

depollute me, pretty baby

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by [writer_in_theory](#)

Summary

It wasn't his first hockey fight, not by far. After decades of playing, it was impossible to avoid the occasional scrum. It just wasn't something that Shane purposefully tried to get involved in. He wasn't like Ilya, he didn't find joy in pushing and prodding at the other team until one of them snapped and threw a punch. When a scrum did break out, he hardly ever joined the fray, preferring instead to focus on managing the refs and trying to get his team out of the fight with as few penalties as possible.

When Shane's fist connected with Comeau's cheekbone, Shane grinned.

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Or, the moment Shane realized he played his last game as a Montreal Metro and has to come to terms with everything that means after. Featuring Shane realizing he's not as okay as he seems, and Ilya trying to figure out how he can help.

Notes

I am so overwhelmed by the kindness you all have shown over this series of oneshots! I am so thankful for each and every one of you, and I hope you know every time I get a notification of a comment I get the biggest grin on my face. Seriously, it makes my day. Clearly, if I'm going through a residency program and still finding time to write all of these lil stories for these guys. Truly, I cannot thank you enough.

Trigger warning for this one that there are a couple of instances of homophobic slurs being used against Shane. Please take care of yourselves and use caution if this is something that would be distressing for you to read.

Chapter 1

“You will never play another game as a Metro again! You’re done, finished!”

The words would sting later.

It would take days, but eventually the weight of the sentence would hit Shane in full force. It would be when he and Ilya escape to the cottage, with promises to visit his parents for dinner later that week. Shane would be lounging on the small dock on the lake, watching his...his *Ilya* swim when suddenly his breath would be knocked from his chest. Tears would build up and fall down his cheeks at the immediate and all-together realization that he would not retire a Metro. His name would never hang in the rafters alongside the banners for the Cups he’d won with them. He would crack and he would crumble, but not until then.

Now, Shane sat completely still in the coach’s office. Theriault didn’t need to say a word to him when he was ejected from the game, simply gave him one look to make it clear that Shane should sit in his office and wait for him. It was the same look he’d given Shane when the captain returned to the first practice after the Boston game he’d abandoned—a righteous anger and complete disdain that chilled Shane down to his core.

He and Theriault were never close. Shane was sure that Theriault wasn’t close with any of the players, to be honest. The coach was no-nonsense—he was a complete dick to them during practice, pushing them well beyond their limits so they would perform just as well during their games. It worked too, clearly if they went to the Cup finals three times in a row and won it all twice. It didn’t make any of them want to invite him to their post-game celebrations, or their hockey watch nights during playoffs they were eliminated from.

Still, after nine seasons on the team and being the captain for five of them, Shane would have thought Theriault would have more respect for him.

There were a lot of things he thought about the team that were wrong, apparently.

“Are you fucking listening, Hollander?”

The slam of Theriault’s hand on the desk knocked Shane from his thoughts. Shane painfully pulled his vision up from the desk to his coach’s face which was now red in rage.

“I’m listening.”

Did his voice always sound so flat? Shane didn’t even remember saying the words, he could only hear them as if someone else had stolen his voice. The words sounded robotic and neutral, as if they weren’t talking about the end of his career in Montreal.

“Well? Maybe then you can explain why you thought it was a good fucking idea to punch your own teammate in the goddamn conference finals!”

Wouldn’t that be too easy, if he had a simple enough explanation?

Hours earlier...

Shane used to be the first player to arrive at the arena before a game. He was the first in the locker room and the last out, trying to play the role of a good captain. Back then, before a rogue hit on the ice revealed his ten-year secret romance, the locker room had been one of the most familiar spaces for Shane. The team was his second family, the guys he could count on to have his back no matter what.

Then the Toronto captain called him a cocksucker as he checked Shane harshly into the boards long after the whistle had been blown, and when Shane pulled himself to his feet he found that none of his teammates had swung a fist in defense of him.

Toronto learned early on in their playoff series that they could do whatever they wanted to. Shane Hollander and the Metros wouldn't retaliate. By the time they eliminated Toronto in Game 5, Shane thought the playoffs would actually kill him. More of his skin was bruised than wasn't, and the left side of his ribs ached in a way that was more than mildly concerning.

Then came the looks in the locker room. The side glances and twisted expressions, like they couldn't believe he'd actually dared to join the rest of the team there. Conversations stopped when he walked into the room, and whispers started the second he left again. Shane was quickly isolated, on the ice and off of it.

Once, and only once, Shane found a note in his cubby calling him a traitor. There was another word on it too, one he'd heard countless times before in his lifetime of playing hockey, but one that felt like a knife to the chest seeing now. He shoved the crumpled piece of paper deep into the bottom of his bag, hoping to erase it from existence completely. He never did speak about that note and the words it bore, simply because he knew telling Ilya or his parents would invite more attention to the issue than he was willing to have.

Quickly, Shane became the first one to leave the locker room, often before having a chance to shower simply because he didn't want to stand in such a vulnerable position with these guys anymore. He hated the way he left the rink still smelling of his hockey gear, but what other choice did he have? Shane also began to show up later too, often dragging himself into the locker room just in time for practice or the game.

For the first time in Shane's life, he dreaded going to the hockey rink.

From the moment he read the first headline about his reaction to Ilya's injury, his heart never stopped fluttering erratically. His breathing always felt like it was one slip away from falling off the deep end into an attack, like one wrong word would send him there. Shane didn't usually eat much anyway, but even his restricted portions began to look like too much as his stomach turned and swirled. All of that, combined with the constant ache from a body who'd been through a dozen beatings repeatedly, and Shane found himself wishing the Metros would lose if only so he didn't have to step out onto the ice anymore.

Ilya knew, even if Shane never told him.

After that first playoff against Toronto, when he'd driven all the way back to Ottawa despite having to be back at the rink for practice the next day, Ilya knew.

No words were needed, as they so rarely were between them. After ten years, it felt like sometimes Ilya knew Shane better than he knew himself.

Ilya slowly stripped Shane of his travel clothes, laid him bare on the sheets, and didn't rest until each and every newly developing bruise was kissed. Every inch of Shane had been cherished that night, treated with so much care that he didn't know what to do with all of it.

"You are *Shane fucking Hollander*," Ilya murmured against his skin, repeating his name like a prayer until even Shane understood the weight of his own name.

It continued like this after every game. Shane would drag himself home and Ilya would attempt to kiss away the brutal treatment he'd suffered.

Still, Shane couldn't quit. He couldn't let them chase him off of the ice, not after all of the blood, sweat, and tears he'd put into getting there in the first place. His parents sacrificed so much for his dreams when he was a kid, how could he walk away from all of it without even trying to fight for it?

So he pulled himself from bed every morning. He pretended like he couldn't see the obvious worry painted on Ilya's face as the other man watched him get ready for practice and for games. When Ilya caught him in the bathroom, clutching the sink countertop and begging his own lungs to *just fucking breathe*, Shane pretended he hadn't noticed the other man was there to see. He told his parents it wasn't as bad as they thought, because he didn't have the heart to crush his mother's love for her favorite team. She'd loved them ever since she'd moved to Canada, how could he rip that away from her?

Shane only had to get through this playoff series. Maybe after the summer break everything would calm down. The team would have time away from him to process the news. They would win the Cup together for the third time in a row, and then they'd all separate for the summer. In the wake of their victory, they would realize what an asset to the team he was, and they would realize that winning Cups was more important than isolating him for loving Ilya Rozanov, and everything could go back to normal.

