knowing that Shane was his forever. God help him, Shane Hollander had turned him into a hopeless romantic.

“Goodnight, Shane.” Ilya said, barely above a whisper, their lips brushing as he spoke. But Shane leaned back in to kiss him again, just as soft, a hand reaching to grasp Ilya by the wrist.

“Stay?” Shane asked quietly, and Ilya felt his heart swell.

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Freak4freak Hollanov, you will always be important to me 💘

Next up: meddling Hayden, misunderstandings, and the origins of Ilya's scars.

Thank you all for your lovely comments and for reading so far!!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The stretch of road games had left Shane feeling equal parts bone tired and pent up; and today's practice - which seemed to stretch into oblivion - only stoked the flames of his desire to do nothing but lay in his bed and make out with Ilya.

He found it somewhat amusing that his idea of a perfect night off had morphed from watching game highlights with a green smoothie in hand, to lazing around with his tongue halfway down his best friend's throat. But, looking at Ilya now, Shane completely understood how he had let this happen.

Shane tried not to stare as Ilya was standing in front of his stall, dressed in only his sweat-dampened base layer that clung to his form as if it were painted on his skin. He was unhurriedly discussing something with Mitka, pushing a hand through his hair, one foot up on the bench as he idly lunged and stretched his hips.

There was something so quietly commanding about Ilya's presence, and not just to Shane. He pulled the people around him into his orbit easily; whether you admired him or were annoyed by him, he was very hard to ignore. He was brazen without being loud, and smug in a way that accented his sharp wit. Shane was thoroughly convinced that the man was so magnetic that he could capture the attention of anyone.

It made his heart do complicated things to realize that he mostly focused on capturing Shane's attention.

As if on cue, Ilya turned his head and caught Shane's gaze. Shane felt his stomach flip, suddenly longing for Ilya's hands on him. Ilya's lips upturned into a small smile; his conversation with Mitka forgotten as he strided over to Shane, crowding him as he leaned against Shane's stall.

“You need something, captain?” He smirked, sweat dripping down the side of his neck. He reached his hand up to gently swipe the pad of his thumb across Shane's cheek bone, and Shane found himself chasing the touch, head turning slightly.

“Just um. You wanna come over later? After Hayden leaves? I know it'll be late, but.” Shane felt guilty, but he was already regretting inviting Hayden over to hang out. It had been awhile since they had hung out together without Ilya, and Shane could tell it was starting to bother him. He was itching to be alone with Ilya instead, but he wasn't going to bail on Hayden.

Ilya bit down slightly on his bottom lip as he smiled; a gesture that made heat spread low in Shane's stomach. “Could never say no to this, *solnyshko*.” He leaned further on the stall, eyes assessing Shane carefully. “Also, worked out that you have to spend your evening with stupid Pike. My friend from Russia is in town tonight for work, I am going to meet her for dinner. Svetlana, you remember.”

Shane nodded. Ilya's long time friend had come up in several conversations over their years together. Shane had always felt a pang of jealousy whenever Ilya brought her up. It was stupid and selfish; of course Ilya had other friends. But he still felt a wave of possessiveness wash over him. “That's awesome. I'm glad you guys will get to catch up.” He said, trying to mask the tightness in his voice.

Ilya's eyes lingered on Shane, a soft smile on his lips. He cut his eyes quickly to their surroundings before dragging his thumb over Shane's bottom lip. “Call me as soon as Pike leaves, okay?”

Shane could only nod, his mouth tingling with want. He could smell Ilya's sweat and feel his heat and wanted to wear him like his very own Russian weighted blanket. The air between them was so charged that Shane felt dizzy with it.

Ilya patted Shane's jaw with a warm hand. “See you tonight, *solnyshko*.” He said quietly.

It couldn't be soon enough.

“I'm meeting her parents this weekend. I'm kinda freaking out. She keeps telling me not to worry about it, but, like, how can I not?”

Hayden was speaking over the rim of his beer bottle, legs kicked up onto the ottoman as his gaze flicked between Shane and the TV screen.

“It'll be fine, Hayd. I'm sure they'll love you. You make Jackie happy.”

“Thanks, man.” Hayden sighed, picking at the damp label on his bottle. Shane became faintly aware of Hayden's eyes tracking him as he leaned forward to grab his drink. The sweatshirt he was wearing - Ilya's sweatshirt - was slightly too large on him, leaving a gap that exposed his collar bones. Shane felt the heat hit his cheeks when he remembered the bruising mark Ilya had left there a few days prior; a hand over Shane's mouth to muffle his sounds that were sure to carry through the thin hotel walls.

Hayden's eyes moved from Shane's collarbone to the fading mark on his neck - barely visible now - but Hayden had seen it at its worst. Shane had artfully dodged his questions about it, but now it seemed like more were incoming. He steeled himself.

“So what about you?” Hayden leaned back into the couch, turning fully to face Shane now.

“What about me?” Shane cast his eyes down, then at the TV, trying his best to look nonchalant.

“I tell you everything about me and Jackie. You gonna tell me who you're apparently having freak sex with?”

Shane sputtered. “I- what? I'm not-” he huffed out and awkward laugh, the heat creeping up his neck.

“Dude. Those aren't even just hickeys. They're fucking *bite marks*. Something is going down.” Hayden cocked an eyebrow. “Unless you're getting bitten by a ghost in your sleep?”

Shane scrubbed a hand over his face. “It's…I don't wanna…” He sighed, frustrated. “Can we just like, not talk about it? It's private, okay?”

“Private because you want to keep up your virgin Mary image, or private because it's Rozanov?”

Shane felt himself freeze, caught like an animal in a trap. His eyes darted to Hayden, who was looking at him expectantly. His vocal cords were apparently frozen as well, because he couldn't bring himself to formulate any sort of outward response.

“Shane. I saw him leaving your hotel room at 4 in the morning. Judging by the way he looks at you, I don't feel like that was just a best friend sleepover.”

Shane put his head in his hands. He knew it was a stupid idea to hook up with Ilya while they were on the road, but he couldn't stop himself. Shane, above everyone else, was drawn into Ilya's orbit like he was the sun himself. And after leaping over the boundary to put Ilya's dick in his mouth, he found himself becoming reckless and desperate in ways he didn't realize were possible for himself.

He realized now that they were past the point of pretending that this wasn't happening. “You can't say anything to anyone, Hayden.” Shane said into his hands miserably.

“I'm not going to.” Hayden heaved a sigh. “Look. I don't care if you're…*gay*…or whatever. I really don't. That part is cool with me. But Rozanoz? Shane. Come on.” The indignant tone of Hayden's voice when he spoke Ilya's name made Shane pick his head up.

“It's not…we're not…he's my friend, okay? And we hooked up a couple times. It's not a big deal.” Shane's leg was bouncing now, his teeth tearing apart the cuticle on his thumb.

“Yeah, I get that part. But why him? It's not a good idea, dude.” Hayden shook his head.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean…it's *Rozanov*.” He said his name like it was poison on his tongue. “Is he not, like, a certified manwhore? I feel like it's only a matter of time before he brings home a venereal disease. Or knocks some chick up. Then what?”

Shane scoffed. “It's not like that, Hayden. He isn't like that. Not anymore, anyway. And he's a grown adult. He can do whatever he wants. We're not in a relationship or anything.” The last part stung on its way out. He knew it wasn't how he truly felt.

The real truth was that if Ilya was sleeping with other people, Shane would be jealous and devastated and pathetic about it. But Ilya seemed so genuine about Shane, it was hard to picture him out there with other people, no matter how naive that seemed.

“Shane. I see the way you look at him, too. Something tells me it's not very casual to you.” Hayden crossed his arms. “Look. I'm just looking out for you. Because I feel like he's looking at you like you're a prize he wants to win. So once he's got it, then what? You've seen all the pictures. Dude had a different girl on his arm every week. You think he's just over that now?”

Shane ripped a piece of skin off his thumb so hard that it started to bleed. He pressed the spot to his tongue, trying to will the metallic tang to ground him.

“If you ask me, he's gonna get bored eventually and move on. I'm not trying to be mean. I just don't want you to get hurt by some stupid fuckboy. You deserve better than that.”

“He's not a stupid fuckboy, Hayden.” Shane tensed his jaw. “He's my best friend. I think I know him better than you do. I'm capable of looking out for myself. So can you just fucking drop it? Please?”

Hayden held his hands up in surrender. “Fine. I'll shut up.”

Shane shook his head, looking down. He would be lying if he said Hayden's words hadn't planted a seed of doubt deep in his gut. The images of beautiful women wrapped around a satisfied looking Ilya flashed in his brain like a slideshow from his nightmares. Ilya likes women. Ilya likes partying. Ilya likes sex. Shane is not a woman. Hates pretty much any approximation of partying. And what if the sex Shane can give him isn't enough?

It made something hot and ugly burn inside his chest, alongside the hot and ugly anger that was already smoldering from Hayden's comments about Ilya. Half of him wants to tell Hayden to get the fuck out if he wants to insult his best friend, and half of him wants to prod at Hayden's brain to get him to say everything that Shane might be too love drunk to see about Ilya.

Because that's the thing. Shane is afraid that what he's experiencing is love. Not the friendship kind. The kind that winds itself inside your chest and through your veins and around your bones until you can't remember who you were before it got there.

Shane pressed the sleeve of Ilya's hoodie to his nose and inhaled. He was scared of these feelings. Terrified, probably. And the only person who had ever really been good about pulling Shane out of his head was the very person he was currently hung up on.

Shane felt like the inside of his head was a listing ship; helplessly resigned to the waves and drifting, drifting, drifting. He took slow, measured breaths, and tried to focus his attention back on the TV.

“What? No, you have to- *no*. Can you just? What? Okay, okay. Fine. Just- wait there. I'll be right down.” Hayden stabbed the ‘end call’ button. “Jesus. I swear. I order from this place, like, once a week and their delivery people still can't figure it out. I'll be right back.”

“No.” Shane shot up. “No, I'll go grab it. Since my food isn't good enough for you, I guess it's the least I can do, right?” Shane forced a smile that he was sure didn't reach his eyes. This night was dragging on in the most awful, gut twisting way, and Hayden's insistence on ordering his own dinner didn't make it any better. He wished Hayden would just shut up and accept what Shane felt was a very sensible meal.

Instead, he slid his shoes on at the door to go retrieve whatever greasy monstrosity Hayden had decided to order.

“Make sure they didn't forget the sauce!” Hayden called to him as the door latched shut behind him. Shane let out a groan, but felt somewhat thankful to get up and stretch his legs. His energy was all over the place. He felt like his brain was going to vibrate out of his skull.

After collecting the ridiculously overstuffed bag from an incredibly confused delivery person, Shane tucked himself in a corner of the lobby to rifle through the bag's contents and ensure the sauce was indeed present. A familiar voice coming from the direction door made his head snap up.

Ilya, speaking in Russian, with an absolutely gorgeous woman hanging off his arm. Svetlana, he assumed. Her delicate looking hands were gripped around Ilya's bicep as she walked tucked close to him, eyes sparkling as she smiled at whatever he was saying to her. Ilya was carrying her bag in his other arm, looking down at her as he spoke.

Shane stayed frozen in place, watching the scene unfold. She was saying something in a suggestive tone now, leaning in close, a hand playing at the curls on the nape of his neck. Ilya seemed to consider for a moment, before cocking an eyebrow and responding in a similarly suggestive tone. The woman threw her head back with a laugh, her auburn curls bouncing. Ilya's arm then snaked its way behind her, his large hand on the small of her back as he guided her toward the elevator.

They stood close, faces pointed to each other. Whatever she was saying had Ilya smiling at her fondly. She put a hand on Ilya's stomach as she laughed. Shane felt his own stomach twist painfully. The last thing he heard before the elevator doors closed behind them was her high pitched squeal, followed by Ilya's bright laugh.

Shane was gripping the bag so hard that his fingers had started to tear into it. Everything about it felt so wrong. She was too close to him. Too familiar. And he was leaning back into her. Why was she even here? Ilya had said they were going to dinner. Why would he be bringing her back to his condo? The thought made nausea climb its way up his throat.

She's a friend. Just a friend. That's what Ilya said.

But Shane was a friend, too.

He hurried his way back upstairs, not even registering his own steps. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears and taste bile in his mouth. He couldn't make himself breathe normally.

When the door finally shut behind him, Hayden was immediately on his feet.

“Dude. What the hell? Are you okay? Shane…Shane, what the hell happened?”

He was vaguely aware that Hayden was approaching him. He thrust the bag into Hayden's chest and willed his legs to carry him to the couch, where he crumpled against the cushions.

“He was with her. Bringing her home. Fuck. *Fuck*.” He put his hands over his face.

“What? Who? What are you talking about?”

“Ilya!” Shane practically exploded. “He fucking- he said he was going out with an old friend for dinner and I just fucking saw them in the lobby. He was taking her upstairs. They looked…fuck.” He couldn't finish whatever thought that was. Bitter jealousy cut the words off in his throat.

Hayden stared awkwardly, like he was looking at a spooked animal.

“Do you…do you think they were just…?”

Hayden heaved a sigh. “I mean. Was she hot?”

“She looked like a fucking super model.” Shane said miserably.

“Well.” Hayden said plainly. Shane dropped his head into his hands.

“I'm such an idiot.” He mumbled. “I don't even know why I'm upset. I mean, it's not like we're…”

“He knew what he was doing.” Hayden cut in. “I mean, I'm not trying to shit on you or anything Shane, but you follow him around and cling to him like a puppy. You look at him like he hung the damn moon. He knows you have…feelings. Or whatever. And he's fucking leading you on to get his dick sucked. Or whatever it is that you guys are doing.” He held a hand up. “I don't wanna know. Point is, it doesn't matter if you guys never said you were exclusive. He treats you like he owns you. I see him doing it all the time. So he should man up and figure out what the fuck he wants and not drag you into his bullshit.”

Shane swallowed hard, looking up. “Do you really think that? That he's…treating me like he owns me?” He hated how small and pathetic he sounded.

“I mean, kinda. He talks to you like you're his little play thing. He flirts with you like crazy because he knows it'll rile you up enough to make you do something stupid.” Hayden shook his head.

Shane bit at his thumb again, feeling like the world was about to open up beneath his feet and swallow him whole. Ilya had said multiple times that he would never share Shane with

anyone. Maybe it was a joke. Maybe it wasn't. But if it wasn't, why would Ilya feel like Shane should share him?

Hayden was right about at least one thing. He had been stupid. Had done stupid things. He had gotten himself in way over his head, and now he was drowning in his own rash decisions.

They sat in uncomfortable silence, Shane's face burning and eyes stinging from tears that he refused to let fall.

Eventually, his phone started to ding.

ilya: Pike is still with you?

Shane stared at the screen, but made no move to answer the message.

ilya: is getting late. you need me to come kick him out??

ilya: …hello???

Shane scrubbed his hands over his face, trying to take a deep breath.

The sound of the phone as it started to vibrate across the table with Ilya's incoming call made him jump. He stared at the phone, then at Hayden, who gave him a pointed look. “I don't think you should…”

Shane tensed his jaw hard. “I'm not. I'm just gonna..” he gestured toward the balcony, then quickly stumbled his way outside. The cold night air hit him hard, crisp as it burned his lungs. His brain felt like radio static; like it was trying to tune into a thousand stations at once. He leaned his forehead into to the cool metal railing, pressing his fingernails into the palms of his hands.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when the sound of banging on the front door jolted him upright. He slid the balcony door open, just a crack, watching as Hayden looked through the peephole. Hayden shook his head, then pulled the door open with an annoyed flourish.

Ilya's voice broke the quiet right away. “Where is Shane?” He asked, brows furrowing. Shane stayed tucked behind the door, watching, unable to make himself move.

“Doesn't matter. Go back downstairs, dude.” Hayden crossed his arms.

Ilya cocked his head. “What the fuck?”

“Yeah. What the fuck. He doesn't want your girl's sloppy seconds. So go back to your place and leave him alone.”

Shane swallowed. Fuck. This was bad. This was going to be really bad. He should stop it. But his limbs felt like lead and his voice was buried somewhere beneath his ribs.

Ilya's face twisted into wild disbelief. “Pike. Have you lost your mind? What the fuck are you even saying?”

“He saw you with her, you know. So don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. He saw you and he doesn't want to fucking talk to you right now.” Hayden's voice grew louder.

Ilya had that look on his face that he got when he wasn't sure if he was translating something correctly in his head. “Saw me with who? With Svetlana?” He jerked a thumb toward the door.

“I guess? Whoever the fuck you brought back to your place. Look, Rozanov. I'm really not in the mood for this. We both know what you're doing. You've been leading Shane around like your little pet for months. You see how he looks at you. You knew it wasn't going to be just casual hook ups for him, and you did it anyway. Believe it or not, some people actually develop feelings for the people they fuck. So yeah. He's pretty upset right now.”

Ilya's face rested somewhere between disbelief and rage. “Well believe it or not, I can have a friend at my house without fucking them. Is that what you really thought was happening? What the fuck is going on? Where is Shane?”

“I told you, he doesn't wanna talk to you right now.” Hayden said tensely. “So go get your dick wet somewhere else.”

Ilya let out a short laugh in disbelief, his face darkening. “Pike. You should think very fucking carefully about what you are going to say next.”

Shane could feel his own hands begin to tremble.

“I fucking knew this was gonna happen from the start. I knew Shane should just stay the fuck away from you, the way you're always touching him and saying insane shit that makes him uncomfortable. And guess what? I'm not gonna just sit back and let it happen. So even if you weren't actually doing anything tonight, it's only a matter of time. I'm not just gonna stand here and let you hurt him.” Hayden was gesturing wildly, his tone shifting into something far less controlled.

But as soon as the last words left him, Ilya had a hand fisted in the front of Hayden's shirt as he shoved him roughly back against the wall, holding him there.

“You have no idea what the fuck you are talking about, Pike.” Ilya's words spat out like venom, his face inches from Hayden's. “*Hurt* him? *Me*? You have no idea the things I have done for him. I would burn cities to the ground before I let something happen to him. I would burn my whole fucking life down. He is everything to me.” Ilya pressed his forearm in a bar against Hayden's chest. Hayden was staring at him with wide eyes, unmoving. Shane opened the door fully and stepped inside, his breath quickening, but Ilya didn't seem to notice.

“I do not know what the fuck you think you are getting at. But you do not fucking know me.” Ilya's accent curved more heavily around his words now, his anger blazing. “And I do not need you to know me. I do not give a single fuck what you think of me. You are meaningless. But you will understand one fucking thing.” He pressed harder against Hayden, leaning closer, never breaking eye contact. “I would never, ever do anything to hurt him. Do you understand me? So do not ever believe that you are protecting him from me. And you are

very lucky that he cares about you, because is the only thing stopping me from breaking open your stupid, pathetic face." Ilya let go and stepped back. Hayden's eyes slowly cut to Shane.

Shane felt his chest heaving softly as he slowly turned his head to meet Ilya's eyes. The look on his face made Shane's stomach drop like an anchor. Ilya's eyes were so hurt and so tired; brimming with bitter tears.

"Shane." He said, his voice now settling. "You really thought this? That I was…" he trailed off, running a hand over his face as he tried to regain his composure.

"I tell you she is a friend, Shane. I tell you this."

"I…" Shane could hardly meet his eye. "You looked like you were…and I thought…" He sounded like an idiot, but the words wouldn't come out.

Ilya let out a soft scoff. "And so instead of talking to me about it, you sit here and talk with him like this about me? Let him believe I would ever hurt you?"

The pain in Ilya's voice made Shane's heart break clean in two. "Ilya-"

"Don't, Shane." Ilya shook his head and held up a hand. He sounded exhausted. "Just… don't."

Before Shane could say anything else, Ilya was gone. The sound of the door shutting behind him made Shane jump.

"*Fuck*." Shane whispered, crouching down. "Fuck, fuck."

It was bad. Worse than bad. Shane felt like his world was tunneling in; collapsing on itself to leave him under the rubble of his own stupidity. He had never, ever seen Ilya look at him that way. Not even when Shane tried to push him away in the locker room. The genuine look of hurt on his face would probably haunt Shane for his next thousand lifetimes.

"Shane…" Hayden's voice broke through the fog of dread clouding his mind.

"You should go." Shane said tightly, still crouched down.

"Shane. You're freaking out, man. You-"

"Please. Please just fucking go. I need to be alone right now. I can't-" He let out a breath of frustration. "Please."

Hayden stared at him for a few beats before exhaling slowly. "Alright. Okay. Fine. But call me if you need me, okay?"

Shane didn't respond. He just waited for the sound of the door closing to lay flat on the floor, putting his hands over his face. "What the fuck." He groaned. He wanted to scream.

He knew he had a habit of catastrophizing. His anxiety would push his head underwater until all he could think about was every possible worse case scenario. Pairing that with Hayden's

dramatic loathing for Ilya only served to create this beast that Shane wasn't sure he could fix.

He stared at the ceiling for what felt like quite a long time, Ilya's words looping in his head. *'You have no idea the things I have done for him.' 'I would burn my whole fucking life down.' 'He is everything to me.'*

It stung worse than getting cross checked and laid out on the ice. Even worse was knowing that he had just stood there and let Ilya defend himself against Hayden's words; let Hayden accuse Ilya of leading him on and using him, all because he was too scared to intervene.

Shane sat up, trying his hardest to gather some resolve buried somewhere deep. It was late now, but he would be damned if he let either of them sleep on this. With far more sureness than he felt, Shane made his way out of the door.

He was barely one foot out of the elevator when a figure leaning against the wall made him freeze where he stood.

Svetlana. Arms crossed loosely, eyes studying Shane carefully. She was so elegant; almost cat-like, slender and beautiful with an edge of intensity.

"Shane Hollander." She said, her gaze unwavering. Her accent was much softer than Ilya's as Shane's name left her lips.

"Um. Yeah. Hi." He took a few steps forward. "Svetlana?"

"Yes." She stood up straight, smoothing out her dress. "I have been waiting quite a long time, I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

Shane's brows furrowed. "You were…waiting? For me?"

"Yes. So listen carefully because I do not have much time and I hate repeating myself." She stepped closer, and Shane felt his veins turn to ice under her stare.

"He cares about you. Very much."

"I know that." He said quietly.

"Mm. I do not think you know it well enough if you truly believe he was bringing me home to fuck me."

Shane felt hot shame creep up his neck. Her stare was so intense that he wasn't sure he could keep looking at her. She let her words sit with him for a moment before she continued.

"He is very brave. Always has been, since he was a small boy. Everyone always called him fearless. But he's not. There is something he is very much afraid of. And that's not being good enough." She looked down, shaking her head. "Many things have happened in his life to make him feel like he is not good enough. But I think nothing scares him more than the thought of not being good enough for you."

Shane swallowed hard, trying to rid himself of the burning sensation in the back of his throat.

“What happened tonight, it made him feel like you think less of him. Like he is the sort of man who would do this to you. He is afraid you feel the same way your friend does.”

“He said that?” Shane's voice was barely above a whisper.

“He didn't need to. He is very bad at hiding what he is feeling. At least from me.” She offered a small smile. “When he returned to Russia after that incident with his father at the hockey camp, I had never seen him like that. And I was afraid he would never be whole again.” She looked off into the middle distance, laughing slightly. “All he would do is lock himself in his room and listen to his emo playlist on repeat. He would never tell me what was really going on. I knew it couldn't just be about the hockey. That there had to be something more.”

She met his eyes again. “And then, one day, I found out that you were the something more.”

Shane felt his heart wobble. “Found out how? What…what did he say?”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “I think that's not my story to tell. We will just say he needed some help, and then he wasn't able to hide from me any longer.”

Shane nodded solemnly. He had no idea what that meant, but he could tell the memory sat heavily on her.

“So. All of this to say: he cares about you very much. More than you know. More than I have ever seen him care about anything.” She put a hand on Shane's cheek. “My god, I can see what all his fuss is about.” She laughed, her eyes wandering his face. “*Krasivyy mal'chik*, he always calls you. It's very true.”

“What's that mean?” Shane felt the corner of his mouth tug up into a small smile.

“Beautiful boy.” She grinned. His cheeks flushed immediately.

“Go to him. I left his door unlocked. He is sitting on the balcony. Please stop him before he chain smokes the whole pack of cigarettes, hm?”

Shane took a deep breath, nodding. She leaned in to kiss his cheek. Her lips were pillowy soft and she smelled sweet, like vanilla. There was something singularly captivating about the woman, that was for sure.

“Thank you.” He cleared his throat, quickly rubbing at his eyes.

“No need to thank me. Just take care of him.” She strode toward the elevator. “And if you break his heart, I will make it my problem.” She flashed him a smile over her shoulder, and Shane knew she was not kidding.

The plume of smoke rising up and away from the dark figure behind the glass door made Shane's footsteps still. He took a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness; Ilya's features settling into focus under the dark blue of the night.

Unfortunately, sadness looked beautiful on him. Though Shane supposed everything probably looked beautiful on him. He was devastatingly handsome, in a way that stopped Shane's breath in his lungs.

Shane slowly opened the balcony door, watching as Ilya barely reacted. He only made a slight movement to blow his smoke away from Shane as he exhaled it slowly.

“Thought you were trying to quit.” Shane leaned against the railing opposite him.

Ilya only hummed out a noncomital sound, flicking his ashes into an empty cup. He took one last, long drag before stubbing it out; leaning over the railing to blow the smoke away.

“Ilya…” Shane started, but the rest only came out as an exasperated sigh.

Ilya jerked his head toward the door, motioning Shane to follow him inside. Ilya sunk down heavily on the couch, but Shane was crawling out of his skin. He couldn't make himself be still. He paced the floor instead.

Ilya brought his thumb and index finger up to pinch the bridge of his nose, taking a deep breath. “I need you to tell me what is going on, Shane.”

The use of his name when he knew it would usually be *solnyshko* made Shane's heart drop. Ilya was angry at him, though he knew he would never admit it.

“It was stupid.” Shane shook his head. “I saw you with her, and I got jealous, and it was stupid.”

Ilya ran a hand through his hair, sighing. “Why would you assume I was going to fuck her?”

Shane put his head in his hands. “I don't know. Just…I saw you in the lobby and she was touching you and laughing and you were smiling at her. And you said you were going to dinner but then you were bringing her home and I just…”

“But I told you she is my friend. Only a friend.” Ilya's jaw tensed.

“I know that. But…I'm your friend, too. And. Well.” He bit the inside of his cheek. “You know.”

Ilya lifted his head then to look at him. “Shane.” He sighed. “Come here.” His voice was tired but firm.

Shane bit down on the inside of his lip, then swallowed hard, eyes avoiding Ilya. He felt shame deep in his gut, harsh and unyielding.

“*Solnyshko*. Please.” He held out a hand, and Shane felt that he had never done anything to deserve Ilya Rozanov. Shane took a deep breath, then sat down close enough to Ilya that their

knees touched. He placed his hand in Ilya's, and Ilya squeezed it tight.

“You are more than just friend to me. Okay? You mean everything to me.”

Shane looked down, nodding.

“I wish…” Ilya sighed heavily. “I wish I could make you see that I would not do something like this.” He looked down, and Shane felt the guilt wipe him clean off his feet. “I know what I have done in the past. But is…is different with you.” He cast his eyes down and swallowed hard.

“Whole world can think what they want about me, I do not give a fuck. But you, Shane…it hurt to hear Pike say those things and you just stand there. Like you believe them, too.” Ilya looked away, casting his eyes down. “Do you?”

Shane felt his heart clench painfully. He took Ilya's face in both his hands, forcing their eyes to meet again.“I don't. I don't think those things. I'm sorry that this even happened. I was being an idiot and I got too deep in my own head and I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. You've literally never been anything but good to me, I should have- fuck. I should have never let Hayden say those things to you.”

Shane felt his own tears hot on his cheeks as he searched Ilya's eyes. The deep sadness in them made him feel like his insides were slowly being torn to shreds.

“God, I'm the worst fucking friend. Please don't hate me, Ilya.” He sniffled, hating the way his voice trembled.

Ilya leaned in and kissed a tear where it sat on Shane's cheek. “You know I could never hate you.” He spoke with his lips still against Shane's skin. Shane curled his fingers into Ilya's hair.

“And if only you spoke Russian, you would know that whole time you saw us, we were talking about you.” Ilya's lips were so warm where they brushed against Shane's skin as he spoke.

The thought simultaneously eased his fears and twisted the knife deeper into his gut. “You were?”

Ilya hummed, nuzzling his nose gently against Shane's cheek.

“Ilya. I really didn't mean for any of this to happen, okay? Please promise you don't hate me.” Shane's pleas came out almost as a whine as he tugged softly at Ilya's hair, desperate to feel him everywhere.

Ilya hooked his pinky around Shane's. “I promise.”

“You're perfect.” Shane turned to bury his face into Ilya's neck, breathing deeply.

“Ah. If only.” Ilya ran his fingers through the back of Shane's hair.

“No. To me, you're perfect.” And he meant it. He nuzzled into Ilya's neck, savoring his warmth.

“Mm. You know there is nothing I would not do for you?” His voice was low and deep and Shane wanted to climb inside of him and never leave.

He pressed a kiss to Ilya's neck, then picked up Ilya's hand and kissed his palm.

When he pulled Ilya's hand back, he stilled a bit. The long, jagged scar stared back at him; the one that had been sitting at the back of his mind for months. Shane traced a fingertip over it. “What happened?” He whispered, his eyes trained on his own finger as it continued to gently caress the mark.

For a few moments, the only sound that filled the room was their breathing. Ilya's eyes fixed on where Shane was touching his hand as he began to speak.

“The day you were drafted, I saw article online. I read your name over and over because it felt so good to see it. Like a reminder that you were real, and you were okay, and I was so proud.”

Shane felt Ilya's other hand curl into the hem of his shirt, as if he were anchoring himself.

“But I was also sad. I felt stuck. I wanted to be there with you. Where I was supposed to be. KHL draft had not happened yet. I did not want to be stuck there, I did not want to be stuck under my father. So I made decision. I found American agent and started talking with her in secret. I was trying to get my way into NHL and out of Russia before anyone could find out.”

Shane closed his fingers around Ilya's, looking up to search his face. He was trying to picture 18 year old Ilya, doing all of this alone. Looking for a way out. His chest began to feel heavy.

“But.” Ilya let out a small, humorless laugh. “My brother saw. On my computer. He saw emails with agent and he saw article of your draft saved. I probably read this article every single day.” Ilya gave a sad shake of his head, looking away.

“He told my father. I did not know my brother even saw, until my father confronted me. I come home one night and he just…” He took a deep breath. “He was very angry. Maybe more angry than I have ever seen. He tells me that he would have me put in jail before he would allow me to leave. He says he would make up story to his police friends and have me arrested, because this would be less embarrassing to our family than to let me go back there. To you.” Ilya swallowed hard.

“He knew I wanted to be back there with you. The article. And they found…fuck.” He pressed his fingers into his eyes. “Letter that I wrote to you, that I was going to ask my agent to give you.”

Shane felt his stomach flip uncomfortably. He squeezed at Ilya's fingers.

“My father told me it was better to be in jail than to act how I was acting. Soft. Obsessing over some boy. He hit me, of course. And I took it. But then…mm.” Ilya's whole body

tensed.

“Then he told me that if I ever try anything like this again, he has connections. In Canada. He dared to speak your name and say things about you I will never fucking repeat.” A tear slid slowly from the corner of Ilya's eye.

“I fucking lost it. I slammed him into wall. I could see in his face, he realized. I am bigger than him now. Stronger. He was afraid. We were in kitchen, and there was almost empty vodka bottle next to him. Before I realize, he grabbed it. Broke it against counter and shoved it at me, probably to make me back up. But I was not thinking. I was so angry I could barely even see. I grabbed bottle with my hand and shoved it back. I did not even feel at first.”

Ilya looked down at his hand where Shane was holding it. Shane felt the nausea rising in his stomach. He thought about what Svetlana said. *He is very brave. Fearless.*

“There was so much blood. I could not feel my hand. Eventually I let go. My father did not follow. I had to call Svetlana to take me to hospital.” Ilya flexed his hand, looking at the scar. “But. I made it very clear to my father that he was not to ever threaten you again, not to even speak of you. I would take fucking glass shard to my neck before I let anyone speak of you this way.”

The weight of Ilya's words forced the air from his lungs. He understood now what Ilya meant when he told Hayden that he had no idea the things he had done for Shane. Ilya's father had hit him so many times, had conspired to control his whole life, and yet Ilya never fought back until it came down to defending Shane.

Shane's chest burned as he climbed into Ilya's lap, taking his tear soaked face into his hands. He pressed their mouths together, holding Ilya's face tight as he kissed him desperately.

It was a messy slide of lips and tongues, wetness covering their faces from spit and tears. Shane grasped onto Ilya like his life depended on it. And maybe it did. He realized that he could never go back to living his life without Ilya in it. His perfect, beautiful Ilya. He wasn't sure anymore if he was crying or moaning into Ilya's mouth, but it didn't matter. Ilya swallowed up every sound in earnest, hands gripped firmly to Shane's waist, holding them together.

When they broke apart to breathe, foreheads rested together, Ilya's hand ran its way down Shane's neck in a motion that made his whole body shiver.

“Is only you, *solnyshko*.” Ilya moved to whisper into his ear. “Has always only been you.”

Chapter End Notes

1. to everyone saying no more angst IM SORRY I can't help it 😭 but they can't stay away from each other they are IN LOVE don't worry

2. I am a good friend Hayden Pike believer I swear, I'm sorry he went off the rails but he was scared of his friend getting dickmatized ig idk I promise he will redeem himself

3. Svetlana is a queen in every universe

4. emo Ilya is so real to me you can't convince me otherwise

thank you all so much for your comments and kudos and reading so far!

next up, the boys kick it up a notch 👀🔥
and Shane stands by his man 👋

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two things could be true at once. Ilya was undoubtedly hurt by the events of the night; left feeling like his soul had been bruised and scraped raw by the mere accusation that he would ever mistreat Shane. Made even worse, of course, by the fact that Shane had stood by silently as his friend attempted to rip his character to shreds. But he also undoubtedly could not stay angry with Shane.

It truly only took one look from those glassy doe eyes to do him in. He knew Shane was sorry. He could see the pain twisted in his face and hear the desperation in his voice. There was no need for Ilya to drag it out and make Shane spend the whole night begging for forgiveness. In truth, Shane had his forgiveness before he had even asked for it.

The moment Shane stepped through the door looking like he was about to claw his way out of his own skin, Ilya knew that Shane was ashamed about what happened. Ilya couldn't bear to let him believe for one second that he wouldn't be forgiven.

So now Shane was perched in his lap, wrapped up against him like he couldn't get close enough. Ilya wouldn't have it any other way.

Well, maybe except for the fact that he knew he probably smelled and tasted like an ashtray, which he certainly did not want for Shane. But Shane hardly seemed to mind, considering he was currently and quite literally sucking on Ilya's tongue.

Ilya gladly held his mouth open, humming happily every time Shane moaned around his tongue. Shane eventually pulled back again, panting and grasping at Ilya's hair. He had spit running from his bottom lip and down his chin and his pupils were swallowing the color in his eyes. He looked completely wrecked already. “Tell me again.” Shane panted against Ilya's mouth.

Ilya leaned back a bit, using his thumb to swipe the drool off Shane's chin. “Tell you what?” He said in a low voice, prodding his thumb at the seam of Shane's lips. Shane immediately opened his mouth, then closed his lips around Ilya's thumb, eyes slowly dragging up towards his. “That you are the only one I want?”

Shane hummed around Ilya's thumb, sucking on it slowly.

“You know you are. You are so good for me, *kotik*. How could I ever want anything else?”

Shane closed his eyes, moaning quietly. And god, it was so true. Shane was so hot, so perfect, so eager. He wanted every part of Shane in every universe and every lifetime. And doing this with him felt like unlocking this whole new version of Shane that allowed himself to let go and come completely undone.

They had only done this a few times now, but Ilya could see immediately the way Shane melted under him, pliant and eager. He wanted Ilya to take control; he trusted him with it. And it was perfect. Far beyond the thrill and pleasure of sex itself. It felt like they were contoured together, body and soul.

It was, of course, also mind-numbingly hot. Whatever hurt Ilya had felt before from his public shaming, followed by tearing open his wounds to tell Shane about a particularly painful night in his life, was being gladly swallowed by the way Shane made his whole body ignite.

“Do you like being good for me?” Ilya purred as he slowly pulled his thumb from between Shane's lips.

“Yes.” Shane nearly shivered, and Ilya couldn't help but to bite him. He sunk his teeth into Shane's plump, perfect lower lip. Shane gasped softly, fingers digging into the back of Ilya's neck as he bit down harder. After Ilya pulled back, he pressed his lips softly against Shane's, fingers slipping through the back of his silky hair.

“Ilya..” Shane said against his mouth, his voice coming out quiet and breathy.

“Yes, *solnyshko*?” Ilya sat back a bit, grasping Shane by the jaw to look at him properly. He was met with flushed cheeks and starry eyes that made the base of his spine tingle.

“I want..” Shane breathed out, his wet lips parted.

Ilya gently squeezed at his jaw. “Tell me.”

“I want you to fuck me.” His blush seemed to deepen, but he didn't look away. “Please.”

Ilya felt the pleasant tingling sensation spread further up his spine. They hadn't gone this far yet. He had wanted to, very badly, but didn't want to pressure Shane into anything he wasn't ready for. Now, Shane was looking at him like he was starving.

“You want?” Ilya pressed his hardness up against Shane's ass where he was sat on his lap, brushing their lips together as he spoke. “You are sure?”

Shane exhaled, grinding down against him. “Fuck. Yes. Please, Ilya.”

That was all the confirmation he needed. He hauled Shane up with him, hands under his thighs. Shane was no small man, but Ilya loved that he was strong enough to do this. Shane locked his legs around Ilya's waist and snaked his arms around his neck, pressing open mouthed kisses along his jaw as Ilya carried him to the bedroom.

He laid Shane onto the bed before making quick work of stripping away all his clothes, eyes trained on Shane as he did the same. Ilya crawled on top of him, hands roaming over his chest and stomach. His body was so smooth and hard; it made saliva start to pool in his mouth.

“*Krasivyy*.” He whispered, leaning down to press a kiss to Shane's lips. He moved to lick slowly down the column of Shane's throat; tongue tracing its way across one collar bone. He

wanted to take his time. To worship and savor Shane as he was meant to be.

By the time he kissed and licked his way down to Shane's hips, he was a squirming mess beneath him. “Relax, *solnyshko*.” He said, just before he began to suck a bruise into the flesh over his hip bone. He used a hand to hold Shane's other hip down, pinning him to the bed as he bucked up beneath him.

“Fuck. God, Ilya, please.” Shane whined. Ilya picked his head up to look at where Shane was hard and leaking steadily against his stomach. He nearly groaned at the sight.

Ilya lapped up the liquid at the tip before pressing open mouthed kisses down the length, savoring the shuddering moans that Shane let out above him. He looked up at Shane, keeping his eyes locked on him as he let a mouthful of saliva drip slowly down onto him. Shane's breath hitched when Ilya began to stroke him; his hand gliding smoothly up and down over the spit slick skin.

“Mm. You are perfect, you know this?” He nipped softly at the bruise he'd left over Shane's hip. Shane whimpered, back arching into the touch.

Ilya crawled down further, folding Shane's legs up as he went. He let a finger softly tease at Shane's rim, circling it slowly. “You ever touch yourself here?”

Shane shuddered. “Yes.” He breathed out.

Ilya hummed “And what do you think about while you do it?” He leaned down, pressing his tongue firmly against the muscle, dragging it slowly.

“Oh my *god*.” Shane moaned, a hand fisting it's way into Ilya's hair. Ilya licked at him a few more times before backing away.

“This is not answer, solnyshko. What do you think about when you touch yourself?” He let the tip of his tongue tease at him ever so slightly.

Shane's breath hitched. “You.” A breathy moan escaped. “*Fuck*. Ilya, I think about you. This. Please.”

Ilya smiled, his tongue moving languidly against him until the muscle yielded enough for him to push it inside. Shane tugged hard on Ilya's hair, shoving his mouth closer. Ilya began to move more roughly then, knowing that the stubble on his jaw was scratching against the soft skin of Shane's ass as he worked. Shane pressed into Ilya further, still pushing his head as well, seeming to chase the sensation.

The way Shane was moaning and whining softly as he writhed against his face and tongue was making Ilya feel drunk.

He was achingly hard and every nerve in his body was on fire. He needed to take Shane apart like he needed air in his lungs.

He reached over to the nightstand quickly, grabbing lube and a condom. He worked the lube over his fingers, warming it up before pressing a slick finger slowly in, watching the way

Shane arched into it, his eyes falling shut.

It wasn't long before he was able to work in three fingers, Shane panting and squirming beneath him as he held his legs up. Ilya pulled his fingers out, and felt the heat grow impossibly in his stomach when Shane whined at the sensation.

He moved up, gently kissing him, letting their noses brush. “You are sure?” He breathed out, his own breath quickening as his heart thundered in his ears.

“Yes. I'm sure. Please, Ilya.” Shane said against his mouth. Ilya nodded, giving him another quick kiss before he sat up and rolled the condom on. The effort was hurried and uncoordinated.

He felt his own breath hitching as he lined himself up, leaning down over Shane, one hand cradling his face. He kept his eyes focused on Shane as he slowly pushed himself in.

Shane clawed at the sheets, gasping softly. Ilya felt like his soul was being snatched out of his body.

“Fuck, *kotik*, you're so tight.” He exhaled, slowly inching into him. He was so hot and tight that Ilya felt the edges of his vision go blurry.

When he bottomed out, hips flush to Shane, he stayed there for a moment. They breathed into each other's mouths, lips barely touching. “Is okay?” Ilya whispered.

Shane nodded, a hand grasping into Ilya's hair. Ilya slowly dragged out and back in, his moans long and drawn out. He didn't think he had ever moaned this loudly during sex, and they had barely even started. The sensation was almost too much, paired with Shane's beautiful face and the toe curling sounds he was making, Ilya knew for certain he could never feel like this with anyone else.

His pace picked up, a steady rhythm as he mouthed at Shane's neck. “You're so good, *solnyshko*. Fuck.” He panted, and Shane arched up beautifully beneath him. He gasped when Shane turned, pressing his open mouth to the side of Ilya's neck, teeth and lips working hard to suck a bruise into the skin as he tugged at Ilya's curls. He murmured out a string of curses in Russian that would likely be incoherent even to a native speaker.

Ilya eventually rolled Shane over, grabbing at his hips to pull his ass up into the air. He pressed back into Shane, smoothing a hand over the expanse of his back. “You are still okay?”

Shane answered by way of pushing back into him with a moan. Ilya felt like he was about to see god.

He began to snap his hips relentlessly, watching as Shane bunched the sheets up in his hands. He was making breathy, punched out noises with every thrust, the side of his face pressed to the mattress. The sounds that filled the room were obscene; the wet slide, the slap of skin, their coordinated grunting and whining, the bed creaking and groaning beneath them.

Ilya leaned into Shane, driving deeper, grinding into him with every thrust. “So good for me, *fuck*. You are my good boy, yes?” He panted, jaw slack.

Shane whined out a moan, pushing back to meet his thrusts in a way that made Ilya feel feral. He could feel Shane's thighs begin to tremble, his skin impossibly hot beneath Ilya's hands.

“Oh my god-” was the last thing Ilya heard before Shane was clenching around him as he came untouched, stuttering out moans into the fabric of the sheets.

Ilya's vision whited out. He came hard, groaning through it as he dug his fingers bruisingly into Shane's hips, completely lost and drunk in the feeling.

His chest was heaving and covered in sweat as he pulled Shane to roll them both onto their sides, clinging to him tight.

The look on Shane's face was one of pure bliss. His eyes were shut and his lips were parted and Ilya truly felt like he may have actually just died coming inside of Shane Hollander, and this was his own personal heaven.

Ilya kissed along Shane's arm, up to his shoulder and to the side of his neck.

“Ilya.” Shane said, his voice floaty and feather light. “That was so fucking hot.”

Ilya couldn't help but laugh softly, kissing Shane's jaw as he hummed in agreement. Fucking hot was understatement, he thought. It was like more like a fucking revelation.

The room was dimly lit only by the soft amber glow of the bedside lamp when Shane emerged from the bathroom to find Ilya smoothing over the fresh set of sheets.

As soon as Ilya flopped down onto the bed, Shane was crawling to him. He laid half on top of him, head tucked against Ilya's warm, firm chest. He hummed softly when he felt a large hand start to trail its way softly up and down his lower back.

Shane realized he hadn't known the meaning of being full until Ilya Rozanov was stuffed inside of him to the hilt. He hadn't known that he was capable of coming without his dick being touched. He hadn't known how badly he needed it. But now he knew. Now he wasn't sure how he was ever supposed to stop himself from jumping Ilya's bones every time they were together.

Shane wasn't sure how the hell he had gotten so lucky. What were the odds that he would become best friends with someone who turned out to be bisexual, mind meltingly hot, incredible at sex, and wanted Shane just as badly as he wanted him? It felt almost like they were made specifically for each other.