He just needed to make it through this playoff series.

You are Shane fucking Hollander.

Shane repeated it in his head like a mantra as he strapped on his pads before the game. It was Game 4 against the Admirals, and considering the miserable showing they'd had in the previous three, he had every reason to believe this would be their last game of the season. Going out 0-4 in the conference finals was embarrassing after such a remarkable season, but there was only so much Shane could do when he didn't have a team to protect him when he had the puck.

Shane checked his phone once more, allowing himself to smile as he saw the string of messages he'd received while he'd been warming up on the ice.

Lily: go fuck new york

Lily: ask scott hunter what life was like before hockey was invented

Lily: stay off the boards

Lily: you are Shane fucking Hollander

“Hey.” A bump to his shoulder pulled Shane from his phone. There was Hayden, a tentative smile on his face. “How about dinner at mine after the game? Jackie said she’d make your weird sticks and grass meal.”

Shane rolled his eyes at the unsubtle tease about his diet, unwilling to consider for the moment whether or not Hayden had a point about it. “I can’t, I’m driving back to Ottawa tonight to see my parents and-”

He cut himself off, giving his friend a meaningful look. The name Ilya Rozanov had not been uttered once in their locker room since his injury, and Shane didn’t want to test what would happen if he changed that now.

“How about this weekend?” Shane suggested then. “I can come over Saturday morning, we could take the girls skating?”

Ruby and Jade were beginning to show interest in skating now. Ruby more so than Jade, stating that she’d be a better center someday than even he was now. Jackie, although she’d married a professional hockey player, didn’t enjoy time out on the ice which made it difficult for Hayden to manage multiple kids out there on his own. It became something they did when Shane came over to visit, because it absolutely took two professional hockey players to wrangle the twins.

“Yeah, man, let’s do it,” Hayden said, grinning at the suggestion. “They haven’t stopped talking about the last time you took them out on the ice. Ruby’s obsessed with being like her Uncle Shane, as if her dad’s not also a hockey player.”

Shane laughed hard enough his head tilted back with the effort. “She’s smart, Uncle Shane *is* cooler than her dad,” he teased, laughing harder as Hayden shoved him.

“You should bring him too,” Hayden suggested then, voice dropping lower so none of the other guys in the room would overhear. The rest of them were all busy chattering amongst themselves, the energy in the locker room high as they prepared for the do-or-die game ahead of them. Still, Shane appreciated the care with which Hayden took this situation.

“You want him at your house?”

“Hell no,” Hayden said immediately, face scrunching up at the thought of it. “Ro-*He’s* annoying as fuck, but if he’s important to you we should meet him.”

“You’ve met him before.” There’s normal chirping, and then there’s whatever Hayden and Ilya have between them. Shane wasn’t sure if part of it was the fact that they both knew him,

but regardless there's few games between their teams that don't include some serious chirping and shoving between the two of them.

"You know what I mean," Hayden said, turning back to his cubby to finish getting ready for the game. "But seriously, Hollzy, bring him with you this weekend. Jackie's been asking to meet him."

"Those two'll be dangerous together." Shane can already see it now, the fierce friendship that Jackie Pike and Ilya Rozanov could develop if given the right time.

"God help us both, man," Hayden laughed.

Time moved quickly after that, until all that was left between Shane and the ice was his captain's speech. It had always been one of his least favorite parts of his captaincy. He appreciated being a team leader, keeping an eye on the rookies and inspiring the team after difficult losses. But this, being the rally cry before each and every game? It made his chest tight and uncomfortable each time the entire team turned their eyes to him.

It was even worse now, when the team stopped humoring his carefully chosen and practiced words. The locker room still silenced the same as before, but now they watched him with obvious distrust in their eyes. Even J.J., who Shane had thought of as a friend, had been more distant than before. He was never hateful, had never thrown around the words that some of the others did, but made it known that he felt betrayed by Shane's relationship with Ilya.

Shane was still the captain of this team, though, for at least this game. So he stood up on the bench like he always did and shoved down the swirling nauseating panic at the sight of so much dislike.

"It's not over," Shane called out, thankful that his words were even in tone despite his shallow breathing. "I've heard what they're saying out there. They're counting us out already. They're calling New York the Eastern Conference champs. Well I say let's remind them of who we are. We're the Montreal Metros, back-to-back Cup winners. Don't let them count us out!"

At least they still cheered after the rally speech, the adrenaline of the playoff game winning over the team for the time being. It gave Shane enough time to get to the ice without panicking, giving him the chance to steel his nerves against the brutal hour of ice time that was about to come.

Shane bent down for the first face-off of the game, fighting back a smirk as he saw Scott Hunter just in front of him. *Ask Scott Hunter what life was like before hockey was invented.* He wasn't sure why Ilya had such issues with Hunter, but Shane didn't have it in him to chirp the guy. Neither guy was really known for their chirping skills, nor for fighting on the ice. The one and only time Shane even said anything to Hunter resulted in a full fight after the game had already been finished and a steep fine for Shane to pay for it.

"Good luck, Hollander."

Hunter was a nice enough guy, he was just also the only thing standing between Shane and winning one more Cup as a Metro.

“Don’t need it,” Shane fired back. He took a deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth. His entire world narrowed to that slim patch of ice between their sticks. Nothing else existed—all of the fear, pain, and anxiety of the last several days melted away. Shane’s world now was hockey, simple and clear in his goals.

The ref dropped the puck, and Shane took off down the ice.

The first period wasn’t anything different from how the last few games had gone. Shane controlled the puck well, flying across the ice and making several shots on goal to test the skills of the New York goalie. Still, the timing and trust between him and his wingers were off. They missed passes and dropped the puck back to areas that Shane had already moved past. Shane would pass the puck only to find that his winger on the left side hadn’t made it up that far on the ice yet, sending him scrambling across the ice to recover it before the Admirals could get their sticks on it.

Gillis, a defenseman with a much larger stature than Shane’s already strong frame, slammed into Shane’s side a few seconds after he passed the puck away. Shane’s focus had been on the pass, his body not prepared for the hit and sent sprawling on the ice. Even through his pads he could feel the sharp sting as his already sore ribs smacked against the unforgiving surface. It was a clean hit, not meant in malice judging by the nod Gillis gave him when Shane clambered back up onto his skates.

Still, it left Shane’s ears ringing for the rest of the first period and partway through the intermission.

“What the fuck was that?” Thierault yelled to them in the locker room during the break. The coach always switched to French when he was angry, in the same way that Ilya often returned to his home language when his emotions overtook him. “You’re all playing like fucking pussies out there! 2-0? You let them shut us out! You want to lose to New York? That’s how you want to end this season?”

There were times when Shane was able to step out of his own body. He could unfocus his eyes and it was like the world dimmed, like he left his physical being behind and went somewhere else. Sometimes it was scary, when this feeling came about on its own, but this time Shane relished the feeling if only so he didn’t have to hear the rest of the coach’s rant.

Because he didn’t care.

His team was about to lose their chance at the Cup this year, and Shane didn’t feel the typical devastation and guilt he was used to in these losses. There was sadness, somewhere hidden in his bones, at the thought of not proving something to this team that thought so little of him now. But he would go home tonight and would not be kept awake by any mistakes he made in the day’s game. He would not replay each shift he was on the ice, trying to find where he could have played better.

He would go home, he would hug his parents, then he would curl up in bed with Ilya. Life would go on after this loss.

Hockey used to be Shane's whole world. But this team even took that from him too.

"I want a better fucking second period, boys!" Theriault shouted, the words growing louder as Shane came back to himself.

"Maybe if Hollander spent less time on his knees for Boston co-"

"Fuck off, Comeau!" Hayden yelled, lunging for the other man until J.J. thankfully thought to hold him back.

Shane had asked Hayden to stop fighting his battles for him. He'd tried out on the ice to defend Shane against the players who thought to say similar ideas to him. It only got Hayden hurt in the end. At the end of the day, there was no way the Metros would be keeping Shane after this abysmal end to the season, but Hayden would have to stay. Hayden would have to be trusted by this team, and could not be seen as Shane's best friend.

It still warmed something Shane thought long since iced over and dead in his chest, knowing his friend still chose to stand by his side even when that was the worst place to be.

The second period started out just as frustrating as the first. Shane and his teammates were disconnected, and there was no amount of skill in the world that could overcome that. The game was over before it even started, and the fans in the arena clearly understood that as they began emptying out of the stands after the fourth Admirals goal.

Shane could see it in his teammates too: they'd given up. Their anger and frustration had hit a boiling point, quickly bubbling up and spilling over in the wake of the Admirals' celebration for Hunter's hat trick goal.

Shane skated toward the bench, thankful at least to finish his current shift and have a moment to breathe.

That wouldn't come, however, because soon enough Comeau knocked harshly into his shoulder, sending both of them down the ice from the bench.

"You happy, Hollander?" Comeau hissed, face red beneath his visor. "This is your fucking fault."

"Fuck you, Comeau," Shane hissed, feeling his own outrage building in his chest. It was one thing to confront him in the locker room, but here? On the ice? There were cameras, and surely one of them would be able to pick up what was being said between the two teammates.

The defenseman laughed at that, something harsh and bitter. "Fucking faggot like you would like that, wouldn't you?"

Shane turned, ready to skate away from his teammate before he did something he regretted. There were too many emotions building in his chest, mixing dangerously with the adrenaline

already present from the game. Anger, sadness, grief, fear, frustration, all of it swirling around until he couldn't tell the difference between any of them. They all made his heartbeat stutter quicker, made his fingers shake inside his gloves, made his mind fuzzy beyond the immediate situation in front of him.

“Go ahead, run away! Go home and take it up the ass for your faggot boyfriend Rozanov!”

Shane wished he could say he blacked out. He wished he could argue that it was a moment of righteous fury that made him see red, that he didn't remember turning back around.

The truth was, Shane's mind was painfully clear as he turned. All of those swirling, dangerous emotions dropped into one icy cold blanket over his skin. He was terrifyingly aware as he dropped his gloves and swung a fist at Comeau's face.

It wasn't his first hockey fight, not by far. After decades of playing, it was impossible to avoid the occasional scrum. It just wasn't something that Shane purposefully tried to get involved in. He wasn't like Ilya, he didn't find joy in pushing and prodding at the other team until one of them snapped and threw a punch. When a scrum did break out, he hardly ever joined the fray, preferring instead to focus on managing the refs and trying to get his team out of the fight with as few penalties as possible.

When Shane's fist connected with Comeau's cheekbone, Shane *grinned*.

Pure joy bubbled up and mixed with that same cold fury that lingered as Comeau stumbled back, clearly shocked by the hit. Shane didn't stop there, though. He lunged forward again, grabbing hold of Comeau's jersey with his left fist and swinging again with his right. A strange laugh that sounded foreign on his own lips slipped out as blood spurted out from Comeau's nose.

How dare this man bring Ilya into this. How dare this man bring locker room problems out onto the ice during the fucking conference finals. How dare he ruin Shane's final game as a Metro with his homophobic bullshit.

He is Shane Fucking Hollander.

Comeau shook off his surprise quickly, jumping into his well-known rage as a defenseman. He was someone who readily jumped into any scrum he could, a talented fighter in his own right. Shane dodged the first swing but couldn't avoid the second. Pain burst through Shane's head as the hit landed, sending him reeling to the side. Comeau wasn't done either, quickly grabbing hold of Shane and landing another hit that sent Shane to the ice.

“Stay down, bitch!” Comeau shouted, yanking Shane's body up by his jersey and slamming him back down harshly on the ice. A shockwave was sent through the back of Shane's skull down his spine. Later, it would worry him the way his vision blurred and his ears began to ring again. His fingers were numb, but that didn't stop him from grappling Comeau, from swinging back until he was sitting up again.

Both men climbed back to their feet, ignoring the referee's attempts at separating them. Comeau had blood trailing down his face from his nose, and Shane could feel something wet

on his own face. His left eye felt swollen already, a poor sign for the bruising and swelling that would come later.

“You fucking traitor!” Shane spit, reaching across the space between them again to reignite their fight. “You fucking did this! We’re teammates, you moron!”

Hands reach from behind Shane and grab onto his chest, yanking him back from Comeau. He’s ready to fight them too, the adrenaline from the night pushing him and making his mind struggle to keep up beyond his instincts telling him that everyone there wanted to hurt him, wanted to see him down on the ice like Comeau.

“Hollander, Hollander, stop!” That was Scott Hunter. The voice came from just over his shoulder, the other man close enough to speak lower so the cameras wouldn’t pick it up. “Don’t let him win. He wants to rattle you, don’t let him take this from you.”

Fuck.

All at once the anger poured out of Shane like a deflating balloon. His body sagged with it, shoulders slumping forward as all the fight left his body. Hunter seemed to recognize it, too, because he released his hold on Shane and instead clapped him twice on the shoulder.

“Thanks,” Shane breathed out, his chest heaving as he recovered from the sudden exertion of the fight.

“We’ve gotta stick together,” Hunter said summarily. “Call if you need anything this summer. See you next season.”

Shane nodded, not sure he was able to say anything back. His throat felt tight, closing up around any words he may have been able to come up with. That seemed to be enough, though, because soon enough Hunter was skating back to his own teammates to reign them in.

One of the referees skated over, but Shane simply raised his hand, understanding without them needing to say it. He was done for the night. A fight with an Admiral would have gotten him sent to the penalty box, but dropping gloves against his own teammate? That was grounds for an immediate rejection.

Shane wasn’t even terribly upset about it, thankful to be walking away from such a spectacular loss.

Stepping off the ice, chest heaving, heart racing, blood decorating his face and jersey, Shane ended his career as a Metro.

Ilya was standing just inside the front door when Shane got home. Most of the lights in the house were off or dimmed, signalling that his parents had long since gone to bed. It was late, far too late for Ilya to be awake, but Shane knew he would be there. He always was.

Worry danced in Ilya's eyes as he took Shane's appearance in. He clocked the deep bruising already settling around Shane's left eye, and the bruising that ran under both of his eyes as evidence of his broken nose. His eyes landed on the split in Shane's lower lip, right there in the middle. If he were to look at Shane's hands he would see more bruised and split skin across his knuckles.

"So fucking sexy," Ilya groaned, stepping forward and crowding Shane against the front door.

"I'm a mess," Shane protested. His heart fluttered as Ilya's hand reached out to grab his chin, his thumb and the rest of his fingers holding onto either side of his jaw. He loved the way Ilya handled him, the comfort of being in the other man's strong grip.