He was also lucky that Ilya had essentially forgiven him in an instant, because he wasn't sure he deserved that at all. The thought made guilt tug at his stomach.

Shane pressed a few kisses to Ilya's chest, letting his lips linger over the skin. “Why are you so good to me?”

Ilya hummed, his hand reaching down to give him a few light pats on the ass. “You are my weakness, *solnyshko*. You should know this.”

Shane smiled at that, eyes shut as he pressed his cheek to Ilya's pec.

“But I must warn you now. You are only person I am soft for. This is not over between me and Pike. I forgive you because you are special to me. In here.” He grabbed onto one of Shane's hands and pressed it over his heart. Shane felt his own heart flutter.

“But this does not mean I am over it. Not with him. I will make sure he knows this.”

And god, this really should have made Shane uneasy. It should have made him beg Ilya to leave it. But something about the dark edge to his voice made fire lick at Shane's belly. It was outrageously hot to him that Ilya was so sweet for him and no one else.

Shane nodded in response, fingers gently caressing the skin under his palm where it was still pressed over Ilya's heart.

“I'm going to talk with him, too. I want you to know that. Tonight was…I panicked, I think. But I'm not going to let Hayden think any of the things he said were right or okay. I don't want you to think that I wouldn't defend you against that. You deserve better and I'll make sure Hayden knows it.”

Ilya ran a hand up his back. “I know you did not mean for this to happen, Shane. Do not be upset at yourself anymore.”

Shane nuzzled into his chest, then pushed one leg up to hook around Ilya, wanting to get closer. He always needed to be closer. He had to bite down on his own bottom lip to stifle any embarrassing noises when Ilya's hand started to knead gently at his ass. He was so far gone for this man.

“Can I ask you something?” He tipped his chin up slightly to look at Ilya as he spoke.

“Anything, my love.”

Well. That made his heart somersault.

“When did you know that you…wanted this? With me?” He traced a finger down the plane of Ilya's stomach. Shane wondered if Ilya had been as struck as he was on that day back in the locker room when they first saw each other again. That moment had ignited an inferno in Shane that had been blazing ever since.

A small smile spread on Ilya's lips. “Oh, *solnyshko*. You were so unaware, weren't you?”

Shane felt his brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

“Our last year at camp, you remember I tell you that between that summer and summer before I realized I was bisexual, yes?” Ilya turned a bit to look at him better.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Well. Pretty much as soon as I saw you that summer, I knew. First day back, when we went up to our room to put my bags away. I looked at you, and I knew.”

Shane sat up. “Wait…what? Really?”

“Really.” Ilya laughed softly, running a knuckle over Shane's cheek. “I had biggest crush on you. God. I was so afraid you would realize.”

Shane felt himself blush deeply. “You had a crush on me. When we were 16.” He said, less as a question and more to try and wrap his mind around it.

“Yup.” Ilya said, popping his mouth on the ‘p’. “More than crush, really. I was…very gone for you.” Ilya moved a hand to brush his fingers through Shane's hair.

“You were?” Shane felt like he was gaping, but he truly had no idea.

“You seem so surprised.” He smiled. “16 year old Shane was beautiful to 16 year old Ilya, just like you are beautiful to me now. So yes. I was lovesick, horny teenager with massive crush on my best friend. Was very difficult, but I managed.”

Shane felt giddy over this. He felt a weird sense of pride and possessiveness; like he had unknowingly planted a flag in Ilya before all of those women had ever gotten to him.

“You're insane. I was such a dork.” Shane scrunched up his face.

Ilya let out a loud laugh. “*Solnyshko*, you still are a dork.”

Shane scoffed, pinching him hard on the arm. “Fuck you.”

“No, I love this about you. Is…what is word? Very charming. Is good.” He grinned, leaning in to kiss the corner of Shane's mouth.

“No one else ever has given me the feelings you give me, Shane.” Ilya's tone suddenly shifted into something more intimate and serious.

Shane felt himself swallow, eyes flicking up to meet Ilya's. His heart was kicking against his ribcage, a steady *thud thud thud* that felt like it was shaking his whole body. “Same.” He said quietly.

“I meant what I said. Was true when we were 16 and is true now. It is only you. You are all I want.”

Shane felt like his chest was going to burst. He pressed his face into Ilya's neck, wrapping himself around the other man as tightly as he could. “You have me.” He said, nuzzling his cheek against Ilya's shoulder.

And how could Ilya not be the one he gave himself to? He was so careful with Shane; patient and sweet and attentive. But he was also obnoxious, bold, funny, and sort of insane. He loved to push Shane's buttons until he wanted to smother him. He loved to make Shane feel like he was the single most special thing on this planet. He had never, ever met anyone else like Ilya in his life. He knew he never would. He knew he didn't need to. His Ilya was right here.

Ilya kissed the top of his head, and Shane realized that this is what he wanted for the rest of his life.

Shane had spent the pre-dawn hours turning the words over and over again in his head. He needed to make Hayden understand. He was going to make Hayden understand.

He had also spent this time wondering how he was going to be able to skate normally after getting fucked for the first time the previous night, and then fucked for the second time yesterday afternoon. Or how he was going to be able to behave normally around Ilya at practice today when his fingerprints were bruised into Shane's hips. When Shane's mouth-shaped bruise was on Ilya's neck. When Shane had what felt like rug burn on his ass from Ilya's stubble. When Shane swore he could still feel Ilya buried inside of him with every step he took. Every single one of those things was a reminder, and those reminders got him feeling hot all over again.

He tried to shake off all of those thoughts as he dropped his bag in the locker room, taking a steadying breath when he realized he could already hear someone clattering around in the team gym. Shane had asked Hayden to meet him here early for a workout, hoping that they could at least burn off their aggression if things got ugly.

Shane took a few deep breaths before he pushed the door open. Hayden immediately popped up from the bench, pulling an ear bud out. “Hey, man.” He quickly closed the gap, putting a hand placatingly on Shane's shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

Shane inhaled sharply. “Hayden. I made a mistake.”

Hayden's brows furrowed as he searched Shane's face. “What mistake? Shane, please don't tell me you went and fucked him anyway.”

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose, searching for his words. This was already starting badly. “I made a mistake by even thinking that Ilya was fucking someone else. And I made an even bigger mistake by letting you say that shit about him.”

Hayden's demeanor immediately turned indignant. “You cannot be serious.”

“I'm very fucking serious, Hayden. Look. I know I freaked out. That was stupid of me. But I need you to understand that he deserved none of what you said about him. He has literally never been anything but good to me. Ever. He would never hurt me. He cares about me. He's serious about me. About us.”

Shane could feel his cheeks heat slightly. He pictured Ilya's soft eyes and his caring hands and the way his lips always lingered over Shane's. It filled him with a surge of possessiveness. An overwhelming need to protect.

Hayden shook his head. “Shane. With guys like Rozanov, there is no ‘serious' and there is no ‘us’. He's a playboy. He-”

“You don't even fucking know him, Hayden!” Shane saw red. “I mean Jesus Christ! What, you saw tabloids and internet gossip about him and you think you just get to decide you know him better than I do?”

Shane clenched his fists at his side. “I don't give a shit how many women he fucked in Russia.” Well, that part was probably a lie. It made jealousy burn in his chest with the power of a small sun, but he couldn't really fault Ilya for that.

“None of that means he's a bad person. He's the best fucking person I've ever met. He treats me so good, sometimes I'm not even sure what I did to deserve it. I'm not gonna let you talk shit about him ever again, and I just need you to know that. So either start listening to what I'm telling you, or keep your opinions to yourself. He's not going anywhere, and I don't want him to. Get used to it.”

Shand clenched his jaw, walking over to the treadmill. He could see through the mirrored walls that Hayden was shaking his head again. He decided to ignore him. Maybe he would get the fucking hint that there was no further conversation to be had about this.

He ran on the treadmill until his chest heaved and his thighs burned and his anger had mostly quelled. He probably shouldn't have run so hard before morning skate, but he needed to burn through his thoughts if was going to be any semblance of normal out there.

As he was methodically lacing up one skate, Shane could hear someone else shuffling around the locker room. He had assumed it must be Hayden, still pointedly avoiding him, until Ilya was suddenly kneeling between his legs, lacing up Shane's other skate.

Shane was glad that Ilya was temporarily distracted by his concentration on the laces, because he was embarrassed by his own uncontrollable grin. “Morning.” He laughed a bit, and Ilya looked up smirking when he saw Shane's smile.

Ilya perched his chin on Shane's knee, looking up at him with soft eyes through dark blonde lashes. His curls were growing shaggy, falling around his face and over the tops of his ears. Shane could never resist those damn curls. He petted the top of Ilya's head. “You kinda look like a puppy right now.”

Ilya batted his lashes at him, still sporting a lazy smirk. Shane scratched behind Ilya's ear. “Go get your skates on, puppy.”

Ilya raised his eyebrows suggestively, then stuck his tongue out and began to pant, positioning himself now with his panting mouth hanging directly over Shane's crotch. Shane hated himself for how badly he wanted to pull his own pants down in this moment, so he just punched Ilya on the arm instead.

“Pervert." He murmured. Ilya cocked an eyebrow, standing up before turning slightly to point to the rather intense hickey on his neck. Shane blushed at the sight.

“I am pervert, you are freak.” He reached down to pinch Shane's cheek before rucking his shirt off. Shane's eyes widened slightly at the sight of raised, red nail marks raked down the back sides of his rib cage. Ilya took notice to the gaze, shrugging. “You mark your territory, *kotik*. Do you not remember?”

And oh, Shane remembered. He remembered a little too well to be thinking about it in this moment without it becoming dangerous. The sound of a scoff from across the room broke his fantasy.

Hayden was shaking his head, muttering something under his breath. Shane felt himself grimace when Ilya's head snapped up.

Ilya's long legs carried him to Hayden in a few strides. He caged Hayden in with his arms where he stood by his stall.

“You have something else to say, Pike? Fucking say it.”

Shane saw something unrecognizable flash in Hayden's eyes. “Are you even gay, or are you just fucking Shane because you, like, get off on the idea that seducing him is like winning a game?”

Ilya *laughed*. And not in a humored way.
“Did you actually just say that?”

Shane was across the room before he even felt his legs carry him there. Ilya's whole body was tensed when Shane got between the two of them, pressing his palm against Ilya's chest to make him back up.

“Ilya, go get fucking changed. Now.” He turned back to Hayden. “And I thought I told you to fucking drop it, Hayden. Why do you never know when to shut the fuck up? I hope you know I'm calling Jackie about this later, because someone needs to talk some fucking sense into you and clearly it can't be me. You are unbelievable.”

Hayden opened his mouth to respond, but Shane held a hand up. “You wanna be a good friend to me? Accept the fact that Ilya is good for me. Accept the fact that he fucks me because I want him to fuck me. Is that what you need to hear?”

“Accept fact that bisexual people exist.” Ilya chimed in from across the room. “I can like pussy and dick. Is not a myth. Just not something I have advertised since at home I would end up being killed in prison. But please, Pike. Keep being upset over your friend getting laid. Obviously very important issue.”

Hayden seemed to still then. His eyes bounced from Shane to Ilya, then to the floor. Shane felt a bit sobered himself by the reminder of what Ilya's reality truly was.

“Look. Shane, you're my best friend and a good guy and I've just seen so many playboy type dudes in this league and they treat their girls like shit. That's where this is coming from. I'm not trying to be a problem.”

“Well you are, Hayden.” Shane huffed out an incredulous laugh. “You keep saying crazy shit that's way out of line. It's not cool. At all.”

Shane could feel Ilya coming up behind him now, his presence tugging at his back like a magnet. “Ilya-”

“Shane is not prize or game to me. But if he was, I would be fucking winning every single time.”

Shane shot him a look over his shoulder. “*Ilya*. That's en-”

But Ilya's large hand came to cover his mouth, shocking him into silence more than muffling his words.

“If this makes you jealous, I understand. I would be jealous of me, too. For many reasons. But you will learn to shut the fuck up or I will start knocking teeth out of your skull.” Ilya removed his hand, then kissed Shane's temple. “Sorry, *solnyshko*. Please continue.”

Ilya strode out of the room, leaving both Hayden and Shane watching him with slightly dumbfounded looks. *Russian guard dog*, Shane's brain supplied.

Hayden eventually shook his head and looked back up at Shane. “You're sure about him?”

“More sure than I've ever been about anything.” Shane said without hesitation.

“Are you really gonna tell Jackie?” Hayden nearly winced.

“Oh I'm absolutely telling Jackie. It's honestly for your own good, because trust me. Ilya is not kidding. And if you keep at it, there's gonna be a time when I'm not around and you're gonna get your ass kicked, dude. He probably has 30 pounds on you, I've seen how hard he can hit, and I've also seen multiple clips of him laughing after getting punched in the face. I never said the guy wasn't out of his fucking mind, because he 100 percent is. He's really only soft when it comes to me. So.” Shane shrugged.

Hayden scrubbed a hand over his face. “Jesus. Okay. Fine.”

“Okay.” Shane backed away from him. “And Hayden, you really can't tell anyone about this, okay? Well, I mean I guess except for Jackie, obviously. But I kinda trust her more than I trust you.”

Hayden threw his arms up in defeat.

Shane adjusted his posture as a few of their teammates began to trickle in. “And please remember that you're on his shit list right now. I'm not responsible for what happens if you piss him off again.”

Shane patted Hayden's shoulder before he walked out of the room and toward the ice, smiling to himself once he was out of view. He needed to calm himself down, but he couldn't stop thinking about how stupidly hot it was that Ilya was an absolute terror and menace, but not for Shane. Shane was his. He pressed a fingertip to the bruise on his hip, smiling again as he listened to the sound of Ilya's skates carving the ice.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya worships in the church of Shane Hollander for REAL he was raptured by that Shane cookie amen 🙏

Also Jackie please come get your mans we're begging

Upped the chapter count cause we are gonna need more time, all in favor say aye

THANK YOU as always for all your comments and kudos and for reading so far love u all

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains the use of a homophobic slur

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 2012

The sharp sting throbbed in his cheek, made only worse every time his face split into a grin. But Ilya couldn't be bothered enough to care.

Taking a high stick to his face in the last minutes of the game was well worth the tender bruise and split cut over his cheek bone in exchange for a power play. When his game sealing shot hit the back of the net, Ilya made sure to smile and wink into the nearest camera, blood streaking from his cheek down to his jaw.

Ilya stroked a finger absently over the butterfly bandage on his cheek, flicking away a droplet of water from his shower wet curls. His teammates were flocked around him like he was a king in his court; eyes bright and voices loud as they all recounted the final moments of the game.

For a moment he wondered if scenes like this ever bothered Shane. It seemed that the team naturally orbited around Ilya, the way people often did. Ilya was no stranger to his own charisma. But Shane was the captain. He felt a pang of guilt shot through him, lifting his head to scan the room for Shane.

Their eyes locked from across the room as Shane pulled a hoodie over his head, leaving his wet hair a tousled mess. Shane grinned at him, and Ilya was immediately parting the sea of his teammates, practically floating to Shane like a moth to a flame.

“Ouch.” Shane frowned when Ilya got close, reaching his fingers up to gingerly touch Ilya's cheek.

“Looks okay?” Ilya grabbed on loosely to one of Shane's hoodie strings, twisting it between his fingers.

“It's already bruising pretty bad. Did he check to make sure your cheekbone didn't fracture?” He felt Shane's hand gently turn his head to get a better look.

“Yes, *solnyshko*. No fracture. You worry too much.”

“You need to be icing this. Did he not give you an ice pack?” Shane was already grabbing Ilya by the wrist, grumbling as he guided him toward the medical room.

His determination made Ilya's chest feel warm. He wanted to bottle up Shane's charm and let himself get drunk on it.

Shane started rifling around in a drawer, eventually producing an instant cold pack, thrusting it into Ilya's hand. “Here. It's gonna swell up really bad if you don't ice it now.”

Ilya couldn't help but smile at him. He shut the door with his foot in a swift motion. “After you kiss it better for me, captain.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but his smile betrayed him. Ilya took a few steps closer, and was greeted by Shane's hand on his non-injured cheek. Warm, soft lips gently touched over his bruise in feather light kisses.

Ilya turned his head, capturing Shane's mouth with his. He felt his toes curl when Shane sighed happily into the kiss, fingers slipping into the hair at the nape of Ilya's neck. In an instant, Shane's tongue was gliding over his. Shane's mouth was always so hot. It made him lose himself every single time.

He backed Shane against the door, moaning quietly into his mouth when Shane hooked a leg around him, their bodies pressed impossibly close. Ilya pushed a hand up the front of Shane's hoodie, fingers gripping over the firm muscles of his abdomen, shivering at the feeling of his smooth skin.

It had been a few weeks now that they were properly sleeping together, and the magnetic pull between them had become so intense that Ilya could often feel control slipping through his fingers like sand.

Ilya had always enjoyed sex. Maybe a bit too much, seeing as he had allowed it to mar and mold his image into some sort of deviant Incubus womanizer. But nothing had ever felt like this for him.

When it came to Shane, he felt himself slip into wild abandon. He felt need blaze inside of him in untamed flames. Every touch, every taste, every sound - Ilya was starved for it.

He bit down on Shane's bottom lip just as someone started to bang on the door. “Roz? You in there?”

Shane gasped, putting both hands on Ilya's chest to push him backwards. Ilya tried to stifle a laugh as Shane quickly grabbed the cold pack that had been discarded on the floor, but gasped in pain when Shane shoved it against his cheek.

“*Blyat*, you fu-” But Shane shoved the pack against his face harder.

“Yeah, uh, we're in here..” Shane called over his shoulder.

Comeau opened the door, frowning, brows furrowed. “What are you doing?”

“Rozanov is an idiot and apparently needs supervision to follow doctor's orders. What's new.” Shane shrugged.

“He is concerned for my pretty face.” Ilya said, wincing when Shane pressed the pack harder against his face in response.

“Right. Well, we're going out. You coming with?” Comeau leaned in the doorway, eyes assessing.

Ilya hesitated, shooting a look at Shane. “If captain comes, I will come.”

Comeau huffed a laugh. “Whatever happened to the playboy party animal who needed to be leashed? Was all that a myth or something?”

God, were they really still talking about this? “Hollander is my handler. Good Canadian boy keeps me from trouble.” He patted Shane on the cheek.

“Well I think maybe he's doing a little too good of a job. You aren't allowed to have fun anymore?”

Ilya watched Shane bristled.

“I am allowed to do as I wish. I will come out. Celebrate getting my face split open for a win.” Ilya hopped off the table. Shane shot him a look.

“Fuck yes. Okay. I'll send the club in the group chat. Don't flake on us, Roz!” Comeau called over his shoulder.

“Ilya. Seriously?” Shane crossed his arms.

“What? You do not want me to go?” He turned to face Shane and his adorable angry face. “I will not go if you do not want, *kotik*.” He ran a thumb over Shane's freckles lightly.

Shane huffed an exasperated sigh. “No. Go if you want.”

“What is wrong? You will miss me?” He teased, pulling Shane closer by a hoodie string.

“Maybe.” Shane looked down, almost sheepishly.

“I will come back to you, *solnyshko*. I promise. Or you could always come with me, hm?” He put a finger under Shane's chin, gently tipping it up to meet his gaze.

“No.” Shane sighed. “I'm tired. I really don't feel like being out.”

When Ilya nodded, Shane tensed his jaw. “So what are you even gonna do there?”

Ilya shrugged. “Have a few drinks. What else?”

“I don't know.” Shane shifted his weight. “Dance.”

Ilya tutted, now grasping Shane's jaw with his whole hand. “Dance with who? Someone who is not my boyfriend?”

Ilya wasn't really sure why he said it. Maybe he was just feeling bold. Maybe because he couldn't stand the flicker of uncertainty in those pretty brown eyes. Maybe because he was tired of pretending Shane wasn't clearly his boyfriend in everything but name. Probably all of the above.

Shane's brows furrowed. “Your boyfriend?”

“Mm, that is you, no?” He gently squeezed Shane's jaw, eyes searching his as he allowed a small smile to play on his lips.

Shane's face seemed to go through ten emotions at once. He grabbed Ilya hard by the front of the shirt, pulling him out of view of the doorway before pushing their mouths together in a firm and almost desperate motion.

When they broke apart, Shane pressed their foreheads together. “Fuck, Ilya. You're really gonna do that and then go out without me?” Shane was nearly pouting. Ilya kissed his bottom lip.

“Will not be for long. Team bonding, you know? You should try sometime.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Shane pushed him back by his arm, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I bond with you, don't I?”

“Ah, this does not count. We were already bonded. Bonded pair. Like cats at shelter.” He carded a hand through Shane's hair. “I also very much hope that you do not bond with our other teammates the way you bond with me.”

“Ew.” Shane's face twisted in disgust at thought. “No thanks.”

“Is only for me, hm?” Ilya grabbed a handful of Shane's ass, squeezing firmly. Shane grabbed onto his shoulder, gasping softly.

“Fuck. Don't start. Not when we can't finish it.” Shane was close to whining. “You're killing me. I'll be asleep by the time you get back.”

“Well, good thing you give me a key. I will wake you up with polite tap on your ass, then fuck you into your mattress until you remember nothing but my name.” Ilya leaned in to gently bite his earlobe. “Would you like that, *kotik*?”

Shane tipped his head to the side, breath hitching slightly.

“Ilya Rozanov, you are the fucking worst. You're literally evil.” He shoved Ilya hard. “And you better.” Shane leaned back in close. “I need my boyfriend.” He said, a mischievous lilt to his voice.

That sneaky little brat was trying to beat him at his own game. Unfortunately, it was working. Ilya practically growled, turning to bite down on Shane's bottom lip, tugging at it with his teeth.

“Mm. *Umnyy mal'chik*.” He muttered against Shane's mouth. *(Clever boy.)*

He really had Ilya wrapped all the way around his finger. He nuzzled his way into the crook of Shane's neck, breathing him in, resting his lips against the pulse point. “You know I cannot stay away from you for long, *solnyshko*. I have spent enough of my life missing you.”

The soft neon glow from the lights shining over the club cast the private booth in a pink haze. Ilya sipped his vodka, watching in amusement as J.J. worked on picking up a girl in an impossibly short dress on the edge of the dance floor.

He turned his head when he heard a throat clear, watching as Hayden Pike slid into the booth across from him, a petite brunette woman at his elbow.

“Ah. You must be the famous Jackie?” Ilya extended his hand.

“I am. And you must be the infamous Ilya Rozanov.” She smiled, holding her hand out to shake his.

But Ilya instead lifted her hand to his lips, giving the back of it a chaste kiss. Jackie's smile widened as she clutched a hand over her heart. Pike blanched, mouth dropping open for a fraction of a second before it set into a tight line. Ilya only smiled smugly in response.

Jackie looked over her shoulder to be sure no one else was in earshot before she spoke. “Hayden.” She hissed, clutching at his forearm. “You seriously were trying to keep Shane from him?!” She turned back to assess him momentarily, eyes raking over Ilya. “Some friend you are.” She grumbled, elbowing him.

“Hey, what the fuck does that mean?!” Hayden's look was somewhere between furious and exasperated.

“Oh, stop, Hayden. You have eyes. You know exactly what it means.”

Ilya had already decided that this woman was an angel on Earth who had absolutely no business climbing into bed with fucking Hayden Pike.

“I hear you are the one I need to thank for getting this one to lay off, hm?” Ilya tipped his glass toward Pike

Pike rolled his eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. Jackie elbowed him again.

“I told him he needed to grow the fuck up and stop being ridiculous. Shane is my friend, too. He's the best. I only want him to be happy. So when he called me on the verge of tears, I was about to wring Hayden's neck.”

She sighed, placing a hand on top of Hayden's. “He means well. I swear. He's just a moron sometimes and needs to learn how to shut his mouth.” She patted his hand. Pike stayed quiet.

“Well, I am happy to say he has not told me to go get my dick wet elsewhere or call me fake gay since then.” Ilya sipped his vodka, watching Pike's face twist up.

“I still can't believe he said that.” Jackie shook her head, then heaved a sigh. “We just want Shane to be happy. Really.” She laced her fingers with Hayden's. Pike turned to give her a fond look. Ilya could see it in Hayden's eyes. The softness. The love. It wasn't unlike the way he often looked at Shane.

“This is all I want, too.” Ilya shifted in his seat a bit. “I understand maybe you are afraid I am no good for Shane. You see pictures of me back in Russia fucking my way through entire city of Moscow. I suppose I do not blame you for…thinking less of me.”

“But, is a complicated thing. Before, I was sleeping around because I was running from something. Running from myself. I was very unhappy. Life has been…not so good for me.” Ilya felt his lips twitch uncomfortably. He wasn't sure exactly why he felt compelled to say any of this now. Maybe he wanted Jackie with her kind face and obvious concern for Shane to understand him. Maybe he wanted Pike to understand him, too. Even if only a little.

“But I am here now. With Shane. He makes me happy. He is best thing in my life. I do not need to run anymore. I do not need to go back to that life. I do not want to. I only want him.” Ilya looked up at Hayden, meeting his gaze.

Hayden gave him the slightest nod. “I guess I need to trust Shane's judgement on this. And Shane is very clearly obsessed with you. So.” He said, miserably.

“Mm, is he? Please tell me more.” Ilya leaned forward on his elbows.

“Buddy, I could barely get Shane to come with me to a sports bar in the suburbs. He followed you straight into a crowded downtown nightclub and you hardly even asked.” Hayden laughed a bit.

Ilya felt warmth spread in his chest. Oh, Shane. He had known for a long time now that their souls were tethered together, even from all the way across the world. He could feel the phantom tug in his gut when he would lie awake at night in his lonely Moscow apartment. Like his whole being was trying desperately to drift toward something that was just out of reach.

He felt it now, too. Ilya had been here for less than an hour, and he already wanted to make good on his promise to return to Shane and wake him up with his tongue.

“Well. I am maybe obsessed with him even more. Have been for long time now.” Ilya took the last swig of his vodka.

“You aren't exactly good at hiding it, Rozanov.”

Ilya considered for a moment, tilting his head from side to side before heaving a shrug. “We have always been close this way. I never wanted to hide from this. For long time it was very much only…what is word? For only friends?”

“Platonic?” Jackie supplied, smiling softly.

“Ah, yes. Platonic.” He remembered the now the word was similar in Russian. But English wasn't always simple. “We were just kids. I did not want him like this back then. Was just…I feel very strongly about him. Always. From first time we met. It did not feel like normal friendship I had with other people. It always felt special. Maybe like soul mate.”

Ilya shrugged again, trying to play it off like he didn't just surgically cut his chest open and bare his heart to Pike and his girlfriend. Being away from Shane had him feeling sentimental. The love he felt for Shane had always been too big to hold inside, and now it was rapidly escaping containment. He felt as though the contents of his chest were spilling out like an overfilled cup; a messy and uncoordinated cascade that he was powerless to.

“That's so sweet.” Jackie nearly swooned, a hand clutched over her heart.

“Yes. Well. He has this effect on me.” Ilya stood, eyes scanning as he saw their teammates scattered around in various states of drunkenness.

He patted Pike on the shoulder before weaving his way back to the bar. He was going to need at least one more drink to process the fact that he had just forged a truce with Hayden Pike.

Ilya rested a forearm across the slightly sticky bar top, his attention caught when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder. He looked up to see Comeau grinning at him through glassy eyes. He had one attractive girl hanging off of his neck; another standing just behind him as she tucked her hair sheepishly behind an ear, stealing glances at Ilya from behind her human shield.

“Roz!” Comeau said loudly, leaning into his ear as the sounds from the club pulsed around them. “I noticed you haven't really been scanning the scene. There's tons of hot girls here tonight, it's unbelievable. I brought you one.” He jerked his chin over his shoulder to where the shy looking girl was now watching Ilya intently.

“How kind of you.” Ilya gave her a curt nod and tight smile before turning his head back toward the bar. “But I do not need a wingman.”

Comeau scoffed. “So what, you just sit in the corner and expect the girls will come to you?”

Ilya smirked to himself, winking to the bartender when she acknowledged him. “You would be surprised.” Ilya murmured.

“Well. This one has been eyeing you up all night. Told her friend here she likes your hair.” Comeau slid his arm around the waist of the girl who was plastered against him.

“Most people do.” Ilya kept his gaze forward, tapping his fingers against the bar idly.

Comeau gave the shy girl a nudge forward. “This is Roz- well, *Ilya*.” He slurred slightly. “He wants to buy you a drink.”

Ilya furrowed his brows as he looked over his shoulder to see Comeau disappearing back into the crowd, leaving the other girl standing at his elbow. “Hi.” She looked up at him through

her lashes.

Ilya simply gave her another nod, hoping this poor girl would get the hint. He almost wished he was shirtless so she could see the purple bruise mottled on his pec and know that claim had already long been staked over him.

A past version of him would have gladly shown this girl a good time. She was pretty, in a cute sort of way, with glossy lips and dark eyes. But he could feel the way his body pointedly made no response to it. Sheer indifference was layered over his mind like a thick fog. He wished he could turn to this girl and say, '*sorry, I actually have a boyfriend, and I am so obsessed with him that you might as well be another barstool standing next to me*.'

But, that would be problematic. Instead he turned to her, putting on his most polite smile. “My teammate had good intentions…I think. But, I am not…looking for anything. I am just here for few drinks with my team. Sorry about that. You can still get drink on my tab. Is my treat.”

“Oh.” She blinked at him a few times. “I mean, I'm not really…looking for anything either. Just a little fun.” Her shy smile shifted into something a bit more.

Ilya clenched his jaw, silently willing the bartender to hurry the hell up. He was also silently considering making a public service announcement that he was no longer a manwhore. Thank god for vodka.

Sometimes he truly felt like he had magnets in his belly that were polarized only to whatever Ilya's soul was made of. He was like the tide, and Ilya was his moon, gently pulling him along in a way that felt like the most natural thing Shane had ever experienced.

That's how Shane found himself with his hands stuffed into his jeans pockets, eyes scanning the throngs of bodies that littered the overwhelming club.

Fine. Maybe it was a little pathetic on his part that he couldn't wait another second to see Ilya. But Shane really wanted his boyfriend. So sue him.

Boyfriend. He still felt drunk off that word. When it had left Ilya's lips, it hit him like an arrow through the heart. He wanted to hear him say it again. He wanted to hear him say it a thousand times more.

His eyes finally landed on a form leaning over the bar. Shane felt the tug in his stomach turn into a full swoop.

Ilya looked unfairly good, considering he had a bruise on his face and was simply wearing a black t-shirt and jeans. But the shirt clung tight to the broadness of his chest and shoulders. The sleeves hugged at the impressive muscle of his arms. Shane wanted to bite him.

As he moved a bit closer, his steps faltered slightly when he noticed a girl at his side, the both of them grabbing their drinks in unison as the bartender slid them across the bar top. She was trying to move closer, and also looking at Ilya like she wanted to bite him.

Before Shane could even get close enough to get Ilya's attention, his head turned, and his entire face lit up.

"*Solnyshko*! What are you doing here?!" Ilya was beaming, and Shane couldn't stop the smile that split his own face.

Ilya took a few steps to close the gap, both hands finding Shane's face, his thumbs brushing over Shane's cheekbones in tandem.

"Just wanted a drink." Shane shrugged. "Didn't even know you were here."

Ilya's grin never wavered. He pinched one of Shane's cheeks, letting his hand slide down his jaw and neck, fingers trailing subtly. Shane's skin felt buzzy in their wake.

He ran a hand down Ilya's arm, looking over his shoulder to see the girl standing there awkwardly and a little dumbfounded. He could see a flicker of recognition in her eyes as she studied him. Shane wondered if she was trying to work out in her head why Ilya had essentially launched himself away from her and straight into his captain with the enthusiasm of a puppy.

Ilya looked behind him, offering the girl a small wave. "Enjoy your drink. Have a good night." He said before leaning back into Shane's ear. "Comeau tried to be my wingman. I was looking for polite way to tell her that she is nowhere near as pretty as my boyfriend."

Shane bit down on his bottom lip to suppress his smile. "Oh yeah?"

"Mm. I have hottest man in the league. Magazines say so, *da*? I say hottest man in whole world, but." He shrugged.

Shane felt the heat flare under his collar. He sent a silent thanks in tandem with a silent curse to the universe for sending him this smooth talking Russian man who was making his knees weak in the middle of this crowded club.

Ilya hooked his arm into Shane's. "Come. Table is this way. Hayden and Jackie are here."

Shane let his hip brush against Ilya's as they walked. He felt like sparks were igniting off of them, as if their bodies were made of flint. He wondered if it was as obvious to anyone else as it was to him.

When they approached the table, Shane was greeted by a smiling Jackie, Hayden's arm slung around her. "My favorite person!" She said gleefully, reaching out to squeeze his arm.

"Have these two been playing nice?" Shane nudged Ilya with his elbow as he slid into the booth, Ilya moving in next to him.

“Honestly? Yes. I think maybe we're all finally on the same page.” She leaned across the table, lowering her voice. “As long as he takes good care of you, you are very much allowed to have your hot man.”

Shane felt his cheeks warm as he smiled, cutting his eyes to where Hayden was sighing dramatically. Yes, his boyfriend was fucking hot. “He takes very, very good care of me.” Shane said quietly. He felt Ilya's hand give his knee a quick squeeze.

Somewhere along the way, more of their teammates flocked to the table. Shane was glad for this, because it meant they had to squeeze in to make room, which meant he had an excuse to be squished up against Ilya's side. Their thighs were pressed close together, and Shane could feel Ilya's heat bleeding into him.

As the loud chatter swallowed up the sound around them, Shane turned his head to speak into Ilya's ear. “I wish I could kiss you right now.”

Ilya placed his hand high on Shane's thigh under the table. He turned his head so his lips were now brushing Shane's ear as he spoke. “I have been thinking this all night. You look so fucking good, *malysh*.”

Shane closed his eyes briefly as Ilya spoke, getting lost in his voice and the feeling of his breath warm against the side of his neck. Ilya began to murmur in his ear in Russian, and Shane could feel himself practically squirming in his seat, biting his lip to keep from making any embarrassing sounds in front of their teammates. At least they all seemed to be otherwise preoccupied.

Suddenly, another voice broke through the sweet cascade of Ilya's words, causing Shane to snap his head up.

“Roz! What the fuck are you doing?” Comeau was slurring his words, listing slightly on his feet. Shane noticed he was being flanked by two girls; one of them being the one who was making eyes at Ilya at the bar.

“I told you. I do not need wingman.” Ilya attempted to dismiss him, but Comeau leaned over the table.

“Fucking typical. You'd rather be on Hollander's dick like always.”

Shane went still. He felt Ilya bristle beside him. “You are drunk.” Ilya said flatly.

“I thought you were cool, Roz. Now you're making me look like an idiot. Tried to bring you a girl and she tells me you were too busy rubbing up on Hollander to even notice her. I wouldn't have bothered if I knew you were a fag.”

“Whoa!”

To Shane's surprise, it was Hayden who yelled out, springing up from the table immediately, getting into Comeau's face. “Dude, what the fuck?”

Shane felt the world tilting in on itself. Next thing he knew, Ilya was standing as well, pulling Hayden back by the elbow. “He is a messy drunk. Go home, Comeau.” Ilya turned to the girl that was clinging to Comeau's arm. “I suggest you do not follow him.”

“Oh, so now you're gonna give out advice for other people's sex life?” Comeau laughed sardonically. “Fucking cocksucker.”

“And what if I am? Hm?” Ilya pushed Hayden back toward the table, stalking closer to Comeau who seemed to be either shaking with rage or too drunk to stand still. “What? Sucking cock is worst thing you can think of? I could suck a dick at center ice in middle of a game and still have better stats than you on your best game, Comeau.”

Shane felt ice forming in his stomach. He realized he should not have come here. Not when he knew he was going to want to cling to Ilya all night like he was his oxygen.

“You're sick. I hope they deport you back to Russia and kill you, you fucking fa-”

Shane honestly wasn't sure who moved first. There was a sudden blur of bodies; Hayden lurched forward, Ilya lunged like a wild dog, and Shane jumped out of his seat so fast that he nearly flipped the table.

It was too much. Shane was the fucking captain of this team, and Ilya was the love of his life. He would be damned if anyone, let alone a teammate, was going to say things like that to him.

Both of the girls who were with Comeau scattered like birds. Hayden had a hand fisted in Comeau's shirt and Ilya had smacked the beer bottle out of his hand and sent it shattering on the floor by the time Shane was standing fully.

“Hey! Step back, both of you, step the fuck back!” Shane yelled, reaching an arm between Comeau and the two very angry men who were about to double team him. Shane could not let this turn into a public brawl, as much as he would love to watch Ilya and Hayden kick Comeau's ass into next week. He didn't need any of his players spending the night in jail.

Both men acquiesced, taking a step back. Shane grabbed the front of Comeau's shirt with both hands, yanking him forward. “Get in a fucking cab and go the fuck home, Comeau. And I better never, ever hear any shit like that come out of your mouth again or I swear to god I will end your career myself. Do you understand?”

Comeau had the audacity to look shocked. “Christ, cap. Are you really-”

“I am this fucking close to punching you in the mouth myself, Comeau. Please don't test me.” Shane pushed Comeau away, sending him stumbling back into J.J. who had appeared when the spectacle began. “J.J., make sure he gets out of here.”

He turned back to Ilya, whose jaw was tensed so hard, Shane was sure he was going to crack his teeth. “Ilya. Come on. We're leaving.”

Ilya nodded once, then turned to Hayden, who had a protective arm around Jackie as they whispered animatedly. Ilya placed a hand on Hayden's shoulder, patting it. “Pike.” Then he tentatively added, “Thank you.”

Hayden patted Ilya on the forearm. “No one deserves that. Not even you, Rozanoz.”

That earned Hayden one of Ilya's signature grins. It temporarily softened the feeling in Shane's chest, which currently felt like it was in knots.

“I'll text you, Hayd.” Shane grabbed Ilya by the elbow. “Jackie, it was good to see you.”

Shane hurriedly pulled Ilya into his side, desperately wanting to get him the fuck out of here.

It made Shane sick to think about the fact that Ilya had escaped from his personal hell in Russia, but he was still seemingly getting shit from all angles. It was cruel. It was unfair. It made Shane want to cry. But he wasn't going to cry. He was going to get his boyfriend home and make sure he knew exactly how much he was worth.

The moment they stepped through Shane's front door, he gathered Ilya tightly into his arms. “Ilya…” He started, not even sure what it was that wanted to say.

“Is okay, *solnyshko*.” He felt Ilya's strong arms snake around him.

“No. It's really not.” Shane huffed out a humorless laugh. “You came here to get away from the people in your life who treated you like shit, and now-”

Ilya stepped back, hands finding their way to Shane's face. “And now I am. And I am here, with you. This is all that matters to me. The only fucking thing.”

Shane searched Ilya's eyes. There was so much to them. A depth that felt unfathomable. But they looked back at Shane with so much love that it stole the breath from his lungs.

He pressed his forehead to Ilya's. Ilya stroked a finger along Shane's jawline slowly. “I think…I want to come out. Publicly.”

Shane took a full step back, eyes widened.

“Do not worry. I am not asking you to do the same. I am not expecting you to. I just…” He heaved a sigh, moving to sit on the edge of the couch. “You are right. I left Russia to be free. I want to be free. I want to be who I am meant to be and not feel sorry for myself anymore.”

Shane felt his heart clench painfully. Ilya deserved the world, and so much more. “Would you ever be able to go home again?”

“I will never go back to Russia. Is not home for me anymore. Home is here. With you, Shane.”

Ilya was suddenly very blurry in Shane's eyes. He sat down next to him and cupped Ilya's jaw in his hand, guiding their mouths together. He didn't only kiss him. He breathed him in. He savored his warmth and the taste of his tongue. His Ilya.

“I'm so lucky to have you.” He whispered against Ilya's mouth. “You should come out, if that's what feels right. And I'm never going to let anyone hurt you. You understand me?”

As much as it scared him to think about the implications of Ilya being the first out queer player in the league *ever*, he wasn't going to stop Ilya from feeling free. And he wasn't going to allow fear to consume him again.

Ilya smiled softly. “I know you won't. Was very hot, watching you defend me. I should have got on my knees and shown Comeau how much of a cocksucker I really am, hm?”

Shane punched his arm. “Ilya. Don't joke about it. I wanted to fucking strangle him.”

“I know, *solnyshko*. And I would have happily let you.”

Shane sighed, brushing their lips together again. He grasped at Ilya's hands, bringing them into his lap. “Hey. I know you don't really celebrate Christmas, but. We have a couple days off and I'll be going to my parents house in Ottawa. I want you to come with me. Please.”

He desperately wanted his parents to meet Ilya properly. Though he still hadn't come out to them. He still hadn't even said the words to himself at all. But he had to remember. No more allowing fear to consume him. If Ilya could be brave, he could be brave, too.

Ilya squeezed his hands. “Of course I will, *solnyshko*. I will follow you anywhere.”

Shane felt his heart melt for the thousandth time. Ilya Rozanov was going to reduce him to nothing more than a puddle. Ilya Rozanov owned his whole heart.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone meet me outside we're gonna jump Comeau's ass 🗣

Hayden Pike redemption tour has officially kicked off, we prayed for times like this

NEXT UP: lots of feelings and confessions and fluff for Christmas at the Hollander's 💕

Thank you all so much for your love and for reading so far!!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bleak winter sky yawned on above the long stretch of road ahead of them; a cold grey that reminded Ilya too much of Russia.

He almost allowed himself to slip back there in his mind. Back to lonely nights as a teenager, huddled under blankets in the dark with a dull ache in his jaw from being backhanded, the room washed in pale tones from the moonlight reflecting off the snow. Back to lonely mornings in his impressive penthouse apartment, sick to his stomach with a hangover and a deep sense of regret.

But he quickly righted the ship; grabbing Shane's hand from across the center console and lacing their fingers together in his lap. The feeling of Shane's warm hand melted his other thoughts away. He felt himself take a deep breath when Shane started to soothingly rub at his hand with his thumb.

“You remember when you met them the first time? My parents?” Shane's voice broke through the quiet.

How could he forget? It was the last day of their second year at camp. Shane's parents had come to pick him up, and Ilya was still milling about the hotel. Shane had grabbed Ilya by the wrist and led him out to their car, a huge grin on his face. Both of Shane's parents told Ilya how much Shane had talked about him. They said they were so glad to finally meet him. Their smiles were so warm. Shane's dad shook his hand firmly, and his mom gave him a hug.

It had made Ilya's heart ache for many reasons. It was partially in a good way. He was happy that Shane seemed to have such kind and supportive parents. He seemed to have a great home life. Shane deserved that.

But it also partially hurt in ways that Ilya could hardly bear to think about. He would never get to feel his mother's warm hugs again. He would never get to introduce Shane to her. He knew she would adore him, just as Ilya did. And he would never want to introduce Shane to his father. The idea alone made him feel sick.

But he remembered so clearly the way they looked at Shane like he was the center of their universe; and the way his mother had thanked Ilya for being a good friend to him. He couldn't help but to smile now, thinking about it.

“I remember.” He squeezed Shane's hand a bit. “They were very kind.”

Ilya hoped that they would like him just as much now. If all of Ilya's hopes for the future came true, these would eventually become his in-laws. He wanted them to see him as someone worthy of their son. The thought made his stomach churn.

“Now I know what you mean when you say I think too loud.” Shane jostled their joined hands. “They're gonna love you, Ilya. I promise. How could they not?”

Ah. Ilya hummed out a bitter laugh. “There are plenty of people in this world who do not love me, *solnyshko*.”

“There are plenty of people in this world who are fucking idiots.” Shane said so plainly that it ripped a genuine laugh from Ilya's chest. “I'm serious, Ilya.” Shane untethered their hands to pinch Ilya on the thigh. “They know how much you mean to me. You're so good to me. There's nothing for them not to love. So stop worrying about it.”

He turned to look at Shane, who was in profile as he fastidiously watched the road. His face was arresting, to say the least. The strong angle of his jaw. The straight slope of his nose. Those pouty fucking lips.

“You are the hottest person I have ever seen in my life, Shane Hollander.”

He watched as a beautiful blush spread beneath Shane's freckles. “Fuck off. You-you can't just say shit like that when I'm driving.”

“I can and I will. We will see how much your parents love me when I fall to my knees at their feet and thank them for creating perfect man.” He stroked a finger along Shane's jaw.

Shane tried to hide his smile. “Please don't.”

“But I must charm them so that when they hear headboard slamming into the wall and you whimpering and begging me to let you come, they will maybe not kick me out.”

“*Ilya*!” Shane punched his arm.

Shane was so easy to rile up, he couldn't ever help himself. Ilya grabbed his hand on the recoil and kissed it over and over again. “I am sorry. I promise I will behave.”

“You better. And I don't fucking *whimper*.” Shane grumbled.

Ilya barked out a loud laugh, then clamped his own hand over his mouth. “Sorry.”

“Oh, fuck off! I don't!”