"Golden boy Shane Hollander dropped his gloves," Ilya teased, eyes alight with more mischief than worry now. "I must be dreaming."

"Fuck you," Shane returned weakly, hands reaching for their usual hold on Ilya's hips, slipping underneath his t-shirt to feel his warm skin under his palms. "I fight."

"Not like that, you do not," Ilya said. He leaned forward, pressing an insistent kiss to Shane's lips. It burned around the split in his lip but Shane didn't care, leaning further into Ilya and groaning as Ilya slipped his tongue out to run along the cut before slipping in further.

One of Shane's hands trailed up along Ilya's back until he had a firm grip on blond curls at the base of his neck, smiling into the kiss as he heard the resulting moan from Ilya at the hold.

"Bedroom," Shane gasped as they broke off the kiss. This was not their house. He was suddenly and painfully aware of the fact that somewhere deeper in the house, his parents were sleeping. There was no way he could allow them to be caught like this, making out like teenagers in the living room.

Shane was not a small man. He was just as tall as Ilya, and though his build was slightly more slim he still carried plenty of muscle on him after years of intense training. As Ilya grabbed hold of the backs of his thighs and hoisted him up, however, Shane felt weightless. On a normal night he might protest Ilya's attempts at carrying him up the stairs, stating he was fully capable of walking on his own. Tonight, as his body still vibrated from the intensity of the fight, of Theriault telling him how little he meant to the team anymore, Shane would relish in wrapping himself around Ilya's body as he climbed the stairs and brought them to the bedroom.

Ilya deposited him on the bed. He was careful as always, but the way Shane's body bounced as he was set down on the mattress sent another shockwave through his head. Shane winced, eyes blinking shut as he attempted to work through the sudden sharp pain behind them.

"You are hurt." Ilya's accent was thicker, a dead giveaway of his fear.

"I'm fine," Shane said, "I need you. Please, Ilya, I need you to fuck me."

Go ahead, run away! Go home and take it up the ass for your faggot boyfriend Rozanov!

Shane winced again, burrowing his head further against the pillow like that might force the remembered words out of his mind.

“No.” Ilya’s voice was hard, insistence clear with just one word. “You hit head.”

One hand reached out, smoothing over Shane’s hair before landing at the back of his head, pressed between him and the pillow. Warm lips pressed against the deep bruising on the left side of Shane’s face, trailing down over his freckled cheekbones and back over his lower lip.

“Tell me truth. Are you okay?”

Shane had no idea. He didn’t think his body would ever stop buzzing. His fingers were still numb and he didn’t know if it was from the leftover adrenaline still crashing out of him or if it was from hitting his head against the ice. Every word and threat he’d heard throughout the night still bounced in his head.

“I have a headache,” Shane admitted. “Everything’s a little blurry. My ribs, the left side...the trainers said they aren’t broken, but they’re definitely bruised.”

“What about Comeau?”

“What about him?”

“What did he say?”

This is your fucking fault.

Go home, run away!

Stay down, bitch!

“I don’t want to talk about him, not here,” Shane said, finally opening his eyes to see Ilya holding himself up over him. His mother’s cross dangled in the space between their chests, his blonde hair having grown longer in the last several weeks falling down messily in his face. His expression is tight, lips pressed thinly together as he watched Shane, his eyes moving back and forth as if to analyze every small detail of Shane’s expression.

Shane reached up with both hands, resting them on either side of Ilya’s face and pulling with just enough force to bring their lips closer to one another. “I don’t want that fucker here, in our bed. He doesn’t matter, they don’t matter anymore.”

They would still matter. In a week, at the cottage, Shane would mourn the loss of the team he’d given everything to. Tonight, still numb to everything he’d walked away from, all Shane wanted was the feeling of warm safety that came from being surrounded by Ilya.

Their next kiss was less gentle than the first as Shane brought their lips together. It still stung his lip, and Ilya’s nose against his cheek send a dull throbbing underneath the bruised skin there. Shane didn’t care, not when he could feel Ilya’s strong hands on him as he allowed his

body to press against Shane's. He straddled one of Shane's thighs, leaving his knee pressed between Shane's legs.

This was the safest place in the world, laying on a bed feeling nothing but Ilya all around him. Shane's hands tugged at the back of Ilya's shirt, breaking the kiss only so he could pull the fabric off of the man and toss it somewhere across the room. Normally the idea of clothes being dropped haphazardly in the room would make his skin crawl and itch, but all he could think about now was the overwhelming heat and desire building in his gut.

"You are Shane Hollander," Ilya told him, careful with Shane's battered abdomen as he pulled his shirt off of him. He hissed at the sight of the deep discoloration along Shane's side, right hand hovering just over the bruising as if his touch alone could heal the hurt there. "You captained that team for five years."

Ilya brought his lips down to a smaller bruise on Shane's jaw, then down his neck. Shane gasped first at the touch, tilting his head back to expose more of his skin for Ilya to take.

"You won the Cup two years in a row for them."

Lips continued their trail down Shane's chest, focusing in on his left side where his skin had been stained dark purple and blue. Ilya lingered there, his hands digging into Shane's hips as he mouthed at the bruises. Shane's hands found their home in Ilya's curls, feeling his chest swelling with overwhelming emotion at the other man's gentle treatment of him.

This was more than love. This was cherishment, this was worship of his body that had been put through Hell for weeks on end. Shane was sure he'd never been so battered by the end of a season, and laying there underneath Ilya he wondered how he'd made it through to the end at all. It would take weeks for this bone-deep soreness to leave him.

"You are Olympic silver medalist."

Ilya reached for Shane's right hand, pressing those same gentle kisses against each of his bruised and split knuckles.

"You are Shane Hollander. They do not deserve you if they don't see that." Ilya reached up with one hand then, gripping Shane's chin to make sure he was looking right at him. "You are not traitor to that team."

The breath in Shane's lungs was punched right out of him at those words, leaving him gasping around the empty space in his chest. They were so specific, too specific for Ilya to have known that's what he's heard over the last few weeks. How had he-

"I saw note in your bag," Ilya answered, moving himself up so he could face Shane directly. His expression was serious now, all desire left behind in the wake of his simmering anger. He never let go of Shane's chin, never let him look away from those burning hazel eyes. "You are not that. You are best thing to ever happen to that team. They are stupid idiots for letting you go."

Shane let out a sharp laugh, only realizing from the wet sound that he must've been crying. It was Ilya's kindness, his insistent worship of Shane's body, his clear reverence for Shane's career on the ice. It was everything that Shane could ever hope for in a partner, it was everything he never thought he would deserve or get to have.

"I gave them everything," Shane whispered, a quiet admission of everything he'd tried to shove down deep over the last few weeks. If he allowed himself to think about his team's harsh treatment of him, of their quickness to discard him, then he would have never made it through the playoffs. He would have broken there on the ice for the world to see, rather than right here for Ilya alone to help piece him back together.

"I know, *moy lyubimyy*." Ilya brought one hand up, his thumb brushing over Shane's freckles to gather the tears that had fallen there.

"Nine years. I gave them everything. I sacrificed so much, I almost gave *you* up for them, and I-I-" His words stopped coming to mind anymore, that part of his brain shutting down like it was trying to protect him from the rest of that thought. Shane's lips still parted and closed over and over again, as if that could help him search for the rest of the sentence. He clung to Ilya, one hand still wrapped in his curls while the other came up to rest over Ilya's hand on his cheek.

"You do not have to give them any other thing. You are free from them, Shane." A small kiss to his lips, quick enough to shock Shane out of his impending panic. "You will go to Ottawa, and you will be best player on team. You will take them to playoffs, and they will be so happy to have such a slow center they won't even mind your weak backhand."

"Fuck you," Shane laughed, moving his hand from Ilya's to shove weakly at his chest. Ilya laughed and moved off of Shane to lay beside him instead, immediately gathering him up in his arms. Their bodies fit so well together that Shane often wondered if they hadn't been made for each other from the beginning.

"You know Ottawa does pride night?"

"Every team does pride night," Shane supplied then. It was something the league started pushing a couple of years ago. Most teams had a special jersey that many of the players wore during warm-ups, although most of them took it off for the actual game. It wasn't anything special, simply players going through the movements to satisfy the minimum requirements of the league.

"Not like Ottawa does. They wear jersey all game, they even use rainbow tape," Ilya explained, and this sparked Shane's interest. He turned in their embrace so he could face Ilya, their faces so close that their noses almost brushed one another. "Their social media posts all year about it. They do charity events for kids who are gay. They will still protect you on ice, it will be different there."

It will be better there, was left unsaid in the air between them.

It was only this that made something deep and unsettling crawl into his chest. Shane had been so focused on his own hurt that he never even considered that Ilya was also on a team. Ilya

hadn't been back to practice in light of their season being over, but he had to know by now what the team thought of their relationship, right?

"Are you...you know?"

Ilya raised his eyebrows when Shane didn't continue.

"Safe," Shane forced himself to say, feeling his heart begin to pound dangerously against the wall of his chest. What would he do if he wasn't? Ilya's contract wasn't up for another year, would he be forced to be in the same situation that Shane had just escaped? Would Shane be forced to watch game after game, Ilya being battered and destroyed bit-by-bit just as Shane had been?

Shane didn't think he could survive a year of watching that.

"Shane, you are very bad at breathing," Ilya said, hand pressing against the spot where Shane's heart threatened to pound right out of his body. "They don't care, I am safe."

"Really?"

"Yes," Ilya answered. "I think some don't like it, but most said they did not care. They are not as stupid as Montreal, they would not get rid of star player over who I want in my bed."

"Good," Shane breathed, his mind just as exhausted as his body after the wide array of emotions he was forced to contend with tonight. "Good, I don't know what I would've done if they weren't."

"It is just one year, and then I will join you in boring Ottawa. I will show you up with all of my talent, and then we can be boring together."

A life. It sounded remarkably like a life, *together*.

Shane could picture it as easily as if it were there in front of him now. He and Ilya, beside each other on the ice. He would even shift over to the wing if it meant being on the same line as Ilya, a dangerous combination that they'd proved in the latest All-Star Game. Their teammates wouldn't just not mind that they were together, but they'd actively support them. They could go to team celebrations and not worry about anyone seeing them holding hands. They could get a house together, and they would see each other more than just a few times a year.

They would live together.

"You would move to Ottawa for me?"

Ilya hummed as though considering it, as if he hadn't already said as much. "I would move to Ottawa for Yuna and David, but I suppose it is okay if you are there too."

"I hate you," Shane laughed, even as warmth surged through his body at the knowledge that his family had grown so close to Ilya in the last few weeks. Ilya had long ago been well enough to fly back to Boston, but instead he'd chosen to stay here, in his parents' home.

“No, you do not. I am telling Yuna her son is liar.” Ilya grinned, that same mischievous look he got on the ice as he chirped at opposing players. “She will not appreciate your lies. I am her favorite son.”

Shane groaned, rolling his eyes even through his wide smile that stung his split lip. “I should’ve never introduced you two.”

“I am glad you did,” Ilya admitted then, voice softer, more genuine.

Everything would still hurt tomorrow. There was too much grief and hurt to get over in one night. Shane had still not processed all of it, and would not until he spoke to his parents, until he escaped to his and Ilya’s cottage and had nothing to do but think about it.

But for tonight, Shane looked at Ilya and felt nothing but overwhelming love and safety. He felt free, more free than he had in the last few weeks in Montreal.

This wasn’t how he expected this to go. Shane would have never imagined all of their secrets and sneaking around would culminate in one moment on the ice, with him crying out for Ilya as the other man lay lifeless on the ice. He never thought he would lay in his childhood bed, wrapped around the other man without any fear of being caught in the morning.

For tonight, Shane was happy, truly happy in a way that no one could take away.

“I am too,” Shane whispered, knowing in that moment with complete certainty that Ilya would be the great love of his life.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Yes, this was originally a oneshot. But we got 24k in without hearing Ilya's voice, and he demanded to be heard. I'm sorry, and friendly reminder that I am incapable of writing anything without a happy ending. We have the hurt, and I promise there will be comfort.

► Content Warnings

Ilya had not known the full extent of his mother's sadness until the day he found her.

Not to say he hadn't known she was sad. No, it was impossible to ignore the days that her eyes were dimmer than normal, when she smiled at him but the emotion didn't extend any further than her lips. He'd learned as a kid to catalogue his father's every movement because any microscopic change in him was the difference between a regular day and a particularly painful one. It made it impossible not to notice when his Mama changed. The weight on her shoulders got heavier with each passing day. She always took him to the rink to skate—before hockey, when he was simply his Mama's boy skating with her as she showed off the skills she'd never been allowed to pursue—but eventually she spent more time sitting behind the boards cheering him on as he spun and flew across the ice.

Ilya noticed that there were days in which his Mama was more sad than she was before, yes. But Ilya was a kid back then, and he'd trusted her when she told him that she was simply tired, or that yes she was a little sad today but it would be okay tomorrow. He believed it right up until there was no longer the promise of tomorrow, when he'd clutched onto the front of her dress and wailed because he had not done enough to keep her here.

On nights when he was alone and feeling particularly morose, Ilya told himself that if he'd been older he would have known Mama was a good liar. He would have known what to do, he wouldn't have stayed back and watched her deteriorate before his eyes. He told himself that that night before, when she's kissed him goodnight and had tears in her eyes, he would have known she was saying goodbye. He wouldn't have accepted her answer of, *I just love my Ilyusha so much, sometimes I can't help but cry*, and he would've told her to stay. He wouldn't have taken his eyes off of her that night, because he knew now what goodbye looked like.

Which was why the look on Shane's face their first morning at the cottage terrified him.

Shane woke up first. Ilya felt the shift in their bed—because yes, it was *their* bed now—as he'd gotten up, but exhaustion pulled him back until the waves of sleep before he could ask where the other man was going.

For all intents and purposes, Ilya recovered from his head injury. His vision had improved, he no longer felt sharp pain with bright lights or too loud sounds, and he didn't feel like he was moving through the world in slow motion anymore. Even his shoulder had improved, having been able to ditch the sling about a week prior. Still, even weeks later, an unusual level of fatigue crashed into Ilya seemingly without warning. It was like his body was still punishing him for putting him through that injury.

So Ilya slept.

He slept until he could no longer ignore the persistent sunlight shining into his face from the windows that completely enclosed the main bedroom. He slept until he woke up with that particular grogginess that came from sleeping past his typical wakeup time, his limbs heavy and uncoordinated as he climbed out of bed. He pulled on the first pair of sweatpants he could find, and from the snugness in his thighs he'd guess they were Shane's.