“Shane. *Solnyshko*. Light of my life. You very much do. And I love it. You make such pretty noises for me.” Ilya squeezed Shane's thigh, the feeling of the flesh in his hand sending a jolt straight to his dick. “Pretty noises from a pretty boy.”

Color bloomed beneath Shane's freckles again; a beautiful warmth against the grey casted winter. “I'll let you get away with that one because I like the way you say ‘pretty’.” Shane placed a hand over Ilya's.

The feeling of it made Ilya realize how true his words to Shane had been. Shane is home. They could be anywhere in the world - hell, they could be floating in fucking outer space - and as long as Shane was at his side, it would be home. It would be safe. Safe in ways the

Ilya never realized he would be able to feel. Shane's thigh beneath his palm and Shane's hand on top of his; the soft little smile playing at his perfect mouth. He had so many things he wanted - no, needed - to say to Shane. But he knew he needed to go at a pace that wouldn't send his sweet, neurotic boyfriend into a panic.

And then, as if Shane had been tuned into the same frequency that existed inside of Ilya's brain, he tightened his grip on Ilya's hand and cleared his throat. “I, um. I hope it's not too late to tell you this. Like, I hope you don't think I waited on purpose until we were already on the road and you can't get away. Because I didn't- well…maybe I kind of did. I don't know. I just didn't know how to bring it up, and I know I have to before we get there, but-”

Ilya turned in his seat slightly to look at him. “*Solnyshko*. Breathe. Just tell me. Is okay.”

“Sorry.” Shane blew out a breath. “Okay. I'm…gonna come out to my parents.”

Ilya felt Shane stiffen, a stricken look falling over his face. He laced their fingers together firmly.

“This is good, Shane. Why were you nervous to tell me this? You think they will not be good about it?”

“No, no. It's not that. I know they'll be fine. It's just…I was thinking…” Shane swallowed, pointedly keeping his eyes fixed on the road. “I was thinking maybe we should also tell them…about us?” Shane darted a glance at Ilya, then quickly looked away, his face tense and voice layered with nervousness.“I mean, only if you want to. It's totally okay if you don't, I just-”

Ilya wished he could stop Shane's worried words with a kiss on his mouth, but his cheek would just have to do. He leaned over and pressed kisses to his cheek and down to his jaw, letting his lips lingering over Shane's skin.

“Oh, my Shane. Is very okay.” Ilya tried to keep his voice even, despite the lump in his throat and the puddle in his chest that was formerly his heart.

Shane seemed to be swallowing back his own swell of emotion. “Yeah?”

“One day, whole world will know you are mine. This seems like good place to start, *da*?” Ilya pressed his palm against Shane's cheek, warm and smooth under his touch.

“Yes.” Shane leaned into Ilya's hand, nuzzling his cheek against it. “Fuck. Why are you perfect?”

“Ah, coming from Mr. Perfect himself. Number one draft pick, youngest team captain in franchise history, good Canadian boy who never get in trouble, perfect face, perfect body, perfect ass, never eats like shit, speaks two languages-” Ilya honestly could have gone on for an annoying amount of time listing out every flawless thing about his flawless Shane, until Shane cut him off.

“Okay, okay-” Shane said loudly, over top of Ilya's voice. “First of all, you also speak two languages.”

“Mm let us not pretend my English is better than your French. I do not know any French at all and I can still tell. Is perfect. No accent. *Bonjour*.” Ilya poked his cheek.

“Okay. Well. You also have a perfect face, your body is insane, and you probably have the biggest, roundest ass I've ever seen on a man before. So I don't know why you're talking.” Shane huffed.

“Ah, yes. My ass is nice, but I am a top, so automatic two point deduction. Anyway, you are golden boy, prince of hockey. Canada's sweetheart. This I cannot compete with.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “According to who?”

“Everyone, Hollander.” Ilya tugged on Shane's earlobe, earning him an angry glance.

“Well, whatever. You're still perfect. And my parents are gonna love you.”

“Even as your boyfriend?” Ilya chewed the inside of his lip, suddenly feeling the pressure swoop down on top of him like an avalanche. He was fairly certain Shane's parents probably pictured him bringing home some pretty, polite Canadian girl who would look picture perfect standing next to him for the family Christmas card. Definitely not a large Russian man with a smart mouth and probably too many issues to count.

“Yes. As my boyfriend. As my best friend. As my everything. Cause that's what you are.” Shane shrugged.

Ilya felt his whole body fill with a pleasant warmth. The kind that only Shane was able to give him. He brought Shane's hand to his mouth to kiss it, before settling their joined hands back into his lap. For everything that had gone wrong in his life, it was all worth it to be right where he was.

The sun had finally started to break through the clouds when they pulled into his parents’ driveway. Streaks of light angled across the lawn, one of them catching perfectly in Ilya's hair as he leaned into the trunk, making his curls shine like spun gold.

Shane only realized he was staring once Ilya turned back around and gave him a quizzical smile, holding out the flowers Shane had picked out in one hand and the ridiculously expensive bottle of sake Ilya picked out in the other. “What?” He laughed. “Why are you staring at me?”

“I don't know. Just like how you look.” Shane smiled back, grabbing the flowers from Ilya's hand before reaching around him to grab his bag.“You ready?”

He watched Ilya take a steadying breath, slinging his own bag over his shoulder. “Ready.”

Shane wanted to feel bad for how nervous Ilya seemed, but it was hard to when he looked so cute.

Cute was probably not a word the world would ever think to use to describe Ilya Rozanov, who was sitting comfortably in the top five for most penalties in the league this season. He chirped hard, hit harder, and never failed to be the most smug motherfucker in a room.

But the world didn't get to see Ilya's face when Shane would play with his hair until he fell asleep; sweet and cherubic. They didn't see how he would break into a boyish grin when he wrestled Shane to the floor in a battle for the remote. They didn't see the incandescent look in his eyes when Shane would surprise him with a stupid bag of gummy worms after a trip to the store. And they didn't see him now, shrinking forward with his head sheepishly ducked down, broad shoulders and bravado melting away.

Yuna opened the door before they could reach it, smiling brightly as she held it open for them. “Hi, sweetheart.” She said, kissing Shane's cheek as he stepped inside. Shane turned to watch as Ilya followed, a smile tugging at his lips. “Ilya, we're so glad you could join us. Come in, honey.”

“Mrs. Hollander.” Ilya smiled, standing shoulder to shoulder with Shane. “Thank you for having me.”

“Yuna, please.”

“Yuna.” The almost shy smile never left Ilya's face, and Shane wanted to devour him whole. “These are for you.” Ilya handed her the bottle of sake, and elbowed Shane who elbowed him back before handing her the arrangement of flowers. “You may also share with Mr. Hollander, of course. Only if you want to.” Ilya said before offering his signature wink, and Shane could swear he saw his mother melt slightly.

“This is very sweet, thank you boys. Come on. Let's put these in the kitchen, your father is in there fussing over the cookie dough.”

Ilya followed closely behind Shane into the kitchen, where David instantly broke into a grin. “Hi, son.” He wrapped an arm around him in a side hug, careful not to press into Shane with his flour dusted apron. “And Ilya! Wow. Much bigger from the last time we met.”

David held out his hand, and Ilya reached around Shane to shake it firmly. “Mr. Hollander. Yes, I may have grown a bit since then.”

“Call me David, son. Shane talks so much about you, you're practically already part of the family.”

Shane watched as Ilya's cheeks went pink. There was something deeply satisfying about him being the one to blush for once. But not more satisfying than seeing Ilya here, standing in the kitchen of his family home. It was like something straight out of one of his dreams; the ones

he would have as a teenager when he so desperately wanted to kidnap Ilya from Russia and keep him safe.

“Thank you.” Ilya shifted awkwardly on his feet. “I never shut up about Shane, either. You raised wonderful son. I am sure he makes you very proud.”

Damn him, even in his nervous state, he still had that natural charm. Such a smooth talker. And the worst part was that he was being so genuine about it. Shane had no idea what to do with that.

Both of Shane's parents turned to give him a fond look. “Very proud.” Yuna agreed. “Why don't you boys go take your bags upstairs? Ilya, we made the guest room up for you. Shane can show you.”

At that, Shane felt Ilya's eyes cut to him subtly. Now was not exactly the time to break the news; as much as he wanted to blurt out that Ilya wouldn't need the guest room because Ilya was his boyfriend and they would suffocate if they tried to sleep with a wall between them. Instead, he grabbed Ilya's arm. “Come on.” He muttered, quickly trudging up the steps.

He could feel his own heart quickening. This was becoming real. He was really going to look his parents in the face and say the words out loud. He felt his stomach lurch as he stepped into his childhood bedroom and dropped his bag to the floor.

Ilya followed, shutting the door quietly behind him. If he could see that Shane was freaking out, he promptly ignored it. “Oh, *solnyshko*. This is exactly how I always pictured your room would look.” Ilya said with that boyish grin spread across his face.

His room was much the same as it had been since he was a child. Orderly and neat, with hockey posters lining the walls, hockey books stacked on the shelves, and more trophies than he had ever known what to do with.

“Shut up.” Shane reached a foot out to kick Ilya's ankle. “I'm freaking out right now.”

Ilya turned to him, furrowing his brows in concern. “Shane.” He placed his hands on Shane's face, forcing him to look up. “Is okay. Everything will be okay. They love you. I can see it.”

Shane took a deep breath and forced himself to nod. He melted into the soft kiss that Ilya pressed into his lips, his hands dropping to Ilya's waist, thumbs anchoring low onto his hips.

Ilya reared back, hissing slightly as he winced.

“...What the fuck was that? Are you hurt? Did you get hurt during-”

“No, no no. Is fine. I am fine. Sorry.” Ilya moved to kiss him again, but Shane pushed him back by the chest.

“Dude. Don't lie to me. Is this why you didn't want to let me blow you last night?” Shane crossed his arms. “Show me.”

Ilya bit his own bottom lip, a smile spreading across his face as his eyes bounced between Shane's.

“What? You're being so weird right now. What's going on?” Shane insisted.

Ilya took another step back, pulling up the hem of his sweater and holding it between his teeth as he undid the zipper on his jeans. Shane watched with his jaw slack, trying not to drool like Pavlov's dog as Ilya shimmied his jeans down his hips, then reluctantly hooked a thumb into the waistband of his underwear. He yanked the waistband down, all the way past his hip.

Shane stared, blinking at what clearly was a very fresh tattoo; cyrillic letters scrawled low on the span of skin between his hip bone and his groin. “What does it say?” He asked, feeling his mouth go a bit dry.

Ilya dropped the hem of his sweater from his mouth to speak. “Do not kill me. I got it done where I know no one will see it unless I am naked. Only person who sees me naked besides you is team in showers, and they do not know Russian.”

Shane blinked a few times. “Okay…”

“It says Shane.” Ilya couldn't hide his smile.“I got it done yesterday. You like?”

“Fuck.” Shane felt like the breath had been punched from his lungs momentarily, his brain going offline. His fucking name. Ilya got his fucking name tattooed on him. He had adored the sunshine tattoo Ilya got in his honor. But this one was melting his mind.

He surged forward to attach himself to Ilya's mouth in a messy kiss. He licked needily into Ilya's mouth, fingers grasping into his hair. Only when they pulled back to take a breath did he allow the words to breathlessly spill out without thinking. “Fuck, Ilya. I love you.”

In the moment, it hadn't occurred to him that he had never said this out loud before. Neither of them had. Which, honestly, was sort of absurd. It was so clear what they had between them. Even if Shane had been afraid. Even if Ilya had been trying to ease them both into it. Love didn't even seem like a big enough word to describe what it was that he felt about Ilya.

With their foreheads pressed together, Shane saw those soft blue eyes staring back at him, tears threatening to spill over. “I love you. So much.” Ilya said quietly, taking hold of Shane's hand. “More than anything in this world, Shane. I love you. I have always been yours.”

Now Shane felt wetness on his own cheeks, a sob hitching in the back of his throat. “I fucking love you.” He managed to get out, pressing his face into the crook of Ilya's neck.

Ilya wrapped strong arms around him, holding him there tightly as he rocked them both from side to side. Eventually, he felt the rumble in Ilya's chest as he began to speak. “Sooo…you liked the tattoo?”

Shane laughed wetly. “Fuck you. Yes. I love it. You're crazy.”

“Not crazy. Just yours. Next time you bite me, I will get the bite mark tattooed. So make sure is a good one, hm?”

And Shane could tell that he was not joking. “Ilya.” He whined. “Please. We need to go talk to my parents. You can't say that right now.”

“I am sorry, sweet *solnyshko*.” He nuzzled his nose against Shane's, reaching down to zip his jeans back up. “We will go talk with them. You are ready?”

Shane pressed their foreheads together, closing his eyes. “Fuck. No. I don't know. I haven't even…” He couldn't help but let out a small, humorless laugh at himself.

Ilya stepped back, frowning. “Haven't even what?”

Shane shook his head, looking down. “It's stupid. But I…I haven't even…really said the words before. Like, if I didn't say it out loud, it wouldn't be true.”

“What words, *solnyshko*?” Ilya ran the pad of his thumb over Shane's cheekbones.

“That…I'm gay.” He chewed in his bottom lip, feeling the blush flood his cheeks at the admission.

Ilya hummed a bit, taking Shane's chin in his hand gently. “Well. Now you have said it. And you did not die, hm?”

Shane exhaled and closed his eyes, trying hard to swallow down the sick panic that was festering in his gut. “No.”

“Is hard. I know it. I was terrified when I came out to you. Was also first time I had ever said it out loud to anyone. Made me want to throw up.”

Shane felt a new swell of emotion roll through him like a wave. They had been so young. He was trying to imagine himself at that age, having those confusing feelings that he only knew now as an adult. Ilya had been so open and trusting with him, always. And Shane's heart had always been ready to hold space for Ilya exactly as he was.

Shane wrapped his arms tightly around Ilya, hanging onto him like a lifeline. Ilya rubbed soothing circles into his back.

“I promise it will be okay, *solnyshko*. And no matter what happens, you will still have me. Always. Has always been you and me, yes?”

“You and me.” Shane agreed, taking a moment to breathe Ilya in before standing upright again.

The sound of his mom's voice carried from downstairs. “Dinner's almost ready!”

Shane pushed a few stray curls away from Ilya's face, then shook his hands out. “Okay. Fuck. Okay. Let's go.”

The familiar creaking of the stairs beneath Shane's feet almost acted like a countdown as he approached the bottom, listening to the sound of his parents puttering around in the kitchen on the other side of the wall. He felt his heart stutter beneath his ribs as he took a shaky breath, forcing a smile onto his face when his mom looked up at him.

He and Ilya took their seats quietly at the table across from his parents. Shane felt his stomach grumble as he looked at the spread of food. Home. The place where he had always felt the safest. And now he was afraid that he was about to drive a freight train straight through it; fracture it and flatten it into the earth until it could no longer be what it was before.

He took small bites of food, slow and measured, trying his hardest to keep it down. Which was not particularly easy, considering it felt like his stomach was trying to climb out through his throat.

During a beat of silence, he dabbed his mouth with a napkin before clearing his throat. He felt Ilya's foot press against the side of his own as he took in a breath. “I, um. I actually have something I want to…talk about. With you guys.”

Shane's voice felt awkward and foreign in his own mouth as the words tumbled out. He watched as his parents stole a glance at each other before they both looked at him in anticipation.

“I…” He screwed his eyes shut. Fuck. He was making this more awkward than it already was. He wiped his palms down the length of his thighs, partially to remove the cold sweat and partially to ground himself. “I'm gay.”

He couldn't bring himself to look up in that moment, so his eyes settled on his plate instead.

The only sound was the clinking of a fork being set down. It might as well have been a firework exploding right next to Shane's head with how loud it seemed to his ears. Shane felt his chest seize in a painful clench, like his heart and lungs were being twisted up and wrung out.

“Sweetheart.” Yuna started, gently. Shane looked up at her finally, to find her eyes searching. “Thank you for telling us. I-” She cut her eyes to Ilya, taking an awkward pause.

The moment suddenly felt deeply private. Shane was Ilya's whole world. But he needed to remember he was also Yuna and David's whole world. And they did not yet know this part of their son that loved Ilya. They hardly knew Ilya at all. And here he was, watching in real time as they learned something incredibly personal about their son.

“Ah, sorry. I am sorry. I can step out.” Ilya pushed his chair out, but Shane turned toward him, his hands shooting out like a whip to grab at his arm.

“No! No, please, Ilya.” Shane pleaded, his warm brown eyes brimming with tears. “I can't-” his words got cut off by a strangled sound in his throat. Ilya could tell Shane was swallowing back his sobs. He was panicking.

“Okay. I will stay. Is okay.” Ilya tried to reassure him, but Shane's hands were trembling where they gripped into his arm. Shane drew in a ragged breath, but it seemed to hardly reach his lungs.

“Shh. Hey-” Ilya put one hand on the back of Shane's neck, the other cupping his cheek. “Look at me. *Solnyshko*, look at me.”

Shane's eyes met his, the tears now spilling over as his chest heaved. Ilya hated seeing Shane like this; suffering through things he could not control. It broke his heart.

Ilya gently brushed a tear away with his thumb. “Everything is okay. I am right here. Okay?”

Shane closed his eyes as he nodded. Ilya pressed a quick kiss to his forehead before using the back of his hand to wipe the lingering tears that sat on Shane's cheeks and the curve of his jaw.

When Ilya finally turned back to Shane's parents, they were both looking back and forth between Ilya and Shane. Shane kept a hand clutched into the sleeve of Ilya's sweater, his fingers sliding under the cuff to rest on skin.

“Shane.” Yuna said quietly, reaching across the table to cover Shane's hand with her own. “You know we love you. And we're so proud of you. Nothing could ever change that, okay?”

The words shot straight through Ilya's heart. He realized, all at once, that this was how parents were supposed to be with their children. It had been so long since he'd had the love of his mother. And nothing he had done had ever been enough to earn his father's love nor his pride. But Shane's parents were looking at him with such fierce love in their eyes; something so strong and unwavering. He had to physically stop himself from bursting out to thank them for taking such good care of the man he loved more than anything in this world.

Shane took a deep breath next to him, nodding at his mother's words.

“Is there something else you want to say, son?” David said gently. God, they could read Shane like a book. They really knew their son. It made Ilya's heart swell again.

“Yes. I, um. Ilya isn't just my friend. Well, not anymore. We're in a relationship.” Shane's grip tightened on the cuff of Ilya's sleeve. Ilya looked up to meet the gaze of both Hollanders.

David was nodding, and Yuna offered him a small smile. “Well. I can't exactly say we're surprised.” She said, her hand still on Shane's.

“What? About which part?” Shane gawked, and Ilya had to force back a smile. He was so adorable sometimes that it hurt.

“About either part. We know you pretty well, Shane.” She smiled.

“We sort of had a suspicion. With the way you spoke about Ilya, it seemed like maybe he was more than a friend. I personally thought maybe it was a crush. But I'm glad to know it's more than that.” David said, folding his hands in front of him.

Ilya couldn't stop the smug grin that spread on his face. “Oh, *solnyshko*. You could not hide your crush on me.”

“Shut *up*!” Shane smacked him on the arm. “Oh my god. Dad, please. That's so embarrassing.”

“What?” David laughed. “You just said you're in a relationship. I'm sure he's aware that you like him.”

Ilya couldn't help himself. Shane looked mortified, his cheeks a ruddy pink color. He leaned in and kissed him right over his freckles, soft and sweet. Shane tried not to smile, but he failed.

“Well.” Yuna sat up straight. “Ilya. As long as you make Shane happy, you are part of this family. And Shane, sweetheart. We love you so much. Thank you for trusting us.”

“We're proud of you, son. Of both of you.” David added. “You're both very hard working, talented young men. I'm glad you have each other.”

Ilya felt Shane's hand find his, lacing their fingers together. He looked down at his other hand; at the ugly scar that split his palm in two. Shane's father had just said more kind things about him in that sentence than his own father had in his entire life. He wasn't sure whether that should hurt or feel good. Maybe both. He tried to ignore the way his chest felt like it was holding his heart in a vice.

“Shane is very important to me.” He let his eye contact bounce between both of Shane's parents. “He has been for a very long time. He means everything to me. All the love I have to give, I will give to him. I promise you this.”

He felt Shane's lips press a chaste kiss to the hinge of his jaw. Yuna looked at them with an unguarded fondness that made Ilya's eyes sting with the threat of tears.

“That's good to know, Ilya. All we want is for Shane to be happy and loved.” She reached out to place a hand over Ilya's forearm. The warmth of her touch made Ilya draw in a breath. It was a mother's touch. One that he would never take for granted.

He prayed to whatever was listening that this was his future. His family. His forever life with Shane at his side. It was something he had never dared to dream of before. But today, it had never felt more possible.

As the warm water from the sink ran over his hands, Shane stole a glance behind him at where Ilya was sitting next to his dad on the couch. He smiled fondly, his attention turning back to the dishes when his mom began to speak.

“Well. I have to admit, when you came home from that first summer of camp and told me about your new best friend from Russia, I did not imagine one day you would be bringing him here as your boyfriend." She playfully bumped shoulders with him, her hands busy with the dish towel.

“Yeah. Me neither.” Shane laughed softly.

“Leave it to you to fall in love with the only hockey player who could ever keep up with you.” She teased.

“Oh my *god*, mom. That's not why I-” He stopped himself, thinking for a moment. “Okay. I mean maybe that's part of it. But he's…I don't know if I even have the right words.”

“Try me.” She turned to him, hip resting on the counter. “I mean, I know you two get along really well. You've always told us he was a good friend. But…what made it more than that?”

Shane took a breath, cutting the water off. “Well. I just feel like he really…gets me. It's just easy with him, it always has been. And he's just always so sweet to me. Like, I would never doubt for a second how special I am to him. And it's a good feeling.” He let his eyes wander back over to Ilya sitting on the couch, deep in conversation now with his dad.

“He's a good person. He cares. A lot more than people probably realize.” Shane's eyes stayed locked on Ilya. He was unable to stop the smile tugging at his lips. “So, yeah. Plus, he's really-” He stopped that thought from becoming verbal, feeling the heat in his cheeks.

“...attractive?” His mom supplied, an eyebrow raised in amusement.

“Attractive.” Shane agreed. It was a more appropriate word than what he had been thinking.

She gave him a squeeze on the shoulder. “I can tell he takes good care of you.”

“He really does.” Shane was grinning now, and his mom pulled him into a tight hug.

“Come on. Let's go sit.” She rubbed his back a bit before they both went to join Ilya and David in the living room.

It was tradition for them to huddle up on the couch under blankets on Christmas Eve night to watch movies until one of them inevitably passed out. He never imagined that tradition would now involve the man he loved. He plopped down at Ilya's side, leaving not an inch of space between them.

Ilya smiled, snaking an arm around him. He turned his head, speaking quietly into Shane's ear. “I love you. Thank you for bringing me.”

Shane turned his head, letting their lips brush as he spoke. “I love you.” He murmured, then gave him a quick kiss, realizing that they were still in front of his parents. They had only just

found out that he was gay less than an hour ago; he didn't need to further shock them by ravaging his boyfriend's mouth the way that he wanted to.

Instead, he settled at Ilya's side, draping a blanket over both of them. Ilya's arm stayed around him, fingers rubbing circles into his waist. By the soft light of the Christmas tree, Ilya looked otherworldly. Shane let himself marvel at the profile of his face. He was gorgeous, especially the way his soft mouth relaxed and his brows tensed as he focused his attention on the movie playing on the TV.

What movie it was, Shane couldn't say. He was lost in the moment, his body feeling far too small to hold everything he was feeling. He wanted to wrap this moment up in a bow, like the presents under the tree, and keep it forever.

Ilya would forever be the one he brought home. He would forever be the one that Shane soothed to sleep by petting his pretty hair. He would forever be the one that Shane had to wrestle and bicker with playfully over what they would watch on TV. He would forever be the one that Shane would buy horrible sugary snacks for, just to see him smile.

Shane laid his head on Ilya's shoulder, letting himself commit this moment into the deepest part of his memories.

Chapter End Notes

We love a world where Shane's parents have no negative pre-conceived notions about Ilya <3

Also can u believe Hollanov literally invented being in love, so crazy

NEXT UP: our boys stay up to have those deep conversations you only have with your soul mate in the middle of the night when you should be sleeping, we find out how exactly Ilya left Russia, and very sentimental gifts are exchanged

THANK YOU ALL FOR READING SO FAR I read every comment and I smile and I love you all

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The feeling of a warm hand on his cheek pulled Shane from sleep; his eyes bleary as he blinked them awake.

“Honey. We're going up to bed now.” His mom's voice whispered softly. As Shane slowly came back to life, he realized he had been asleep on Ilya's chest. Ilya was currently half slumped over the arm of the sofa, breathing deeply, still sound asleep.

“Okay.” He whispered back. “Goodnight.”

She gave them a soft smile before padding up the steps behind David.

Shane stretched, turning his neck this way and that to work out the stiff muscles from the awkward way he had been sleeping, before turning to Ilya.

His heart surged with an overwhelming fondness as he looked him over. His plush lips were slightly parted. His honey colored lashes were fanned over his cheeks, which were slightly flushed with warmth. His curls were sticking up messily in different directions, some of them falling over his face.

Shane reached down and sunk his fingers deep into the thick tuft of curls on top of his head, scratching at his scalp. “Ilya.” He whispered, leaning down to kiss his forehead. His skin was so warm it made Shane's mouth tingle.

“Mmmnnngh.” Ilya grumbled, a hand coming up to rub at his eye.

“Come on.” Shane kissed his cheek. “Get up, let's go upstairs.”

Ilya made a whiny noise of protest, keeping his eyes closed. Shane tried to tug on him, but he was an unmovable mass of muscle and stubbornness.

Shane hummed, then slid a hand up the front of Ilya's sweater onto his burning hot skin.

“*Blyat*!” Ilya jumped, his eyes flying open then blinking harshly against the light. “Fuck, Shane, your hand is fucking cold.” He tried to kick him away, brows furrowed.

Shane only anchored himself in place and added his other hand, squeezing at Ilya's pecs.

Ilya hissed at the feeling, shoving Shane back by the chest. “You are evil monster. So mean to me.” He rubbed both eyes, then reached his long arms up to stretch.

“Well, get up then. Big baby.” Shane stood, holding out his hands.

“I am *your* big baby.” Ilya said, voice still hoarse and even deeper than usual. He allowed Shane to pull him to his feet.

Shane pulled him into a hug, savoring his warmth. “Yes. You're my baby.”

Ilya pressed his face down into Shane's shoulder, allowing Shane to hold him there. Ilya really was his baby. Shane loved this about him. Just as other people would not venture to describe Ilya Rozanov as *cute*, they also probably would have a hard time believing the Russian was so soft and cuddly. He loved being held. He loved having his scalp scratched and his back rubbed and his face kissed. And Shane loved being the one who got exclusive rights to do so.

Shane joined their hands and half dragged a still sleepy Ilya up the stairs and into the bathroom. They bumped elbows playfully as they brushed their teeth, until Shane threw a hard elbow into Ilya's ribs when he let his guard down to spit into the sink.

Ilya grunted, whipping his head up as Shane grinned wickedly at him, jumping backwards.

“Oh you little fucking brat-” Ilya grunted between his teeth, clearly trying not to be too loud with Shane's parents sleeping in the room over.

Shane had to hold back a squeal as Ilya grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him down into a headlock.

Sure, they were boyfriends. But at the end of the day, they were still best friends. And they were still stupid jock hockey players. Roughhousing was an everyday occurrence for them.

Still tucked into a headlock, Shane planted his feet hard into the floor and twisted them both, shoving Ilya back into the sink. Ilya hissed when his hip clipped the counter top with a loud clatter, and Shane tried to take the opportunity to flee the scene. But Ilya's ridiculously long limbs allowed him to reach out and grab Shane by the back of the shirt, pushing him against the doors of the linen closet.

“Ow!” Shane grunted when his back hit the door handle.

“*Stop*.” Ilya hissed when Shane lurched forward and pulled him down by his neck. Shane ignored him, twisting Ilya into a headlock, giggling wildly.

“Boys!” Yuna's voice from the hallway made them both jump. “Enough. Are you both 12 years old? Go to bed!” She crossed her arms.

Shane grinned when Ilya hung his head like a child. “Sorry Mrs. Hollander. We will keep it down. Good night.” He grabbed Shane by the wrist and quickly pulled him along into the bedroom, promptly shutting the door behind them.

“You are trying to get me into trouble.” Ilya said, now stalking around him, circling like a predator. His pupils were blown wide in the darkness of the room, only adding to his predatory gaze. Shane's dick twitched with interest, and he wondered whether that should concern him.

Ilya didn't give him much time to consider, because Shane was suddenly flat on his back, pinned down on the bed with Ilya over top of him. He held Shane's arms down above his head, staring down at him, his eyes nearly black.

“I thought you were good boy, hm?” Ilya's voice was a low growl that tugged at Shane's lower stomach. “You do not want to be good for me anymore? Is that it?”

Ilya Rozanov unfortunately knew *exactly* what he was doing, and Shane was always so embarrassingly hypnotized by it. Shane felt his lips part, eyes wide as he stared up at his boyfriend. “I do.” He said quietly.

“Hm?” Ilya gripped Shane's chin in his hand. “I did not hear you, *kotik*. Tell me.”

“I want to be good for you.” Shane said, mouth slack as he went pliant under Ilya's touch. Ilya was so honey sweet to him always, but Shane always found himself practically drooling when he took control like this. He had been wanting to get on Ilya for hours now, and the want had bloomed into a need that was growing exponentially as he looked into Ilya's eyes.

“Is what I thought.” Ilya dipped his head down to tug Shane's bottom lip between his teeth. Shane sighed out a moan, writhing beneath Ilya as he tried to find some friction. Ilya moved one hand down to pin his hips in place. “Ah, no. You will be good, and you will be patient, yes?”

Shane nodded emphatically, and was rewarded with the slide of Ilya's tongue in his mouth. He groaned into the kiss as Ilya deepened it, his whole body feeling like a live wire. When he finally pulled away, Ilya's lips were slick and kiss swollen where they hovered above him.

“Keep your hands here. Stay still for me. And stay quiet.” Ilya instructed, pushing up at Shane's shirt. Shane helped him remove it completely, before settling back into position, hands laying on the pillow above his head. Ilya grinned down at him.

“*Krasivyy mal'chik*.” He cooed, his hand trailing from Shane's jaw down the side of his neck. *Beautiful boy*.

The sound of the Russian rolling off Ilya's tongue made Shane shiver. He was really going to need Ilya to teach him some one day; particularly for how much he used it when he was seemingly too turned on to use English. Shane was fairly certain he had just said the words that Svetlana had told him about, but he wasn't completely sure, and he also couldn't remember what she said at all. He was too far gone at the sight above him.

Shane tried to keep his breathing even when Ilya rucked his own shirt off, tossing it to the floor next to them. His hand twitched in response to seeing bare skin. He so badly wanted to touch. But he curled his fingers into his palms and took a steadying breath instead.

Ilya leaned back down, pressing messy, open mouthed kisses to the column of Shane's throat. Shane gladly tilted his head back to give better access, exhaling shakily as he felt teeth scrape over the skin. Ilya's tongue then dragged a path from the hollow of his throat to a collarbone, where his mouth latched on as he began to suck a bruise into the skin there.

Shane gasped softly, his leg kicking out as he fought himself to stay still. A large hand reached back to press down on his thigh. “Relax, *malysh*.” Ilya purred.

Shane's skin prickled when he felt the warmth of Ilya's tongue run between his pecs; a slow, wet drag that made his stomach muscles contract. He was beginning to realize that Ilya intended to take his sweet time, which already had Shane practically panting.

He gasped louder this time when he felt teeth clamp down gently over a nipple. He bit down harder on his own bottom lip, but was still unable to stifle the moan that escaped his throat when Ilya's tongue swiped over it languidly to soothe the bite.

He felt the loss of heat when Ilya's mouth left his skin as he picked his head up. “Shh. Hush now. Quiet, remember?”

The deepness of Ilya's voice was enough to make Shane's back arch off the bed. He nodded, then swallowed back a whine when Ilya murmured “good boy” against his sternum.

Hot lips trailed their way down past his navel, and Shane had to screw his eyes shut when he felt Ilya bite down on his hip bone, squeezing flesh between his teeth. His fingers dug into his own palms as he slightly writhed under the feeling, unable to stop his open mouthed panting.

Nimble fingers were now unbuttoning and unzipping his jeans; and Ilya smirked when Shane immediately lifted his hips off the bed to aid in the process of pulling them down. Ilya yanked them off completely and tossed them over the bed before leaning down, hovering just above where Shane was incredibly hard in his boxer briefs.

Through the thin layer of fabric, he could feel the warmth of Ilya's breath. It was enough to make his heart stutter. Shane watched, jaw slack, as Ilya began to nuzzle his face against his clothed erection where it laid flat against his stomach.

He forced the air out of his lungs, toes curling, throat burning with the words he was holding back. *Please*.

“You are being so good for me.” Ilya said, hooking his fingers under the waistband. Shane drew in a breath when the cool air hit him as his underwear were shoved down in a swift motion.

“Beautiful.” Ilya murmured, and Shane sent a silent thanks up to whatever the hell was listening when Ilya didn't hesitate to get his mouth on him.

His tongue ran up the length before swallowing him down completely. Shane could feel the saliva pooling out of Ilya's mouth as he bobbed his head, fingers digging into Shane's thighs.

He couldn't hold it back. A moan tore from him, and Ilya pulled off immediately, a trail of spit hanging from his mouth. “Quiet, *malysh*.” He whispered, and Shane clamped his mouth shut when Ilya got back to work.

Lava was pooling in his belly as Ilya picked up the pace. He was panting again, hands clenched into the pillow to stop himself from reaching down to grasp into Ilya's curls. There

was something distinctly erotic about having Ilya here, in the room he grew up in. About the way Ilya was commanding but soothing. Ilya knew how to light him up like a match, and he could feel himself burning from the inside out.

His orgasm hit him hard, a guttural moan forcing its way out as he spilled into Ilya's throat. Ilya pulled off of him and quickly covered Shane's mouth with his; swallowing down his panting as he kissed him deeply.

Shane's hands flew up to grasp hard at the curls on the back of Ilya's head, tugging. Ilya moaned into his mouth, hands holding Shane's face. When he pulled back, Shane was murmuring against Ilya's lips.

“I love you. Fuck, I love you.”

“Mmm. I love you.” Ilya kissed his bottom lip, then laid down next to him, shimmying out of his jeans. “I think my dick will fall off if I keep it trapped in these pants for one more second.”

Shane wasted absolutely no time, immediately rolling to his side and yanking Ilya's underwear down in a rough motion.

“Woah.” Ilya laughed, but Shane grinned in satisfaction when the laugh dissolved into a soft moan as he took Ilya in his hand. Ilya yanked Shane's hand back up by the wrist, spitting into. He moaned louder this time when Shane's hand found him again.

“Shhh.” Shane chided, then covered Ilya's mouth with his own to dampen the sound. He could tell Ilya was already teetering on the edge, bucking up into Shane's hand as he grunted softly.

When he started to let out a string of garbled Russian, Shane quickly ducked down to replace his hand with his mouth. Ilya grabbed a pillow, pressing it over his face as he groaned through his release. Shane happily swallowed it all, peppering kisses over Ilya's thigh when he pulled off.

“Fuck, Shane.” Ilya panted when he tossed the pillow to the side.

“Feel better?” Shane grinned up at him, taking in how perfect he looked with his flushed face and wrecked expression.

“Better.” Ilya exhaled, carding a hand through Shane's hair. “Come up here.”

Shane crawled back up to him, sighing happily into the tender kiss Ilya placed on his mouth.

“I forgive you for trying to get me in trouble with your mother. Do it again, and I will leave one of these-” Ilya poked his finger into the fresh hickey on his collarbone “-where she can see it.”

“You're a menace.” Shane murmured against his mouth before kissing him again. He let his hand pet the thatch of hair below Ilya's navel, eyes trailing down the hard lines of his body until they caught on the tattoo.

“I really can't believe you got my name tattooed on you. I can't believe you have *two* tattoos for me. Do I need to return the favor?”

Ilya hummed, considering. “I think yes. What about one above your ass that says ‘property of Ilya Rozanov’?”

“You fucking wish, dude.” Shane huffed.

“Wish what? That your ass belongs to me?” Ilya turned to him, cocking an eyebrow.

“That I would get a tattoo that says that, idiot.” Shane flicked him on the stomach.

“Ah. But you admit, your ass does belong to me.”

“I mean. You're the only one who's ever been inside it.” Shane shrugged.

“Oh. So your ass is like the moon, then? Whoever gets there first gets to have? Should I stick tiny flag with my face on it into your asshole?” Ilya smiled smugly, pressing their noses together.

“Oh my god, go away.” Shane laughed, pushing him by the shoulders.

“What? We lost space race first time around. Let me have this one. Claim over Shane Hollander's ass. My greatest achievement for my motherland.”

“Yeah, I'm sure Russia will just love that one. Putin will personally congratulate you.” He shook his head, and Ilya laughed loudly. Shane put a hand over his mouth.

“Shh! Shut up!” He whispered sharply. “God, you're so loud. Putin can probably hear you from here.” He admittedly loved how boisterous Ilya was, but maybe not when it was the middle of the night after his mom had already scolded them for being too loud.

Ilya pouted, lifting his hips as he pulled his underwear back up. “My boyfriend hates me.”

Shane rolled his eyes, pulling his boxers back up as well. “Unfortunately, I'm obsessed with you.”

Ilya bit his lip with a grin. “I am obsessed with you too, *solnyshko*. Have been for very, very long time. Is embarrassing.”

Shane turned to look at him again. Sometimes he really could not get over Ilya's face. They looked at each other for a few moments, as if they were memorizing each other's features. Ilya stroked a gentle hand along Shane's cheek, and the softness in his eyes made Shane feel like we wanted to weep.

Eventually, Ilya sat up a bit. “I have something I want to show you.” He fidgeted with his hands, as if he were unsure, before leaning over the bed to unzip his bag. There was a rustling sound in the darkness before he sat back up, producing a wrinkled and worn piece of paper that had been smoothed out as much as possible. He flicked on the small bedside lamp, the room now taking on a soft, warm glow.

“Do you remember when I told you about the night I fought with my father? When I got these?” Ilya gestured down to the scars on his hand. Shane nodded, suddenly feeling his chest tense up.

“And I told you that my brother found the letter I wrote for you? That I wanted my agent to give you?”

Shane could only nod again, his eyes glued on the wrinkled paper.

“When I came home from hospital, I thought my brother had probably destroyed it. But I found it, balled up in the trash. I didn't want to get rid of it. I had hoped I would still be able to get it to you, somehow. Obviously that did not happen, but.” Ilya sheepishly held the paper out. “I packed up a little too well in the move. I only just found it recently. Here. I want you to have. Was meant for you.”

Shane swallowed, the saliva sticky in his mouth. He gently took the paper, as if it would break in his hands if he weren't careful. He turned a bit toward the light to get a better look.

Shane
(солнышко),

First - congratulations on draft. I am so proud I cannot even say in words. Not English anyway. You are best player I have ever seen. NHL better get ready.

I only wish I could have been there with you. I miss you so much. I think of you every single day. I wish so badly that all of this could have been different. I never wanted to say goodbye to you. That was maybe hardest thing I have ever done. I am sorry that our last memory together is a sad one.

I am trying very hard to change this. I have American agent to help me get to NHL. I want to leave Russia. I do not know if I ever want to come back. I am so alone here.

I am hoping this works. Maybe by the time you read this I will be on my way there.

I need you to know I have never stopped thinking about you. I do not think I ever will. You will always be my favorite no matter what happens.

You have biggest piece of my heart and I will carry you there always.

Yours,
Илья

Shane felt the wetness on his cheeks before he could even register his own thoughts. Ilya was still a teenager when he wrote this. He couldn't help but to imagine him, scrawling this out in his room in the dark. *I am so alone here*.

He was so young and so sweet and Shane's heart was shattering into a thousand tiny pieces for this version of Ilya that he couldn't protect. Ilya, who risked everything to try to leave

home and be closer to Shane again. Ilya, who never stopped being proud of Shane, even when his own dreams got crushed under his father's ugly foot.

“Oh, *solnyshko*. Is okay. Don't cry.” Ilya whispered, using a thumb to brush away the tears burning on Shane's cheeks. “You will make me cry.”

“I love you, Ilya. I'm so sorry I couldn't help you.” Shane choked out, sniffling wetly.

“I know, my love.” Ilya said softly, his hand still brushing Shane's cheek.

“I thought about you, on draft day. I thought about you that whole day. It all felt so wrong. I fucking missed you so much. You deserved to be there.” Shane felt his lip wobble and his chin tremble. That day had been horribly bittersweet. Everyone around him was so ecstatic and so proud. He had been happy, truly. But there was part of him that ached desperately for Ilya. That wondered if Ilya was okay. If he was happy. If he was safe.

And he wasn't, as it turned out. He was desperate and sad and lonely. And soon after he wrote this letter, he was bleeding all over his kitchen floor in front of his piece of shit father and resigning himself to the fact that he would never leave Russia. Shane felt his stomach twist painfully.

He put both hands on Ilya's face. “I'm so sorry, baby.” He said, barely above a whisper, pressing their foreheads together.

Ilya had to swallow back the lump in his throat that was threatening to turn into a sob. Shane was holding his face so sweetly and called him *baby* and he knew he had never felt loved or cared for like this since his mother passed.

“Is okay, *solnyshko*. I am here now. With you. That is all I care about.” Ilya closed his eyes, their noses brushing together.

“How did you get here? How did you leave? You never told me. You're not…like…you're safe, right?” Shane grasped at the curls at the nape of his neck, and Ilya could feel the fear in his still shaking voice.

“I am safe, *solnyshko*. Don't worry.” He brushed his lips against Shane's cheek, leaving a soft kiss there. “Two months before I come to Canada, my father…he died.”

“Oh.” Shane said softly. “Ilya…”

He knew Shane was trying to figure out if he should offer his sympathy or not. Shane knew as well as anyone that his father had been a terrible person. Still, it did mean that Ilya was technically an orphan now. And he felt every bit of it.

“I called agent the next day.” Ilya scratched the side of his nose, looking down. “I did not…” he swallowed hard. “I did not go to his funeral. I did not go to his grave. Was the one time I was happy that he hated my mother, because it meant he did not want to be buried anywhere near her. So I did not have to be anywhere near him when I went to see her for last time.”

The admission made a tear roll down his cheek. “My brother was furious with me. We got into fist fight day after the funeral. Was…not good.” He quickly swiped a tear, shrugging. “Only thing that shut him up was when I tell him NHL will pay me much more than KHL, and I will send money back for my niece. Always comes back to money with him. Was all I was ever good for. Money and to be the enemy everyone took their anger out on.” He shook his head. “But, is over now. Is done.”

Shane wrapped his arms around him, cradling the back of Ilya's head. “Fuck them. Fuck your brother. Fuck your father. My mom always told me not to speak ill of the dead, but that fucker didn't deserve to be alive.”

That made a wet laugh escape Ilya's throat. He buried his face into Shane's shoulder.

“I'm serious.” Shane held onto him tighter. “That day in camp, when you came back to the hotel, I've never in my life wanted to hurt someone worse than I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to kill him, Ilya.”

“I know, *solnyshko*. You do not have to worry about that now.” He closed his eyes, cheek pressed to Shane's shoulder.

“I love you, Ilya. And I want…I want this. With you. I want you to be part of my family. I want you to have that. And there's no one else I'd rather have it with.”

Ilya pressed his cheek harder against Shane, feeling the burn of tears in his eyes. Only a few months ago, he would have never believed any of this to be possible. He didn't dare to imagine it. Being wanted. Being chosen. Being loved.

He wanted to burrow under Shane's skin and live inside the warmth and the scent of him. There were probably people who would think that the level of sheer obsession he had with Shane was not normal. But he truly did not fucking care. Those people didn't understand that Shane had, honestly and literally, saved his life. That loving him was the only thing that had ever been easy. That Shane was the only light he'd ever known.

It was only when he heard Shane's soothing shushing that he realized he was fully crying now, wet face pressed into the side of Shane's neck. “*Spasibo, solnyshko*.” He whispered. “*Spasibo*.”

He felt Shane laugh softly. “You know, one day you'll have to teach me more words than just *da*, *nyet*, *blyat*, and *solnyshko*.”

Ilya sniffled a laugh, picking his head up to look at Shane. “*Spasibo*. Thank you.”

“*Spasibo*.” Shane repeated. His pronunciation was shit and his accent was horrible. God, Ilya loved him so much it hurt. “You don't need to thank me for loving you, Ilya.”

“But I do.” Ilya sat back. “I could be easy not to love, I think. I come from fucked up family. Maybe I am fucked up too. Pathetic, probably. Not worth it.”

“No.” Shane grabbed his face firmly. “Don't you ever say that again.”

Shane's voice was firm, teetering on angry. Ilya looked down and swallowed. “Ilya Rozanov, look at me right now.” Shane squeezed slightly at his jaw, and Ilya met Shane's gaze to see his eyes blazing with determination.