Making his way out of the bedroom, knowing that Shane was somewhere else in this cottage, felt entirely too domestic considering where they'd been only a couple of months before. The last time Ilya had felt this warm, comforting domesticity was the day Shane ran out of his house, panicking over the same strong emotions that had brought Ilya peace.

This time, Ilya knew Shane did not run. He was somewhere in the cottage, likely going through his typical morning routine. Shane Hollander was a man of carefully built routines that could not be strayed from, even if he was now in the off-season. That meant Ilya knew that Shane would have already done his morning yoga, showered, and had his one cup of plain black coffee. Judging from the blender that sat on the counter—had Ilya slept through a *blender being run?*—he'd also already had his morning smoothie consisting of vegetables, egg, and whatever the fuck else Shane chose to add to the monstrosity he called breakfast. After breakfast would be a workout, cardio based on it being a Tuesday.

Shane was sitting at the dining table. His finished smoothie cup sat abandoned on the table in front of him. His arms were crossed on the table and he looked-

Shane's eyes were as dull as his Mama's, staring unseeing out the large floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the lake. Any breath left in Ilya's chest escaped in a gasp as he looked back in time, blinking as though that could get the image of his Mama watching without watching as the snow fell out of his head.

"Shane," Ilya said, wincing as his voice betrayed his fear. "*Hollander.*"

Like he was twelve years old all over again, Ilya watched the man in front of him startle at the word and blink several times in succession as if waking up.

"You're awake," Shane said, a soft smile crossing his face that should've been heartstopping if it weren't for the fact that the warmth never made it to his eyes. "I wanted to surprise you with *syrniki*, but I think I need more practice."

Shane's hand waving in the direction of the stove led Ilya to notice the sickly sweet and faintly burning smell of the other man's failed attempt. The image of Shane standing over the stove, hurriedly sorting through recipes online to make a meal Ilya had grown up eating

burned in his chest, warming him up from the inside out. Still, something cold and persistent fought back against it as the lost look in Shane's eyes refused to leave Ilya's mind.

"I show you how to make tomorrow," Ilya promised, pulling one of the chairs around so he could sit next to Shane, facing him directly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Shane said quickly, eyes refocusing on the cup of leftover green smoothie in front of him. "It looks worse than it feels. I'll put some ice on my eye later today to head off some of the swelling but I—"

"I do not care about your face, Hollander," Ilya barked out, feeling his chest constrict tightly around the all-consuming panic he felt at hearing those two words again.

"Wow, thanks for your concern, asshole."

"That is not—the words are not right." Ilya hated English sometimes, if only for the fact that he hadn't started learning it until it became clear he was skilled enough to compete on an international stage. He hated the way the language escaped him when he felt too much, when he couldn't focus on each translation. "I mean *you*," Ilya punctuated the words by gesturing to his own heart, to his own head, "Are *you* okay? You were staring in space."

"I was just thinking," Shane answered, shrugging as if the look before had not devastated Ilya to his core. "You worry too much about me."

I'll never worry enough.

"I cannot help it, *moy lyubimyy*, is my job to worry about you," Ilya said, willing to smooth over his fear with the promise that he would bring it up later. Shane could scare easily if he pushed too much too soon. This moment would not be forgotten—rather, it would linger in Ilya mind for far too long after—but Ilya would wait for a time when Shane was not coiled so tightly, when he could gently bring up the topic and not risk Shane running away again.

So when Shane stands and repositions himself in Ilya's lap, Ilya allows himself to sink into his own desire. He reaches out, finding the places on Shane's hips where his hands fit perfectly.

Shane's hands find their home cradling either side of Ilya's face, the ends of his fingers wrapped in his curls. The mischievous sparkle in his eyes was enough for Ilya to let the moment rest. "We didn't come here for you to worry."

"Why then?" Ilya asked, squeezing at the soft skin around Shane's hips. The other man was muscular after years of playing hockey, but Ilya adored the bit of padding there, perfect holds for his hands when they were together.

"We came here for privacy." Shane leaned forward and pressed their lips together. It was brief, but intoxicating enough that Ilya leaned forward to chase the feeling as Shane broke off the kiss. "For two weeks with no one to interrupt us." Those sinful lips landed in the spot where Ilya's jaw met his neck, latching on as he tipped his head back to give the other man more room.

“Is good plan,” Ilya groaned, knowing with complete certainty that there would be a mark left behind on his neck from Shane’s ministrations. The other man was relentless, moving further down his neck and chest, leaving behind more evidence of their morning together.

Before, neither of them would have dared to do such a thing. Their bodies were too often on display in the locker rooms. Too many questions that neither of them would be able to answer.

Now, though, they had all the time in the world, and Ilya wouldn’t dare waste a second of it.

Waking up wrapped around Shane that afternoon was the best feeling in the world.

The couch was massive but still barely fit both of their frames beside each other. Shane ended up laying half on top of Ilya, head resting on his chest, his soft breaths blowing against Ilya’s bare skin.

It wasn’t the first time Ilya got to witness Shane sleep. During their many years meeting up together, there had been times the other man would drift off to sleep in between them finishing and Ilya getting up to clean them both off. It’s a sight worthy enough to be a painting, the way Shane’s face relaxed as he slept. The other man was often weighed down by a nonstop narrative in his mind, always something to think through or be concerned with. All of that went away as he slept, leaving nothing but long eyelashes that fluttered as he dreamed, perfect freckles across smooth skin, and warm lips slightly open.

Ilya couldn’t help but reach out and touch, letting his finger brush along Shane’s freckles on his exposed cheek. It was enough to rouse the other man, pulling a small noise akin to *an actual fucking whimper* as his eyelids fluttered open and his head tipped up to look at Ilya.

“G’m’ning,” Shane slurred out, voice rough already from the brief nap they’d had.

If this were a hotel room, Shane would’ve already tensed in Ilya’s hold on him, bracing himself to escape from the softness of the moment. This was not that, though, and for the first time Ilya could allow himself to slowly take in the moment without fear of it being lost to him. Shane stayed relaxed, brown eyes still heavy with sleep as his free hand traced patterns across Ilya’s chest that sent shivers across his skin.

“We slept through morning,” Ilya pointed out. Would Shane stay here long enough for him to count each freckle on his cheeks?

“We don’t have anywhere to be.”

The words were simple, nothing more than a fact, but they filled Ilya’s chest with something warm like an ember. There was no practice, no game, no reality that could break up this moment. They could lay there all day if they wanted, though Ilya knew both of them would grow restless before that happened.

It was their choice how they spent the day, and that was that.

“Good,” Ilya said. “I will keep you here all day.”

“You can’t, we have to get up eventually.”

Ilya hummed, tightening his hold on Shane only long enough to pull the other man so he was fully laying on top of him, straddling Ilya’s hips.

“Don’t manhandle me,” Shane huffed, though the pink glow of his cheeks told another story.

“Don’t pretend you do not love when I have my way with you,” Ilya returned, a near-feral grin forming as the blush only darkened. Before he could help himself, Ilya leaned up far enough to press a kiss there if only to feel the burning heat under his lips for himself. “You were just begging me to ravage you an hour ago.”

“I’m not some fucking damsel for you to woo,” Shane protested. The way his pupils widened told a different story.

“No,” Ilya agreed, tilting his head a little as if he were considering the words. “You are strong hockey captain. You are still *mine*.”

Shane groaned at that, leaning forward to bury his face in Ilya’s neck. “You can’t say things like that to me.”

“Why not?”

Ilya smirked at Shane’s non-answer, taking the opportunity to nip at the spot where his neck met his shoulder to pull the most delicious yelp out of the man. It was so easy to get him worked up, Ilya would never ever tire of it.

“Is okay, I know my good boy gets shy.”

Ilya felt more so than heard the catch in Shane’s breath, an obvious sign that he’d accomplished his goal. Still, though, Shane never pulled his face out from Ilya’s neck, even as the blush settled over his neck and top of his chest.

It was too fun to tease his boy. Ilya ran one hand soothingly over Shane’s hair before grabbing a handful in the back, giving it one short tug until Shane moaned into the sensitive skin of Ilya’s neck. His other hand ran along Shane’s chest before circling lightly around one of his nipples. Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane’s shoulder just as he pinched the bud tight, and *oh God*, the noise that Shane let out was pure sin.

“You’re teasing me,” Shane gasped out, shifting his lower body against Ilya’s. He could feel his rapidly hardening length pressed to his abdomen, making his chest feel fuzzy with the knowledge of how easily he could make the man in his grasp come undone.

“How can I not when you make such sweet sounds?” Ilya laughed at the pinch Shane gave his side, his only defense against Ilya’s continued attention on his poor, sensitive nipples.

“Fuck you.” Shane commented on Ilya’s English enough times, but it seemed those were the only words the Canadian knew. “Stop fucking around.”

Ilya grinned, tightening his hold on Shane's hair and tugging back with enough insistence that the man finally pulled away from his neck, sitting up fully.

If Ilya died tomorrow, he thought this would be his Heaven. Shane already looked debauched—eyes half-lidded and swimming with pleasure, skin flushed red, head slightly tipped back to accommodate Ilya's hold on him, cock hard and creating a small wet spot on the front of his sweatpants, lips parted slightly and already wet.

"All this for me, *kotik*?" Before the flash of embarrassment on Shane's face could truly take root, Ilya released his hold on his hair to instead run a thumb over his lower lip. "So pretty like this. Could keep you like this forever, so wet and needy only for me."

"*Please.*"

"What is it?"

"I need you."

And oh, Shane knew the way to Ilya's heart, didn't he? He knew the exact steps, every winding path and trail.

"Oh, sweetheart, you have me," Ilya told him, gathering the other man up in his arms. He forced himself not to run to the bedroom, forced himself not to give into the eagerness that pulled every muscle in his body taut like a bowstring. "I am yours, always."

There were times when they were rough with each other. When Shane was left with bruises on his hips that fit Ilya's fingers perfectly, and when Ilya's back burned with the red scratch marks Shane had dug into him. He loved those times too, when he had a physical reminder of what they meant to each other left behind for the rest of the next day.

Ilya savored times like these too, when he could gently take his Shane apart and piece him back together again. When Shane was so overcome with desire that he whimpered and moaned around even just Ilya's fingers, when he thought the other man might just come from this alone without ever having his dick touched.

The times when Ilya could fill Shane up and stay there, bodies pressed together and lips pressed in a breathless kiss. When he finally began to move and Shane honest to God *cried*, and those tears were the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever seen because they were all for him, proof of the way Shane's body sang for him and him alone.

Ilya was the only one who had ever taken Shane apart like this. He was the only one who got to look upon this shaking, moaning, beautiful version of Shane and know he was the one who got him there. His was the only name Shane's voice cracked around, the only person he pleaded with for more even as Ilya rocked into him relentlessly.

He was the only one who got to hold him after, when both of them were exhausted and worn out to the core but at more peace than either of them had been at for weeks. Ilya had not been able to touch Shane like this since he'd gone down on the ice, and he hadn't realized how

much his body and mind needed it until he had Shane wrapped up in his arms, as Shane thanked him and he laughed because only his sweet Shane would thank him for this.

For a brief moment, Ilya was the happiest man on the Earth and nothing, nothing could ever take that away from him.

Of course, that familiar sadness did not stay away forever.

It happened again when they were lounging in the living room, watching the Admirals take on San Francisco for the Cup. The night had started out great. He and Shane had cooked dinner together after Shane finally gave into Ilya's pleas to make Yuna's chicken parmesan recipe. They'd eaten dinner on the couch and Shane didn't complain once about how unhealthy the meal was.

The other man even humored Ilya's constant jokes about Scott Hunter, shaking his head and smiling in the same way Ilya noticed David would with Yuna.

The change happened slowly, so slowly that Ilya hadn't noticed. He didn't notice when Shane stopped reacting to his jokes, or when his complaints about the announcers quieted down. He only noticed when Shane's hand stopped rubbing circles into his ankle, the hand going boneless as if he'd fallen asleep.

Shane wasn't asleep though. He was staring at the TV, but that same faraway look was in his eyes again. His eyebrows were pressed together in the middle, and Ilya could see a spot of blood peeking out from where Shane chewed on his lip. He was sure that the man wasn't aware that he was even doing it.

"Shane," Ilya tried, leaning forward on the couch to grab hold of him, shaking his shoulder insistently. "Shane, what is wrong?"

"Hm?" The man turned his head toward Ilya, but his eyes were dropped down to focus on his lap where Ilya's legs had been before he'd sat up. His eyes were wide like he was surprised by Ilya's reaction, as if he hadn't noticed that anything had happened at all. "What?"

"What is wrong?" Ilya repeated, feeling his heart sink like a stone in his chest. "You went away."

"I'm right here."

"No, you-" Ilya huffed, waving his hand in the air as he searched for the right word. "You are here, but you are not here. You went somewhere else."

"I'm fine, Ilya," Shane sighed, turning to look back at the game.

Filled to the brim with fear, with desperation, with frustration, Ilya grabbed the TV remote and smashed the power button before dropping the thing on the table.

"What the hell?"

“Talk to me, please.” Ilya did not beg. He did not plead. And yet, he would get on his knees and spend the rest of his life whispering the word over and over again if it meant he would not lose Shane to this. He could not watch him slowly disappear, Ilya simply would not survive it. “Don’t keep it here,” he said, tapping his own temple.

Shane shook his head, busying himself with picking at a loose thread on the blanket thrown loosely over the both of them. “You’re reading too much into it. I’m tired, okay? The playoffs took a lot out of me. I’m just tired.”

“You are not the first to tell me this.”

“What does that mean?”

Ilya knew it would kill him to say it aloud.

It would kill him to not say it, if something happened that he could not fix.

“My mother. She said it before she died. She said it all the time.”

Shane looked at him then, brown eyes open wide and lips parted, as though he already knew the answer to his next question. “What happened?”

It was Ilya’s turn to look away, staring at a spot just over Shane’s shoulder. He tried not to think about what happened. When he did, it was like it happened all over again in real-time, each moment burned into his memory for all-time.

Like suddenly, he was twelve years old again and he was waking up on a Tuesday morning. He missed school for being sick, he’d come down with something like the flu the day before. His father was already at work and Alexei at school. Normally when he was sick, his mother would make him soup in the morning. The smell would seep through the whole house and warm him up before he even had a bowl. That morning, Ilya woke and immediately felt barren cold, like his body knew what he had lost before ever seeing the proof of it.

His Mama never slept in. She was always so tired but she was always the first one awake, constantly moving about the house and making it spotless for her husband and children. Ilya knew he got his restlessness from her, that ache in his bones when he sat idle for too long was passed down like an heirloom.

The house was quiet that morning. It was perfectly, unnaturally still.