“You are not fucked up or pathetic. And you're worth everything to me. I love you exactly how you are. I always have and I always will.” He used both hands to wipe the tears from Ilya's cheeks. “No more tears. I love you so much. Okay?”

“I love you.” Ilya thunked their foreheads together. “Forever.”

Shane pressed a soft kiss to his cheek, then carefully set the letter down on the nightstand and clicked off the lamp, the room now only very dimly lit by the moonlight from behind the blinds. “Come here.” He whispered, laying down and opening his arms.

Ilya gladly positioned himself half on top of Shane, sighing happily when he felt arms wrapping around him. “This is only way we will both fit in this tiny bed anyway, I think.” Ilya mumbled against him.

“Yeah. I don't think when my parents got me this bed in middle school that they were anticipating I would be sharing it with another 200 pound man when I grew up.” Shane tangled a hand into Ilya's hair. “But I'm glad I am.”

“I am glad, too.” Ilya whispered. His breathing slowed as he listened to the sound of Shane's heart.

Shane woke to the feeling of a solid, warm mass on top of him. He blinked against the soft light of dawn filtering through the blinds, then smiled at the sight of Ilya sprawled over him, face tucked between his neck and shoulder. He felt Ilya stir a bit as he rubbed his hands up and down his back. Ilya was sort of crushing his bladder, but he didn't care at the moment.

Ilya exhaled a soft groan into his neck, shifting to tuck himself tighter into Shane. Shane smiled, running his fingers through the back of Ilya's hair. “Morning, baby. Merry Christmas.” He said softly.

Something about using the pet name made his chest feel tingly. Ilya had been calling him by pet names for basically as long as they had known each other. It only felt right to do the same. And Ilya was *his baby*. He felt a wave of adoration and possessiveness come over him as he tightened his arms around Ilya's back.

He felt Ilya smile against him, then press his lips to Shane's skin. “Merry Christmas, *solnyshko*.” His voice was still gruff with sleep.

Shane patted him on the ass a few times. “Up.”

Ilya groaned his protest, so Shane slapped his ass hard, giggling at the sharp crack that echoed through the room, followed by Ilya's yelp. Ilya rolled off of him, kicking him on the side of the leg. “Fucking brat.” He grumbled, sliding off the edge of the bed and grabbing Shane's arm to make him follow.

Shane stood, plastering himself to Ilya's back, kissing him on the shoulder as he snaked arms around him. He felt Ilya's arms move behind him as he crouched a bit, hands going to the back of Shane's thighs as he pulled him into a piggy back. Shane couldn't stop his big stupid grin as he put his arms loosely around Ilya's neck, allowing himself to be carried out into the hallway towards the bathroom.

Yuna almost ran into them as she opened the bedroom door, laughing and rolling her eyes fondly. “You two really are just big kids, aren't you? Breakfast will be ready in half an hour.” She patted Shane on the back as she squeezed by them.

Ilya deposited Shane on the floor when they reached the bathroom, both of them brushing their teeth as they stood hip to hip. Once they had finished, Ilya immediately crowded Shane back against the bathroom door, a hand draped across his throat loosely as he kissed him, slow and deep.

Shane let his hands roam the bare skin of Ilya's back, melting at the feeling of their tongues sliding together. He nipped at Ilya's lower lip as he pulled away, speaking against his mouth. “Come on. I wanna give you your present before we go downstairs.”

Ilya quirked up a brow. “Oh?”

“Not that, pervert. A real gift.” Shane rolled his eyes, taking Ilya by the wrist and leading him back into the bedroom.

Ilya sat down on the edge of the bed, kicking his feet a bit as he bit his lip over a smile. His eyes were bright and his curls were a mess and he looked so happy that Shane could cry.

Shane reached down into his duffel bag, pulling out the gift bag that was now a bit crumpled from the journey. Though Ilya hardly seemed to mind as his hands shot forward, a smile beaming on his face. Shane gladly pushed the bag into his hands, then sat down next to him on the edge of the bed, watching.

Ilya reached into the bag and carefully extracted the small photo album, his fingers tracing over the spine of it, then over their initials that were scrawled over the cover. Ilya seemed to hesitate for half a second before he opened it, then Shane watched as his face immediately twitched with emotion. Ilya's chin wobbled and his brows furrowed and he immediately moved a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose as a tear slid down his cheek.

Shane had found his old digital camera discarded in a drawer in this very room over the summer while searching for a phone charger. The thought hadn't occurred to him to turn it on and look through it until the week that Ilya arrived in Montreal.

It was the same camera he had brought with him to all three summers of camp, after his mom had begged him to take pictures for her. At the time, he had found his mother's request annoying. But now, the contents of that camera felt priceless.

The first page, which Ilya was already stuck on, had pictures from their very first days at camp. At the top of the page, ‘Year 1’ was written in Shane's chicken scratch.

[Baby faced Shane and Ilya at 14 years old. Shane holds the camera for a selfie, grinning wide. Ilya's arm is around his shoulder, sticking his tongue out.]

[Ilya leaned back against the railing of the hotel balcony, the sun setting behind him. He holds up both hands in deuces, face serious.]

[Shane leaned back against the same railing, arms crossed over his chest with a similar serious expression.]

Ilya swiped at his tears. “Oh my god. I remember this day. I remember taking these stupid pictures. I can't believe you found this.” He was shaking his head in disbelief.

“Keep going.” Shane encouraged, unable to stop his smile as he rested a hand between Ilya's shoulder blades. Ilya turned the page.

[Shane and Ilya side by side in their full gear, both leaning on their sticks.]

[Shane holds the camera high for a selfie, pointing it downward to get Ilya in the frame. Ilya is sitting on the locker room bench below him, staring up at the camera in tired annoyance. Shane smiles triumphantly.]

“Ah. Evidence of you always being a brat. You were so fucking smug that you beat me in the shootout.” Ilya smiled, eyes still brimmed with tears.

[Ilya holds the camera for a selfie. He leans an elbow on Shane, who is a head shorter than him. Ilya grins smugly. Shane deadpans at the camera.]

[Shane and Ilya in front of the team bus. They each have an arm around each other, and they each hold up a peace sign, their bags at their feet.]

Shane slowly rubbed circles on Ilya's back, the smile never leaving his face as Ilya flipped the page again. ‘Year 2’ was scrawled across the top.

[Slightly less baby-faced Shane and Ilya at 15 years old. Their cheeks are squished together as they both sport wide grins, Shane holding the camera, Ilya's hand on Shane's opposite cheek to press their faces against each other tight.]

[Ilya lounges on the hotel bed, doing his best impression of sexy Ian Malcom in Jurassic Park.]

[Shane digs through his suitcase on the floor, his other hand flipping off the camera.]

They're both full on giggling now, fingers tracing over the pictures.

[Ilya holds the camera. He and Shane are side by side on the bus, both wearing sunglasses, their heads pressed together.]

[Shane and Ilya on the ice, stares locked in a face off.]

[Ilya holds the camera in one hand, a 'draw 4' uno card in the other with a big grin. Shane deadpans at the camera, a large pile of cards in his hands.]

[Shane holds the camera, fighting off a smile as he rolls his eyes. Ilya has his tongue pressed flat against Shane's cheek.]

Shane moved his hand into the back of Ilya's messy curls, ruffling them as Ilya turned the page once more. 'Year 3'.

[16 year old Shane and Ilya. Shane holds the camera, cheeks flushed as Ilya presses an aggressive kiss to his cheek.]

[Shane stands in the middle of the hotel room in a white Spartak Moscow hoodie that looks a size too big. He points at the red logo on his chest with both hands, his tongue hanging out.]

Ilya huffed out a laugh, tracing a finger over it. "If only you knew, you were wearing Spartak Moscow hoodie of future Spartak Moscow superstar."

Shane elbowed him. "All I remember is it smelling like your Russian fuckboy cologne."

Ilya smiled fondly, eyes moving across the page.

[Shane holds the camera, their heads pressed together, backs to the balcony railing. The night sky stretches out behind them. Ilya is winking, tongue pressed to his upper teeth in a suggestive snarl. Shane lips are pursed in a kiss, eyes shut.]

*[Shane and Ilya stand shoulder to shoulder, backs to the camera with their jerseys on display. Their heads are turned to face each othe*r.]

[Ilya holds the camera up high, pointing it downward to capture both his face and Shane's head in his lap where he sleeps. They are sitting on a bus seat. Ilya holds up a finger to his own pursed lips in an exaggerated 'shushing' pose.]

Shane watched as Ilya's eyes drifted to the final picture, his chin wobbling again.

[Ilya holds the camera far out in front of him. Shane is settled on the floor between his legs, head laying back on Ilya's chest. They both wear soft grins.]

"Shane." Ilya gently set the album down and turned to him, taking both of his hands. "This is…this is the best gift anyone has ever given me. I cannot even remember last time I got a real gift. One that meant something. This means everything."

Oh. Now Shane was *definitely* going to cry. He squeezed Ilya's hands. “I'm glad you like it. I can't believe I found them. We're pretty cute, right?”

Ilya laughed wetly. “Yes. The cutest.” He leaned in and kissed Shane, tender and sweet. “I love you so much. So, so much.” He moved warm hands to the sides of Shane's neck. Shane couldn't stop himself from leaning forward again, slotting his lips against Ilya's. It wasn't long before his tongue was begging entry into Ilya's mouth.

He fisted a hand into Ilya's hair. Looking at those pictures had made another surge of possessiveness bubble up inside of him. Ilya had always been his, and he had always been Ilya's. He didn't always exactly know it, but his heart had belonged to this curly haired Russian menace for years. He loved everything about Ilya. He loved that he was sort of insane. He loved that he was effortlessly smart and funny. He loved that he was rough around the edges with the sweetest heart.

Ilya pulled away with a smile, laughing when Shane chased his mouth. “Don't you want *your* present, *solnyshko*?” He grasped at Shane's jaw, kissing his bottom lip softly before reaching down into his bag on the floor.

He produced a box, holding it in his hands as he turned to look at Shane again. “I know that I will probably never go back to Russia. Is…” He looked up, searching for the word. “...bittersweet. I get a little sad to think I will never be able to show you my country. Is not a perfect place and was not an easy place for me to be, but is where I come from. Is part of me. So I wanted to give you some pieces of me, from Russia. Good parts. Things I would have wanted to show you.” He held the box out to Shane.

Shane's heart clenched. He couldn't imagine what that must feel like; to leave your country behind forever. It was the only place Ilya had ever known. He wanted to know it, too. He carefully took the box, setting it between them as he removed the lid.

Shane immediately smiled when he saw a red sweatshirt folded neatly at the top, the Spartak Moscow logo bold in white on the front. He lifted it from the box, unfolding it and turning it around to see ROZANOV 81 displayed on the back.

“Was funny that you find that picture. But now you get official one, special player edition. Russian fuckboy cologne is still included, because I was always wearing it.” Ilya grinned, and Shane immediately brought it to his nose, inhaling. The Russian fuckboy cologne was indeed included, with an undertone of cigarettes.

His mind wandered to Ilya, probably sauntering around Moscow in this sweatshirt like he owned the city, fans stopping him in the streets. Him posing for pictures with a smug look on his face and a cigarette hanging between his lips. It was hot.

He bit his lip a bit, folding the sweatshirt back up and reaching into the box again. He pulled out what looked to be some kind of old notebook, handling it carefully. He opened it to see looping cyrillic neatly written along the lines of the pages.

“Is a recipe book. It belonged to my grandmother, then my mother. Is filled with both of their writing and recipes. My mother used it all the time. I know you cannot read it, but. I thought

maybe we can do it together.” Ilya's voice was a bit sheepish and unsure.

Shane reached out to take his hand. “I would love that.” He said quietly. And he really would. Even if neither of them were the best at cooking, just the thought of sharing this with Ilya made him feel warm all over.

There was one last piece in the box, wrapped carefully in paper. Shane pulled the paper away to reveal a glass frame with various flowers pressed inside.

“From my mother's garden. Our yard was very small, but she loved her flowers. They still came back every year, even after she passed. Was my favorite spot to sit and read when weather was decent. Sometimes I would talk to her there.” Ilya placed his fingers over the cross around his neck.

Shane swallowed down the lump in his throat, taking in the colorful display behind the glass. He gently set it down before he leaned forward to press his face into Ilya's neck, hugging him hard. He eventually pulled back, hands petting through the back of Ilya's hair as he looked over his face. “My baby.” He said quietly. “I love you so much.”

Ilya pressed their foreheads together. “I love you. My Shane.” He sighed, dreamily.

Shane couldn't help but to kiss him again. Multiple times. “Now come on. Breakfast.” He patted Ilya's bicep, hopping up off the bed.

He knew Ilya was going to love today. French toast and hot chocolate and cookies. He was going to be in heaven. And Shane couldn't wait to share this with him. To let him feel the love and comfort he deserved more than anyone he knew.

Shane pulled the Moscow sweatshirt over his head, smiling at Ilya from over his shoulder, taking in the beautiful brightness in his boyfriend's eyes.

Chapter End Notes

who wants to play "how many emotions can we put in a single chapter" MEE I DO

also my hand slipped and the chapter count went up again WHOOPS 🤭

thank you all so much for all the love!!!! your comments keep me motivated 🥰

next up, Ilya gets his first proper Christmas and also drops a bomb on social media 👀

as always, THANK YOU for reading so far!!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The smell of breakfast and the heat from the kitchen hit Shane as soon as he rounded the corner. His dad was stacking french toast onto a plate; his mom pouring coffee into a mug as she leaned back on the kitchen island.

“Morning.” Shane padded towards them, noticing the way his mom's eyes immediately snagged on his sweatshirt.

“Moscow fan?” She quirked up an eyebrow, grabbing two more mugs from the cabinet.

“Rozanov fan.” Shane grinned, turning around to show his boyfriend's name and number displayed boldly across his back.

She laughed, shaking her head. “Yes well, that much we can tell.” She smiled as she poured, handing him the mug of black coffee.

“Was I really that obvious?” Shane grimaced a bit, the embarrassment washing over him again as he remembered their previous conversation.

David carried the plates to the table, an amused look on his face. “Excuse the expression, but you always talk about him like the sun shines out of his ass.”

“*Dad*.” Shane groaned.

“Well!” David laughed. “If I heard you call him sweet one more time, I was planning on staging an intervention to let you know that you were in love.”

“He is sweet!” Shane protested. “It's not my fault.”

“We aren't making fun of you.” His dad put a hand on his shoulder. “I'm happy to see you happy. And he is sweet, I can tell. Sweet to you, anyway.”

Shane couldn't stop the smile that spread over his lips. They didn't know the half of it.

“Speaking of sweet. Do you have creamer for the coffee? Ilya consumes more sugar than an unsupervised child.” Shane said, opening the fridge.

“On the door there.” His mom said over her shoulder. Shane poured a sickening amount of creamer into a fresh mug of coffee, his head whipping around when he heard the creak of the stairs.

Ilya rounded the corner, dressed in fitted jeans and an even more fitted thermal henley that was stretched taut across his chest and hugging his biceps. Shane almost dropped the mug in his hands as his brain made a computer dialup sound.

“Good morning.” Ilya said to no one in particular, but his eyes immediately found Shane as he flashed a grin.

Shane held the mug out to him, feeling his chest flutter when Ilya pressed a quick kiss to his cheek as he took the mug from his hand. He took a long sip, hand moving to the small of Shane's back. “Mmm. Is perfect.”

“I made it extra disgustingly sweet just for you.” Shane said, bumping his hip playfully against Ilya's.

“*Spasibo, solnyshko*.” Ilya bumped him back.

Shane still felt like he was living in a dream. It was Christmas morning. His parents were settling in at the kitchen table. There was a Christmas movie playing quietly in the background. And Ilya was standing glued to his side, sipping coffee, his face soft and content.

Shane grabbed Ilya's free hand and tangled their fingers together, leading him to the table.

“Ilya, I hope you like french toast.” David smiled, grabbing a plate to pile pieces onto.

“Is sweet, yes? If so, I will like.” Ilya settled in his chair, grinning.

“It's sweet. Even sweeter with the maple syrup.” David handed Ilya a plate with a portion that made Shane's stomach churn.

“Dad. No one needs that much food.” Shane huffed. He then watched as Ilya practically drowned his plate in syrup, covering both the french toast and the bacon with an unreasonable amount of sticky sweetness.

He grabbed Ilya's wrist. “*Ilya*!” He hissed, and both of his parents laughed. “It isn't funny, you guys are enabling him. Between the sugar and the cigarettes you're going to die before you're 40.”

“Cigarettes?” Yuna cocked an eyebrow. Ilya kicked Shane hard under the table. Shane dug his heel into the top of Ilya's foot.

“I am quitting. I promise. I hardly ever smoke anymore. Shane is just trying to get me into trouble. Probably afraid you will like me better than him.” Ilya smiled that smug smile that made Shane want to punch him and then lick his mouth.

“Just shut up and eat your thousand grams of sugar.” Shane rolled his eyes.

Ilya turned his head and stuck his tongue out at him, then narrowly dodged Shane's hand when he reached up to smack him on the head.

Yuna shook her head with a laugh. “Well. I can see we're going to have our hands full having two sons.”

Shane just barely caught the way Ilya smiled softly down at his plate. He wondered if Ilya was thinking the same thing he was. That this could be their life. That Ilya already fit here, in the fourth chair at their table that had been waiting empty for Shane's whole life. Like it had always been reserved for Ilya.

“Ilya, I asked Shane this same question yesterday and I'd love to know the same from you. How did you know you wanted Shane to be more than just a friend?”

“Mom.” Shane gave her a pleading look. “Can we-”

“No, is okay.” Ilya put a placating hand on Shane's knee. “For me, I realized back when we were 16.”

Shane glanced up to catch the look of surprise on both his parents’ faces.

“Shane was always special to me. Our friendship always felt different than how it was with other friends. There was special connection there. When I was 15 is when I realize I am bisexual. I think that…maybe unlocked something with me. For what I felt about Shane. Made me realize that maybe it felt different because it was different. It was more. Maybe I always saw him differently, even if I did not realize. So when I see him again at camp after that, it all just started to make sense. I realized I was attracted to him and that I was probably in love with him. By the end of that summer, I knew for sure I was in love with him.” Ilya swiped at the side of his nose, a tell of his that Shane had picked up on years ago.

Shane felt his heart wobble. It was still so unbelievable to him that Ilya could have been in love with him when they were 16 years old. It was also unbelievable that he was offering this information so freely and so calmly to his parents.

“Wow.” Yuna sat back in her chair a bit, as if she were taking Ilya's words in. “So you've been in love with Shane since…”

“Since I was 16. Yes.” Ilya confirmed without hesitation. “I think for a while I tried to tell myself I was not. Because I fear I would never see him again. But it was always there. No matter what I did, I could not get this pretty face out of my head.” Ilya turned to look at him, fingers pinching at his cheek, and Shane very much understood the term ‘heart eyes’.

Ilya's words, coupled with the way he looked at him, made him feel almost dizzy. It was surreal. *He* was surreal. This beautiful man with his beautiful heart; like he was plucked straight from the pages of a romance novel. Shane felt his cheeks heat under Ilya's touch.

Yuna tutted sympathetically. “That's very sweet.”

“You know, you have a reputation of being the terror on ice.” David mused. “They made a whole segment with your fights on ESPN. I didn't really believe it when Shane said you were secretly a big teddy bear. But now?” He grinned.

“Teddy bear, hm?” Ilya slung an arm around Shane's shoulders. “Ah. Shane has always been my weakness. For him, I am teddy bear. Big puppy. But is special for him. I will still be horrible monster to whoever is in my way on the ice.”

Shane felt heat creep up his neck as the words left Ilya's lips, his mouth twisting up into that sly, wolfish grin.

“I don't doubt that.” Yuna said, carefully cutting into her french toast. “But, you really do need to watch it with the penalties.”

“Mom, please. It's Christmas morning. We don't need coach Yuna right now.” Shane rolled his eyes, but felt a smile tug at his lips when Ilya rested a hand on the back of his neck, fingers dancing over the skin.

“Coach Yuna may tell me whatever she wants. She raised prince of hockey. This makes her queen of hockey.” Ilya winked at her, and Shane could see that she was turning into another helpless victim of Ilya's charm.

The effect only seemed to deepen when Ilya was first to the sink to start washing dishes. Shane couldn't help the dopey smile on his face as he watched his mom and his boyfriend smile and laugh easily; his mom dwarfed by the large Russian as they stood side by side at the sink.

Shane joined his dad by the Christmas tree, sitting cross legged on the floor in front of him.

“He seems like a good man.” David was idly pulling presents forward from where they were stacked beneath the tree.

“He is.” Shane ran his fingers along the hem of his sweatshirt, eyes tracking over all the ornaments that dangled from the branches. Years of memories, bathed in the warmth of the twinkling lights.

“And he looks at you like you're the most precious thing on the earth.” David smiled, nudging Shane with his foot.

“He does.” Shane couldn't help but agree. He knew he was blushing. “He treats me like I am, too. He's the most caring person I've ever met. He's so kind to me, sometimes I don't…” Shane dropped his voice a bit. “Sometimes I don't understand how someone like him came from the home he came from. You know what I mean?”

Shane had told his parents about Ilya's home life the day they picked him up from that last year of camp.

Shane was still a wreck; eyes wet and rimmed red. Face rubbed raw from wiping tears away. His breathing still ragged from his panicked sobs.

His parents had been horrified that something terrible happened to him. He had to explain something terrible *had* happened, just not in the way they were thinking.

He told them about Ilya's father, and how Ilya had confided in him about the abuse in the past. It took him several tries to tell them about Ilya returning to their hotel room with a bruised face; trembling with fear and unable to speak. Recounting it had made the sobs wrench their way back up his throat.

They knew that Ilya's father was the reason he had stayed in Russia. That he had beaten his own son into submission and dragged him away to control his life and destroy his dreams.

He couldn't help but to now look at his boyfriend in wonder. The sweet, kind-hearted man he was. A gentle soul, once the hard edges were peeled away.

“Maybe it's part of the reason why he is the way he is.” David said quietly. “He's giving out the love and the kindness that he didn't receive. Or maybe he can better appreciate how good you are for him, after being around people who weren't good for him for so long.”

Shane took a deep breath. Sweet Ilya. He deserved love and kindness more than anyone Shane knew. He vowed to himself that not a day would go by where Ilya forgot how loved he was.

“You know,” Yuna looked up at him from where she was stacking the dried dishes. “Shane never really liked people touching him. He was never cuddly, not even as a toddler. I think maybe the most surprising part about all of this is the way he can't seem to keep his hands off of you.”

Ilya felt a soft smile playing across his face. “Yes. He is very…cuddly with me.” The word ‘cuddly’ came out strangely in his accent, but the images of Shane attached to him like a koala eased his frustration with the English language.

“I'm glad.” She dried her hands, turning to face him. “Things haven't been easy for Shane.”

Yuna's face settled into something more serious. Ilya's brows pinched slightly in concentration, wanting to make sure he caught all of her words.

“He was always the only Asian kid on his team. He was quiet and shy. He wasn't good at talking to people or making new friends. He was just…he was different. And I knew he could feel it. He's always tried to pretend it didn't bother him, when the other kids would make fun of him. But I knew it did. He just didn't want to show it. I guess he didn't want us to worry.” She turned a bit to look at Shane, and Ilya could see the pure love in her eyes. A fierce kind of love that he felt could only come from a mother. His own mother had looked at him that way.

“He is strong.” Ilya followed her gaze to Shane. “He likes to protect. Comes naturally to him, I think.”

She nodded. “He is very protective of the people he loves. But he doesn't always protect himself. I think he's gotten used to pretending to laugh it off.”

Ilya could see the worry etched over her face. He placed his hands over her shoulders, his palms engulfing them.

“He knows how to protect himself. He is very capable. I promise. And I promise that I would never, ever let anyone hurt him. My ways of dealing with it would probably be different than his.” That earned him a knowing smile.

“But you do not need to worry. I have him.”

“I trust you.” Yuna put a hand on Ilya's forearm. “I trust you to take good care of him.”

Ilya could feel his chest ready to crack open and spill the contents of his heart all over this kitchen floor. “This means a lot to me. I will not disappoint you.” His voice came out much more quiet than intended.

Yuna smiled up at him. “I'm sure you won't.”

“He deserves the world.” Ilya's eyes drifted back to Shane. To the soft, easy smile on his lips. To the way the gold light of the Christmas tree made his freckles look so warm against his skin. He was so beautiful it made his breath catch.

Yuna placed a warm, soft hand to his cheek. “He deserves someone who will love him. Come on.” She tucked his curls back before she walked towards the living room, and the gesture was so familiar it made his chest ache. Mama always tucked his curls like that.

Ilya allowed himself to take a few breaths before he followed her, sitting down on the floor near Shane.

Shane immediately plastered himself to Ilya's back, chin hooked over his shoulder, limbs wound around him. Ilya smiled, tugging at Shane's large hands where they draped over him before lacing their fingers.

“Hi.” Shane kissed his cheek sweetly. It made his heart stutter. Ilya was going to die, right here on this floor. He was sure of it.

“Hi *solnyshko*.” He leaned into the kiss, closing his eyes at the feeling of Shane's plush lips.

“I've heard you say that a few times now.” Yuna sat down next to David. “What does it mean?”

“Ah. I think literal translation is little sun. Is like sunshine. Like term of…” He tilted his head, searching for the word.

“Endearment.” Shane whispered into his ear.

“Ah, yes. Term of endearment. Is always what I have called him. He is like sunshine to me.”

He felt Shane press himself tighter against his back. Ilya pulled on his hands a bit, making Shane's arms tighter around him.

“That's very sweet.” Yuna put a hand over her heart.

“Yes, yes, he is mushy and disgusting with how much he loves me.” Shane said impatiently. “Let's open gifts.” He pressed his cheek against Ilya's.

David started to slide wrapped gifts across the floor, Shane's name scrawled across the wrapping paper.

“You sit here, *solnyshko*.” Ilya said softly, patting the floor in front of him. Shane happily crawled between his legs, and Ilya's heart was so full of fondness for him that he just wanted to squeeze him.

He instead leaned back on his hands, watching with a smile as Shane unwrapped his gifts, examining each one gratefully. Hockey books and expensive socks and everything he would assume Shane would be happy to receive, the boring hockey nerd that he was. His heart thudded every time Shane turned around to show him; an excited little grin on his handsome face.

Shane neatly piled his gifts and leaned back against Ilya's chest, head tilted up toward him. Ilya wrapped his arms around him and pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose.

“Ilya, I think this one is for you.”

Ilya's head tipped up to see Yuna smiling, nudging a wrapped box in his direction. Shane's whole face lit up as he turned around to sit facing Ilya, pushing the box between them.

“I-” Ilya started, but Shane patted his knee.

“It's Christmas. You didn't think Santa would forget you, did you?”

Shane was smiling so hard his eyes were crinkling in the corners, and Ilya felt an overwhelming surge of emotion as he gingerly took his fingers to the wrapping paper, tearing into it.

When all the paper was peeled away, Ilya could hardly swallow the lump in his throat with how sticky his mouth had gone.

A beautiful set of vintage leatherbound books sat before him; a complete set of Dostoevsky's works. He traced his finger over the embossed cyrillic on the spines, his mouth slack.

“Shane said you liked to read the classics.” David was saying, snapping Ilya from his trance.

“I…yes. I do. These are my favorites. These are Soviet era. My grandmother had set just like this one. I have not seen it since I was a child.” Ilya couldn't tear his eyes away from the books. He felt Shane's hand grip gently on his forearm.

“I was only able to bring couple of books with me from Russia. And these are…you cannot find this easily in North America.” He was shaking his head a bit. Seeing his own language staring back at him made an ache bloom in his chest. Shane was home. But living in a strange country where the letters did not even look the same sometimes felt alienating.

These books felt like a lifeline to the parts of Russia that he loved. They reminded him of cold winter nights, settled under a heavy knit blanket on his grandmother's couch, the TV flickering low in the background. Being curled into his Mama's side as his grandmother sat back in her chair, a book perched in her lap. His grandfather behind them in the kitchen, prattling away in their mother tongue. A language that Ilya sorely missed. A life that he sorely missed.

But he could not be more grateful for the one that was being laid out before him now. Shane's hand was so warm against him, and he was studying him with those big, dark eyes. His parents watched them fondly. This gift laid out in front of him, so thoughtful that he couldn't even formulate what he wanted to say about it.

“This…it means a lot. Really. You did not have to get me anything at all. This is very…thank you.”

“You're very welcome, son.” David said, and Ilya felt the familiar burn in his throat of desperately fighting back tears.

He thought of his own father's voice. Always harsh and clipped. Telling him he was stupid, lazy, embarrassing. The Hollanders hardly knew him, and they were being so kind, and Ilya's brain couldn't figure out how to react.

Shane must have seen it in his face, because he sat up on his knees and wrapped his arms tightly around him, cradling Ilya's head. “It's okay, baby.” He whispered softly into Ilya's hair.

“Sorry.” He croaked, eyes stinging. He felt ridiculous and exposed; crying over a Christmas present. He probably looked pathetic.

“We'll be right back.” Shane was saying over his shoulder, and then he was pulling Ilya up with him, leading him into the hallway bathroom.

“I'm sorry.” Ilya said, swiping at his leaking eyes. “You don't have to-”

“Shh.” Shane held his face in his hands, feeling the heat of the tears on Ilya's cheeks. “Don't apologize. Just talk to me.”

Ilya took a shuddering breath. “I just…it's a lot, you know? I'm not really used to…” He gestured around vaguely. “This. Any of this. I think maybe I made myself used to not having it. Maybe I have convinced myself I do not deserve it. I do not know.”

Shane's chest ached. He was glad Grigori Rozanov was rotting in hell where he belonged. “You deserve it. Okay? Don't you go saying my best friend doesn't deserve things because I'll have to punch you.”

That earned him a laugh, Ilya's palm covering Shane's hand where it still rested on his cheek. “I would not want that. Because I taught you how to punch, and you learned well.”

Shane thumbed away a few stray tears. Ilya looked down, taking a breath. “I do not know why I am so emotional these past few days. I think I…”

Ilya looked up, eyes as deep as oceans as they met his own. “I think I just feel safe here. With you. I was not allowed to cry in my home. Maybe tears I stored up are finally coming out now.” He gave a heartbreaking ghost of a smile.

“Ilya.” Shane wrapped him back up in his arms, holding him tight. “You're allowed to cry. You're allowed to have emotions. You're allowed to get gifts and you're allowed to be loved. You are loved. I love you so fucking much. You don't ever have to hide from me, okay?”

“Okay. I'm sorry. I am being dramatic and making Christmas weird.” Ilya sniffled a laugh.

Shane grabbed Ilya by the shoulders and jostled him. “Stop fucking saying that.” He said with no heat, teeth gritted. “Stop apologizing. You aren't making anything weird. Come here.”

Shane pulled his sleeve over his hand and used it to roughly wipe away the wetness on Ilya's sweet face. “You're still pretty when you cry.”

“Mm. Yes. Big cry baby boyfriend. Very attractive.”

“Shut up.” Shane grabbed the curls at the nape of his neck and tugged. Ilya gave him a soft grin, and Shane smiled back, pulling him into a kiss.

“You go on. I will be out in a minute.” He patted Shane on the ass, stealing another kiss.

Shane smiled over his shoulder before shutting the door gently behind him, quietly walking back to the living room. Both of his parents immediately looked up.

“Is everything okay?” His mom's brows were pinched with worry. “I hope we didn't overstep.”

“No.” Shane cut in, a bit harsher than he meant to. He sighed. “No.” He started, more softly. “It's not that. He's happy, he loved the gift. He's just…he's overwhelmed. He isn't used to this, you know? He just needed a minute. He's okay.” Shane sat on the floor, fingers running over the spine of the books.

Yuna sighed, shaking her head. “How bad was it for him?” She said quietly, not really asking anyone. More just pondering aloud to the universe, an ache in her voice.

“Pretty bad, I think.” Shane answered anyway, swallowing around the reality of the words. “But he's here now. And his stupid fucking father is dead.”

“Shane.” Yuna chided, but Shane just shook his head.

“Just please act normal when he comes back in, okay? He feels like he made it weird and he doesn't like it when people pity him.” Shane tore at a piece of wrapping paper discarded on the floor, his eyes cast down.

He wasn't trying to sound rude or impatient with his parents. But he was so protective over Ilya, he couldn't help himself. He wanted to wrap himself around his boyfriend and shield him from anything that would ever even remotely upset him ever again.

Yuna stood, leaning down to ruffle Shane's hair as she walked by him. “You're good for him, Shane.” She said gently.

David hummed an agreement, following his wife into the kitchen. “He's lucky to have you.”

Shane ran his fingers over the hem of the sweatshirt before bringing the crook of the sleeve to his nose. He couldn't help but to smile slightly at the way the flashy cologne and cigarette smoke seemed woven into the soft fabric. His smile only grew when he pulled on something clinging to the cuff of the sleeve, and a single strand of honey colored curly hair sprung out between his fingers. Shane was so in love he was making himself sick with his own sappiness. He didn't care.

He felt Ilya walk back into the room before he saw him. Shane turned his head to see Ilya take a seat on the couch, eyes still slightly red.

Shane stood and immediately plopped down next to him. Well, more like half into his lap. An arm wound around his waist and Shane couldn't stop himself from capturing Ilya's mouth in a soft kiss. He brought a hand up to squeeze at Ilya's bicep where the fabric of his shirt strained against it, letting out an involuntary sound against his boyfriend's mouth.

“*Kotik*, do not start this on your parents’ couch.” Ilya murmured, though Shane felt the way his boyfriend shifted toward him.

“*Kotik*. You always call me that and you never say what it means.” Shane made no move to turn away from where their lips brushed, hand still mapping the strong muscle of Ilya's arm.

“Mm, is like kitten. You purr like a kitty when you get like this.”

Shane scoffed, feeling his cheeks heat. “I do not. Fuck off.”

Ilya made a soft, high pitched meowing sound that sounded so ridiculous coming from him that Shane couldn't help but throw his head back with a laugh. When he sat back up, Ilya was laughing too, and Shane could feel the pressure releasing in his chest.

Seeing Ilya's smile - his real, unguarded smile - was like watching the sun glitter off the ripples of a lake. Dazzling and bright and breathtaking. Something hard to look away from. It knocked Shane on his ass like a wave.

It was accompanied by his loud, deep laugh that rumbled through him and made his shoulders shake. It reminded him of when they were teenagers, making each other laugh until they were in tears into the early hours of the morning. They were so carefree and unburdened;

their whole world shrunk down to just the two of them. He would always hold those memories close.

But he was also feeling like he may need to pinch himself over the new memories they were making together. Here, tucked on his parents' couch, close and happy and safe.

By the time dusk painted the sky a cold, dark blue, Ilya was sure he finally understood why North Americans made such a big deal about Christmas.

He had eaten more cookies than he could count (much to Shane's horror), conquered the Hollanders in a game of Monopoly (to Shane's and Yuna's horror equally), and watched a movie about a fully grown man who believed he was a Christmas elf while Shane napped with his head in Ilya's lap. It was perfect.

Both David and Yuna had bid Ilya farewell with warm hugs and sincere words that threatened to make him go misty eyed again. Ilya decided to let Shane have a few more minutes alone with his parents, though it was also a strategic way to reel his emotions back in before he made himself look like a pathetic mess.

Ilya hauled their bags out to the car, savoring the feeling of the biting cold against his cheeks and the smell of woodsmoke clinging to the night air. He tipped his head up to see the brilliant scatter of stars overhead, the fog of his breath curling around him as he let himself get lost in thought.

Not so long ago, he had been staring at the same sky from the other side of the world. He could picture himself; shirtless on the balcony of his penthouse apartment, pacing with a cigarette between his lips. He had always felt caged in there. Chasing pleasure through alcohol and sex and then feeling horrible and empty when it was over. Stuck. Sad.

He snuck a glance at Shane through the glass door. He was still flushed with warmth and his hair was still slightly tousled from sleep. And he was everything. Ilya knew that all the best parts of himself got to exist because Shane was there to pull them out of him.

It made him feel free and happy in ways that he couldn't comprehend. In ways that Russia could never have given him.

It was then that he decided. He pulled out his phone and started drafting the message, wanting to get the words out before he could change his mind.

He wasn't going to tell his agent first, nor his team. This was his life, and he intended to live like it.

By the time Shane came out, wrapping big, warm arms around him and kissing him with soft reverence, Ilya felt resolute. He kissed Shane back, whispering against his mouth. "I love you

so much, *solnyshko*.”

Shane smiled brightly at him. “I love you too. Now come on, it's cold as fuck.”

They both hopped into the car, waving to the Hollanders as they pulled away and onto the quiet street.

“I'm going to do it.” Ilya said into the silence of the car. “I just wanted to tell you first.”

“Do what?” Shane's brows pinched.

“Come out. I'm just going to do it. On Twitter. I am ready.” Ilya shrugged a bit, watching for Shane's reaction.

Shane took a deep breath and nodded. “Fuck. Okay.” He placed a hand on Ilya's knee. “You're ready to be the first out queer NHL player ever?”

Ilya smiled smugly. “You know I like to make a scene.”

They both laughed, and Ilya pressed send on the tweet, not regretting it for a moment as the message made its way out into the ether. He was ready.

@81rozanov
I left Russia looking to follow my dreams. Not only to be in NHL but also to live my life as my true self in ways I could not before. I am bisexual. I am happy to be in a place where I can say this openly. If you do not like this please know that I do not and will never care ✌️😘

Chapter End Notes

Shane's thoughts on Rozanovs:

-ilya: my man my man my man, that's my baby, my angel, my pookie bear, need him to breathe, makes the world go round, etc. etc.

-grigori: this ugly bald bitch could rot in hell for the rest of eternity and it wouldnt be long enough

HOW ARE WE FEEEELING GUYS love all of you and your comments, smiling and giggling and kicking my feet always~

Next up: the world reacts to Ilya coming out

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

warning: this chapter contains homophobic language

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The obnoxious buzzing of his phone skittering across the nightstand as his alarm sounded jolted through Shane like a lightning strike. Though, as he reached to silent it, he realized it did very little to disturb the dozing Russian at his side.

Shane took a moment to drink him in. He was on his back, blankets kicked down to only cover his lower half. An arm was slung over his eyes; his chest rising and falling rhythmically. His eyes caught on the fresh mark he'd left on his boyfriend last night. A perfectly shaped bite mark bruised right into his pec.

They had both been tired by the time they arrived back from his parents, but that certainly never stopped them. Shane had hopped on top of his boyfriend's lap and hoped that the ridiculously expensive building they lived in had thick enough walls to spare the neighbors.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss over the bruised bite, then rolled back over to scroll on his phone.

Shane was hit immediately with the reality of the tweet that Ilya had decided to send last night. *Shit*. This was actually happening.

He took a deep breath and started to scroll, shaking his head with a laugh when he reread Ilya's tweet. It was so on brand for him that he couldn't help but be amused. Though, he anticipated that the rest of the world may not feel the same.

Shane felt his pulse kick up as the reactions started to fill his screen.

@HockeyNet
Montreal's newest center shocks the sports world with coming out tweet, becoming the first ever out queer player in NHL history *[link]*

@slapshotme
BI ICON BI ICON BI ICON 👑 🗣

@2inthenet
I just fell to my knees the hockey gods have heard us omg 😭 screaming crying throwing up

@vicmontreal
bro no one asked just get on the ice and play.

@littlevoyage
just when I thought this man couldn't get any hotter ILYA ROZANOV WHEN I CATCH YOU

@notsrrry
SO YOURE SAYING I HAVE A CHANCE?! *@81rozanov* stay right where you are im on my way daddy 🥵🥵

@mattw99
Dude can we keep this shit out of hockey wtf

@hotforhollzy
NOTICING AND OBSERVING 👀 #Hollanov 💞💞

@voyageursfan0
disgusting smh please send him back to Russia

@TBallday
please tell me the league is going to shut this down?? Sick

@bigrozanov
MHMM AND WHAT IF I SAID I KNOW I DOM TOP WHEN I SEE ONE 👏 *@81rozanov* you dropped this king 👑

@pj6753
I always knew Rozanoz wasn't right in the head

@icedout
this has actually healed something inside of me, thank you *@81rozanov* for speaking your truth 💕 Montreal loves you

Shane sat up out of bed, feeling whiplashed from the multitudes of responses. It seemed the world was torn between being pissed off, disgusted, excited, hopeful, and or horny. He would especially need to block out that last part for now, as seeing people shamelessly proposition his boyfriend was making him feel unreasonable feelings. Shane decided it was probably best to stop scrolling.

He looked over his shoulder at Ilya, still fast asleep and entirely unbothered by the storm he had created. Shane wasn't sure what Ilya would feel about the world's reactions, but he hoped

he would at least feel some bit of relief. He deserved that.

Shane quietly made his way through his morning routine; teeth brushed, face washed, stretching, protein shake. When he realized Ilya was still sleeping like the dead, he decided he would go run off some of the nervous energy that had started to accumulate.

He knew that, realistically, it was only a matter of time before people started to put a microscope over their friendship. Knowing one of them wasn't straight would of course open doors for people to assume things about them. Which, to be fair, he had Ilya inside of him last night while he moaned directly into his mouth about how much he loved him. But that was beside the point.

Some of the buzzing in his head had cleared by the time he was walking back through his front door; damp with sweat despite the cold. He lifted the hem of his sweatshirt up to wipe his face, startling a bit at the deep purr of a voice that hit him as he walked into the kitchen.

“Oh. Hello.” Ilya was saying with a grin. He was leaning forward over the kitchen island in only his joggers, curls wild from sleep.

“You're awake.” Shane huffed a bit, breathing still coming down from running.

“And you are hot.” Ilya stalked toward him and pulled his sweatshirt back up, his warm palm immediately pressing against his abs, running up them slowly. “Fuck, Hollander. I cannot let you out into the wild like this.”

Shane shivered, grabbing Ilya's wrist and tugging at it. “Stop. I'm all sweaty.” He protested weakly.

Ilya smirked at him before sinking down to his knees and obscenely dragging his tongue up the same path his hand had just traveled, leaving a wet stripe up Shane's abdomen. Shane's hand immediately cradled the back of Ilya's head as he gasped softly.

“You think I care?” Ilya's voice was gravely as he tipped his head up and rested his chin against Shane's stomach, staring up at him with a playful smile. God, he was good looking.

Shane slid a hand around Ilya's jaw. “Come up here.”

Ilya never stopped smiling as he got to his feet. They met each other with an open mouthed kiss, all wet heat and languid tongues, and Shane felt the deep swoop in his belly that made him get a bit weak in the knees. He ran his hands down Ilya's chest and felt Ilya gasp softly when his fingers ran over the bite mark.

“Ah, is still tender.” Ilya stepped back at bit, holding Shane's hand there. “You bite hard, *kotik*.”

Shane ran his fingertips over it again, then grabbed Ilya's hands and placed them on his hips where he knew his boyfriend's thumbprints were bruised. It was probably reckless of them to mark each other up the way that they did, maybe even more so now that Ilya had come out.

But it excited him in ways that he couldn't describe; the almost animalistic way that they claimed each other, letting it be visible and real.

“I don't know, maybe I need to bite you harder now that women and men both think they have a chance.”

Ilya laughed at that, thumbs pressing into Shane's hip bones. “They can think what they want, *solnyshko*. There is no chance.”

Shane felt his breath catch slightly as Ilya pressed their hips flush together. “Have you even been online to see what everyone is saying? I mean you kinda just made history.”

“Mm, yes. Is whatever.” He shrugged, as if they were discussing the weather and not how he just changed the world of professional sports forever. “I would rather shower with you than read what people have to say.” He tugged Shane's hands with a smile, and Shane allowed himself to be pulled along to the bathroom.

After an indulgently long shower that resulted in both of them coming and lasted until the water ran cold, Shane found himself pressed into Ilya's side at the kitchen counter as they both sipped on a pre-practice smoothie.

“I'm kinda surprised no one from the league or the team has said anything to you yet.” Shane said around his straw as he watched Ilya scroll on his phone mindlessly.

“Oh. They have.” Ilya said casually, not looking up.

“What? Why didn't you tell me? What did they say? Are you in trouble? Did-”

Ilya sighed, leaning further into him. “Calm down, *solnyshko*. Is going to be fine. Not for you to worry about.”

“Uh. I mean, yeah, it kinda is. I'm your boyfriend and also your captain, in case you forgot.” Shane scoffed.

“They will not bench me or fine me. This is all that matters. Anything else they have to say about it, I do not care. Coach and owners want to meet with me when we get to practice. I think commissioner will be on the phone.”

“*Ilya*.” Shane turned to him, exasperated. “Were you just not gonna tell me? Jesus christ, this is a big deal. It sounds serious.”

Ilya simply shrugged. “Maybe. But what can they really do? I have already said what I want to say. They need me to play. I am not scared of them.”

Shane stilled a bit, picking at the skin around hs fingers.

“They will get over it. Is fine. I do not mind being test subject. When you decide to come out, everyone will know what to expect.”

When. Shane felt the familiar sensation of his chest squeezing like a fist. Would he ever actually be able to go through with it?

And if not, then what? Ilya would just be his secret until he was ready to retire? They would both just have to pretend to be single for the next 15 years?

Ilya must have sensed Shane's racing thoughts, because he immediately set his phone down, brow furrowed.

“I did not mean- you know is up to you, Shane. You do not have to ever do it, if you do not want. I just meant…” He let out the frustrated huff of breath that usually came when English was escaping him. “Please do not be upset.”

Shane looked up to see the concern stretched over Ilya's face. He placed a hand firmly on Ilya's cheek. “I know, baby. I'm not upset.”

“Is really going to be fine. I promise. I will make it fine.” Ilya's eyes kept their concerned edge as they studied Shane carefully. “I'm sorry. Maybe I should have done this different. I am stressing you out.”

“No.” Shane added his other hand to Ilya's other cheek. “No, don't say that. It's your business. You did it how you wanted to. You being bi doesn't fucking effect anything. If they make a big deal out of it, then that's stupid. And that's on them.”

Ilya nuzzled a cheek into Shane's palm. “Only person it should matter to is you, since you are the one who's dick I am sucking. And ass I am fucking. And eating. And-”

“Okay, I get it.” Shane laughed, shaking his head. “That what you're gonna say in your meeting today?”

“Obviously. I will walk in and say, oh you do not like that I am bisexual? Captain Shane Hollander loves it. Just ask him. Looked very happy bouncing on my dick last night.”

“You are the fucking worst.” Shane put a palm over Ilya's face and pushed him back, shaking his head. “I hate you.”

“You love me.” Ilya licked his palm.

“Ew.” Shane wiped it off on Ilya's pants. “Unfortunately.”

Ilya leaned in and bit him on the cheek. “I love you, *solnyshko*.” He crooned. “Even if they kick me off team for sucking your dick, I will never leave you.”

“Ilya, it's not funny.” Shane swatted at him.

“Is a little funny.” He shrugged, pulling Shane's arms as he stood. “Come, Captain. We should get going to practice. Well, practice for you. For me, gallows.”

Shane shoved him hard. “It isn't fucking funny, Ilya! God. I'm gonna fucking kill you. And how do you even know that word? Like, in what scenario did you ever need to learn that?”

Ilya was grinning at him and Shane was going to wring his neck. “I watch movies, Shane. Not just about hockey. Learn many useful things.”

Ilya was lucky they really did need to leave, because he may have actually tossed him off the balcony.

Well, not actually. He loved the man so much he sometimes forgot to breathe when he looked at him. But whatever.

The moment Ilya stepped into the facility, flanked by Shane and Hayden, he was intercepted by the team manager.

He could feel Shane's discomfort cloud the air immediately. Ilya turned to him and offered his best approximation of a reassuring smile, though he could feel the annoyance mounting inside of him like a rising tide.

He was shuffled into a conference room that fell silent the moment he stepped through the threshold. Eyes studied him, and he felt much more like a zoo animal than a hockey player.

“Take a seat, Rozanov.” Coach Theriault gestured toward the empty chair. Ilya met his eyes as he slowly sank down into it. It creaked under the weight of him; the sound crackling through the uncomfortable silence of the room.

In the center of the table was a conference phone, the buttons blinking ominously.

“We have Commissioner Crowell on the line.” Coach nodded toward the phone. Ilya stared at it, feeling the way his own gaze was searing.

“Rozanov.” Theriault started with a sigh. “I'm sure you know why this meeting is happening.”

“Do I?” Ilya challenged, the defiance growing through him like a weed. The way everyone was looking at him as if he were a criminal being interrogated had snapped any patience he had for this like a twig.

Theriault glared at him before he spoke again. “We have become aware of the statement you decided to release on Twitter.”

“Ah.” Ilya sat back, folding his hands in his lap.

“Do you care to explain why you put this out without so much as a single word to the team or the league?”

Ilya blinked a few times. “I was not aware I need to ask team to Tweet.”

“Well, did you think maybe you should think about your team and the implications of all this before you dropped a bomb that got the attention of the entire world?” Crowell's voice crackled through the speaker, quick and sharp. Ilya tensed his jaw.

He wasn't certain he caught every word, but he understood the sentiment well enough.

“Is my personal business.” Ilya shrugged. “Do players ask before they post about engagement? Or having baby?”

“This is different, Rozanov, and you know it.” Crowell said tightly.

“Why?” Ilya cocked his head and feigned ignorance. He could see Theriault taking the bait, anger flashing behind his eyes.

“*Why*?” He huffed. “Because there has never been a gay player in this league, there-”

Ilya cut him off. “I am not gay.”

Coach gritted his teeth. “All of this takes focus away from hockey and hangs a controversy over this team. Do you get that?”

“Over the whole league.” Crowell interjected.

“All of what?” Ilya huffed a humorless laugh. “I say one thing. I am bisexual. That is all.”

“And that is all you will say about it, period.” Crowell's voice rattled out tersely.

“Or what?” Ilya crossed his arms.

Silence fell over the room again.

“Is in my contract that I cannot call myself bisexual?” He raised an eyebrow.

Theriault opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“Am I benched?” Ilya stared forward at his Coach, unblinking.

When there was no answer, he pushed up out of his chair. “Since you did not invite my agent, I will let her know about this meeting. If I have done something that is breach of my contract, you may contact her about it. But it does not seem like this is the case.”

“Rozanov, you listen here.” Crowell spat. “You say one more thing out of line, I will suspend you.”

“Then do it. Show my agent the rules I broke in my contract.”

He glanced at Theriault, who suddenly looked nervous, before walking out.

He probably could have handled that differently. But it was beyond annoying to him that anyone felt like they had authority to tell him he couldn't talk about his personal life. He was tired of old men talking at him. He had enough of that to last a lifetime.

He could hear his father's voice clearly in his mind, like a ghost hanging over his shoulder.

No discipline. You have always been this way, since you were a child. I blame your mother. She was too soft with you. Now you are selfish and unruly. Always wanting more than you deserve. Always running your mouth like a petulant child. You are a disgrace.

Ilya squeezed his hands into fists and swung the locker room door open. The clattering of gear and cacophony of voices promptly came to a halt as he was once again greeted with a sea of eyes.

"*Gospodi*." He muttered, rolling his eyes as he made his way to his stall. He was in no mood to be gaped at like some sort of fucking cryptid.

Shane and Hayden glanced at each other before both turning to look at Ilya. He wanted to be annoyed by this, but he could only bring himself to be annoyed at Hayden. Shane was far too pretty.

"Okay?" Shane asked quietly, those earnest eyes focused on him intently.

"Fine." Ilya responded tightly. He rucked his shirt off and watched as Hayden's eyes landed on the bite mark on his chest.

With the way Hayden's face reacted, one would think Ilya had just bent over and shown him his asshole. Ilya rolled his eyes even harder than the first time, angling himself away from everyone to face his stall.

He was acutely aware of the low whispers rumbling around him. He heard someone snicker. Whatever.

Ilya had to resist the overwhelming urge to explain to everyone in this room, loudly and in detail, how much he loved sucking dick. One dick in particular, really. He laughed quietly to himself, imagining his teammates ugly faces as they pictured him with a dick in his mouth.

He started to laugh louder when he pictured Crowell sputtering in fury at his desk when Ilya refused to bow and scrape at his feet. He leaned his head against his stall, eyes closed as his laughter continued to spill out.

Ilya felt an elbow catch him in the ribs. "What are you laughing at?" Shane's voice came in close to him.

Ilya shook his head. "Nothing, *krasivyy mal'chik*." He reached a hand out to rough up Shane's hair. He could feel the tension radiating off of Shane in waves.

"Shane." Ilya said quietly. "Everything is fine. Okay? Let's get on the ice."

"Right. Yeah, okay." Shane sighed and clapped him on the shoulder.

Ilya ignored the feeling of eyes searing into him from all directions as he followed Shane out of the locker room. He supposed he was going to have to get used to being treated like the league's newest freak show.

“Dude, did you see it?” Drapeau's voice urged. “It was a straight up bite mark. All teeth. Like, bruised.”

“You think it was from a chick? Or a dude?” Mitka said over the sound of clattering, probably tossing his gear haphazardly into his stall.

Comeau huffed. “Definitely a dude. Was too big to be a chick's mouth.”

Shane clenched his jaw as he listened to the exchange from around the corner, yanking his shirt over his head with more force than necessary before covering his damp hair with a backwards cap. He knew this was coming. He knew he was going to hear things said about Ilya that would make his defenses blare like sirens. But he hadn't yet decided how he was going to deal with it.

It wasn't lost on him the way some of their teammates avoided him during practice, as if making contact with him would cause a spread in disease. It was even more obvious in the showers, where Ilya was exiled to a corner and very pointedly not looked at.

And now, his teammates were openly discussing him, speculating, looking for somewhere to place their disgust.

“Fucking sick.” Comeau's voice again. “I'm talking to Coach today, I'm not sharing a shower with a faggot.”

Anger flared deep in Shane's veins, white hot and blinding. His legs were moving before he could even process his own thoughts.

Shane shoved Comeau with one hand to his chest, hard enough to startle the other man into silence.

“Didn't I tell you I better never hear you say that shit again, Comeau? Seriously, what the fuck is your fucking problem?”

Comeau's face had gone a deep shade of angry red. “*My* problem?” He spat, indignant.

“Yes. *Your* problem. That's what I said. Why do any of you even give a shit who he sleeps with? Is that what you spend your time thinking about? Who Rozanov is fucking? We're professionals. Worry about hockey. Get the fuck over yourselves.”

Comeau shook his head. “Of course you defend him. What, is he your boyfriend, Hollander? That why you care so much?”

“Oh, I'm the one who cares too much? You're fucking standing in the corner whispering about him like a bitch.” Shane could feel his heart thundering in his ears, stepping closer to Comeau. “You think because he likes dick that he suddenly is gonna be interested in yours?

We've all seen it, Comeau. No one is impressed. You aren't going to say shit to Coach and you aren't going to say shit about Rozanov again unless you want bag skates every practice for the rest of the fucking season. So shut the fuck up." Shane prodded the other man in the chest as he spoke, eyes fixed on him in fury.

He suddenly cursed himself for being captain, because he wanted to hit Comeau so badly that his hands felt like they were vibrating with the want of it. He could so easily knock his teeth back into his throat and make the idiot think twice about ever opening his stupid, ugly mouth again.

"You aren't gonna tell me what I can and can't say." Comeau spat back. "Seems like you're just as fucking sick as he is. Which one of you takes it up the ass, Hollander? You let him make you his little bitch?"

Shane hadn't even registered Ilya's presence until hands were wrenched into Comeau's shirt and hauling him to the opposite wall, slamming him against it so hard that his head ricocheted off of the surface. Shane's eyes widened slightly at the sheer force in Ilya's movements, watching as water dripped from his curls and down the bare skin of his back.

"You do not say another fucking word about him, you hear me?" Ilya's voice came out almost as a growl, and his hands were fisted so hard in Comeau's shirt that it was starting to rip at the collar. "That is your fucking captain. You have no respect."

"Dude, Rozanov, relax-" Mitka tried to approach the scene like one might approach a wild animal. But Ilya hardly seemed to notice. He pinned Comeau harder to the wall, pulling him so hard that his feet were coming up off the floor.

"You think because I am not straight that I am a pussy? Is that it? You think you get to say whatever you want? You think you are so tough, Comeau. You know Hollander will not hit you because he is captain, so you call him a little bitch. *You* are a little bitch. *You* are a pussy. Do not fucking disrespect him again."

Ilya tossed him aside like a ragdoll, sending him stumbling into Mitka and Drapeau, shirt ripped and face stunned. Ilya stalked off wordlessly, but squeezed Shane's shoulder as he passed him on the way to his own stall.

Shane could feel the sickly tension fill the room as most of the men were now out of the showers, all cutting sideways glances at each other.

Shane nodded a bit to himself, inhaling sharply before he began to speak.

"What happened just now cannot and will not be happening with this team again." He started, voice projecting and echoing through the otherwise silent room.

"In case you somehow haven't heard by now, one of your teammates came out as bisexual. Apparently, some of you in this room have a problem with this. I'm here to tell you that your fucking opinion on people's lives outside of hockey don't mean shit. We're supposed to be brothers in this room. We're supposed to support each other. If you can't handle the fact that

someone on this team isn't straight, then maybe you aren't fucking man enough to be in this league."

Shane looked around the room, letting his eyes settle over his team. "Ilya Rozanov is one of the best players in this entire league. He's the top scorer right now. Do you think who he chooses to sleep with is somehow more important than that? He was bisexual before he joined this team. He's been bisexual this entire time. It hasn't stopped him from being great before, and it won't now. And if you are full enough of yourself to think that he's suddenly gonna start hitting on you or trying to look at you in the showers, go get a fucking reality check."

He heard the unmistakable rumble of Ilya's laugh at that one.

"We're here to play fucking hockey. We're here to win. If you want to spend your time insulting and disrespecting your teammate over their sexuality instead, you don't fucking belong here. And I'm not gonna let it slide. I don't care what the internet says. I don't care what Coach says. I don't care what the league says. We are the ones that make this team what it is. We are the ones out there on the ice fucking bleeding to bring the cup home. And *we* includes every person in this room right now."

He caught Ilya's eyes, blazing with an intensity that made his stomach swoop.

"I don't want to hear anymore disrespect coming out of anyone's mouth. We're here to play and we're here to fucking win. So everyone grow the fuck up and support your brothers. I'm not saying it again."

Shane chanced to look over at Comeau, who was almost wearing the look of a chastised child. Good. Just as he was ready to turn back to Ilya, Coach Theriault appeared in the doorway, his gaze locked tightly on Shane.

He crooked a finger, summoning Shane with the gesture and his impatient glare.

Ilya grabbed Shane by the elbow. "Shane-" He started, but Shane shook his head.

"It's fine. I'll meet you at your place when I'm done, okay?" Shane said quietly. He felt Ilya's grip tighten slightly before he dropped his hand, conceding.

Shane gave him one more reassuring nod before following Theriault out of the room.

Routine was always Shane's thing, but pre game naps were something that Ilya would never skip. Typically after a morning practice, he would hit the couch or the mattress like a ton of bricks the moment he got through the door, and stay that way until the very last moment he could.

However, he was currently pacing the floor of his kitchen instead, dreading the position he had put Shane in.

There was his father's voice again. *You are so selfish, Ilya*. He certainly felt it; acting so stubborn and then leaving Shane to clean up his mess.

Things were expected of Shane. He was held to an impossibly high standard, Ilya knew. And now his best friend and teammate was causing tension and Captain Hollander would be expected to right the ship. Would likely get scolded for addressing the issue with the team the way that he did.

It had been so incredibly hot the way he took command and defended Ilya with such fervor. Ilya was planning to ravage his mouth and taste the tongue that said all those beautiful, passionate words. But now he felt like he had ashes in his mouth. Bitter and harsh and stuck there to remind him that no matter how blinded Shane was by his love for Ilya, Ilya was still a deeply flawed person. One that could cause trouble for him. It made Ilya's stomach churn with sickness.

The sound of the door unlatching made Ilya's head snap up. Shane stepped in, cheeks still pink from the December cold. He looked so beautiful. Ilya wanted to tell him so. But he swallowed the words in his throat at the serious, tired look frozen into his boyfriend's face.

“Shane.” Ilya stepped forward. “Shane, I am sorry. I should not have- I was being irresponsible. I am really sorry. I-”

Shane's cold hands anchored themselves on Ilya's face. “Baby. It's okay. You don't need to be sorry for anything.”

Those soft brown eyes stared back at him like pools of amber and Ilya knew he didn't deserve the unguarded devotion of Shane Hollander. “I do. I know they are trying to make me your problem.”

Shane smiled at that and his mouth looked so soft and perfect. “You *are* my problem, Ilya.” He brushed their noses together playfully.

Ilya heaved a sigh. “So what did they say?”

Shane took him by the hand, leading him back toward the bedroom. “That you're stubborn. Which I knew. And that you're skating on thin ice. Which was a little too on the nose, in my opinion. But…they weren't exactly happy with the way your meeting went and they think I'll somehow talk sense into you about keeping your mouth shut and pretending like you coming out never happened.”

Shane collapsed onto Ilya's bed with a sigh. Ilya stood at the side of the bed, chewing his lip. “And what did you say?”

Shane smirked up at him. “That there is no such thing as talking sense into Ilya Rozanov.”

“You did not.”

He shrugged. “I told them it wasn't my place to tell you how to talk about your personal life. Because it's not. I told them my job as captain is to keep the team running, and that's what I plan to do. That's what I am doing. And if they think I'm gonna let people be fucking homophobic, they can fuck off. Theriault was pissed about what I said in the locker room. I didn't even know he was listening. But whatever. He can be pissed about it. I meant what I said and I'll say it again if I have to.”

Ilya practically dove on top of him, capturing his mouth in a hungry kiss. “Fuck. I love you. You're fucking hot, Hollander, do you know that? Standing there, telling the whole team off in your fucking backwards hat. You are like hot jock from a wet dream. I got hard.”

“Shut up. No you didn't.” Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist where he lay on top of him, squeezing him close with those powerful thighs.

“I did. Of course I did. You are hottest man alive.”

Shane scrunched his nose up, his skin going pink under his freckles, and Ilya wanted to swallow him whole.

Instead, he pressed their mouths together again. They made out lazily for a few minutes, hands roaming slowly. This was Ilya's favorite thing. Limbs and tongues tangled together, pressed as close as they could be, breathing each other in. The whole world fell away around him until all he could think was *Shane, Shane, Shane*.

And when he finally pulled away and stared down at that devastatingly beautiful face, he felt an overwhelming squeeze in his heart as he saw his entire universe staring back at him.

Watching Ilya Rozanov stretch on the ice was, frankly, pornographic. His curls were falling forward, his perfectly bowed lips were parted, and his hips were spread and lunging in a powerful, fluid motion.

Ilya gave his hips a particularly ruinous roll, and all Shane's very helpful brain could supply were thoughts of how good it felt to be on the receiving end of the gesture. To have those strong hips fucking him so hard into the mattress that he-

Focus.

Shane shook his head a bit, as if it would make the thoughts physically rattle loose and fall onto the ice beneath him. He wasn't supposed to be watching Ilya right now for the purpose of marveling at the strength and flexibility in his hips, but rather to catch his reaction when he saw the surprise Shane had been keeping from him.

When they had been leaving his parents house, and Ilya had stepped outside to take their bags to the car, Shane's dad revealed his plan.

David had his work Christmas party in Montreal tomorrow, and he and Yuna were planning to come a night early to catch their game. But David wanted to do something special for Ilya.

After seeing just how deprived Ilya had been of a loving, supportive family - in addition to seeing just how important he was to his son - David was on a mission to make sure Ilya knew he had people in his corner. So, he let Shane know that he would be purchasing a Rozanov jersey and proudly wearing it tonight in his parents' designated seats in the family section.

It was a small gesture, but one Shane knew would reach below the surface to cover some of the deep wounds Ilya had been carrying around for most all his life. It felt especially important now that Ilya had come out. His own father would have disowned him for this, or worse. But David would be in the stands, proudly wearing Ilya's name and number on his back, showing Ilya that he had people in his life that were safe and caring.

A smile tugged at Shane's lips when he saw his parents filing to their seats; Yuna in her Hollander jersey and David in his Rozanov one. They were close enough to the ice that it was easy to spot them from where they were warming up. Shane skated closer to Ilya, sliding to a stop next to him.

“My parents are here.” He said casually, nodding toward the seats.

“Oh.” Ilya picked his head up, sitting up on his knees. “I did not know they were coming.”

Shane watched as Ilya's eyes tracked for a moment; a smile forming when Shane's parents caught his eye. He lifted a hand to wave, but the motion got frozen in mid air when David stood from his seat and turned his back to the ice, ROZANOV 81 pointed boldly toward them.

Ilya blinked a few times, then turned to Shane, brows knitted as if he wasn't sure he was seeing correctly. Shane offered him an encouraging nod, his face spitting in two with a wide grin at the utterly adorable look of confusion on his boyfriend's beautiful face.

Ilya got to his feet, eyes locked with David as he turned back to face the ice. Shane watched as his dad gave Ilya a small nod, a wide grin on his face that mirrored Shane's.

He heard Ilya let out a small breath. “You Hollanders are…”

Ilya turned, and Shane was met with the full force of those blue eyes, so deep and full of emotion. “*Redkaya ptitsa*.” He breathed out.

Shane of course had no idea what he was saying, but fuck if it didn't sound beautiful rolling off his boyfriend's tongue.

“Ah…special. Rare.” Ilya supplied. Shane nudged Ilya with a gloved hand.

“You're pretty special yourself, Rozanov.”

Ilya let out a sigh; a dreamy sound that made Shane's chest flutter. “*Moy solnyshko*. Sweet, sweet boy.” He cooed, then dropped his voice as he skated past him. “Cannot wait to kiss your pretty face later.”

The thought of Ilya's lips covering every square inch of his skin was enough to flood his body with a warmth that rivaled the chill carrying over the ice.

It was also a pleasant thought that he clung to for the rest of the game, because the game had turned out to be particularly brutal.

Two of their players had left the game with injuries, which left Hayden shifted onto Ilya's line as the game was winding down to the final minutes. They were in a deadlock with Nashville; the score stuck at 3-3. Shane was soaked through every layer with sweat, hair slicked to his forehead as he yanked his helmet off and sank to the bench. His mouth guard dangled between his teeth; idly chewing as he watched Ilya line up for the face off, Hayden bent at the waist in anticipation just off to his side.

Shane could see mouths moving, but could hear nothing from where he sat. He could only tell that the Nashville center, Frey, was jawing at Ilya with an intensity that seemed to be increasing. And then, quick as a lightning flash, Ilya's gloves were on the ice and his fist was pummeling his opponent's face so brutally that the other man's helmet went careening across the ice.

Frey only seemed to get one lick in on Ilya before he was buckling at his knees; Ilya not letting up. Blood sprayed across the ice just before Hayden came to yank Ilya hard by the back of the jersey. The ref was yelling. Frey was on his hands and knees. Ilya was panting like a rabid dog; chest rising and falling so hard it could be seen through his pads.

Ilya didn't even wait for instruction. He pumped his legs hard as he skated to the penalty box. He spit blood onto the ice before throwing his stick and helmet hard to the floor as he stepped inside.

Shane felt his mouth go dry as his thoughts raged like a storm. Major penalty. Nashville on the power play. Ilya's face blank and cold behind the glass.

Shane jumped over the boards for the power play, skating past the penalty box, eyes searching. But Ilya's gaze was fixed forward. He didn't move. Didn't look. Shane felt his stomach twist painfully.

And just as quickly as Ilya's gloves had hit the ice, Nashville scored, and the buzzer sounded, and they had lost.

Shane hated losing. He figured he probably hated more than anyone else in the entire league. But the loss barely even registered to him as his entire body flooded with worry for Ilya.

He watched as Ilya moved mechanically toward the locker room; bruised and busted knuckles hanging at his side, his lip split and crusted with dried blood.

Shane jogged up beside him, their shoulders brushing. “Hey. You okay? What happened out there?” He asked quietly.

But Ilya only gave a barely perceptible shake of his head and stalked off to his stall without a word. Shane watched as Ilya stripped his gear off, his face never wavering from its

blankness.

Ilya was the first to the shower, and Shane noticed the way some of their teammates lingered behind. It felt like a finger pressing into a fresh bruise. He hated this. He hated it even more than he thought he would.

Shane stole sideways glances at Ilya in the shower, but the other man stayed tucked into the far corner, facing the wall.

By the time Shane stepped back into the locker room, Ilya was already dressed and silently exiting the room. Shane's brows furrowed in concern. Ilya never left without him.

Just as the thought crossed his mind, his phone buzzed in his stall. Shane was quick to snatch it up, his eyes fixed on Ilya's words where they sat on the screen.

Ilya: i needed some air. i will meet you outside.

Shane blew out a breath, dropping his phone back onto the shelf. As he dressed, he turned to find Hayden doing the same quietly behind him.

“Hayd.” Shane sat down on the bench, pulling on a shoe. “What the hell happened out there? Did you hear anything?”

Hayden stilled a bit, leaning back against his stall. “I heard all of it.” He said, eyes cast down as he picked at a loose thread hanging from his towel. Shane just looked at him expectantly.

“Frey said something about having to face off against a cocksucker.” Hayden started, jaw clenching a bit. “Ilya chirped back at him. Said…” Hayden shook his head a bit. “Fucking Rozanov. He said ‘yes, I'm good at it, too. Just ask your father.’”

Shane let out a laugh at that, shaking his head. “Very Ilya response.”

“It was. But Frey didn't like that one, obviously. He, um. He…” Hayden blew out a breath, his voice dropping.

“He said, ‘I bet your whore mother wishes she swallowed you instead of breeding a fucking faggot.’” Hayden winced as the words left his mouth.

Shane's mouth dropped open, then clenched shut painfully. *Fuck*.

“And Rozanov just lost it. He looked like a fucking wild dog, man. I think I see now why you warned me to shut my stupid fucking mouth about him. Shit.” Hayden rubbed at the back of his own neck. “Trust me, I wanted to deck Frey myself but Rozanoz had it covered a little too well. I was afraid he might have gotten himself suspended if I didn't pull him away. This shit really sucks, Shane. I wish I knew what to say.”

The storm was raging in Shane's head again; a violent cloud tearing itself in two. Half wanted to go find Frey and finish breaking his face. The other half wanted to find Ilya and make it clear he would start a fucking war for him. The storm was equal parts anger, frustration, worry, and heartache. It thundered in his brain, loud and ugly and deafening.

“I know, Hayden. And thank you for stopping him. I…I gotta go find him.” Shane quickly pulled on his other shoe, his body feeling like it belonged to someone else as he pushed his way through the doors.

The words were burning their way through Shane's chest. These people were so fucking hateful, so cruel. And over what? Who Ilya takes to bed? Ilya, who they don't even fucking know.

His mind flooded with images of Ilya's bright smile and the way he always holds Shane's face so gently. The way his voice sounds when he tells Shane he loves him. The sheer reverence in every kiss he laid on Shane's skin.

And now the world was punishing him. And it was unfair. And Shane didn't know how to fix it.

The cold slapped him in the face as he burst through the player's exit, eyes frantically scanning for Ilya under the street lights. Instead, he found his parents standing on the curb.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Yuna stepped forward, placing a hand on his arm. “Tough game.”

“Yeah…” Shane said absently, eyes still searching. “Have you seen Ilya out here?”

His mom frowned a bit. “No, not yet. Is he alright? That fight was…intense.”

“I don't know. That's why I'm trying to find him. I think he-”

The unmistakable form rounded the corner; broad shoulders slumped, head cast down. Ilya slunk toward them like a kicked dog, and Shane felt his throat burning. Ilya looked up, his gaze far away.

David stepped forward first, wearing a look that Shane recognized from years of his father's unwavering support. He lifted his hand to Ilya, and to Shane's horror, Ilya flinched away.

A full body wince that sent him stumbling back; his head turning and ducking down. A reflex.

David's hand hung in mid air. Yuna's mouth hung open. Ilya looked up, wide eyed, chest heaving. He quickly pushed back through the doors into the building without a word.

“Oh, god.” Yuna gasped softly, her hand curling around her husband's arm. “Did he…did he think…?”

She didn't need to finish the sentence. They all witnessed it in real time. Ilya reacted as if David was going to hit him.

Shane felt nausea surge up from his stomach, but he forced it back down as best as he could. “I need to go talk to him. Just…I'll meet you guys back at my place, okay?”

Shane didn't wait for a response before he burst through the doors, trying to take measured breaths. He allowed his body to carry him to his boyfriend. Somehow it always knew. Shane

was a compass, and Ilya was north.

He gently opened the door to the equipment room, immediately finding Ilya leaned against the wall, pinching the bridge of his nose with his eyes squeezed shut.

Shane latched the door behind him, closing the distance in a few careful strides. “Hey.” He said quietly, running a hand up and down the side of Ilya's arm. When there was no response, Shane took a deep breath. “Ilya, I need you to talk to me.”

“I keep fucking up.” Ilya's voice came, hoarse and miserable.

“You aren't-”

“I am.” Ilya shook his head, moving his head to meet Shane's eyes. The pain was palpable. “I have coaches on your ass now because of me. I cost us the fucking game because I could not control myself. I just made a fucking fool of myself in front of your parents. I mean what the fuck, Shane? What will they think of me? That I am uncontrollable rage monster who cannot do his job right? That I am pathetic, weak little boy who is still afraid of his dead father? I fuck everything up.” He looked down now. “My father was right about me. I do not deserve-”

“*Don't*.” Shane's voice was sharp and his hand grabbed Ilya's jaw firmly, forcing his head back up. Ilya looked startled, brows knitted as he swallowed hard.

Shane sighed, his grip loosening as he moved his hand to cup Ilya's cheek instead. “Don't say that shit, Ilya. Just don't. Do you even understand how much I love you?” He brought his other hand up to hold Ilya's face.

“I love you so fucking much. And it's sure as shit not because you're a monster or pathetic or a fuck up. You're strong. You're the strongest fucking person I've ever met. Hayden told me what that piece of shit said to you, and I'm sorry I wasn't out there beat his fucking ass for you. Fuck him.” He moved his hands to thread into the back of Ilya's hair.

“I took it too far.” Ilya's jaw clenched shamefully.

“Maybe. But that idiot got what was coming to him. Maybe now people will realize they shouldn't fuck with you unless they want to get mauled.” He pressed their foreheads together. “But don't do it again.”

“I won't, *solnyshko*.” Ilya said softly.

“Good. Because it was really fucking hot and I was very conflicted.”

That earned him a laugh; the deep rumble shaking through them both. “You are a freak, Shane Hollander.”

“Only for you.” He gave Ilya's curls a gentle tug.

“I am sorry. For the game, and for what happened outside.”

Shane immediately shook his head. “Don't apologize. Just…can you tell me what happened? Why did you…” He trailed off, unable to say the words.

Ilya closed his eyes, hands grounding themselves on Shane's hips. “I felt like I disappointed everyone. It reminded me of disappointing my father, because he was always disappointed. And when I made mistakes like this, when I play undisciplined, he…you know what he did.”

Shane gently scratched at Ilya's scalp in soothing motions, taking a deep breath.

“I felt I disappointed your father and it just…I think I went back there. In my mind. I do not know. Is stupid.”

“It's not.” Shane brushed their noses together. “But you're safe here, okay? I promise.” He stepped back and brought Ilya's battered knuckles to his lips, kissing them gently. “And you're mine.”

Ilya stared at him in wonder, and Shane felt his cheeks heat under the gaze.

“*Bozhe moy, ty prosto chertovski krasiv*.” Ilya breathed, his thumb stroking over Shane's cheek. “*Ya tebya ochen' lyublyu*.”

My god, you are so fucking beautiful. I love you so much.

Shane closed his eyes as he listened to the words. He felt Ilya's lips brush against his cheek. “I love you. I have always loved you and I will always love you, Shane.”

He turned his head, eyes still closed as his lips met Ilya's. “I love you.” He whispered back. “Now come on. I would rather be kissing you in bed.”

By the time they made it back to Shane's condo, Yuna had mugs of tea waiting for each of them. Ilya nursed his gingerly, working around the bruise blooming beneath his split lower lip. And by the time their mugs were emptied, David was guiding Ilya out onto the balcony.

Shane watched, only for a moment, with a complicated feeling in his chest. He so badly wanted the world to see Ilya the way he did. Kind and smart and impossible to ignore. He was glad for his parents and the way they were so easily letting Ilya in; so eager to allow him to fit.

He eventually allowed himself to step away and get ready for bed; going through the practiced motions before saying goodnight to his mom and crawling under the blankets. Ilya and his dad were still outside, so Shane grabbed his phone and curled up onto his side as he started to scroll.

Apparently, the internet was in another frenzy over Ilya, now including his own fucking hashtag.

@bigrozanov
the way big daddy *@81rozanov* dropped that Nashville trash ohhh lord i fucking barked at the screen #RussiasGreatestRageMachine

@puckkoff
I just know Fr*y made a homophobic comment and Rozanov had to let the terror on ice out of containment 👏 #RussiasGreatestRageMachine

@hotforhollzy
oh he PUMMELED that man DEAR GOD #RussiasGreatestRageMachine

@urownpersonaljane
….well here's everyone's reminder to never piss him off #RussiasGreatestRageMachine

@2inthenet
all the gross homophobes been real quiet since #RussiasGreatestRageMachine almost killed a man with his fist, hmmm

Shane found himself unable to stop the grin on his mouth. Even if Ilya's penalty sealed their fate to lose that game, seeing these reactions felt almost worth it.

He chewed the inside of his lip, staring at the screen for a moment before the decision came over him.

He never posted anything on social media, unless it was for a brand deal. But the way everyone felt entitled to have an opinion about his favorite person in the world had left him feeling like he had some things to say.

@shanehollanderofficial
When I met *@81rozanov* at 14 years old, he was the boldest, funniest, and craziest person I had ever encountered. He quickly became my best friend. All of those things are still true 8 years later.

My best friend is also the bravest person I've ever met. There are no words to describe the kind of courage it takes to stand in front of the world and say you won't hide or apologize for

who you are.

It doesn't matter if the sports world or the world in general is ready to accept Ilya Rozanov for who he is. Because Ilya Rozanov was never going to wait for anyone's acceptance.

Ilya, I will always be proud to call you my best friend.

PS, he's the one who taught me how to throw a punch 👀 #RussiasGreatestRageMachine

[Image 1: 14 year old Shane and Ilya side by side in their full gear, both leaning on their sticks.]

[Image 2: Shane and Ilya during warmups at their first game of this season, standing side by side on the ice, heads turned to each other in conversation.]

Shane reread the message a few times before pressing send and dropping his phone to the nightstand. Something about it felt bittersweet. Maybe because he knew he was still hiding himself. Still hiding them.

But, at least the world knew that he was proud of Ilya. For now, it would need to be enough.

Shane wasn't sure when he had dozed off, but the familiar weight shifting into the bed caused him to stir awake. Ilya's warm, firm body scooted closer to his, and Shane felt a slow smile spread over his face.

“Hi, baby.” Shane said quietly. He leaned in close and pressed his lips gently to the bruise on Ilya's chin.

“Shh. I did not mean to wake you. Go back to sleep, *solnyshko*.” Ilya peppered his face with kisses. “God, you are so cute.”

Shane smiled, eyes falling shut again at the feeling of warm lips and stubble scraping against his face. His breathing slowed as Ilya started to whisper to him in Russian, fingers trailing lightly down Shane's side.

It didn't matter what the world knew or what they thought they knew about Ilya. Because Shane knew the truth. He had the most beautiful heart. One that Shane would protect with his life.

Shane allowed himself to be lulled back to sleep by the man he knew he would be spending the rest of his life with, world be damned.

Chapter End Notes

BAMF shane hollander has entered the mf chat 😤

also #RussiasGreatestRageMachine is the people's princess 💖

THANK U AS ALWAYS FOR UR KIND WORDS AND FOR READING SO FAR I love reading all your comments they make my day 💕

Up next: Ilya's situation becomes far more serious, and Shane is pushed to the limit of what he can witness without taking action against the league

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains homophobic language and heavy descriptions of blood.

(Pls don't panic but pls do strap yourselves in for this one)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dull, throbbing pain in his knuckles was enough to keep Ilya from sleeping even until sunrise. He allowed himself a soft groan into the pillow, tongue darting out to feel the aching split in his lip.

Ilya peeled himself from the bed, careful to not move too much as he did so. He didn't want to disturb Shane, who looked absolutely unreal. His dark hair pushed back away from his face; showcasing all of its sharp lines and perfect features. His pink, pouty lips parted slightly. His lashes fanned out above the scattering of freckles over his cheek bones; one cheek squished slightly against the pillow.

Absurdly, Ilya felt like he was about to cry. *Mine*, he thought. He is mine, and I am his, and no one can take that away from us.

He stared at Shane for a few moments more before silently slipping into the bathroom to empty his bladder and brush his teeth.

He thankfully remembered Shane's parents were here before he sauntered out of the room in only his Calvin Kleins; so he pulled on his joggers and a Montreal shirt that was definitely Shane's with the way it hugged tightly against his shoulders.

Ilya moved with practiced ease across Shane's kitchen as he started a big pot of coffee, letting it drip as he dug through the freezer for an ice pack. He hissed quietly when the cold settled across his knuckles. It was uncomfortable, but he knew Shane and Yuna would both pester him to ice the ugly mess that had formed on the top of his hand.

Montreal was slowly yawning to life as the sky lightened from black to navy outside the large windows that covered the far wall. His hand was aching and his lip was sore and he would kill for a cigarette right now, but Shane would kill him if he found out. And Ilya loved Shane more than anything. Much more than Marlboros. So he settled on the couch instead, ice pack balanced on his hand as he distracted himself with his phone.

He noticed immediately that #RussiasGreatestRageMachine was trending on Twitter, which tugged a smile onto his tired face. He didn't need to read the rest to know what that was in reference to, but he did anyway. At least the internet found his crash out entertaining.

He found a link to the video clip, and had to admit that it looked…intense. Though, the angle didn't quite capture the moment Frey's teeth went flying from his mouth, which was a shame.

Ilya kept scrolling, and was suddenly flooded with reactions to something he clearly wasn't privy to, but everyone seemed very excited about.

@littlevoyage
why yes I AM crying in the club over *@shanehollanderofficial* and *@81rozanov*'s friendship, thank you for asking

@niccatnite
THEY WERE BABIESSSSS OH WOW 😭

@bigrozanov
ok i am framing the entire tweet, this is not a joke

@hotforhollzy
too many of yall were getting thirsty and *@shanehollanderofficial* had to come on main and remind you where your place is in line 😇 #Hollanov

@iceicebbyy
oh dear god they were precious little angels, and Hollander's message was SO SWEET IM SICK 😫

Ilya found himself scrolling more furiously now to try and find what exactly all of these people were talking about, and then there it was. Shane's message, capped off with two matching pictures of them 8 years apart, and Ilya felt his heart swell so much it was bordering on painful.

His sweet Shane, who never posted anything on social media, lest he be perceived. Ilya felt like his skeleton was going to vibrate out of his skin if he didn't kiss Shane right now, so he hopped up off the couch, abandoning his phone and ice pack, and shuffled back into the bedroom.

He furrowed his brows when he saw the bed empty and blankets pushed back, but his ears perked at the sound of the sink running. Ilya shoved the bathroom door open, causing Shane to jump nearly feet into the air, water still trickling from his chin after rinsing toothpaste from his mouth.

"*Fuck*, Ilya! You scared the shit out of me. What are you-"

But Ilya attached his mouth to Shane's before he could finish his question. Shane made a surprised little noise, but started to kiss him back immediately after, because of course he did. The pressure against his mouth was painful; crushing his bruise and split lip. But he truly could not care less. Ilya pressed his tongue far into Shane's mouth as his hands slid his hands

under his thighs and hoisted Shane up onto the bathroom counter. Shane made a startled laugh, gently pushing at Ilya's chest.

“Okay, wait, wait.” Shane was saying breathlessly, his lips slick and kiss swollen. “I'm not complaining, but why are you attacking me right now?”

“I saw your Tweet, *solnyshko*. You are sweetest boy in the whole world, did you know this?” Ilya squished Shane's cheeks between his hands. “You are my good boy and I love you.”

Shane's cheeks flushed beneath his hands, and he scrunched up his nose, and Ilya was going to die. He moved his hands, then leaned in and bit Shane right on the apple of his freckled cheek.

“Cut it out.” Shane wiped the residue of spit off his cheek with the back of his hand, so Ilya licked the other cheek.

“Ilya!” Shane punched him hard on the arm. “You're so fucking weird.”

“Oh, but you love me and I am your best friend.” Ilya made an exaggerated show of batting his lashes.

Shane hopped off the counter and wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck. “I love you. And you're my best friend.” He punctuated each sentence with a kiss. “And you're weird.”

“Ah, apparently craziest person you have ever met, yes?” Ilya mused.

“Uh, yes.” Shane huffed a laugh. “Obviously.”

“Ever in your whole life? Bah. I do not believe this.”

“Ilya. I've witnessed you pick another kid up by the throat, throttle him, then laugh in his face and ask him if it's his bedtime when he started to black out.”

“And he never called you a fucking racist slur again, did he?” Ilya cocked his head. “Does not seem so crazy to me.”

Shane shot him an unamused look. “The fucking league commissioner threatened to suspend you, and you responded, quote, ‘then do it.’”

“Ah. So they tattle on me to captain. I did not know they were giving out full transcript of conversation.”

“You,” Shane put both hands on Ilya's face. “are out of your fucking mind, Rozanov.”

But Shane was smiling at him; his voice dripping in fondness that he couldn't seem to hide.

“And you like it. So what does that say about you, hm?”

“Fuck. You're right.” Shane laughed, his eyes crinkling in the corners. God, it would have been impossible not to fall in love with him, Ilya thought. He never stood a chance.

“Come. I made coffee. I am sure your parents will be up soon.” Ilya took Shane by the wrist to lead him, just as he always had when they were young.

Once they got into the kitchen, Shane snatched Ilya's hand up before he could hide it. He sucked in a breath, staring down at the mottled skin over his knuckles. “Ilya. You need to ice this.”

“Yes, dear.” Ilya sighed, and Shane shot daggers at him with his pretty brown eyes. Ilya settled back onto the couch, laying the ice pack atop his hand dutifully.

“You'll thank me later.” Shane followed behind with two mugs, setting them down on the coffee table before turning to stand in front of Ilya. “You need that hand. And not just for hockey.”

Ilya made an involuntary sound low in his throat. “Is this so?”

Shane bit his lip and crawled into Ilya's lap, knees planted on either side of his thighs. He grabbed onto Ilya's uninjured hand and guided it to the curve of his ass.

Ilya loved this about Shane. He was too shy or embarrassed to say what he wanted out loud, but god, did he ever want it.

He gently kneaded at Shane's ass as Shane pushed his tongue deep into Ilya's mouth, eliciting a low groan from Ilya when a hand tugged at his curls.

“Your coffee is getting cold.”

The sound of Yuna's voice startled them both; Shane's teeth clamping onto Ilya's lip when he jumped in surprise.

“Ow, fuck.” Ilya immediately tasted the metallic tang of blood where his split lip had now been freshly reopened.

“Oh, shit. Shit, I'm sorry.” Shane's hands went to Ilya's face, a thumb brushing at the blood. “Sorry. Are you okay?”

“Is fine, *solnyshko*.” Ilya patted Shane's lower back. He turned his head a bit to see Yuna watching them from the kitchen with an amused look on her face.

Shane clambered off Ilya's lap, cheeks tinged pink. “Sorry. I thought you were still asleep.” He grumbled, grabbing his coffee.

“It's fine, honey. I'm not naive enough to think you two just sit around and hold hands all day.”

Ilya laughed at that, poking Shane's still flushed cheeks. He could tell Shane was absolutely mortified at the prospect of his mother knowing that he engaged in sex as a fully grown adult in a committed relationship. He was so fucking cute.

The moment Ilya reached for his coffee, his phone began to buzz on the cushion next to him. He glanced over to see his agent's name on the screen.

Ilya wasn't going to admit this to Shane, but he had about 20 missed calls and as many unanswered voicemails and texts from his agent over the last 24 hours. He had a great relationship with his agent; she always looked out for him. She helped him immensely in getting out of Russia.

But he hadn't been in the right headspace to deal with the incoming reality of what he had done. He supposed it was time to bite the bullet.

“My agent. I need to take this.” Ilya said quietly, excusing himself out onto the balcony.

The moment the line connected, a stern, exhausted voice filled his ear.

“Ilya Rozanov, you will be the death of me.”

Ilya let out a huff that was part laugh and part sigh. “Hello to you too, Farah.”

“I was one more call away from showing up at your front door.” She let out a breath. “Ilya. I'll start by saying this - I'm proud of you for coming out. I support you one hundred percent. I know it's your life and your business, but I'm here to help you with these things. Especially the backlash from the media and the league. Which is already piling up, I see.”

“I know that. I was not trying to blindside. I just did not want it to be a whole…thing.”

“Well, unfortunately, it is very much a whole thing.” She sighed again. “I spoke with Montreal and the Commissioner last night. First and foremost, you are not to speak to them again without me. Understood?”

“Understood.” Ilya did not like the way this sounded. He gripped hard onto the freezing metal of the balcony railing.

“As I'm sure you're aware, they are not very happy with how that meeting went. You are correct that they have no real basis to bench you, suspend you, or terminate your contract. Yet.”

“Yet?” Ilya bristled.

“Ilya. We need to be very careful. The team can and will find ways to drop you if they really want to. And with your Visa, we need to be especially diligent.”

Ilya felt his stomach twist. His Visa. If he had to go back to Russia, he would be well and truly fucked.

“So.” Farah continued, the sound of shuffling papers beneath her voice. “I know it isn't right the way they approached, and frankly, threatened you. But I do need you to be on your best behavior right now. Well, for you, better than your best behavior.”

Ilya snorted out a laugh. He could hear the smile in Farah's voice. “For you, Farah, I will be boy scout.”

“Hey. This isn't for me. We need to keep you safe. So work with me here.”

“I understand. And thank you. I am sorry I was ignoring your calls. I think I was just…not ready to deal with everything at once.” Ilya leaned over the railing, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I'm sure this is a lot to deal with. But you don't have to do it all alone, Ilya. I know it's early, I'll let you get back to your morning. But call me right away if anyone from the league tries to speak with you, okay?”

“Yes. I will. Thank you, Farah.”

Ilya slipped his phone into the pocket of his joggers, trying to force a deep breath into his lungs.

Russia. If he had to go back to Russia, even for a short amount of time, would he even survive? He would never get to see Shane again. He would never get to marry him. Shane would be a wreck.

Ilya felt his breathing go uneven as he pressed his forehead to the railing, trying to use the cold to ground himself. How could he be so stupid? If the league found a reason to kick him out, he wouldn't be able to stay here. He was digging his own grave. And he did not want to die. Not anymore. He wanted to live for Shane, with Shane.

His chest rose and fell too quickly and too out of rhythm and he couldn't stop himself from thinking about the worst possible scenario over and over again.

Ilya didn't even hear the balcony door open. He only felt a warm hand place itself firmly between his shoulder blades.

“Ilya? You okay?” Shane's voice was gentle and steady. Ilya found himself unable to form any words; just sucked in a ragged breath.

“Hey.” Shane rubbed at his shoulders. “Hey, come inside with me. Come talk to me. Please? It's freezing out here.”

Ilya straightened up but kept his head bowed, following Shane back into the house. His emotions must have been written all over his face, because the moment Ilya looked up, Shane's hand was cupping his cheek.

“Hey. What's going on?” Shane's dark brows were scrunched in concern, his eyes catching the morning light. He was like an angel. How could Ilya ever be able to leave him behind? He wouldn't even make it to Russia. If he ever had to say goodbye to Shane again, his soul would dissolve and leak from his body and he would die.

“I-” Ilya started. But he felt like he had rocks filling his chest. “My agent. She…Montreal and the league are not happy with me. She says I need to be careful, because they could look

for reason to terminate my contract. And if this happens…my Visa…I could get sent back to Russia."

"No." Shane said firmly, shaking his head. His hand took a possessive grip against Ilya's face. "No, that's not gonna happen."

Ilya felt his eyes drift away, unable to look at Shane now. But Shane - his determined, stubborn Shane - placed both hands on his face now. "Ilya." He snapped. Ilya cut his eyes back to meet Shane's.

"It's not going to happen." He insisted.

"We would never allow that, sweetheart." Yuna's voice now, her hand warm against the side of Ilya's arm. "You wouldn't be safe."

"I know. This is why it scares me. I…I could not…"

Shane was shaking his head again. "Baby, I need you to listen to me. I won't let that happen. Okay? I'll hire every fucking lawyer in Canada. I'll marry you right fucking now. You aren't going back there."

Ilya swore he heard his breath and Yuna's hitch in sync. His determined, stubborn Shane indeed. He was so sweet and earnest and so god damn protective that Ilya's chest burned with the intensity of it.

"Shane. You don't-" Yuna started, but Shane dug his heels in.

"No. I'm not fucking kidding. I'm dead serious, he isn't going back there. They can take him over my dead fucking body."

"Oh, *solnyshko*." Ilya could see now that Shane's hands had started to tremble. He was afraid. Just like Ilya was afraid. He pulled Shane into a tight hug. "You are right. Is not going to happen, okay? I am not going anywhere. Is going to be fine."

Shane clutched hard at the back of Ilya's shirt. "No more mouthing off to the Crowell. As much as he deserves it." He grumbled into Ilya's neck. "Also, this is my shirt, you asshole."

"How do you know?" Ilya gave him a playful shove.

"Because you're fucking stretching it out with your obnoxious shoulders."

Ilya scoffed. "Mama Yuna, you see how mean he is to me? Has he always been such a brat?"

"Always." Yuna smiled and ruffled Shane's hair.

Shane flipped him off with a deadpan stare. "You're so lucky I love you."

"The luckiest." Ilya winked, and grinned wide when Shane couldn't stop the small smile that played on his lips.

They all settled into the couch with their coffee; Shane tucked into Ilya's side, his cheek nuzzling Ilya's shoulder every so often. David joined them eventually, and they slipped into easy conversation.

This was what Ilya was fighting to keep. What he wouldn't allow Russia or Crowell or anyone else tell him he wasn't supposed to have. What he wouldn't let the world tell him was wrong.

How could it ever be wrong? Shane was the light that brightened every dark corner of Ilya's soul. That breached the walls carefully constructed to guard the softness of his heart that he was told was weakness.

Shane didn't let it feel like weakness. He wrapped himself around Ilya's tender heart and told him he was perfect. He ripped open the seams of his own life to make room for Ilya to nestle inside, safe and warm and happy.

Happy. It was a simple enough word. But Ilya had fought tooth and nail most of his life to claim it for himself. And now here it was, spread out before him on a warm couch in the Montreal winter. Love. A family.

If Ilya was wrong for giving his whole heart to someone who cared for it so carefully, only because this person was a man, he did not wish to be right.

He pressed his cheek into Shane's soft black hair and felt more at home than he ever had anywhere else in his life.

Road games against Boston would always be intense, but their matches lately had all taken on a whole new level of severity.

The microscope over Ilya seemed to have magnified ten fold, and Shane had never felt more fiercely protective in his life. Think pieces and ESPN segments and radio morning shows had all latched onto the story like relentless leeches. Every game, the TV cameras would find their way to point at Ilya on the bench, on the ice, in the penalty box, hovering over his face like it would somehow crack open and reveal more secrets for them to obsess over.

The only solace Shane had was that Ilya didn't seem particularly bothered. When he caught the cameras pointed toward him, he always made a point to wave, or wink, or blow kisses. He was choosing to be very Ilya about it all; save for mouthing off to the team owners or the league again. Because Shane would actually have to kill him if he got himself in a situation where he could be deported.

For now, Shane needed to stop thinking about every hypothetical thing that could go wrong, which was made easier by the very distracting scene in front of him. Ilya was returning to the bench; helmet wrenched off as he tilted his head back and squeezed the water bottle in his

hand, the stream pouring into his open mouth. His face and neck were flushed and glistening with a sheen of sweat. He hopped over the boards with a soft grunt and plopped down next to Shane, exhaling deeply.

“Their goalie is getting tired.” Ilya leaned forward on his stick. “You will score on next shift. Easy.”

Shane hummed his agreement, eyes tracking as one of the Boston rookies came skating past their bench, eyes shooting daggers at Ilya.

“The fuck is that about? You chirp him too hard?” Shane turned a bit to look at Ilya, who was shaking his head.

“Ah, no. That is Dyatlov. He is like me. Fresh import from Russia. Beginning of season he stopped me after a game, told me he was big fan of me in KHL. Seems his opinion must have changed since then.” Ilya leaned closer to Shane. “Wonder why.” He said sarcastically.

Shane was shaking his head now. Ilya went from being universally hated for being a menace, to being public enemy number one for being bisexual. He wondered if any of this would ever let up. If people would ever get over it. So far, it didn't seem like that was ever going to happen.

That assumption only deepened on their next power play. Ilya had cut across the ice in a blur, no one able to keep up as he used his long legs to power through and slide a hard pass through the defenders right onto Shane's tape. When Shane rocketed a slapshot straight into the back of the net to give Montreal the lead, Ilya lifted his arms, elated as he moved toward Shane.

“*Davaye*!” He yelled out, right into the face of a Boston player who happened to be in Ilya's line of fire.

The player shoved Ilya hard in the chest. “Shut the fuck up, faggot.” He spat.

Shane's vision tunneled in, and he saw red.

The next thing Shane knew, his gloves were on the ice, and he was clipping the other player on the jaw with his fist. Another Boston player was trying to yank Shane back by the jersey. Several Montreal players were holding Ilya against the boards.

When the ref got between them and signaled a penalty on Shane, and only on Shane, he felt rage slam hard into his chest.

“You were standing right fucking there! You heard what he said! Are you fucking serious right now? We're just gonna let people use fucking slurs?” Shane was gesturing wildly, his skin on fire.

Shane had his fair share of slurs directed at him over the years. It made him decide long ago that words were awful things. They couldn't hurt you. Not physically. But they could make

you feel so small. Less than. Shane always pretended like the words didn't matter. Like maybe he didn't even hear them. He always heard them.

If he had to hear someone hurl that word at Ilya one more time, he was going to lose his entire fucking mind. Ilya was the top scorer, had made a huge name for himself by being a star player in the two biggest professional hockey leagues in the world, was well on his way to helping lead this team to a cup, and he was being reduced to a slur.

It was insulting. It was disgusting. It was infuriating. And Shane felt his insides burning like a furnace.

“Fuck you!” He screamed at the player whose jaw he had almost certainly broken. “Worthless piece of shit.”

“Hollander, I won't tell you again.” The ref said impatiently.

“This is unfucking real.” Shane grumbled as he skated toward the box. He caught Ilya's eye from across the ice, an unreadable expression stuck on the Russian's face.

He felt entirely useless from the box. Anger was caged up inside of him like an animal. That stupid fucker who spat those words in Ilya's face was looking smug on his bench. And now his team was going to have to fight through these last few minutes without him. All he could do was use his vantage point to watch Ilya carve up the ice like a man possessed.

Ilya had been flying down the ice before sliding the puck across the ice in a beautiful pass that landed perfectly, as it always did. Ilya was watching the puck, his forward momentum carrying him, when Shane saw it all happen in seemingly slow motion.

Dyatlov made no move to stop. In fact, Shane watched as he dug his skate in hard, lurching his body to meet Ilya's full force. Ilya had no time to brace for the hit. He landed back on the ice with a sickening sound as his helmet bounced off the surface. The whole arena let out a collective sound at the collision. Shane felt like his breath had been punched out of his lungs.

Ilya wasn't moving. His body laid limp, turned at an awkward angle, and he wasn't moving.

Shane's body was carrying him forward before his mind registered what he was doing. He was out of the box, stomach in his throat, legs pumping toward the far side of the ice.

Get up. Get up. Get up. He chanted in his head; sick and dizzy and unable to hear anything but his own ragged breathing.

He became acutely aware of Dyatlov leaning over Ilya's unresponsive body, mouth moving. Shane needed to get there. But the ice stretched out in front of him like an impassable sea; Ilya the unmoving beacon.

Then Cliff Marlow's large body was obscuring his view, standing across from Dyatlov at Ilya's other side. And suddenly, Marlow was on his knees, and sound returned to Shane's ears in a horrible whoosh.

“Shit! Fuck. Hey, hey, hey! We need help over here!” Marlow was shouting. Dyatlov was skating away. Shane was moving like his body belonged to someone else.

Marlow shifted his position, and Shane's entire world tilted violently.

Blood. There was so much blood. Pooling and trickling down the ice in a deep red puddle. Shane fell to his knees and slid the last few feet, right into Marlow's side.

Marlow looked up at him with an expression of pure horror. His gloves had been discarded, and his large hands were holding the side of Ilya's face and neck, blood seeping through his trembling fingers.

“Oh god. Oh my god. Oh my god.” Shane's panicked voice rose out of him as tears immediately welled and blurred his vision.

“Dyatlov- his fucking skate- I-” Marlow was shaking his head in disbelief. Shane leaned over Ilya, adding his own hands into the slippery mess, applying as much pressure as he could.

“Ilya-” Shane choked out.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Marlow stick one hand into the collar of his jersey and rip out a small mic with a tangle of wires. He threw it across the ice with a clatter. “They don't need to fucking hear this.” He said, voice low.

Everything felt like it was moving too slowly. Ilya's pulse beneath his palm. The blood spreading beneath him. And the medics, fuck, where were the medics?

“Fuck. Please.” Shane felt a sob tear out of him. “Please, please, please. Ilya, open your eyes, baby. Please.” He pressed his forehead into Ilya's. His skin was so cold. “Wake up. I love you. You have to wake up. *Fuck*. Fuck!”

He felt new hands moving to the source of the blood, pushing his own out of the way. “Sir, you need to step back.” A voice came from behind him.

“Deep laceration to the face and neck. Artery is still in tact.” Another voice from beside him. “We need to get him up. Stabilize the head.”

The voices came from all around; a steady flurry of commands that floated across the ice and through Shane's ears like ghosts.

Keep pressure. Going into tachycardia. Try to get a response. Eyes open, keep your eyes open for us, okay?

At that, Shane snapped like a rubber band. He jumped up onto his skates, closing the distance between himself and the stretcher they were laying Ilya on.

Ilya's eyes were an impossible blue under the harsh arena lights. He was blinking against the brightness; chest heaving with an unnatural force. “*Shane*.” Ilya breathed out weakly.

“Hey, hey, I'm here.” Shane put a hand to Ilya's face. He was so pale, Shane swore he could see the blue of the veins beneath his skin. “I'm here. I'm right here.”

“Is okay. Do not panic.” Ilya lifted a hand to him, but the medical staff were swarming still.

“Stay still for us, okay?” The one holding pressure on the wound said firmly.

They started to slide the stretcher off the ice, and Shane followed in stride.

“Hollander. You need to stay back.” One of the coaches was pulling at his shoulder.

“No, no, I can't- I'm going with him. I have to-”

“You can't fit in the ambulance with that gear and we need to go now.” One of the medics barked.

Shane felt like the ice was going to melt and swallow him up in a bottomless pit. The coach held him firmly, and the stretcher kept moving, moving, moving until he couldn't see Ilya anymore. All that remained were red streaks in the ice; Ilya's blood spilled across the bright white.

Maybe the ice had actually melted and swallowed him whole, because Shane suddenly felt like he was underwater. His limbs didn't make sense on his body, the sounds around him were strange and wrong, and his eyes couldn't focus.

“Shane. Shane!” Hayden's voice cut sharply through the fog, his hands planted on Shane's shoulders and shaking him firmly. “Shane, come on, buddy. They want you and Marlow off the ice.”

Shane looked down at himself then, and realized his hands and jersey were painted with blood. He turned to Marlow and saw the same; the large man moving silently off the ice.

“Come on, buddy.” Hayden said gently. “Come on, let me help you.”

Hayden held Shane's arm as he guided him. Shane kept his eyes cast down. He watched as his skate ran right through the blood, dragging some along with him, and he felt his stomach lurch. He clutched hard onto Hayden's jersey, trying to swallow back panic and nausea as they threatened to take him.

Shane barely registered that Hayden had gotten most of his gear off. He felt as if the moments were passing by in strange snapshots.

“I have to- I have to go to him, Hayden. I need-”

“I know. Just- just at least wash your hands? I need to get back out there. They pulled you and Marlow for the rest of the game. You should go. But you need to take some deep breaths first, yeah?”

Shane nodded a bit. “Go. I'll be fine.”

Hayden looked at him for a beat before disappearing from the room, the door shutting softly behind him.

Shane barely trusted his own legs as he stumbled toward the sink. The warm water ran pink as he scrubbed his hands under the spray. He watched the blood slip off his skin. Ilya's blood. *Ilya*.

He gripped the edge of the sink, folding nearly in half as he inhaled sharply. What if they were too late? What if he lost too much blood? What if they were wrong about the artery? Ilya's skin was so cold. His skin was never cold. Everything about it was wrong, wrong, wrong. He couldn't live without Ilya. He couldn't-

A strong hand landed between Shane's shoulder blades. “Hollander. You need to sit down, kid.”

Marlow guided him back to the bench with steady hands, then handed him a bottle of Gatorade. Shane took a small sip through shaking hands, his brain fuzzy.

“That's it. Take a breath. You're alright.”

Shane felt the breath catch in his throat, one that morphed harshly into a broken sob. The sound tore out of him before he could stop it.

“Fuck. *Fuck*, oh my god. I need to- I have to get to him.” He was jumping to his feet as reality came crashing back down and clamped onto him like a vice. “I have to get there.”

Marlow grabbed him by the shoulders. “I know. I know, I'm gonna take you there, okay? We're gonna get there as quickly as we can but I need to know you'll be able to walk to my car without passing out.”

The authority in Marlow's voice helped to loosen the grip ever so slightly. He nodded, clutching the Gatorade bottle between his hands so hard he was starting to crush it. “I can. I can, please. Just- please.” He felt hot tears spill over his eyes and to the tops of his cheeks.

Marlow put an arm around Shane's shoulders and guided him quickly out through the player's exit and to his car.

Boston flew by the windows in a sickening blur that made Shane have to wrench his eyes shut. The panic had seeped through him so deeply that he felt paralyzed.

Ilya. His Ilya. His best friend. His love. His life. He found himself silently praying to whatever fucking entity might be out there. To whoever would listen. *Please let him be okay. Please. He deserves to live. He deserves it more than anyone I know.*

Then over and over again, like a prayer, *Ilya. Ilya. Ilya.* On Shane's tongue like keeping his name alive would keep him safe.

He let that thought carry him straight to the desk inside the emergency room.

“Ilya Rozanov.” The name spilled out so quickly, so desperately that it took the woman a moment to register his words. Shane gripped the edge of the desk so hard he felt like he might break it in two.

“Your name?” The woman eyed him carefully.

“Shane Hollander.” He gritted out, leg bouncing in place.

“Okay. I see you're listed here as his emergency contact. We'll get you up into the waiting area and someone will be with you as soon as possible.” Her voice was clinical. Practiced. Even. But Shane felt like he was unraveling under the weight of it.

Now. He needed to know what was going on *now*. He felt like his fucking heart was going to give out.

But Marlow was pushing him forward, forward, forward until they reached a small waiting area. Small being the operative word, because Shane himself could barely squeeze into one of these stupid plastic chairs. Marlow looked like he might break it completely.

He tried to focus on the feeling of the floor beneath his feet, his whole head throbbing with a panicked pressure he had never felt before.

When the nurse entered the room and called out Ilya's name, Shane nearly launched himself at her.

“You're Mr. Rozanov's contact?”

“Yes, yes. I am. I- please.” He stared at her, silently pleading, unable to form a sentence.

“Mr. Rozanov is in stable condition.”

Shane's knees nearly buckled. He bent forward, hands on his hips as he blew out a breath.

“He's currently undergoing a blood transfusion. He lost a significant volume, but he's stable and reacting well to treatment. His laceration was stitched. He also suffered a grade 3 concussion, but he's awake and responsive which is a great sign. We'll come back and grab you when he's all done with the transfusion, okay?”

Shane nodded automatically, trying to let the words sink in.

The nurse gave a small, knowing smile. “He has been very insistent that he see you as soon as possible. So I'll be sure to come back as soon as you're able to.”

Of course. Shane would expect nothing less. He could picture it now; the nurses and doctors asking Ilya questions, and him punctuating every answer with *‘but where is my Shane? Bring him here. I need to see him now.’*

When the nurse turned her back, he allowed himself to sink into the chair, put his face in his hands, and sob.

Full on, crybaby sobs that made his whole body shake and the chair creak beneath him. He could hardly tell what the tears were for. Relief that Ilya was okay. Frustration that he couldn't see him now. Every thought and emotion moved through his head like a hurricane, and Marlow's hand stayed planted on his shoulder until the storm passed.

Once the tears were spent, Shane sat himself up, and felt all his thoughts sharpen at once.

“How did it happen? You said Dyatlov. But how? Ilya was already down on the ground, he was already out. Dyatlov was standing next to him. I saw him talking. How the fuck did this happen?”

Marlow took a big breath, hands folding into his lap as he hung his head and started to shake it in disbelief.

“He- fuck. Hollander…he fucking did it on purpose.”

The words landed on Shane's ears and flooded his veins like poison. No. That couldn't be right. But Marlow was Dyatlov's teammate. His fucking captain. He wouldn't lie about something like this. He wouldn't say this unless he was sure.

“I fucking saw it. He said something to Rozanov, and then he turned around, and kicked his skate back into his fucking face. I saw it. I fucking saw it.”

The tone of Marlow's voice let Shane know that he was haunted by the memory. Sickened by it. Shane thought back to the way Marlow yelled out. To how his hands were shaking.

“What did he say to him?” Shane clenched his jaw so hard he swore he could feel his teeth cracking. “Dyatlov. What did he say?”

Marlow shook his head. “It was in Russian.”

Of course. Shane put his head in his hands. He had some fucking guesses as to what was said. Anger started to flare up inside of him, blazing through him like a sun. Did someone actually fucking slice Ilya's god damn face and neck with a fucking skate blade? Was it possible to pass out from being too angry?

“The mic.” Marlow perked up a bit. “I was mic'd. He was definitely close enough that it got picked up. Maybe they had it on the broadcast and someone can translate? I doubt Rozanov will remember it. His bell got rung hard.”

Right. The mic. The broadcast. Marlow had ripped his mic out, right before-

Oh. Fuck.

Shane whipped his head around, eyes meeting Marlow's with a widened gaze. Recognition seemed to pass through Marlow's expression.

“Hey. Listen. You were watching your friend unconscious and bleeding. Whatever you were saying to him is none of my fucking business. I mean that.”

Shane blew out a breath. “Okay. Okay. We're gonna…fuck. We're gonna fucking figure this out. Fuck.”

Shane put his hands into his hair. He could not believe this was happening. But for now, he needed to focus on Ilya being okay. He needed to hold that beautiful face in his hands and look into those blue eyes and hear his perfect voice.

He spent the next grueling hour focusing on those thoughts between phone calls. His parents. Hayden. His coach. Svetlana had even somehow tracked down his number. He dutifully told each person exactly what the nurse had told him. Repeating the words thankfully helped him process them himself. Ilya was alive. He was going to be okay.

Marlow left him with a hug, a bottle of ginger ale from the vending machine, and his promise that he would tell the truth about what he witnessed tonight.

Shane wasn't even sure how to thank him properly. For jumping in to help Ilya. For checking on Shane. For bringing him here. For staying. For telling Shane what he saw. He owed Cliff Marlow a debt he wasn't sure he could ever repay.

He wasn't able to ruminate on that for too long, because suddenly the nurse was in front of him with her clipboard, the small smile on her lips again.

“Mr. Rozanov is ready to see you. Very ready.” She laughed a bit. “Follow me.”

Shane nearly tripped over his own feet as he jumped up to follow behind her.

“He's on some pain medication and likely still a bit exhausted from the blood loss, so he might fall asleep on you. Just be careful around the stitches. Keep the overhead lights off. No screens.” She stopped and gestured to a door. “We'll be back to check on him in about a half hour.”

Shane nodded, not able to even squeeze out a thank you as his heart leapt into his throat. He pushed the door open and felt the air rush into his lungs.

“There you are, my *solnyshko*.” A lazy grin formed on Ilya's face. His skin was getting its color back. He honestly didn't look awful, all things considered. Shane felt tears welling.

He rushed to Ilya's side and brought a hand to his cheek. “Fuck. Ilya, oh my god.” He choked out.

“Oh, *solnyshko*. Is okay my sweet boy.” Ilya's voice was light and floaty. He put a hand on top of Shane's. Shane's eyes flitted over to the other side of his face to see the line of stitches that stretched from just next to the hinge of his jaw, down toward the column of his throat.

Shane pressed their foreheads together as a sob shook through his body.

“No, no. Shhh.” Ilya put a hand to the back of his head.

“*Fuck*, Ilya. There was so much fucking blood. I thought you were gonna die. Please don't ever die.” Shane draped himself over Ilya, unable to hold his own weight anymore. He felt

his tears drip down onto Ilya's face.

“My love. I am here. I tell you before, I will die being suffocated by your thighs. Not like this. Is okay.”

Shane laughed wetly. “What the fuck, Ilya.”

“Mm no, call me baby. I like when you call me this.”

Shane stood to wipe his tears, then pushed Ilya's curls back from his forehead. “My baby.”

“Yes. Better.” Ilya closed his eyes with a dopey smile. Shane could tell he was fading fast.

He pulled a chair up to Ilya's bedside and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. “Go to sleep, baby. I'll be right here.” He said softly.

He closed his fingers around Ilya's hand and allowed himself to pretend they were the only two people in the world.

The humming of machinery was the first thing that Ilya registered before pain rushed into his head like a freight train.

A dull, throbbing ache behind his eyes; accompanied by a strange feeling on the side of his neck. Warm and sore and itchy. He blinked his eyes open to see the stark white blanket draped over top of him.

Right. He was in the hospital. The nice nurse had explained it to him. He was injured during the game. He remembered being hooked up to machines. Lights shining in his eyes. And Shane was here. He had been crying. Ilya needed to find him now. He needed-

“Shane?” He groaned out. Fuck, his throat was dry.

A soft sound came from next to him. He turned his head slightly to see the dark tuft of hair tucked next to him. Shane was on a chair, slumped over with his head on Ilya's bed side.

He lifted his head sleepily. His eyes were rimmed red and Ilya could see tear tracks still marking his freckled cheeks.

“Oh, *solnyshko*.” Ilya felt his heart squeeze. He pressed a palm into Shane's cheek.

“My love. You are exhausted. Why did you not go sleep in the hotel?” He used a thumb to stroke Shane's cheekbone. His skin was warm and soft beneath his fingers.

“I wasn't gonna leave you.” Shane said groggily. “How are you feeling?”

“I am fine. Is just a concussion, *solnyshko*, you know I will be okay. You have been crying. Why?”

Shane sat up straighter, dark eyes searching him. “What do you remember?”

“Ah, not much.” Ilya admitted. It was all a blur in his mind. Fragments floating in space.

Shane took his hand, his expression solemn and serious. “Ilya. It wasn't just a concussion. You didn't just hit your head.”

“Then what?” Ilya felt his brows furrow.

Shane sighed. “You- you got cut. By a skate.”

Ilya tried to swallow, but his mouth was bone dry. He allowed his own fingers to trail over to where his skin felt sore and tight. *Oh*.

“Don't touch.” Shane said gently. He stroked Ilya's face with the back of his hand.

Ilya moved his hands back to his lap. Shane looked utterly wrung out. He wondered how bad it was. Had Shane been scared? His poor, sweet Shane. His heart was aching worse than his head.

“Are you okay?” Ilya whispered.

“Yes, of course. I just- you scared me is all.”

“Come.” Ilya held an arm up, and Shane settled his head in the crook of Ilya's neck, breathing deeply. “Is okay.” Ilya whispered, wrapping his arm around him.

He rubbed at Shane's shoulder, eyes scanning the cramped hospital room until they landed on the TV. Shane must have been watching ESPN. Nerd. He smiled fondly.

Just as he was about to look away, knowing screens weren't great for the concussed, a scene on the screen kept his eyes glued there.

It was Ilya's own body, lying still on the ice. Cliff Marlow was skating by. And Dyatlov was hovering over him. The TV was muted, so Ilya could only watch the scene play out in silence. He felt his brows furrowing.

He didn't see a cut or blood. How could he have been hit with a skate? He wasn't tangled up with anyone. It didn't make sense.

The breath Ilya was about to take got caught in his chest.

He watched, wide eyed, as Dyatlov turned away, then kicked his skate up behind him and directly onto Ilya's jaw. He felt himself gasp softly.

A horrid red gash opened up across the neck and face of the small Ilya on the TV screen. Blood ran into a puddle beneath him. It poured and poured, like spilled wine over the edge of

a table.

Marlow's hands were at his neck. And then there was Shane. Holding his bleeding neck. Pressing his forehead to Ilya's. Getting Ilya's blood all over his hands and his jersey. His breath hitched slightly, and Shane lifted his head, following Ilya's gaze.

“Oh, shit. I-” Shane reached for the remote, but Ilya watched the motion get canceled midway as Shane's eyes focused on the screen. He heard Shane swallow hard. Saw his eyes go glassy. Saw his bottom lip begin to tremble. Ilya felt like his chest was broken open, rather than his face.

“Shane.” He put a hand on Shane's face, gently guiding it back to him. “Oh, Shane.” He felt his own voice break slightly at the look in Shane's eyes. And when his boyfriend buried his face into his chest and started to heave broken sobs, Ilya knew this was more painful than death by a thousand cuts.

“God, Shane, I'm so sorry. Come here, *malysh*. Please.” He tried to tug Shane fully onto the bed. Shane sniffled.

“I can't. I'll hurt you.” He managed to say between cries.

“No. You will not. I promise. Please. I need you here.”

Shane wiped his nose on his sleeve and climbed into the narrow space next to him on the bed, body half draped over him. Ilya put an arm around him tight, cradling him there. He could feel Shane trembling.

“I'm sorry. I'm being dramatic. I'm sorry.” Shane said into his chest.

“*Solnyshko*. You are not being dramatic. You were scared. I would have been terrified if was the other way around.” He tightened his grip. “We are okay now. Okay? Listen to my heart.”

He felt Shane still, ear pressed to his chest. “Beats just for you, you know.” Ilya added quietly.

Shane whined quietly, sitting up a bit. He pressed his mouth into Ilya's hungrily. Ilya groaned softly into his mouth, hand threading through the back of Shane's hair.

His mouth was so warm and soft and Ilya wanted to feel it on him forever.

“I love you.” Shane panted when they pulled apart. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“Sweet boy. I love you so much. I know you will never let anything bad happen to me.” He brushed the hair back from Shane's forehead. Shane squeezed his hand tightly.

Ilya looked down at their joined hands and frowned at Shane's bruised and reddened knuckles. “You got into fight?”

“Don't worry about it.” Shane sat back up when he heard the nurse enter the room.

He wasn't sure if it was the concussion or the lingering emotions from feeling Shane's fear, but letting go of his hand in that moment felt like cutting the string from a kite. Shane was his tether, and from across the room, he might as well have been a thousand miles away.

Though even from a distance, he could feel Shane's tension. Something was bothering him deeply, Ilya knew. He would need to coax it out of him eventually. But for now, they were ushering Ilya out of his room to go get his head scanned. Something they were apparently unable to do yesterday with his fragile state after losing a fair amount of blood.

By the time he got back to his room, he felt nauseous and exhausted to his core. He frowned a bit when he realized Shane was no longer there. He settled into his bed, the nurse leaving him with instructions to rest. But the moment he shut his eyes, the door swung open with fervor.

"*Ilyusha! God. Don't you ever scare me like this again, you asshole!*" Svetlana stomped into the room, auburn curls bouncing with each step.

"*Hello to you, too*." Ilya shook his head with a smile.

"*Fuck off. You scared the shit out of me. I had to bribe several people to get your boy's phone number because you never gave it to me. Men. I swear.*" She leaned down and kissed his cheek.

Ilya craned his neck up to see Shane standing almost shyly in the doorway.

"*Solnyshko*, you can come in. Is okay."

"*He is afraid of me.*"

"*Who isn't?"* Ilya retorted, which earned him a light slap to the arm. Usually he would prefer to switch to English in front of Shane, but his head was swimming and not having to translate was like a god send. "*But seriously, Sveta. Be nice to him. That is my sweet sunshine boy.*"

She rolled her eyes, but smiled. "*Yes, yes, I know. He is very good. And very feisty, I must say. He is protective of you. And it gets him all riled up. I think he's even hotter that way.*"

Ilya shot her a sharp look. "*Svetlana Vetrova, keep your greedy eyes off my boyfriend.*"

"*I will give you this, Ilyusha. You settle for nothing but the best. He is unfairly good looking and I can tell he loves you very much.*" She grabbed his hand. "*I'm happy for you. You deserve him.*"

Ilya felt his heart swell. The words meant more than he could say.

But he could feel something off. In the corner, Shane was pacing. Tense. Biting absently at the skin of his thumb.

"Shane." Ilya called over to him. "*Solnyshko*, you are spiraling. Come sit."

Shane sighed and sat down at the seat near Ilya's bed. He and Svetlana exchanged a look. Svetlana quirked a questioning brow. Shane sighed and looked down.

Ilya's eyes bounced between them. “What? You two are being strange.”

Shane heaved another sigh, running a hand through his dark hair. “It's about Dyatlov. I know you saw the replay, but…did you notice that there was something strange about the way it happened?” Shane was picking at the skin around his fingers now. A tell that he was anxious.

Ilya chewed the inside of his cheek a bit, thinking back to what he watched. His mind was bit hazy from being concussed, and he had been so overwhelmed he hadn't been able to process much of what he saw anyway.

“Strange how?”

He saw Svetlana and Shane share another glance.

“*Gospodi*. Will you two cut it out? Tell me what is going on.” He huffed out in exasperation. His head was killing him and they were certainly not helping.

“Marlow saw it happen. Then we watched the replay. He did it on purpose, Ilya. It was fucking obvious.”

Ilya stilled, swallowing hard. He wasn't sure what to say, so he said nothing.

“And it wasn't just how it looked. He…” Shane dragged a hand down his face. “He said something to you before he did it. Marlow heard him, but it was in Russian, so he didn't understand. Obviously. But he was mic'd.” Shane looked to Svetlana then.

She placed a hand on Ilya's forearm. “The broadcast caught it. He leaned over top of you after he knocked you out. He said-”

The two looked at each other again, and god help him, Ilya was about to combust. Shane gave her a barely perceptible nod and looked at his lap.

“He said ‘you are a disgrace to our country, faggot.’ And then he fucking kicked you with his skate.”

Ilya's eyes immediately went to Shane. He could see rage building behind his beautiful brown eyes. Fuck. Ilya felt like he was going to be sick.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose.

“He's not going to get away with this.” Shane said, hands clenched into fists. “He's not, Ilya. He could have fucking killed you. The doctor said the cut was millimeters away from your artery. You would have bled out. You would be dead. I'm not fucking ignoring this, I'm not-”

“Shane.” Ilya grabbed for his hand. “I know. I know. Just breathe, okay?”

Shane squeezed his hand hard. “I'm not fucking around.”

His eyes were shining with what Ilya knew were angry, frustrated tears. He wasn't sure he had actually ever seen Shane so angry before.

"*You see? Feisty. I like him.*" Svetlana smirked.

"*Shut up. He is upset, Sveta.*" Ilya shot her another look, swallowing down the nausea that was threatening its way up his throat again.

"*Upset because he wants to kill someone for you. I like this. Keep him.*"

Shane looked between them, watching curiously.

Ilya gave him a small smile. "Ah, she says I should keep you." He squeezed Shane's hand again.

"Oh yeah?" Shane allowed himself a smile.

Svetlana nodded emphatically. Ilya's smile grew. "She is very bossy. But always right, of course."

He lifted their hands to kiss Shane's knuckles, his eyes feeling heavy. Shane moved his hand to rub Ilya's thigh soothingly.

He would have to worry about this fucked up situation later. For now, he allowed the feeling of Shane's hand to lull him into sleep.

"Shane. You need to go, *solnyshko*. We cannot both miss the game. Fly home with the team. Go sleep in your bed. Win for me. I will be home in a few days, as soon as doctor clears me." Ilya was stroking the back of his hand with his thumb, his eyes looking more green than blue in the low light of the hospital room as he kept his gaze on Shane.

Shane hadn't left Ilya's side except to use the bathroom. He watched him sleep. Watched his chest rise and fall. Listened to the monitor beep. Reminded himself that Ilya was alive. He was going to be okay. He repeated the words to himself over and over until Ilya woke again.

But their team flight was leaving in an hour. Hayden had already gathered Shane's things from the hotel. He needed to leave. He knew he did. But it felt like he was breaking his own fingers by letting go of Ilya's hand.

Here, he was real. In front of him. Warm and sweet and alive. He wasn't sure how he was going to feel when he couldn't see that for himself.

Svetlana appeared back in the doorway, her lean arms crossed loosely. "I promise I'll keep an eye on him."

Shane sighed deeply, then nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.” He said quietly. “Just- just come back to me, okay? Promise you'll come back.”

Ilya looked at him with so much fondness that Shane felt his heart hammer against his ribs. He grabbed Shane's hand harder.

“*Ty tsentr moyey vselennoy. Ya znayu, chto naydu put' obratno k tebe, potomu chto tak velit gravitatsiya.*”

His voice was honey smooth, his eyes never leaving Shane's as he spoke.

Shane heard Svetlana huff a laugh from the doorway. “Oh, wow. He is a poet, this one.”

“What does it mean?” Shane looked at Ilya, who only smiled. He figured Svetlana would probably be more helpful, so he turned his head to look at her expectantly.

She smiled, shaking her head. “He said ‘You are the center of my universe. I know I will find my way back to you, because gravity commands it.’”

Shane's heart wobbled in his chest. Maybe he was the one who should be hooked up to the heart monitor.

“Ilya…”

“You are like the sun. My sun. You know this. Is why you are *solnyshko*.” He held up his tattooed pinky finger.

Shane pushed himself forward and captured Ilya's mouth. The kiss was far from appropriate with Svetlana still standing there, but Shane couldn't help himself. He needed to taste Ilya. To feel the warmth of his tongue. To hear the little satisfied groans in the back of his throat.

He tugged lightly at the curls on the nape of Ilya's neck before pulling back. “I love you. So much. Get some rest, okay?”

“I love you, *krasivyy mal'chik*. You rest too. I will be home soon. I promise.” He hooked their pinkies together.

Shane gave him one last look before tearing off the metaphorical bandaid; repeating the mantra in his head as he walked away.

He is alive. He is going to be okay.

The moment the automatic lock on his condo door clicked open, Yuna was moving toward him. They had arrived just ahead of him, and Shane was glad for it. He nearly collapsed into his mother's open arms, allowing his head to fall onto her shoulder.

“Oh, honey.” She hugged him tightly, then pulled back to look at him. “Shane. You look exhausted. Have you slept?”

“Mom. I'm fine. Well, no. I'm actually not fucking fine at all.” He huffed out a humorless laugh.

Her brows knitted with concern. David stood and put a hand on his shoulder.

“They're going to ignore it. I know they are.” Shane's jaw clenched hard.

“Who is going to ignore what?” Yuna tilted her head.

“The league. They-” He shook his head. Took a breath. He was so angry he could barely even form a coherent thought.

“Dyatlov. The one who fucking did this to him? He did it on purpose. He fucking did it on purpose and you can see it on the replay. He leaned down into Ilya's face and called him a *faggot* and told him he was disgrace to Russia and he fucking sliced him on purpose.” Shane's eyes were burning. His throat was burning. His cheeks were burning.

He was stoking the flames of his own fury every time he recanted it. Every time he rolled it over in his mind. Again and again and again until he had created his own personal hellscape from it.

His parents exchanged a look. He recognized it easily. Pure, unedited concern.

“We didn't watch the replay.” David said solemnly. “Son, if this is true-”

“It's true.” Shane snapped. He buried his hands into his hair. “Fuck. I'm sorry. I'm on edge right now. I just- it's true. Go watch it yourself if you want. You can see him do it. What he said got picked up on Marlow's mic. It's in Russian, but Ilya's friend already translated it for me. It's only a matter of time before other people figure out what he said. And the league hasn't said shit about it.”

Shane collapsed onto the couch now, putting his hands over his face. He wanted to scream into them.

From the corner of his eye, he could see his mom scrolling. Her brows went from furrowed together, to raised in shock. “Oh, wow.” She shook her head. “Wow. People online have started translating what he said. This…I can't believe this.” She slammed her phone down. “That replay is making me sick.” She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Shane.” David sat down next to him. “It's okay to not be okay. That must have been a lot.”

“It was. And it still is. He could have died, Dad. The cut was millimeters away from the artery. I can't-” Shane put his head down between his legs. “I can't stop fucking thinking about it. I know Ilya is fine. He's alive and he's fine. But I just…” He groaned in frustration.

Yuna knelt down in front of him. “Shane. Look at me.”

Shane took a deep breath, then lifted his head to meet his mother's determined eyes. She placed a hand on his face. “We aren't going to let the league do nothing about it. I won't have my boys playing somewhere that isn't safe, and the league sure as hell isn't going to want to lose two of its top performers like this. We're going to take care of it.”

Shane nodded, swallowing. *Her boys*. His parents already held space for Ilya; already protected him fiercely like they did Shane. It helped quiet the rage burning through his body.

But the rage bubbled up again the next day when Shane found himself walking into a conference room at the arena, flanked by Yuna and Farah. The faces of Theriault, Crowell, and who Shane assumed were members of the legal team, stared back at them from around a dark wood table.

Shane sank into one of the chairs, hands fisted in his lap. He was resolute in that no one would be leaving this stuffy fucking room until this was fixed.

It was Farah who spoke first; her voice calm, authoritative, and even.

“Gentlemen. I am Farah Jalali, and I am here representing Ilya Rozanov as his agent. We also have Shane Hollander, team captain and close friend of Mr. Rozanov, as well as Yuna Hollander, mom and manager. As you well know, we're here today to discuss the unfortunate incident that occurred in Montreal's last game.”

“We hear Rozanov is recovering well.” Crowell sat back in his seat. “Very good to hear.” He shuffled through a few papers lazily. “Look. I've read through your concerns. I see that you want to know what disciplinary action will be taken against Andrei Dyatlov. The incident *was* unfortunate, but we cannot discipline players for accidentally injuring another player.”

Shane couldn't stop the scoff that echoed out of his mouth. “Wow.” He shook his head.

“Hollander-” Theriault started, but Shane powered right through him.

“No. If you *actually* read, you would know that what happened was not an accident. I mean hell, all you needed to do was just watch the game.” Shane glared across the table, feeling the heat rising again.

Crowell sighed like a fat dog. “Hollander. Even if this were true-”

“It *is* true!” Shane threw his hands up. “Why are we talking about this as if it isn't literally on video?! And even if you want to say the way he kicked Ilya right in the neck was somehow an accident, all you would need to do is listen to the audio. Dozens of people online have already translated it for you. But by all means, go hire your own translator if you don't believe Dyatlov called him a fucking slur right in his face before he sliced his neck open.”

Shane wished Ilya was there with him. He needed to feel that strong, heavy hand on his leg. Grounding him here. Keeping him from spiraling away. Was this what he had to look forward to when he came out? Would someone nearly kill him in the middle of a game?

He could see it now. The only Asian player in the league. The only gay player in the league. In a relationship with the only other queer player. He might as well start drawing the target on his jersey now.

But to Shane's shock, Theriault turned to Crowell, face twisted in concern. “Is this true? Is that the translation?”

Crowell cleared his throat, then shuffled his papers again, pretended to read something, then finally gave a nod.

Theriault tensed up. “I won't have my players attacked, Roger.”

Shane's eyes bounced between them. Crowell put his hands up placating.

“Look. These are very serious allegations.”

“Indeed they are.” Farah cut in. “Very serious allegations over a very serious matter that could have easily resulted in the death of one of your players. One that could very easily be proven as a hate crime. And one that deserves very serious action to be taken.”

Shane watched as the legal team started to whisper to each other in hushed tones.

Yuna straightened up next to him. “The internet is already seeing this for exactly what it is.” She folded her hands in front of her. “This isn't something that can be hidden. It's already out there.”

Shane decided now was his time to add the final blow. A kill shot in the flurry of flying bullets. “I will not step foot onto the ice until disciplinary action is taken and the league issues an official statement. I will not represent a league that allows something like this to happen without consequences. That decision is final.”

Yuna put a hand on his knee and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Now Shane really wished Ilya was here. He would have loved to see the sputtering look on Roger Crowell's face. He was caught in a trap. Cornered and wide eyed with nowhere left to go.

Shane felt dizzy with sick satisfaction at the sight. He kept his gaze pointedly on the commissioner. A challenge. A threat. A promise.

Ilya Rozanov was the wrong fucking person to mess with, and Shane was going to make sure the whole world knew it.

Not even an hour had passed since they walked out of that room that Shane saw the Tweet flash across his phone screen.

@NHL
In reviewing the footage from the Montreal vs. Boston game, we were deeply troubled by the words and actions that preceded a dangerous injury to a player. Effective immediately, Andrei Dyatlov is placed on an indefinite suspension as we investigate this further. Our thoughts are with Ilya Rozanov as he recovers from his injuries.

Chapter End Notes

MAN this chapter was a doozy 😭 I have so much to say

1. all hail our glorious king cliff marlow
2. svetlana LOVES feisty shane, she is seeing the vision
3. farah, yuna, AND shane all in one room to stand on business? cataclysmic event. everyone should have immediately ducked for cover
4. BAMF shane will stop at nothing and ilya is his BABY

and finally...IM SORRY FOR HURTING OUR BOYS but I PROMISE that the last 2 chapters will be nothing but joy, fluff, and Hollanov world domination.

LOVE U ALL SO SO MUCH 💓

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cascade of hues from the TV screen flickered across the darkness of the room, bathing it in a technicolor glow that Ilya watched move and change across the blank ceiling.

He technically wasn't supposed to be watching TV, but he could at least listen to it from his comfortable nest on Shane's couch.

The timing of his release from the hospital could not have been worse. By the time he was discharged, the team was gearing up for another roadie. He landed in Montreal exactly 20 minutes after the team flight departed. It had been over a week now since he had seen Shane, and he felt like he was going to claw his way out of his own skin.

Svetlana told him he was dramatic. That he was pathetically, embarrassingly in love. And she was right, of course. She told him that if he looked up "*codependent*" in the dictionary, there would be a picture of him and Shane wrapped around each other printed on the page. She was maybe right about that, too.

But he decided he wasn't going to feel ashamed about it. He *did* need Shane. It had been nearly 10 years since his mother passed, and he had spent that entire time not needing anyone. He relied on no one. Sought love from no one. Not until now. Not until Shane became a constant; something that he could finally allow himself to need.

He always had Svetlana, of course. But Svetlana did not live in Russia. She visited a few times a year, and she was good to him while she was there. But she was not always there. And so Ilya was mostly alone. That loneliness bred an instinct to want nothing from anyone. Nothing real, anyway. Nothing lasting.

And then the universe decided to have some mercy on his bitter Russian soul and plopped him down in front of his pretty, perfect Shane. So yes, he had become a little pathetic about it. Sue him.

Thankfully, Shane was due home from the airport any minute now. He could feel a current humming under his skin, not unlike the low hum of the TV. It hadn't been an easy week, between his injuries and being away from Shane. He couldn't stop thinking about the heart wrenching sobs that broke their way through his boyfriend. He swore he could hear them every time he touched a finger to his stitched up neck.

The sound of the lock flipping open made Ilya jolt up so fast that he gave himself a head rush. Right. Grade 3 concussion. Oh well.

He half ran and half slid on socked feet toward the door, grinning wide when it swung open.

Shane stepped inside, a smile spread across his cold flushed face as he dropped his bag to the floor with a clatter. The door had barely shut behind him when Ilya practically lunged at him, a soft *oof* escaping from Shane's mouth at the impact.

Ilya hugged him hard, squeezing and lifting him off the floor. The sound of Shane's soft giggles made his insides turn to goo.

“Hi baby.” Shane laughed, putting both hands into the top of Ilya's hair. He was smiling so big and giddy and he was so cute that Ilya seriously felt as though he might cry. “How do you f-”

Ilya didn't mean to be rude, but he couldn't wait another second. He latched onto Shane's mouth and started to devour him like a starved man; his hand on the hinge of Shane's jaw to force it open even further as he licked greedily into his mouth. Shane's satisfied little noises zapped straight up his spine like a live wire.

He started to pull Shane along with him, back toward the couch, teeth tugging at Shane's plush bottom lip. He sat down and pulled Shane into his lap, whining a bit when Shane pulled back from the kiss.

“*Jesus*, Ilya.” He panted through a laugh. His whole mouth was glistening with spit; as was most of his chin. “You miss me or something?”

Ilya pinched his face. “Yes, you cheeky little brat.”

Thankfully, Shane melted back into him, their lips slotting together tenderly. “I missed you too.” He murmured against him. “How do you feel?”

“Better with you here.” And it was true. The dull ache in his head was entirely forgotten with Shane in his lap; strong thighs bracketing Ilya's waist, strong arms draped around him. It felt like the air had finally returned to his lungs.

Shane lightly ghosted his finger tips over the line of stitches down his neck.

“They will come out tomorrow.” Ilya used his thumbs to rub at Shane's hip bones. “Will leave behind a nice scar, I think. Match the one on my hand. Maybe people will look at me and think I am insane.”

“You *are* insane. And people already know that.”

“Right. Craziest person you have ever met.” Ilya sat back a bit to look in Shane's eyes. In the low light, they were black as night. Ilya knew he could get lost in them.

“It's true.” Shane twisted a curl up in his finger, giving it a gentle tug. “But I love you anyway.”

“I think me being insane is part of reason why you love me, actually.” He gripped Shane's ass hard enough to make him gasp.

“Maybe.” Shane rocked his hips forward. “You're the craziest person I've ever met, and also the hottest. Even with the scar.”

“Mm. Is that so?” Ilya bucked his hips up, and Shane instantly latched his mouth to Ilya's again. He groaned at the feeling of Shane's tongue, eager and warm against his own.

Shane pulled back again, far too soon, and hopped off of Ilya's lap before he could catch him. “I need to shower.”

“*Shaaaane*.” Ilya whined.

“I'll be back. I promise. I…I need you to fuck me and I can't if I'm all dirty from the plane.”

Well, Ilya wasn't going to argue with that. “Fine. Hurry. My dick is hard and you are evil.”

Shane shot him a smirk over his shoulder. Ilya would burn the whole fucking world down for him.

He hadn't even realized he had dozed off waiting for Shane, until he felt a warm hand nudging under his shirt. Ilya cracked his eyes open to see Shane standing before him, looking like a vision. His hair was damp and he was wearing nothing but his tight black boxer briefs; his smooth skin glowing in the light of the TV.

Ilya reached down and pulled his own shirt off, eyes never leaving Shane. He leaned forward and ran his finger tips across smooth, hard abs. It made him shiver.

Shane climbed back into his lap, sitting up on his knees as he tugged Ilya's hands around to grip his ass. Ilya happily obliged, hands squeezing possessively. He felt like a fucking king. The luckiest man alive. All this was *his*.

He gave Shane's ass a firm smack, earning a whimper that melted into Shane tugging Ilya's bottom lip between his teeth. Ilya tugged at the waistband of Shane's underwear. “Off.” He growled.

Shane made quick work of sliding them down and placing them neatly on the cushion beside them before settling both legs back around Ilya's, still slightly up on his knees, giving Ilya perfect access.

He squeezed and pulled Shane apart, feeling how Shane's breath came harder. Ilya trailed a finger down to his rim, then froze. His eyes snapped up to Shane when he felt the way he was slick and warm and open. It made Ilya's mouth drop open slightly before his lips curved into a smirk.

“*Shane Hollander*.” He said, scandalized, shaking his head with a smile. Shane blushed deliciously.

“I need you.” Shane's hand anchored itself in the back of his hair. “*Now*.” He used his other hand to tug Ilya's sweatpants and underwear down in one motion, springing him free from his confines.

Shane reached behind him, producing a bottle of lube. Ilya's head lolled back onto the cushion with a drawn out groan as Shane worked it over his length.

“Condom?” Ilya managed to croak out. But Shane was already shaking his head.

“No. Need to feel you. Come on.”

Fuck. Ilya was going to die. He survived his head smacking into the ice. He survived getting cut in the neck with a skate blade. But he was going to die right here on this couch with his pretty, perfect, eager Shane perched atop his dick. They nearly always used condoms. Not because they necessarily needed to; they were both clean and very much monogamous (their combined possessive jealousy could probably power the fucking Death Star). But Shane didn't like the mess. And Ilya wanted Shane to be comfortable, always. But god, when they did it like this, Ilya felt like he would ascend into another dimension.

Ilya barely had time to line himself up before Shane was sinking down onto him. Every muscle in his body coiled tight at the feeling. He sucked in a breath, hands digging into Shane's waist as he sat himself fully into Ilya's lap. Shane's eyes fluttered shut, his head tipped back, and the low moan that crawled from his throat nearly made Ilya come right then and there.

“*Fuck*, Shane.” Ilya rasped out, watching where their bodies were joined as Shane began to slowly lift up, then sink back down into his thighs. The sensation was mind-altering. The heat and tightness wrapped around him; the slick, slow drag of every movement. Shane's face inches from his own, blissful and concentrated.

Shane took firm hold of his shoulders, squeezing at the muscle there. “God, fuck, Ilya. You're so-” a choked out moan escaped “-so fucking hot.” He rolled his hips in a way that made Ilya gasp softly. When he looked down at the way Shane's abs contracted with the motion, his gasp turned into a low groan.

Ilya kept his hands on Shane's hips in a bruising grip, helping to guide his motions as the pace picked up. He could feel Shane's powerful thighs start to tremble against him, both of their breathing gone ragged. He could see Shane was flushed hard and leaking between their stomachs; his movements starting to become less controlled.

Ilya put one arm around Shane's waist, one hand gripped firmly on the back of his neck, and rolled them with a grunt. Shane went like putty beneath him, eyes glassy and pupils blown wide. His jaw was slack, but his legs tightened around Ilya's waist, ankles hooking together behind his back. “Please. *Please*.” Shane pleaded through his panting when Ilya still hadn't started to move yet. He tried to push himself forward, to push Ilya deeper, but Ilya pressed a hand down hard onto his hip to still him.

He was flushed and squirming and so beautiful that Ilya knew for certain this was the greed the Bible warned about. He pressed hard into Shane, hips snapping relentlessly, and as his boyfriend became breathless beneath him all he could think was *mine, mine, mine*.

Shane squeezed at his biceps, moaning out a garbled string of *ilyaohmygodfuck*, a sound that made Ilya light up like a struck match. He leaned down, biting hard onto the side of Shane's

neck. He felt Shane's nails rake across his back.

“Touch yourself. Come for me, *kotik*. Let me feel it.” Ilya said breathily into his ear.

It was only seconds later that Shane's gasping moans were followed by the feeling of hot liquid spilling between them; a sensation that hurdled Ilya quickly over the edge of his own release. His orgasm hit him so hard that he felt like he'd been full body checked. He wasn't entirely certain that he hadn't actually started to levitate. The head rush was so intense that he pitched forward, collapsing into Shane once he had finally finished.

It was good. It was so good. How was it always so good? His muscles were still trembling as he let his breath come back to him.

“You good?” Shane trailed fingers down Ilya's sweat sheened back. “Fuck. You probably aren't supposed to be doing any rigorous activities.”

Ilya huffed a small laugh against his skin. “I am 21 year old professional athlete, Shane. Sex will not kill me.” Well, maybe sex with *Shane Hollander* would. He had certainly felt close to it on numerous occasions.

“Yes, and you also have a concussion and lost a shit ton of blood. Your body is healing.” Shane said, voice fading into something syrupy slow. He always got so sleepy after sex.

Ilya fumbled blindly for his underwear and tucked it quickly under the curve of Shane's ass as he slowly pulled out, knowing Shane would have a conniption if his cum leaked all over his fancy designer couch. He trailed kisses down Shane's chest before disappearing into the bathroom, returning with a warm washcloth and fresh towel.

He cleaned Shane up with all the reverence of a ritual that more resembled worship than cleaning. But that's what Shane was to him. Something so precious that he couldn't possibly be of this world.

Once they were both clean and Ilya had successfully coaxed and half dragged Shane into bed, he tucked them both under the blankets, Shane pulled into his chest.

He didn't even remember drifting off into sleep, let alone sleeping through the whole night. Just felt his body surge back to life under the sound of Shane's horrible, terrible, obnoxious alarm that set off the pounding in his aching head. He grunted and groaned, pressing his hands into his eyes to shield them from the gray light of the winter morning coming insistantly through the sheer curtains.

“Shit. Sorry.” Shane grumbled, fumbling for the alarm. “I know that's loud.”

“*Loud*? Loud is understatement, *solnyshko*. What is this, town alarm for all of Montreal?”

“Fuck off.” Shane dropped a pillow on top of him.

“Throwing things at me while I am injured?” Ilya tutted. He sat up a bit, wincing at the pain in his head.

Shane gently pushed his curls back from his forehead. “Head still hurts?”

“I will live.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“Fine. Yes. It hurts.” Ilya said through a sigh.

Shane leaned over and pressed his lips to Ilya's temple. “Stay here. I'll go get you medicine.”

“Shane. I can g-”

“Shut up. No. I said I'm getting it.” Shane jumped out of the bed before Ilya could protest further.

He reappeared moments later with a glass of water and two pills in his palm. He held his hand out to Ilya, who took the pills and swallowed them dry before taking a few sips of water.

“Such a stubborn boy you are, *solnyshko*.”

“I am. You knew this from the first day you met me, so.” Shane plopped back down onto the bed. “Not my fault you fell in love with me anyway.”

“Mm, actually *is* your fault I fall in love with you. You are stubborn and a brat but you are also very adorable. Hypnotize me with your pretty brown eyes and make me fall in love.” Ilya put a hand on Shane's face, running a thumb across his cheek bone. “Your mouth, too. *Bozhe moy*. I would start wars over this mouth.” He moved his hand to run his thumb over Shane's bottom lip before capturing it in a kiss.

When he ran his tongue along the seam, Shane squirmed away from his lips. “We haven't brushed our teeth yet.” He said, face scrunched up.

“Shane, we have been over this. My tongue has literally been inside your-”

“In my asshole, yes, I know.” He rolled his eyes, waving Ilya away.

“You are very mean. Did you know this?”

Shane rolled his eyes more dramatically this time.

“So mean to me.” Ilya stood up, stretching, pressing a hand to his temple as if it would stop the throbbing. “You watch me almost die and you still bully me.”

“Hey!” Shane jumped up after him. “That's not funny, Ilya.” He whined, grabbing Ilya's elbow as he walked toward the bathroom. “Take it back.”

Ilya popped his toothbrush into his mouth. “Make me.”

Shane glared at him as he brushed his own teeth. “You're so lucky you're hurt right now, dude. Because I would put you in the nastiest headlock.”

Ilya spit into the sink. “Oh, I am lucky I got knocked out and kicked in my neck with a blade by deranged Russian homophobe? Damn. I thought we were upset about this.”

He watched Shane freeze, like his operating system had stopped responding momentarily. “Ilya. That's not-” He said, toothpaste spilling out of his mouth. “*Fuck*.” He spit into the sink and wiped his mouth on a towel, brows pinched together. “That's not what I meant. You know I didn't mean it like that.” He wrapped both hands around Ilya's biceps.

And oh, Ilya would love to keep this up and see how far Shane's eyebrows could push together and how far out his lip would pout. But Ilya knew Shane was genuinely getting upset, and he could not have that. Not his Shane.

“Yes, *solnyshko*, of course I know. I was fucking with you. Stop looking sad. You are like sad little puppy.” He pulled Shane into his arms, smiling at the way Shane melted into him.

“Well don't joke about it. Asshole.” He mumbled, face pressed into Ilya's shoulder.

“I know. I am sorry.” He carded a hand through the back of Shane's hair. “Come. You can make me green smoothie for breakfast and I will not even complain.”

Shane pulled back, a small smile on his lips. “Fine.”

Once they were settled on the couch, horrible grass smoothies downed, Ilya laid his head on Shane's shoulder, feeling the pain start to soften around the edges. Shane was warm and his shirt was soft and his big arm was holding Ilya close. It was almost perfect, other than the fact that he could feel Shane's tension like it was a physical thing looming over top of them.

“You are upset.” Ilya murmured.

“I'm not.” Shane twitched slightly when he lied, his hand flexing.

“You are terrible liar. You know this. Just talk to me. Whatever it is, I promise I will not break.”

Shane heaved a sigh, head falling back against the cushion. “My mom talked to Farah. They were pushing for criminal charges. Because. You know. He basically fucking slit your throat.” A huff of humorless laughter shook through Shane's chest. “But apparently, they don't think they have enough to charge him with anything. Say it's hard to prove intent especially with the nature of the game. Apparently Dyatlov claims that he was trying to ‘*flex his leg*’ after the hit and he ‘*didn't realize*’ you were so close.” Another incredulous laugh. “Doesn't deny what he said to you, though. But. I guess none of that fucking matters to anyone. It's all just such fucking bullshit, Ilya. I'm so-” He cut himself off with a frustrated groan, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Ilya sat up and turned to face him. “Hey. Look at me.”

Shane turned to face him too, and the look on his face was so miserable that Ilya hummed out a sympathetic sound. He placed a hand on Shane's cheek. “Is not important. Okay? I mean, yes, it is. But…is not everything. Does not mean he wins. He is suspended at least for rest of this season, his contract money will go to shit. Sveta says no way Boston will keep him. He will go to shit team and make no money and everyone knows what he is.” He stroked Shane's cheek softly.

“What, an attempted murder?” Shane muttered.

“Well, yes. But also fucking coward who couldn't knock me down without doing illegal check on my blindside, then waited until I was knocked out to say shit to me. And then yes. Try to murder me with his skate like fucking insane person. No one will respect him again.”

Shane sighed softly, clearly not entirely convinced.

“Shane. He does not win because we do not let him. I am alive. I am going to be playing again in a few weeks. We are going to win that fucking cup. And one day, I am going to marry you. I will disgrace Russia with our big gay wedding and there will be nothing he can do about it. We will be happy and he will be nothing.” Ilya pressed his palm firmly into Shane's cheek, insisting.

Shane pressed a hand over Ilya's heart, as if to remind himself. He nodded, taking in a deep breath.

Truly, Ilya had not bothered to think much about that idiot Dyatlov. Because he didn't get to dictate Ilya's story. He would never make Ilya regret coming out. Ilya would do it again. He would take a matching slice to the other side of his neck if he had to.

Coming out was getting him one step closer to where he wanted to be: with Shane, for real. Out loud. Forever.

The simple truth was that the moment Ilya realized he was bisexual, confused and young and mostly terrified, his mind had immediately gone to Shane.

He hadn't ever really thought of Shane in that way. But Shane fascinated him. Shane made him laugh. Shane made him feel safe. Shane made him happy. And as he walked home from his first sexual encounter with another guy, hands shoved deep in his pockets, an image had flashed in his mind. An insane thought.

What if, one day, he married Shane Hollander? It was crazy, he knew. He hadn't really understood at the time why he would even think of something like that.

Perhaps he was much smarter at 15 years old than he gave himself credit for.

Ilya leaned in to slot their lips together, leaving soft, tender kisses against Shane's soft mouth. “*Ya tebya lyublyu*.” He said quietly.

Shane smiled against his lips. “I love you too, baby.” He breathed out.

Fuck Dyatlov. Fuck the world. As far as Ilya was concerned, everyone who hated him for what he was, who would hate Shane for the same reasons, could keep hating. They were going to fucking choke on it when they realized that Shane and Ilya were unstoppable.

It took an embarrassingly herculean effort for Shane to leave Ilya behind on his way to their afternoon game. Especially considering Ilya had promised he would be there to join them in the locker room and watch the game from the box as soon as he was finished getting his stitches out.

With the concussion, he wouldn't be cleared to play for 2 more weeks. The timing was thankfully not terrible; they needed Ilya if they were going to keep steamrolling their opponents, but playoff pictures wouldn't start forming for a couple months, and they were still in good shape. Knowing that Ilya was okay and recovering well gave him the peace of mind to go back into Captain mode.

For whatever reason, Shane couldn't shake the way his stomach was doing flips as they returned to the locker room from warmups. It would be the first time the team was seeing Ilya since getting injured. And they all knew exactly what happened. Exactly what was said. It seemed Ilya's sexuality had still remained an elephant in the room, even after Shane's speech. Would that elephant grow into a mammoth now that everyone knew Ilya had been physically harmed over it? Shane couldn't say.

So he stood in front of his stall, chewing on the edge of his mouth guard, eyes cutting to the door every few seconds to try and catch Ilya's entrance.

“Relax.” Hayden elbowed him. “You're being weird.”

“Fuck off. I'm not.” He angled his body away from Hayden, arms crossed defensively. His head snapped up when he saw the familiar figure fill the door way.

Ilya had his hands shoved into the pouch of his Montreal hoodie, blue eyes scanning the room as he strolled in casually. There was a very noticeable long, pinkish line trailing down Ilya's jaw and neck where the stitches had been. Shane wanted to run his fingers over it. To kiss it.

Suddenly, Theriault was clapping his hands together, beckoning the team's attention to the center of the room.

Shane's eyes couldn't stay away from Ilya, however. He watched the way his boyfriend's jaw flexed as he shifted his attention to their coach.

“Boys. We have a job to go do out there, but before we do, I need to say a few things.” Coach turned slightly toward Ilya.

“Rozanov is back with us today. He's doing well and on track to return to play in 2 weeks. But there's something we need to address.” Theriault paused, face set into something hard and serious, and Shane felt the saliva evaporate in his mouth.

“When Rozanov made his announcement about his…sexuality…I can admit, I did not handle it in the best way. I felt that it shouldn't be discussed. Leave it out of hockey. It doesn't deserve to be here. What I didn't know then was how deeply those feelings could run for some people. Deep enough that they would purposely hurt another player over it.”

Shane watched Ilya's throat jump as he swallowed.

“What happened to Rozanov was not just a normal part of the game, and I think we all know that. He was targeted by someone who was angry about his personal life, and given a very dangerous injury that could have very easily been the end of this young man's life.” Theriault fully turned to Ilya now.

The impact of those words slammed into Shane like he had just fallen straight onto the ground. The air left his lungs. He had to screw his eyes shut to keep the tears at bay

“I know we all have different backgrounds in this room. Different beliefs. But believe this - no one deserves to be harmed over it. Rozanov works just as hard as anyone else, maybe harder. We've all seen that wrist shot.” That earned a few laughs and hums of agreement around the room.

“And he's worked hard since the moment he arrived in Montreal. We should treat him no differently now than we did before we knew this about him. He hasn't acted differently or played differently. He's still busting his ass to help this team win. And we should all be fucking pissed that this happened. I know I am. It probably shouldn't have taken something like this to happen to make me realize I was wrong. But I was wrong.”

Theriault put a hand on Ilya's shoulder. “Rozanov. You're a hell of a player. I'm glad you're here. And this team is going to have your back.” He turned to address the room again.

“Is that understood?”

“*Yes, coach*.” Voices carried through the room, echoing off the walls.

Shane watched with a tightness in his chest as his team all flocked around Ilya to clap him on the back. Jostle his shoulder playfully. Tousle his hair. Ilya's eyes sparkled and his smile was easy and Shane felt warmth seep through his body.

Shane was the last to reach him, and pulled Ilya into a tight hug.

“Go win for me, captain.” Ilya said as he gave him a squeeze.

“Always.”

And he meant it. He would do anything for Ilya, and his heart was soaring, flying high above the clouds as he started to feel like maybe this was possible. Maybe the entire world wasn't against them. Maybe the future started right here, in this locker room, where even fucking

Comeau had looked Ilya in the eyes and squeezed his shoulder and told him he was looking forward to Ilya coming back to play.

Shane took to the ice with a renewed fervor. He felt fire licking at his bones. And when the announcer's voice boomed out that they had a special guest watching the game tonight, Shane felt all his nerve endings ignite from the roar of the crowd. He craned his neck up to the jumbotron, the camera pointed into the box that perched high above the stands.

And there stood Ilya, waving to the crowd, wearing the most smug expression known to man…and a #24 jersey.

Shane smiled so wide it hurt his cheeks.

May 2013

The late spring air felt like its own living thing; slightly warm and smelling of dew and fresh grass as it cooled the warm flush off of Ilya's skin.

He wasn't sure he had ever worked so hard in his life. Not even in Moscow, where he had dragged a young franchise behind him as merely more than a teenager. With his home city watching him expectantly with outstretched hands. With the weight of his own misery dragging him down by the shoulders.

He had helped to carry his team there to the conference championships. He remembered his lungs screaming and his hips aching and not knowing if it was sweat or tears on his face from pushing through the exhaustion and pain.

But this was even more than that. He hadn't known he even had it in him to push harder. Not until he had Shane Hollander as his captain, face set in such sheer determination that simply looking at it made Ilya feel like he could fucking fly.

So here they were. One game away from winning the goddamn Stanley Cup. Ilya had to step outside and stare up at the Montreal night to remind himself that he was here, and he was alive, and this was really happening.

Most of the team had gathered at Pike's new place just outside of the city for a team dinner. Ilya told him he was insane for moving in the middle of the season, but Jackie was his fiancé now, and they wanted more space. Already planning for little Pikes. He did it for love, and Ilya could hardly judge anyone else for that.

He was also not going to complain about the large yard that was allowing him to escape the heat and noise of being shoved inside a house with a dozen rowdy hockey players. He was craving the ground beneath his feet to anchor him inside this moment.

He dragged his fingertips over the thin skin of the scar along his jaw, then to the pulse point just beneath it. He fixed his eyes up to the sky again; to where the stars were shining against the darkness, like light glinting off the sea.

"*I'm going to do it, Mama. You always said I would. Do you remember? You told me, 'Ilyushka, one day you will be a big hockey star. You will win that big, ugly trophy and everyone will know your name.' And now it's happening. I know it is. I can feel it. We're going to do it, me and Shane. Together.*"

He held the cross on his necklace between his fingers, and brought it gently to his lips. A secret prayer. He knew his mama was listening. She would be watching. And she was going to be so proud when Shane hoisted that big, ugly trophy over his pretty head. The thought made him laugh softly to himself.

"He's out here!" A voice drifted from the patio door, sound from the house spilling out into the yard as the door pushed open further.

He kept his eyes up to the sky as his teammates started to wander out into the yard. There was a soft *whoosh* as the gas firepit ignited to life. And then the sound of footsteps that he could identify out of a crowd of thousands. A large hand squeezing around his shoulder.

"You good?" Shane threw a bulky arm around Ilya's shoulders, leaning into him slightly. He looked so good that Ilya felt unmoored.

He was clad in a white backwards cap; silky strands of hair spilling from beneath it. A hint of dark stubble was dusted across his jaw. The light from the fire illuminated his face in a soft warmth that made his freckles look like tiny glowing embers.

"I am good." Ilya leaned into Shane's side, eyes cutting sideways to make sure their teammates weren't within earshot. "I mean, you are sexy as fuck and I am dying. But. I am good."

"Fuck off." Shane elbowed him with a laugh. "Behave."

"Yes, yes. Your wish is my command, *kapitan*."

Shane rolled his eyes at him, but Ilya always caught the fondness behind it.

"Where are the besties? Guys! Come sit!" A voice called from behind the firepit.

Ilya bumped shoulders with Shane, smiling when Shane gripped the back of his neck and pulled him along toward where the rest of the team was sitting.

They sat hip to hip on one of the small benches, Ilya's arm resting along the back. Shane leaned back a bit, the back of his head grazing Ilya's forearm.

The conversation was flowing easily; the whole team sated from a huge dinner and content to sit still for a change. The energy around the team had shifted since Ilya's injury. The tension had eased away into something that felt far more like the real camaraderie a team needed, rather than an army tearing itself apart from the inside. Perhaps the ones who took issue with

Ilya had realized that him being bisexual was a lot less scary than watching him bleed all over the ice. Perhaps Coach Theriault's words had struck something deep. Perhaps Shane's unwavering competency as captain had gathered a tight hold on them. He suspected it was a combination of all of it.

Eventually, one of the rookies shot his attention to Ilya and Shane.

“So. You guys really met when you were 14?”

“We did.” Ilya gave a small smile, patting Shane on top of the head.

“Do you remember what, like, your first impression was?” The rookie leaned forward curiously, elbows resting on his thighs.

“Mm. I remember Shane was very quiet. Many of the other boys were show offs. You know. This was big shot hockey camp, you only go there if you are very, very good. Many of the boys were trying to be loud and flashy. But Shane was just…precise. All over the puck without making big fuss. He was scary good and then would just go sit on bench like he did not just kick everyone's ass and make it look easy.”

The group rang out in laughs and hums of agreement that not much has changed. Ilya jostled Shane's shoulder a bit.

“Well. This one honestly kinda scared the hell out of me at first.” Shane started. “I just saw this tall kid with a wild look in his eyes and such a long stride I wasn't sure how any of us were supposed to keep up with him. And then he took a shot and I had seriously never seen a kid hit a puck that hard. Ever. The goalies looked so stunned and terrified that it was actually kinda funny.”

Shane patted his knee with a smile. Ilya knocked their ankles together, feeling a surge of fondness overtake his chest.

“Okay, so, literally nothing has changed. Hollander is still fucking lethal and acts nonchalant about it. And Rozanov is still an apex predator on the puck.” J.J. mused.

Ilya supposed he was right. There was still so much that was the same, despite the years that had passed between them. Here they were, sitting squished together and laughing with their team, just as they had when they were teenagers.

“Was he an asshole back then, too?” J.J. chirped. Ilya held his middle finger up in front of his smile.

“Of course he was.” Shane laughed, leaning back with his hands behind his head. “Just not to me.”

“Ah. Okay. So truly nothing has changed.” Another round of laughs rang out from the team.

“How could I be asshole to this sweet face?” Ilya grabbed Shane's chin in one hand, squeezing at his cheeks. Shane glared at him, but made no move to push him off. “Besides. He was only one who did not treat me like I was an idiot. Other kids thought because I did

not speak English I was stupid. They talked to me like I was 3 years old. Or they did not talk to me at all."

"To be fair, I think some of them didn't talk to you because they were afraid of you." Shane chimed in.

Ilya shrugged. "Maybe. But you treat me like I am normal person. Not scary Russian or giant idiot. We were both outcast a little bit, I think. I am foreign. Shane is Asian. And we were both better than everyone else. So other kids try to pick on us. Look how that turned out. Now we are both hot as fuck, rich as fuck, and about to win the fucking Stanley Cup."

He noticed Shane's cheeks go pink at the comment, though it was hardly the first time Ilya had ever called Shane hot in front of their team. He was fairly certain the whole team thought he had some sort of unrequited crush on Shane. He didn't mind.

"That fucking cup is ours!" J.J. agreed, and Ilya pulled Shane into him as they all raised their drinks in salute.

They left well before the rest of the team, in Shane's sensible car to accommodate Shane's sensible bed time, though they both knew sleep would be hard to come by. Exhaustion had settled in bone deep; but the excitement was buzzing under the surface of their skin like an electrical current.

Tomorrow was going to be a day they had both dreamed of since they were old enough to step into skates. Ilya let his fingers sink into the hard, tense muscles of Shane's shoulders the moment they stepped through the door.

He kneaded at the muscles firmly. Shane whined and groaned softly, his head falling forward. "That feels fucking incredible." He grumbled.

"Mm. I will give you full body massage after you win Conn Smythe tomorrow."

"Don't jinx it, asshole." He threw an elbow back at him.

"Is no such thing, *solnyshko*. We will win and you will be MVP because you have played your ass off and outscored everyone in the playoffs. This is how award works. And you cannot laugh at me when I cry because I will be so proud of you. I *am* so proud of you."

Shane turned in his arms, hands threading in the back of Ilya's hair. "I'm proud of you, too. We wouldn't be here without you. And I'll be the one crying when you get that Art Ross." He gave Ilya's curls a tug.

"Mm. You almost caught me, but I could not let you win everything. Some of the trophies in our trophy room will need to be mine, yes?"

Shane smiled, kissing him sweetly. "Yes." He felt one of Shane's hands drop down and push up beneath the hem of his shirt, fingers trailing through the patch of hair above his waist band, then over the tattoo at his hip. "Hey. I wanted to ask you something."

"Anything, *solnyshko*." He nuzzled his nose against Shane's.

“I've been thinking about getting a summer house. Like a cottage? On the lake, near where my parents live. There are a few that I really like, and I want you to come help me pick one out. For us.”

Shane's brown eyes flicked up to meet his. They were warm and molten in a way that made Ilya temporarily forget to speak.

“For us?” Ilya repeated. Shane's face got closer to his; soft lips brushing against Ilya's.

“Yes. For us.”

Ilya pressed his lips into Shane's once, then twice, hands finding his hips. “*Da.* Yes. I would love to.”

“Good.” Shane patted Ilya's ass twice. “You didn't have a choice, anyway.”

“Mm. Bossy.”

“You love it.”

“I love it.” Ilya kissed the corner of his mouth. “Does this mean I can buy that Lambo?”

“Uh, absolutely not.”

“You are buying entire house!” Ilya threw his hands up.

“Okay? That doesn't mean I'm gonna change my mind about you buying that obnoxious death trap, Ilya.”

Ilya threw his head back with a groan.

“You're a baby.” He hooked their pinkies together, leading Ilya back to the bedroom.

“But you still love me.” Ilya mused.

“I still love you.” Shane tangled their fingers together. “Always will.”

“Hey.” Ilya tugged him closer. “This time tomorrow, we will be champions.”

The bright smile that spread across Shane's face was worth ten thousand Stanley Cups. “We will.” He tightened his grip on Ilya's hands. “You and me.”

He fell onto the bed, pulling Shane down with him. “You and me.”

The morning was gold in a way that inexplicably reminded Shane of Ilya. Maybe the color reminded him of those honey colored curls that Shane wanted to curl up inside and live in.

Maybe the warmth reminded him of Ilya's skin and the way it felt to be nestled in his big arms. Maybe the brightness reminded him of Ilya's smile; the real one, unguarded and shining in a way that always made his heart still.

Warm light spilled across the room and softly lit Ilya's slack, sleeping face. The scene was so peaceful that he almost forgot to feel like his heart was going to climb out of his throat with the anticipation of tonight's game.

Shane swallowed that down momentarily to enjoy this moment. A calm oasis planted at his feet ahead of what was sure to be an overwhelming day. He pressed his lips gently against Ilya's, his hand running down the other man's ribs.

He was unfairly good looking. Body sculpted meticulously from marble and face dreamt up by an artist who wanted to see the beauty of a God replicated on Earth. Shane wasn't blind to the way other people looked at his boyfriend; with his handsome, serious face and his arm muscles permanently straining against the fabric of his sleeves.

One day, he thought. One day the whole world will know this hot Russian work of art belongs to Shane fucking Hollander. And they will weep over the fact that they never had a chance.

He kissed Ilya again, pressing into his heart-shaped lips tenderly.

“Mm. *Da, solnyshko*?” His voice was deep and hoarse, but his fingers were so gentle as they reached for Shane's face.

“Good morning.” Shane whispered, fingers scratching gently into Ilya's scalp.

“*Dobroye utro*.” He responded. “*Kotoryy chas*?”

Shane couldn't stop his smile. “You're speaking Russian, baby.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He mumbled. “Time?” He rubbed at his eyes.

“Time to get up.” Shane patted at his abs. “Big day.”

Just saying it sent a jolt down Shane's spine. They were really about to go play game 7 in the Stanley Cup finals. Him and Ilya. He was going to vibrate out of his skin.

“I hope you know. The moment we get to locker room after we win, I am shoving you into a closet and fucking you stupid.” He slapped Shane once on the ass. It sent a second jolt of electricity down his spine.

“Stop it. You can dirty talk me all you want when it's actually done. No distractions beforehand.”

“Yes, captain.” Ilya drawled, then saluted before he rolled out of bed.

Shane wanted to quip back at him, but he just found himself smiling instead as he watched the muscles of Ilya's back work. He was perfect. Relaxed and confident and strong. And they

were going to climb all the way to the top together, like they'd always promised each other.

His mind flashed briefly back to one particular night at camp. Shane and Ilya had been discussing their dreams of being in the NHL; of winning it all and hoisting the cup and being named champion.

"*I know my mom and dad will be losing their minds when it happens*." Shane had beamed. "*My mom will probably try to dive from the stands straight onto the ice*."

But Ilya had gone quiet in the next bed over. Shane could see, even in the darkness of the room, that the other boy was staring at the ceiling.

"*What is it*?" Shane had asked, turning onto his side to face him.

Ilya shrugged. "*Was just thinking. I will have no one there for me. When I win*."

And Shane's heart had plummeted to his stomach. He climbed from his own bed and crawled in next to Ilya. He took Ilya's hand in his own and squeezed. "*I'll be there*." He'd promised. "*Wouldn't miss it.*"

And Ilya had squeezed his hand back, and smiled that easy smile.

Even his young mind hadn't been able to dream that it would happen this way. That they would be heading into this together. So in love that it felt unreal.

He had to force the dizzy feeling down and get his feet under himself. It was time.

The pulse of the arena sounding above the locker room felt like it was moving in time with Shane's heartbeat. He took his place at the center of the room, feeling the eyes of his team lock in on him intently.

He pushed his hair back, eyes moving around the room when he began to speak.

"Everything any of us has ever wanted is waiting outside of those doors. On that ice. *Our* ice. In front of *our* fans. Our friends. Our families. Those are our dreams waiting for us out there. Our stories to tell to our children and our grandchildren. It's our history to make. *Not* theirs. This doesn't belong to them. We've fought for this. Hurt for this. Bled for this.

This is ours. All we have to do is go out there and fucking take it. Take it before they can ever even dream of taking it for themselves.

Show them what the fuck we've fought for. Show them what we'll keep fighting for until we have fucking nothing left. Give it fucking everything you have. Because this is the last chance we have to take what's ours. Let's fucking go."

“*Let's fucking go*!” Voices sang out around him, so loud his ears rang with it. But he was smiling and breathless and the adrenaline had flooded deep into his bones.

He bumped helmets with each teammate as they walked past him out the door on their way to the ice. Ilya hung back to be last, as Shane knew he would.

He pressed his visor into Shane's, eyes blazing through to his soul.

“We're fucking doing this, *solnyshko*.” He said firmly. “I fucking love you.”

Shane grabbed him by the shoulders hard. “I fucking love you.” He breathed out. They bumped heads one more time before filing out onto the ice.

The cold and the sound hit Shane like a wave. It was like nothing he'd ever felt before. The air was frigid and electrified and alive.

The crowd moved and the arena shook and Shane could feel it in his teeth.

Behind the glass, he caught sight of his parents. His mom clad in #24; his dad in #81. Shane noticed Ilya's gaze locked on the same sight, a grin splitting his face ear to ear. It made Shane's whole body tingle and tense and he knew he was ready.

Shane could feel his eyes searing into the scoreboard. The clock was winding down dangerously low. And San Francisco was up 3-2.

J.J. and Shane had one goal each, and each was hard fought. Every single shift had been grueling. Every player drenched in sweat through every layer.

Ilya's line was up now, and Shane's whole body was leaned forward toward the boards as he watched. Ilya had dried blood smeared across his chin from an early check; sweat dripping down his face so profusely that he looked like he had just stepped out from the spray of the shower.

He was bent in the face off, eyes predatory and dark and focused. When the puck dropped, Shane swore he could hear the sound echo in his head as Ilya's stick swiped it with reflexes quick as a whip.

He shot the puck back to J.J. and flew down the ice like bat out of hell, weaving around defenders like slaloms. He was mesmerizing; the crowd goading all as one as he cut back and took the pass when it bounced off the boards like a pin ball.

The lane was closing fast. But Shane knew Ilya was faster. He could feel his heartbeat in his throat as the seconds ticked and ticked and the end of regulation came speeding toward them in unstoppable motion.

But he could feel it before he even saw it. Ilya setting his feet. Squaring his shoulders. The narrow opening getting swallowed up in front of him.

And then he rocketed a wrist shot so hard off his stick that it looked like a bullet.

And it hit the back of the net just like one.

The arena erupted. Shane was on his feet and screaming before he could even process what his own body was doing.

Over the sound of the screaming fans, *Rasputin* blasted over the speakers. Once the dog pile cleared from Ilya where he stood in front of the net, he skated out to the center, the camera projecting his elated face on the jumbotron.

He moved in time to the music, blowing kisses to the crowd as the speakers bellowed out "*Ra-Ra-Rasputin, Russia's greatest love machine-*"

Shane shook his head with a smile. Hayden was shaking Shane by the shoulders.

3-3.

Overtime.

As Ilya's line skated by the bench, Shane felt his heart fluttering like a caged bird.

He grabbed Ilya by the front of the jersey, smashing their helmets together. "Fuck yes!" Shane screamed. Ilya smacked him on the back of the helmet, his grin so wide that it made his lip split again.

Shane reached out with his bare hand and wiped the fresh bead of blood from Ilya's mouth. His eyes were transfixed on him for a moment, blue and bright.

"Go fucking kill it, Shane." He leaned in and growled into the side of his helmet.

It made Shane's whole stomach coil taut.

And when he vaulted over the boards with his line, his focus honed in so hard that he could barely even hear the crowd anymore. Could barely see anything but the ice in front of him. The edge of his stick. His opponent bent in front of him for the face off.

The world moved in slow motion around him, and his mind moved in flashes as the puck began to drop.

His very first Tyke game. His mom tightening his laces. His dad adjusting the strap on his helmet.

The first day of hockey camp. Ilya's wild curls. His smug smile. The way he skated.

Draft day. His name being called. Holding the Montreal jersey against his chest.

Ilya arriving in the locker room. His warm hands on Shane's face. The wobble in his chest.

His lips on the scar on Ilya's neck. A whispered promise that they would show the world nothing could stop them.

Shane grabbed the puck and flew. He could barely even feel his skates on the ice. Bodies blurred around him in shapes and colors. He didn't turn. Didn't look.

He kept his eyes fixed forward. Kept his hands firm. All he could hear was his own heart in his ears.

The defenders were scattered. Shane was too fast. He drew his breath in. Felt the cold burn his lungs. Let his eyes settle on the net.

His hands moved. He felt the slide of the puck off his stick. Saw it fly in a spray of snow. Heard it crack against the bar.

Saw it ricochet into the net.

His knees nearly buckled. The roar of the crowd hit him like a wall; as did the sudden onslaught of his team. Gloves and helmets were flying through the air like a flock of birds.

Hayden was shaking him. He realized now that they were both screaming. *All I Do Is Win* blasted and thumped over the roar of the fans.

J.J. flew into them both, howling at the top of his lungs. Shane's throat felt burning raw. Tears and sweat mixed on his cheeks as he wrenched his helmet off, panting and screaming and maybe sobbing. It was hard to tell.

And suddenly, familiar hands were on his face. Ilya was screaming in Russian, voice breaking as he did. They embraced each other so hard that they almost toppled over.

Shane pressed his face into Ilya's neck, and now he knew he was sobbing. “Holy fuck.” He cried, holding the back of Ilya's jersey in a vice grip. “Is this fucking real?”

Ilya gripped his sweat soaked hair and tugged. “Is real, *solnyshko*.” He yelled into his ear. “We fucking did it! You fucking did it!”

Shane stepped back slightly, eyes up to the crowd in disbelief. He kept a hold of the sleeve of Ilya's jersey, drifting them both toward the center.

The whole crowd was on their feet. The team was all skating laps, pounding the glass, hugging and crying and collapsing onto the ice.

Shane felt his chest heaving. His eyes finally settled on what was next to him at center ice. Ilya; eyes bright and rimmed red. Curls matted down with sweat. He had a hand fisted in the back of Shane's jersey. His lips were parted as he breathed heavily. Shane could see his pulse jumping in his neck.

He was beautiful. Glowing and perfect and beautiful. *Mine*, Shane thought.

He knew he couldn't have done this without Ilya. He knew he couldn't breathe without Ilya. The man next to him was his entire heart. They were two halves that made a whole.

His chest surged with every emotion at once. A tidal wave. An unstoppable force. And he decided.

Shane turned and grabbed Ilya by the front of his jersey. Ilya turned to him, their eyes meeting, faces now only inches apart.

“I love you, Ilya.” He panted, putting a hand on the back of Ilya's head. “I fucking love you.”

He tightened his fingers into Ilya's sweat soaked curls, and let the world fall away around them. He pressed their mouths together hard, feeling the startled sound Ilya made against him before they both melted into it.

It was a messy slide of tongues and lips and tears; Ilya's hands now gripping Shane's face like a lifeline. They kissed and kissed until Shane's lungs screamed for air. When he pulled back, he kept their foreheads together, both of them smiling through their broken sobs.

Around them, the crowd had erupted. Shane lifted his head to see the image of them on the jumbotron, huddled in an embrace.

He slotted their lips together for one more kiss before tangling their fingers together. His eyes found his parents. Even from here, he could see the tears on his mother's cheeks.

It made his smile widen as he squeezed Ilya's hand hard. Ilya turned to him, a disbelieving look stuck on his face.

“Shane…” he breathed out. But Shane just pressed a palm into Ilya's flushed cheek.

“We fucking did it.” He said. “I love you so much.”

“*Fuck*.” Ilya choked out. “Fuck, I love you.”

He tugged Ilya closed into his side, arm wrapping around his waist. He wanted to burn this moment into his mind forever. Every sound. Every feeling. The tears and sweat and spit cooling on his face. Ilya burning hot and panting at his side. It was everything.

He could barely even register the rest of the team gathering around them, or the carpet being rolled out onto the ice.

He felt frozen there, Ilya anchored into him. *His*. His for the whole world to see. The two of them, champions, and *together*.

Time blurred and bled until his attention was snapped back into focus by the feeling of the Cup cold in his hands. Shane's breath left him in a whoosh as he lifted it, brought the metal to his lips, then hoisted it over his head.

Sound erupted around him again. The team encircled him, cheering and screaming and making Shane's chest ache with pride. He whipped his head around to Ilya, and was unable to

stop himself from leaning in to kiss him again, the Cup over both their heads as their lips pressed together.

Ilya breathed out against his mouth. Shane let his eyes flutter shut. His heart was beating so hard that his chest hurt.

There was no turning back. He didn't want to.

Ilya's words echoed in his mind as he brushed their lips together again.

I know. It's scary. But we are brave.

Chapter End Notes

WE PRAYED FOR TIMES LIKE THIS 😭😭

no hate to Skip but Hollanov did it better yall, you know that ice was MELTING underneath that kiss 😌

also I had to make Montreal stop being so awful so that they could actually be proud to win the cup there so mini redemption arc i guess??

ANYWAYS

I can't believe next chapter is the last 😭 thank you all so much for coming with me so far and all your wonderful words. I live for your comments, they are my lifeblood 💖

THANK YOU and see you next chapter 🥹

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This couldn't be cloud 9. It had to be at least cloud fucking 50.

Shane was skating laps around the rink with the Stanley Cup in his arms, raised over his head in triumph. And Ilya was watching with Shane's spit dried on his lips, because he sure as hell wasn't going to wipe it off. He didn't ever want to wash his face again.

It was soaked with sweat and tears that he never wanted to forget the feeling of. Hard work and emotions turned into something visceral and real.

And of course, the kiss. His lips were still tingling. His hands were still trembling. His heart was still hammering against his ribcage. Shane had grabbed him, looked him in the eyes, and kissed him like his life depended on it. Right here, in front of thousands of people and TV cameras and the world.

They held the Stanley fucking Cup together over their heads. They kissed again beneath it. Cloud 9, cloud 50, cloud 100, Ilya didn't know anymore. All he knew was pure elation. A dream knocked loose from the confines of his brain and playing out right here in this arena.

They did it. And Shane was his, and he was Shane's. And the whole world knew it.

He hoped Dyatlov was watching on a big screen TV when his tongue went halfway down Shane's throat. He hoped he saw their spit swapping in 4K HD.

He knew Crowell saw it. Here, in this arena, zoomed in on the jumbotron, with the fans exploding in their seats. The thought made him bark out a hysterical laugh.

The team gathered up again as they made the announcement that they were to present the winner of the game MVP. Every head swiveled right toward Shane. Perfect Shane, who was shining like the sun with sweat glistening on his skin.

As he knew he would, Ilya felt tears stinging at his eyes the moment the Conn Smythe trophy made its way onto the ice. He stepped back a bit from where he had plastered himself to Shane's side, allowing for him to have space for his moment.

Ilya definitely wished it wasn't fucking Crowell who was about to bestow the award upon Shane, but he also was feeling a sick sense of satisfaction in knowing that Crowell was most definitely seething inside over what they had just done in the middle of the ice. Just like everyone else, he had no choice but to watch Canada's golden boy, Prince of hockey, with his tongue inside Ilya's mouth. What a glorious thought. He filed it away for later as Crowell began to prattle away about the significance of the award.

He decided to drown out the sound and focus entirely on Shane. He stared at his side profile; cheeks pink from the cool air, lips slightly upturned into a small smile. He thought about the Shane he met at 14. About how determined and serious he was the moment his skates hit the ice. How impressive he was. He had taken Ilya's breath away, even back then. Shane had worked so hard for this. Had dreamt of this. Ilya was certain if you were to crack Shane open, he'd have a hockey stick for a spine. Ice in his veins. This was everything to Shane, and here he was, about to accept the trophy that proved to the world that he truly was the best.

When Crowell finally said Shane's name, Ilya swallowed hard as tears spilled over onto his cheeks. The crowd erupted as Shane skated forward toward the trophy, unable to stop himself from smiling. And when he finally lifted it into his arms, the crowd chanting his name, Ilya felt a sob wrench loose from his throat. He pressed a hand over his mouth to stifle it, shoulders shaking as tears flowed down his face in tiny rivers.

“You good, bud?” Hayden's voice cut through over top of the crowd, his arm around Ilya's shoulders. Ilya could only nod, sniffling.

“Don't worry. No one will remember seeing you cry, not after you just sucked face with Shane at center ice on live TV.”

That made a laugh break free through his tears. “Fuck off, Pike.”

Hayden gave him a grin, stepping aside as Shane came skating back toward the group. Shane made a sympathetic pout, pulling Ilya into him and kissing the top of his head. “You okay?” He pulled back, hands on Ilya's face.

“Fuck. I am proud of you, *solnyshko*.” He sniffled. “You earned this.”

Shane knocked their foreheads together. “Love you.” He said quietly, hand squeezing at the back of Ilya's neck.

Ilya had barely registered when the families started to wobble their way onto the ice. He watched with a small smile as wives were pulled into hugs, children were lifted into the air, and parents fawned over their sons.

Shane skated toward Yuna and David as they approached, proud smiles worn big. Ilya stayed back, feeling his heart squeeze at the emotion all over Yuna's face when she put her hands on her son's cheeks before pulling him in. Shane went limp under her touch, head tucked into her. And even though he was a six foot tall, 200 pound hockey player in full gear, he looked like a little boy in her arms.

Ilya shut his eyes for a moment, and tried to remember the feeling of his mother's hugs. Her skin was warm, and she smelled like linen and earth and strawberries. She always kissed the crown of his head, right on top of the curls that were a perfect copy of her own. *I did it, mama. This one is for you.*

When he opened his eyes again, he was surprised to see the way David moved right past Shane, coming directly toward him. He felt his own breathing stall out, his limbs frozen in place.

David planted both hands firmly on Ilya's shoulders, and looked him directly in the eyes.

“I'm so proud of you, son.”

He pulled Ilya into a tight hug. Ilya let his arms come around him, feeling the fabric of the Rozanov jersey he was wearing beneath his fingertips.

This night just kept getting more and more surreal as it went on.

It wasn't long before David and Yuna switched places, and Yuna's warm hands were on Ilya's cheeks, and he could see the tears shining in her brown eyes.

This was simultaneously everything and nothing Ilya ever dreamed of. He of course had always wanted love like this; craved it down in the deepest parts of his soul. But he never let himself truly believe he would have it. He left those thoughts on a shelf, high and out of reach, to look at when he needed to. But never to touch.

And then Shane took it down from its perch and thrust it into his hands and forced him to understand that he was allowed to have it. There were no words to describe how grateful he was for that.

Shane kept a hand firmly at the back of Ilya's neck as the team finally filed off the ice and toward the locker room. He gently squeezed, pulling at the scruff as they walked side by side. Ilya had been a bit preoccupied at the time that it happened to catch his teammates' reactions, but he wondered now exactly what was going to come of this revelation. Their fearless captain and MVP was gay, and in a relationship with their second line center. And they just got to witness *exactly* how good that chemistry was. How real it was. If Ilya coming out as bisexual shocked them, this new development must have been a tectonic shift.

As they walked into the locker room, he expected Shane to maybe look…nervous? Apprehensive? But Shane stopped, hand still on his neck, in front of Ilya's stall and pushed his hand up into the back of Ilya's hair, tugging it as he jostled him with a smile. Shane parted from him with a pat on the cheek, walking off to his own stall, lifting his jersey over his head.

Ilya shook his head with a fond smile. *Brave boy*. He started to remove his own gear, watching as the champagne bottles started to make their way into the room. Everyone was in their base layers now; gear haphazardly shoved into stalls or discarded on the floor. Ilya shook out his matted curls and leaned against his stall when Shane walked to the center of the room.

“Before we celebrate.” Shane started as a hush came over the team. “I just want to say. You all fucking earned this. We did this together. I couldn't be more proud. Also…yes. That really happened. Ask questions later, if you need to. Right now, let's get this fucking started.”

The room dissolved into a sticky chaos of spraying champagne and screaming, sweaty hockey players that Ilya knew would make for an undetectable exit. It seemed like the team was much more keen on celebrating than pressing the issue, which was fine by him.

He casually walked behind Shane, grabbing a handful of the back of his Under Armour, soaked through with champagne. He felt Shane stumble as he started to drag him quickly toward the equipment closet, trying not to trip over discarded gear on their way.

He yanked Shane into the small room, slammed the door, then crowded him back against it.

"*Shane fucking Hollander.*" He purred, eyes assessing him as he shook his head in disbelief. "You-" he put his mouth to Shane's. "-are unfuckingreal. Did you know this?" He fisted a hand in the top of Shane's hair.

"Yeah?" Shane exhaled against him. A humid heat started to build between them; the musk of sweat and the sweetness of champagne clinging to the air.

Ilya stepped back a bit and captured Shane's jaw in his hand, looking him in the eyes firmly. "You really wanted this? You are okay with everyone knowing?"

Part of him was terrified that Shane had done it in the heat of the moment. Drunk off winning and not thinking. That he would regret it and all of this would spiral out of control.

"I wanted it. I want it. I'm done hiding. I just fucking want to be with you." Those honest brown eyes were looking directly into his soul now. Ilya felt something tighten in his stomach. "You were perfect out there and I want everyone to know you're fucking mine."

The words barely left Shane's mouth before Ilya's lips were on his; tongue begging entry and hand squeezing at his jaw. Shane was already moaning into his mouth, and the sound went straight between Ilya's legs. He pulled off and moved his mouth to Shane's throat; smiling against him when he tipped his head all the way back to give Ilya better access. Ilya sucked into the tender skin, teeth tugging at the flesh.

"Oh *fuck*." Shane fisted into his hair. "Fuck, Ilya, don't-" he moaned, squirming back against the door. "Don't leave a mark. Not now."

Ilya whined, unlatching his mouth and instead licking a stripe up his throat. "You are no fun."

"*You* are insane."

"Yes."

Shane pushed him back by the shoulders and put both hands on his face. "I love you. And I'm proud of you. I'm proud to be with you. Whatever happens after this, we'll get through it. I know we will."

Ilya leaned forward to put their foreheads together. "We will. Together."

Shane nodded against him. "Together." He pressed their lips together again. "We need to get back out there."

Ilya groaned dramatically. "You kill me."

“I know, baby.” He gave his hair a gentle tug. “But we kinda just dropped a bomb. I think we might have to go answer a few questions.”

“Mm. You may be right.” He patted Shane's cheek.

They took a moment to just smile at each other. Marveling at the other, like they couldn't believe what they had in front of them, before slipping out of the room and back into the chaos.

The hissing sound that escaped Ilya's mouth the second the hot water streamed from the shower head onto his back made Shane wince slightly.

He was already mentally cataloging all the damage he'd dealt as his eyes raked over Ilya's body: angry looking scratch marks across his back, a mouth shaped bruise blooming on his pec, another on the side of his neck, and a perfect bite mark on his bicep.

Shane had already seen the damage on himself in the mirror as the water heated. A bite mark on the back of his shoulder, hand print bruises on his hips, and sucked in bruises on his inner thighs and under his jaw.

“Maybe it was…a little much?” Shane grimaced. Ilya only laughed, head tipped back under the spray.

They had stumbled through Ilya's front door and not made it past the foyer before they were all over each other. Both had been pent up with adrenaline, a little tipsy, and *very* feral.

They had broken a lamp, dented the wall behind the headboard, and thoroughly ruined a set of Egyptian cotton sheets. His boxer briefs were ripped and somewhere in the kitchen, and the buttons to Ilya's shirt were scattered across the living room floor.

So, to put it mildly, they looked like they had both survived some sort of horrible home invasion gone wrong. Shane was certain he wouldn't be walking right for a week.

It was well worth it.

By the time they were showered and tucked into each other in bed, the soft light of dawn was peering through the small gap in Ilya's dramatic blackout curtains.

“What a fucking day, huh?” Ilya sighed, one hand playing at Shane's hair while the other scrolled on his phone.

“I think I need to sleep for a week.”

“Mm yes. You have been very…*enthusiastic* tonight.” Ilya grinned.

Shane scoffed. “Yeah, you're one to talk, dude.”

“Ah, maybe we both have been a bit excited, hm?” He kissed Shane's temple. Shane tilted his head and kissed Ilya's jaw.

“That's one word for it.” He grinned, picking up his own phone. He knew the world around them had likely been losing the last thread of its sanity over what Shane unleashed on the ice. He was curious to see what exactly that aftermath was.

@HockeyNet
Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov shock fans with heated kiss on the ice after Stanley Cup win *[link]*

> **@littlevoyage**
> I honestly thought I was hallucinating because WHAT?????????? HOLY-
>
> **@niccatnite**
> oh….OH….OH??????? 🌈
>
> **@hotforhollzy**
> RISE UP #HOLLANOV NATION WE FUCKING MADE IT #HOLLANOV #HOLLANOV #HOLLANOV
>
> **@voyageursfan0**
> this is so inappropriate and unnecessary. they should have cut the broadcast tbh.
>
> **@alexc89**
> Well. Way to make this about themselves smh. Why can't we ever just focus on hockey?
>
> **@bigrozanov**
> SO MUCH HISTORY WAS JUST MADE MY HEAD IS SPINNING
>
> **@hockeydad1000**
> I was watching this with my CHILDREN. This was SO inappropriate and strange…
>
> **@notsrrry**
> HOLY HELL DID ANYONE IN THAT ARENA SURVIVE 🥵
>
> **@icedout**
> HOCKEY IS HEALING I LOVE IT HERE OMFG OMFG

@HockeyNet
Shane Hollander confirms sexuality; relationship with teammate Ilya Rozanov in post game interview *[link]*

@puckkoff
MONTREAL ARE THE CHAMPIONS AND THE GAYEST TEAM IN THE LEAGUE EAT IT CROWELL #HOLLANOV

@icedout
We just saw the Conn Smythe go to a gay man, how blessed we are to live in this timeline 😭 🌈

@mattw99
No one cares

@hotforhollzy
“I love him and I just felt like it was time to stop hiding that. That's all there is to say.” TELL EM SHANE #HOLLANOV

@bigrozanov
claiming his man MHMM I KNOW THATS RIGHT #Hollanov

@montrealmac7
Taking away from the team win by talking about this disgusting bs the NHL needs to do better

@HockeyNet
Rozanov and Hollander spotted celebrating with team at Montreal after party *[link]*

@notsrrry
ok whoever recorded the moment that Rozanov HAULED SHANE HOLLANDER UP BY HIS THIGHS LIKE HE ISNT A FULLY GROWN HOCKEY PLAYER u deserve a fucking medal

@bigrozanov
Ilya looks so fucking happy to be showing off his man 😭 my heart

@voyageursfan0
please stop posting about this dumb shit

@littlevoyage
why yes Shane Hollander pouring from the bottle straight into Ilya Rozanov's mouth IS very important to me, thanks for asking 👄

@pj6753
Sick should not be out in public

@hotforhollzy
i usually hate sneaky photos and find them super creepy and invasive but #Hollanov

making out in the corner of the bar??? the boots on the ground journalism we deserve

Shane's head was swimming. He was out. To the world. Everyone knew. The devil on his back was unlatched and released out into the ether, and he no longer had anything to hide.

It felt fucking incredible.

He collected screenshots, feeling himself smiling at his phone like an idiot as he did so, and typed out his own post.

@shanehollanderofficial

✅ Stanley Cup
✅ Conn Smythe
✅ Love of my life

[Image 1: The entire Montreal team is gathered at center ice. Shane sits front and center, smiling big, the cup in front of him.]

[Image 2: Shane hoisting the Conn Smythe trophy in triumph.]

[Image 3: Shane and Ilya at center ice, their mouths together in a passionate kiss. Shane's hand is in the back of Ilya's hair. Ilya's hand is holding Shane's jaw.]

His three greatest achievements, all neatly lined up and proudly on display. His chest swelled. And then the sound of Ilya snickering to himself made him narrow his eyes.

A new post popped up on his feed, right on top of his own.

“Ilya. You're so stupid.” He said fondly, dissolving into laughter as Ilya simply shrugged smugly.

@81rozanov
I don't see how you can hate from outside the club… you can't even get in 😘 🏆

[Image: Shane and Ilya each with a hand holding the Stanley Cup up above their heads. They are angled toward each other, lips pressed together.]

“What? Is true.” He cupped his hands over his mouth. “Jealous haters get fucked!” He yelled into the room.

“*Stop it.*” Shane hissed through his teeth, smacking Ilya's arm. "We're lucky the neighbors haven't called the cops yet.”

Ilya turned to him with a look of so much genuine fondness that Shane felt like he might melt through the mattress.

“Only thing I am lucky for is you, *solnyshko*.” He placed a hand on Shane's cheek, stroking it with a thumb. “I am so fucking lucky. Luckiest man alive.”

Shane closed his eyes, savoring the warmth against his cheek and the deep timbre of Ilya's voice. “Mmm. I love you.” His own voice felt thick with sleep.

“I love you more, my *solnyshko*. Now get some sleep.”

The last thing he felt before sleep pulled him in was Ilya's gentle kiss to his lips.

The room was sun-warmed and bathed in the orange and gold hues of the late summer afternoon. Through the large panes of glass, Shane could see the low angle of the sun gleaming over the rippled surface of the lake, leaving brilliant streaks of white over the deep blue water.

The sounds of downtown Montreal were long gone here. He could hear only the gentle lapping of the lake against the dock, the soft chirping of birds, and the rustle of a breeze through the tall trees that surrounded the cottage. It was peaceful in a way that Shane hoped he would never take for granted.

It had taken them only a single day to decide that this house was the one. Of course, Shane had done extensive research leading up to their scheduled appointments with the real estate agent. But it was deeply important to him that Ilya feel just as strongly about the place as he did. This was for the both of them, after all. A place for them to escape together, away from hockey and press and brand deals and everything else that stopped them from being able to slow down.

He craved having a space carved out that was shaped just for the two of them. Where they could be obnoxious and rough house and get overly competitive playing backyard games.

Where they could fuck in every room of the house and not worry about the neighbors hearing. Where they could wake up whenever they wanted, wrapped up in each other's arms, and just exist.

So when Ilya had walked around the entire cottage following the real estate agent with a small smile, eyes bright and finger hooked through Shane's belt loop, he'd figured it was a good sign. It had secretly been his favorite listing all along, and when Ilya whispered in his ear that he loved it, Shane was ready to sign the papers right then and there.

He wasn't sure why he ever even doubted that he and Ilya wouldn't be aligned. Their souls were one in the same; made up of something cosmic and tied tightly together by fate. They could see each other blind. Their hearts had always wanted the same thing.

The house was beautiful. Huge windows lined the walls that face out toward the lake. Everything was in various shades of warm brown wood. It was plenty big enough for them to have their own room, multiple guest rooms, a gym, a game room, and perfect open living space flooded with natural light. It was private and perfect and everything Shane had dreamed of.

And now here Shane sat, collapsed into the new sofa that had just been delivered earlier that morning, kicking his feet up onto a moving box that he was using as a makeshift coffee table.

He had arrived at the cottage three days ago to do a final walk through, sign paperwork, and start unloading the seemingly endless boxes. Ilya had to stay behind to finish moving himself out of his Montreal condo, and into Shane's that they would now share during the season.

Shane already missed him terribly. It was a strange thing, thinking that he had previously spent such long stretches of time without Ilya. That he spent five whole years not even knowing if he'd ever see him again. Now, being without him was like missing a limb.

He settled himself into the cushions with a sigh, pulling out his phone to check the time. Ilya was currently driving to him, and he couldn't stop himself from watching the clock.

He wanted to jump into his arms and smell his skin and kiss his face.

In the meantime, a rerun of the NHL awards was filling the TV screen, so he was content to indulge in reliving the joy of that night.

Shane was admittedly only half paying attention to the TV until he heard the voice coming through the speaker announce the special presentation of both the Art Ross and Rocket Richard trophies, together.

“...the youngest player to ever achieve winning both the Art Ross and Rocket Richard in the same season, in his debut season in the NHL, the league is proud to recognize Ilya Rozanov of the Montreal Voyageurs.”

Shane remembered those words immediately springing tears to his eyes. Not only was he the youngest player to ever do it, but he had also done it in spite of missing three weeks due to

his injury. Shane had only briefly been able to pass him while he was out, but Ilya had come back with a vengeance. With something to prove.

The camera panned to a smiling Ilya swaggering toward the stage, looking devastating in a navy suit that was tailored to perfection. His easy confidence would be infuriating if Shane weren't so helplessly charmed by him. He was glad that the concealer Svetlana had layered onto the side of his neck beautifully covered the obscene hickey Shane had left for him. "*You two are animals."* She'd chided. Ilya had wanted to leave it there for the world to see, but Shane insisted, and Ilya of course would do anything for him. He was such a doll.

Both trophies stood sentry by the podium as Ilya shook hands and stepped up to the mic, that crooked smirk and those blue eyes making Shane's stomach somersault, even through a TV screen.

"I would like to say is hard to achieve this, but back in Russia, they throw you in bear pit when you do not score. So. You learn quickly." Laughter rises from the audience. "I have had many people say I make this look easy. This is because I am very good at what I do. Clearly." He gestured vaguely at the trophies as laughter carries through the crowd again.

"But is not just that. Is also that I am in best league, on best team, with best captain." Cheers and whistles ring out. Ilya breaks into a wide grin. The camera briefly pans to Shane in the audience, who is hiding his face in embarrassment. Ilya steps back from the mic briefly to join the crowd in clapping, before schooling his expression back into something more serious.

"Is a very big honor to have my name along with other players who have won these awards. I am grateful to have opportunity to play this game, even if some people out there believe I should not." He pauses a beat, a pointed look on his face. "Thank you to Montreal. Thank you to my mama, ty moy angel." Ilya touches a hand briefly to the cross on his chest.
You are my angel.

"And thank you to my Shane. You are reason that I breathe. I love you."

Ilya walks off stage, and the camera pans briefly to a misty eyed Shane in the audience, clapping hard.

The amount of pure pride and admiration swelling in Shane's chest was almost unbearable. He loved that man so much that he was sick with it.

It wasn't long before he was watching himself walk to the stage in his tailored black suit to accept the Hart Memorial trophy. He swore he could hear the way his heart thudded wildly as he approached the mic.

"This season has been filled with some of the greatest honors of my life. Winning this. Winning the cup. These are things I've dreamed of for as long as I can remember. Getting to join the legendary players who have earned this award is just…I don't have the words. I'm so grateful to even be considered among them." Shane adjusts his collar slightly.

"*Something else happened, that I'm sure you may have all heard about." Apprehensive laughter rises from the crowd. "I, uh. I did something that I think even shocked myself. I've*

played hockey in the biggest venues, in front of thousands, but somehow I was still afraid to let the world see me. So I decided to be brave. I know there are plenty of people in this world, specifically in the world of hockey, who have hate and disgust for who am I. But I just want to say that no one should ever let the world tell them they are wrong for listening to their heart." Shane swallows hard. Applause rises from the crowd.

"To my team, thank you for all the blood, sweat, and tears you put into this game. I wouldn't be up here without you guys. To my parents, thank you for all the love and support you've given me for my whole life. I owe you everything. And to Ilya." Shane looks up. "I'm proud to love you. I'm so lucky I get to share this game, my love, and my life with you. Ya tebya lyublyu." Shane walks off the stage. The camera pans to the audience, where Ilya is smiling through his tears, wiping at his eyes. Yuna is clutching his shoulder, a tear on her cheek. David sits next to her, clapping with a proud smile on his face.

"Fuck." Shane wiped at his eyes, laughing at himself for getting emotional, and at the memory of Ilya hugging him hard and whispering into his ear that he almost got the pronunciation right.

He took a deep breath, turning to look at the way dusk had started to settle over the landscape. His whole body jolted at the sound of gravel crunching under tires, and the purr of an engine growing closer.

Shane nearly gave himself whiplash the way that he flew to the door and swung it open, striding out onto the porch.

He felt his jaw drop open at the sight of Ilya, sunglasses on and hair windswept, sitting in the driver's seat of a bright red Ferrari Spider convertible.

Ilya grinned wide as he cut the engine.

"*Ilya*." Shane scolded, though he couldn't stop his smile as he shook his head. "I'm gonna fucking kill you."

Ilya tossed his sunglasses onto the driver's seat and sauntered toward him. "What? You said no Lambo. This is Ferrari."

And *fuck*, the sight of him in that car was unfortunately and unfairly hot, and he missed him so much. He was going to have to be mad about it later.

"Fuck you." Shane said before he jumped from the bottom porch step into Ilya's strong arms.

Ilya held him up a few inches off the ground as they kissed; Shane's hands pushing through his curls. He set him back down with a smile, then dove in to kiss him again, more deeply this time.

"Mmm *solnyshko*. I missed you."

"Missed you too, baby." Shane smiled against his mouth.

Ilya stepped back a bit, looking up at the house. "I cannot believe this is ours."

Shane's smile grew. “It's ours.” He tugged on Ilya's hand. “Come on.”

He led him inside and straight to the kitchen, where he had made a stockpile of what he lovingly referred to as Ilya-snacks. Hot cheetos, several flavors of pringles, gummy bears, mini m&ms. Cokes in the fridge. Two different flavors of ice cream in the freezer. Ilya's eyes lit up before he put both hands on Shane's face and kissed him loudly.

“You are my favorite person ever. Did you know?”

“Of course I know.” Shane pinched his arm. “It's not hard. I just think about what I would eat if I was 14 and feral, and that about covers it.”

Ilya leaned down and blew a raspberry into his neck. “You are such a brat.”

“Mm, maybe. But now the whole world knows I'm yours so you can't deny me.”

“Oh, a tragedy. Cannot deny that I am dating hottest man alive and best hockey player in the world. Horrible.”

“So you admit I'm the best?” Shane smiled smugly.

Ilya pinched both his cheeks between his fingers. “Yes. You are best at many things, *solnyshko*.”

Shane felt himself go a bit boneless as he looked into Ilya's eyes. “God, you're pretty.” He heard himself say as he shook his head in slight disbelief.

Ilya's cheeks went pink, and Shane bit his own bottom lip with a satisfied grin. “Made you blush.”

“Lies.” He put a palm over Shane's face. “Everyone! Shane Hollander is lying liar who lies!”

“Shut the fuck up.” Shane bent Ilya's arm back, then pressed their mouths together, feeling heat flood his stomach at the low groan that escaped Ilya's mouth when he slipped their tongues together. Nothing ever lit him up the way Ilya did. Every look, every touch, every sound. He couldn't believe he got to have him all to himself.

He felt Ilya's stomach grumble against him and laughed softly. “Hungry?” He murmured against Ilya's lips.

“Fuck. Starving.” Ilya went to grab for the bag of cheetos, but Shane swatted his hand away.

“No. We're making dinner.” Shane reached into a drawer and carefully pulled out the cookbook Ilya had given him, filled with his mother's recipes. He watched Ilya's face do something complicated.

“I sent Svetlana a bunch of pictures so she could help me with the translations for the ingredients.” He flipped to a page he had bookmarked. Ilya ran a fingertip over the writing.

“You'll have to read the recipe for me, though.” Shane said softly, brushing a curl away from Ilya's eyes.

“This is what we are making? *Okroshka*?”

“Uh, that sounds right. Like, cold soup, right?” Shane moved to open the fridge, but Ilya caught his wrist.

“Thank you.” Ilya said gently, and the emotion in his eyes was almost too much for Shane to look at.

“You don't need to thank me. I want this place to feel like home for us both. I figured this was a good way to start.”

“I love you so much, sometimes I do not even know what to do with it.” Ilya put a hand on Shane's cheek.

Shane turned his head to kiss Ilya's palm. “I know the feeling.”

There was so much easiness simply existing with Ilya. They fell into a rhythm; chopping vegetables side by side, their elbows bumping playfully. Ilya quietly sang in Russian as he set the table. When they settled to eat their soup and fresh bread Shane picked up from the bakery that morning, socked feet touching together, one word kept repeating in Shane's mind.

Forever. This was his forever. This beautiful, sweet man would forever be the one at his dinner table. He would forever be the one lazing next to Shane on the couch. Forever be the one he kissed goodnight, and woke up to in the morning. Forever.

Brilliant columns of orange and yellow flickered and swayed in front of them; the heat rolling off of it with every gust of cool night breeze that carried from the lake.

Shane's need to have everything just so really paid off, because the patio set he'd picked out was ridiculously cozy. Ilya laid across the loveseat with his head in Shane's lap, his solid thighs serving as the perfect pillow.

“So. Is this what you did as boy scout? Build fire and stare at it?”

“Fuck off. I was never a fucking boy scout.” Shane pinched his side.

“No? Then how you learn to survive out here in this…wilderness?”

“We're not even in the wilderness. We're literally 10 feet from the house.” Shane shoved a hand into his hair. “I forget you're a city boy.”

“Mm. Is nice out here. Really.” He kissed Shane's thigh. “Can pretend we are only two people in the world.”

“Yeah.” Shane's fingers scratched circles into his scalp. “I like that idea.”

It was a fantasy that used to play out in Ilya's mind often back in Russia. That he would find Shane, and they would run off together. He knew he would never need anyone else. There was nothing else he even wanted at all. It was this. Always only this.

The sound of the lake lapping and the flames crackling were almost hypnotizing in a way that was making Ilya feel like he wanted to crack his whole chest open to show Shane how truly and deeply he loved him. He was afraid words could never really be enough to explain. But he would always try.

He let the silence stretch for a few more moments.

“I am very lucky I met you.” His voice was quiet, eyes fixed on the flames.

“I'm lucky, too.” Shane rubbed a hand down his ribs slowly.

“Shane. You saved my life. You know that, right?”

He felt Shane's hands still a bit.

“I do not mean just as metaphor. You saved my life. I do not think…” He bit down on the inside of his cheek before he allowed himself to continue. “I do not think I would have survived this life. When I met you, I was very lost. I was so young but I was so done. I was angry with whole world. I hated my life. I had no friends. I got into fights all the time. I was not happy and I did not think I would ever be happy again. But then I met you. And you looked at me like…like you were actually seeing me.”

He swallowed down the lump in his throat. “You did not treat me like problem. You talk to me like I am a person. Do you know how rare this was? After my mama was gone, people in my life only treated me like I was in the way. Or like I was only meant to be hockey machine. There was no Ilya. No one cared. But you cared. You were kind to me. You made me laugh. *Really* laugh. You understood me. You made me feel like maybe there were things in life that could still be good. And I held onto this feeling, as tight as I could. With everything I had. Because you gave it to me.”

Shane was tugging at him now, pulling him up into a sitting position so they were face to face. His eyes were glassy with tears that threatened to spill over. “Baby.” His voice wobbled.

“You are everything to me, Shane. Since that first summer we met, any time I felt like I wanted to give up, I just thought about you. You make me happy, even when I thought it was impossible to be happy. You saved me more times than I can say.” Ilya felt a hot tear track down his cheek.

There truly was a Shane shaped space in his heart that kept it beating. It's how he knew Shane could only ever be the one. There was never anyone else.

Shane's hands came to his face. “You deserve to be happy, Ilya. Fuck everyone who ever made you feel like you couldn't be. You literally have the most beautiful soul. You are the sweetest, kindest person I've ever met. You made me feel seen. No one else could ever do that. We were meant to find each other. I believe that.”

Ilya put his hands on top of Shane's where they rested on his cheeks. “I do too, *solnyshko*.” His eyes searched Shane's face. His flawless skin. His dark eyes. “My perfect boy.”

Shane pressed his plush lips to Ilya's, soft and reverent. He let his fingers trail over the scar on Ilya's neck, then the one in his palm. “I'm not letting anything bad happen to you ever again.”

“As long as I have you, nothing could be bad.” Ilya hooked their pinkies together.

Shane lifted their hands and kissed the tattoo on Ilya's finger. “I have something to show you.”

He watched intently as Shane reclined back against the arm of the sofa and pushed up his shirt.

Ilya raised his eyebrows suggestively.

“No. Shut up. Not that.” Shane tugged down the waistband of his shorts, and Ilya felt his brain short out.

Oh.

On Shane's hip, in the same place Ilya had his tattoo for Shane, was Ilya's name, written in his own cyrillic hand.

“Shane…” His voice was quiet and stunned.

“I used the letter you brought me from Russia. Where you signed it at the bottom.” Shane touched his fingertips to it lightly. “Got it 3 days ago, when I got here. It hurt less than I thought it would.”

“Shane.” Ilya repeated. “You…this is real?”

“Of course it's real. Now we're almost even.”

Shane Hollander would never stop amazing him, it seemed. He thought back to himself writing that letter. The way his pen dragged across the page in hopeful strokes. He had written it imagining Shane unfolding the paper and holding it carefully in his hands. He never imagined that part of it would end up tattooed on Shane's body. His name, permanently etched into smooth, warm skin.

Ilya leaned down and kissed the soft skin just above the ink. “Fuck. You are perfect.”

Shane sat back up to pull him into a hug. “My baby.”

“Yes. Yours. Always yours.”

“I hate you for making me so disgustingly in love. We're gross.” He groaned, pressing his face into Ilya's shoulder.

“Yes but is okay because we are hot.”

Shane laughed into his neck, then peppered the skin with kisses. “Can't argue with that.”

“Real reason people hated seeing us kissing on TV is because they know they will never be this hot and they will never have hot freak sex as good as we do.”

“Oh my god. Shut up.” Shane laughed, and the sound made butterflies fill Ilya's stomach. It was insane the effects this man continued to have on him.

“Hope you bought stuff to patch up walls because I will be fucking you through the headboard again.” Ilya grinned as Shane punched his arm.

“That's not funny. Don't start breaking the house already.”

“Is not my fault you like it so much. Who am I to deprive you?”

“Shut *up*.” Shane went to punch his arm again, but Ilya grabbed his arm and pinned it back against the couch.

“Everyone thinks I am mean, but is really you.”

“Well. You are mean. Just not to me.”

“Mm. Never to my *solnyshko*.” He leaned in to kiss him sweetly.

The cool air started to drift over the dying fire, leaving their skin prickled. Ilya tilted his head up to the sky.

It was brilliant out here. He wasn't sure he had ever seen so many stars. They dotted the sky in small clusters that reminded him of Shane's freckles; each one perfectly placed. Behind them, the dark backdrop of the night sky reminded him of Shane's eyes when his pupils swallowed them whole. Beautiful and deep and wanting. He sometimes wondered if there was anything good in this world that *didn't* remind him of Shane. He supposed not.

“Is pretty.” He said absently, head still angled at the sky.

“We should go down to the dock. You can see it even better from there.”

“Is dark down there.” Ilya frowned, eyes tracking down to the bottom of the yard where the dock seemed to get swallowed into the darkness.

“I'll protect you.” Shane stood up and offered his hand.

“Of course you will. Brave boy.” Ilya took his hand and allowed himself to be pulled up.

They walked barefooted through the lush grass, hand in hand. The sweet scent of night-blooming jasmine and the soft sound of crickets chirping carried through the breeze. The dock was still slightly warm from the day's sun under their feet. The wood creaked gently beneath them; the water lapping softly against the posts. Shane squeezed his hand, leading him along toward the edge.

The lake stretched out infinitely in front of them, as did the sky. Shane was right. The stars looked even brighter from here. But even better was the way Shane looked in the moonlight. He was captivating. Ilya couldn't stop watching his face.

Shane turned to face him fully, finding his other hand. “You're staring.”

“I am.”

“At me.”

“Yes, *solnyshko*. At you. My favorite view.”

Shane squeezed both his hands and looked at him with particular intensity.

“You know, if I had never met you, there's no way I would believe in soulmates or fate. It all seems made up. But I know it isn't. It can't be. Because you're here in front of me. And when I look at you, I see a part of me that I can't live without.”

Ilya felt his heart start to skip in his chest, like a rock along the surface of the lake. His lips parted to speak, but Shane held his hands tighter and continued.

“Being without you all that time only helped me to understand it more. No one has ever made me feel anything close to what you make me feel. You're my best friend. The best friend I've ever had. And you love me in ways that don't even feel possible. Sometimes I look you, and I can't believe you're real. But you are. And I never, ever want to know what it's like to live without you again.”

“Shane…” His voice came out as a whisper.

Shane reached into his pocket, and suddenly, he was down on a knee in front of him, and Ilya's breath hitched so hard he was sure it could be heard clear across Canada.

“Ilya. I love you more than I've ever loved anything. I know you're my forever. I want this forever.” He opened up his hand. “Will you marry me?”

Ilya's heart was thudding so hard and his breathing had gone ragged and he could feel his hands trembling. “Shane…” he choked out, looking down at the black band sitting in Shane's palm.

Those big, brown eyes stared up at him; glassy as the surface of the lake. His dark hair was being swept back by the wind. His lips were parted slightly, his breathing a bit uneven. He was Ilya's heart on the outside of his body.

“Fuck. *Yes*. Yes, Shane, of course.” He could feel his voice shaking. This didn't feel real. Shane's warm hand gently took his and slid the metal onto his finger.

Ilya hauled him up and hugged him so hard it was painful. He hadn't even registered his own tears until he could feel the wetness cooling against his cheeks. Shane clutched onto him, and Ilya could feel the way both their chests were heaving.

He sniffled wetly, then pulled back and crashed their mouths together, hands pushed up the back of Shane's shirt. If you asked Ilya anything in that moment, he wouldn't be able to answer. Not where he was, or who he was, or where he came from. All he knew was Shane.

The feeling of his warm skin beneath his palms. The taste of his tongue. The softness of his lips. The tug of his hands in Ilya's hair.

He smelled like woodsmoke and sweat and fresh laundry. He tasted like the greatest thing Ilya had ever had in his mouth.

He was everything.

Ilya pulled Shane down with him onto the dock. Shane laughed against his mouth; thighs bracketing Ilya's as they continued to kiss each other breathless.

“I fucking love you.” Ilya practically growled, a hand gripped into the hair at the nape of Shane's neck.

Shane hummed happily, hips rocking down onto him. “You're gonna be my fucking husband.”

Ilya groaned loudly. *Husband*. Fuck. He could probably come on the spot just hearing Shane say that word.

“*Mine*.” He gripped onto Shane harder, pushing his hips back up to meet Shane's.

“Yours. Forever.” Shane gasped, then moaned softly as he started to find a rhythm in grinding down against him.

Ilya tugged at Shane's shorts. “Off. Take these off. Need to feel you.”

They both made quick work of discarding their clothes; shorts and shirts and underwear in a heap on the dock. Ilya sat up now, Shane seated in his lap. Shane started to rock against him again, causing them both to moan softly.

Ilya grabbed Shane's wrist and spit into his palm, watching Shane's eyes darken with lust at the action. Shane took them both in his slick hand, and the feeling made Ilya's head loll back with a groan. “Oh, fuck, Shane.”

He lifted his head again to meet Shane's mouth in a scorching kiss, their lengths sliding together in Shane's hand. Shane rocked back and forth into the motion, his mouth dropped open with little panting moans escaping out into the air between them.

This. Ilya got to have all of this, forever. His whole body ignited at the thought. Every muscle coiled taut. “Shane.” He panted out like a prayer. He swore he could feel electricity between them; a wild current that sparked bright.

“Come for me.” Shane said against his mouth, breath quickened. “I wanna feel it.”

Ilya gripped the back of Shane's head and let out a stuttering moan as he felt his release overtake his whole body. He coated them both, and Shane gasped softly.

“Oh, *fuck*, Ilya-” He whimpered out before he followed Ilya over the edge, heat caught between their bodies.

“Jesus Christ." Shane panted, head falling forward onto Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya nuzzled against the side of his head, a hand rubbing up and down his back, their breathing starting to even out. He never wanted to leave this place. He wanted to stay curled up in Shane under the stars, with nothing but the sound of the lake and their breathing between them.

Nothing mattered to him in this world the way that Shane did. Nothing even came remotely close. He held Shane tighter against him, and pictured his elated face when they won the cup; flushed and smiling in disbelief. The way he looked at him when they first met again in the locker room over the summer. His soft, serene face when Ilya would roll over to look at him in the middle of the night.

Ilya pressed his thumb to the smooth metal band around his finger, and felt his breath catch again. Life was not always fair, but it didn't matter anymore. Because this was all he would ever need.

The large, warm, calloused palm rubbing circles into his back was enough to put Shane into a trance. Never mind the fact that they were naked out on the dock; stickiness cooling between them. He didn't want to move from Ilya's strong arms. The arms of the man he was going to marry.

Deciding to propose was the easiest conclusion he'd ever come to. There was no reason to wait. The world knew Ilya was his. It was time to show them all just how serious he was about it.

His heart had been fluttering like a hummingbird for every second leading up to it. But the cool blue of Ilya's eyes had calmed his trembling fingers. And then Ilya had said yes, and he felt like the moon and all the stars were shining just for them.

Shane felt Ilya's grip around him loosen. He kissed Shane sweetly before squirming out from beneath him and getting to his feet.

Shane looked up as Ilya unclasped his necklace, gently removed his ring, and slipped it onto the chain before securing it around his neck again.

Shane's brows pinched together. “What are you-”

But before he could finish the question, Ilya was leaping from the end of the dock and into the lake with a large splash.

He emerged from the water and shook his head out like a dog before letting out a loud sound that was half whoop and half howl.

Shane let out a disbelieving laugh. “You are actually insane.”

“Need to clean off.” He grinned big. “Come, *solnyshko*.”

“No way. It's way too cold.”

Ilya pushed his bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. “I will keep you warm. Please, *malysh*.”

And god help Shane if this wasn't the most beautiful man he'd ever seen in his life. He could do anything - get into a hundred fights on the ice, say the most unhinged things, buy a stupidly fast sports car. It didn't matter. Shane would always look at him and see the man that he would follow to the ends of the earth.

He shook his head as he stood up. “You're so lucky I love you.” He took a deep breath, then jumped into the abyss of the dark lake.

“Fuck! That's fucking cold!” He exclaimed when he surfaced, pushing his wet hair back from his forehead.

Ilya swam to him, a boyish grin on his face. Shane couldn't stop his fond smile as he wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist and his arms around his neck.

Water was dripping down the edge of his jaw and his wet hair was already starting to curl back up at the ends. He was so perfect. Shane tightened his legs around him and put their foreheads together. “*Ilya*.” He breathed out, a hand finding its way into his soaked curls.

“Yes, my Shane?” Ilya brushed their lips together, feather light.

“You're gonna be my husband.”

Ilya smiled so big and gleaming that Shane could have forgotten the moon hanging over them. He thought about the boy who showed up in Montreal at age 14. The one who thought no one could love him. That no one would ever care.

Underneath that weight was the Ilya he saw in front of him now; wild and bright and full of love to give.

“*Da*. I am going to be your husband.” He brought a hand up to touch the ring on his chain.

“Why'd you move it there?” Shane asked quietly, fingers twisting gently into his hair.

“Because I was jumping into lake like big idiot and did not want it to fall off. Must guard this with my life, *solnyshko*.” His touch against the metal was something deep and reverent. “Do not worry. It will be on my finger. I will show off to everyone. I am engaged to *the* Shane Hollander, captain of Montreal Voyageurs, Stanley Cup Champion, Conn Smythe winner, Hart Memorial trophy winner, tightest ass in the-”

Shane tugged his hair and shut him up with a kiss that he smiled through. They kissed until they were both almost numb from the cold water of the lake.

They could hardly keep themselves apart long enough to make it back into the cottage and the welcomed warm spray of the shower.

The heat and steam curled around them as Ilya took Shane right there against the tile wall; the curve of their bodies pressed together like they were designed specifically for each other.

Ilya came deep inside him, lips to Shane's ear as he praised him beautifully, hand pressed to the wall next to Shane's head where his ringed finger was proudly on display.

Shane came with Ilya's name on his lips and their fingers tangled together. When Ilya tried to pull their hands apart, he whined in protest.

Ilya laughed softly. “We need to wash up, *solnyshko*. You will be sad if you do not scrub lake water out of your pretty hair.”

Shane sighed, but loosened his grip and allowed Ilya to busy his hands into his hair, scrubbing gently into his scalp.

They took turns washing each other, hands steady and loving and worshipping in the ways that they only knew for each other. Shane couldn't imagine any other hands on him. He didn't want to imagine any hands other than his own on Ilya. They were for each other, in a cosmic way that he wasn't sure he could ever fully comprehend.

Once they were dried, skin still flushed and warm from the shower, they fell together into bed. Shane tangled their legs together, hands splayed across Ilya's firm chest. The steady beat of Ilya's heart thumped against his palm in a gentle rhythm.

Ilya rested a hand over his. “Sometimes I cannot believe this is all real.”

He could see the emotion working behind those beautiful eyes. He could see a boy who once thought he wasn't allowed to be happy. Who was sometimes afraid that he still wasn't. Shane would do anything and everything to show him he was.

“It's real.” His thumb stroked softly against Ilya's skin.

“What did I do to deserve you?”

Shane squeezed at his chest. “Ilya. You are the most caring person I've ever met. You're so sweet with me that sometimes I don't even know how to deal with it. You always have been.

You're patient and you're kind and you deserve to be loved. I only hope I can give you the amount of love you deserve."

"*Solnyshko*. This-" He tapped where Shane's hand rested over his heart. "It beats for you only. Love you give me is all I want. Is all I need. I think my heart was made for you."

He felt his own heart tumble helplessly, as it so often did at Ilya's words. He felt the metal of the ring on Ilya's finger warm against his own hand. "We were made for each other."

"*Da*. You and me."

Shane knew for certain that their souls loved each other in every lifetime. Every universe. There was no version of Shane and Ilya that did not exist for each other. As best friends. As lovers. As husbands.

They had the type of love that was unabashed. They never cared who saw them sitting too close or whispering in each other's ears or climbing onto each other's backs. They were never afraid to hold each other and expose all the things they were scared to say to anyone else. They never needed to explain it to anyone. Because it was only for them.

Hooking their pinkies together, he let his lips brush Ilya's as he spoke.

"You and me."

Chapter End Notes

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S OVER IM SO EMO 😭✋

to all of you who have come with me in this journey THANK U from the bottom of my heart, all your love has fueled me and this fic and I am forever grateful 💕

and to anyone at all who has taken the time to read this: THANK YOU 💖 getting to write what I want and have people actually enjoy it is such a wonderful thing.

Hollanov 4ever in every universe 💘

LOVE YALL, UUHHHHH 💞

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