Ilya had crept through the house, as though breaking that silence would break some unspoken rule.

When he opened the bedroom door, Ilya thought she was sleeping. His first thought was relief, because his Mama always said she was so tired, and she deserved to have a day of rest. But then he’d noticed the unnatural way her arm hung off the bed, and there on the wooden floor just out of reach of her outstretched fingers was-

“It was an accident. She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills.”

“Ilya.” Shane reached for his hand, and though Ilya could see it he could not feel the touch on his own skin.

He could feel the rough fabric of his Mama’s dress as he clung to it. He could feel her chilled skin against his cheek, he could feel the painful scratches in his throat as he wailed and wailed for hours, begging the God only his Mama believed in to bring her back. He could feel the rough callouses of his father’s hands as he pulled him away from his Mama, as he shook Ilya’s shoulders and yelled until Ilya could repeat the story back to him. *It was an accident. She didn’t mean to do it. She was a silly woman who accidentally took too many pain pills and went away forever.*

Shane was giving him that look, that same one that his teachers gave him when he finally returned back to school. He’d stayed home for the flu and came back motherless, and though they’d all stuck to the story, that look told him that they all knew what happened anyway.

“I don’t want you to think she was weak.”

“I don’t.” It looked like Shane had more to say, but Ilya couldn’t let it rest, not yet. Not when this was the first he’d spoken of his Mama honestly since he was twelve years old and screaming at the medics that came to his house, begging them to tell him why she *chose* to leave him.

It had taken years for him to understand. It didn’t make the crushing agony in his chest go away, but he understood his Mama. He could not fault her for being tired, for being sad. He could fault his father for being cruel, he could fault Alexei for growing up in their father’s image, and he could fault himself for seeing his Mama start to wither but never saying a word about it until it was too late. But he could never fault her.

“She wasn’t. She was so funny, and so beautiful.” When Ilya pictured his Mama, it was not the cold and stiff body he remembered. It was her with worn, frayed skates on her feet, twirling across the ice with a smile so bright it reached her eyes. He only ever saw that smile on the ice, there at the end. “She was so sad. My dad was so hard on her, and...”

And when I look at your eyes now I see hers, and I cannot fail you like I failed her.

“Don’t-”

Don’t what? Don’t say he’s tired, don’t hide away the hurt? Don’t have an accident like his Mama did?

“I won’t,” Shane said firmly, his eyes glassy with tears. “I don’t feel *that*, I promise.”

“You would tell me, if you did.”

It wasn’t a question, but Shane nodded anyway. He moved, climbing onto Ilya’s lap so he could wrap him up in a tight hug. It reminded Ilya of a hotel room in Florida, when he’d cried and Shane had held him through it. He held onto Shane tight enough he was sure it might’ve hurt, but all Shane did was squeeze even tighter.

“Do not go where I can’t follow, *lyubimyy*.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m right here, I’m right here.”

They don’t talk about it again that night, but any time Shane catches that look in his eyes again he says it.

I’m right here.

I’m right here.

“I cannot believe they allow dinosaurs to win Cup!” Ilya groaned as the final buzzer sounded, flopping back against the couch.

“What do you have against Hunter? He’s a nice guy,” Shane laughed, tossing one of his obscene amounts of throw pillows at Ilya.

“Nice. Who cares about nice? He is older than New York!”

“You know, my Mom called it. She said weeks ago that the Admirals were gonna win.”

“That is because Yuna Hollander is genius, not because of Scott Hunter,” Ilya protested, scowling as the man in question lifted up the Cup.

It shouldn’t bother him as badly as it did. He’d known what it was like to hold the Cup years before Hunter ever did, even though he’d been playing in the MLH for less time. If it were a competition then Ilya won far before now, but that didn’t stop the burning jealousy from spreading through him.

Maybe it was because of the still-healing bruises on Shane’s face and chest. The swelling around his left eye had largely gone down, but his skin was still mottled with bruises in varying shades of healing. If his team wasn’t filled with a bunch of assholes, Ilya knew for certain that it would be his boyfriend on the TV screen right now.

But they were, and so he wasn’t.

Ilya shouldn’t be upset that he gets to have Shane all to himself. But he is, he’s furious about it because Shane was the best hockey player he’d ever played against. Shane Hollander deserved to be written in the history books as the first captain to three-peat, and yet, all he got was the opportunity to sit on the couch with the captain of a team who hadn’t even made the playoffs at all. This was Shane’s Cup to win, and his fuckass teammates had ruined it all for him.

So yes, in that moment he *did* hate Scott Hunter’s old face for winning the Cup, no matter how nice he was.

“He called me when you got hurt,” Shane said, simply as if that weren’t the strangest thing Ilya had ever heard.

“Mmh? For what reason was Scott Hunter calling you?”

Shane shrugged. “He said we weren’t alone. That if we ever needed anything he would be there.”

“Oh yes, I would prefer Scott Hunter to nurse me back to health instead of my hot boyfriend.”

“*Your hot boyfriend* didn’t nurse you back to health either,” Shane said back, rolling his eyes though he smiled through it anyway.

“You did in my dreams.” Ilya wagged his eyebrows obnoxiously as he said it, laughing as Shane smacked him with the throw pillow again. “Careful! You do not have enough of these pillows, we must spare them!”

“I hate you.”

“This is not what you said this morning while you rode my c-”

“*Ilya.*” Did Shane know what that blush did to him?

“Is nice he called, I guess,” Ilya relented, crossing his arms and turning his head back to the screen where Scott Hunter was starting to skate away from his teammates over to the crowd of his adoring fans.

“It was Hunter that broke up my fight with Comeau too, in case you forgot,” Shane pointed out, still watching the side of Ilya’s face instead of the screen. It was how he missed the moment a man in the crowd climbed down the stands toward Hunter.

“Shane.”

“I know, I know, I get it. He’s a dinosaur. But he still-”

“*Hollander.*”

Because Hunter was holding that fan’s hand as the other man climbed the boards. And Ilya was starting to think that this wasn’t just a fan, based on the way Hunter pulled him across the ice, never taking his eyes off of him. It was the same way Ilya looked at Shane, like if he looked away his own heart might forget how to beat again.

“What? So he’s-Oh, holy shit,” Shane breathed, leaning forward like he might be able to crawl into the TV himself.

Ilya could not move. He could not speak. He was not convinced he could even breathe.

Because there, right there for the entire fucking world to see, Scott Hunter was kissing a man.

The world already knew about Ilya. They had already seen Shane break down over Ilya’s unconscious body on the ice. They had seen their kind of love poured out over deep distress,

in the wake of a terrifyingly dangerous injury that should have been a lot worse than it had been. This was not that. This moment, this kiss, was not born from the fear of loss, but pure, instinctive *joy*.

The arena was not left speechless in the wake of pained cries, of a swarm of medics, of a body that had not moved until after he'd already been loaded into an ambulance and whisked away from the crowd. No, this crowd was allowed to cheer. They were able to celebrate with Scott Hunter and this man from the crowd.

And they did. They cheered, as loud as they had when Hunter hoisted up the Cup. The crowd cheered like this was their victory, and Hunter ignored them all. He only looked at this man, this ordinary man who wore sneakers on the ice and who didn't dress in either teams' colors to the fucking Cup Finals.

It was a perfect moment, and Ilya's chest ached.

Shane did not eat breakfast or lunch on Thursday.

The fact burned in Ilya's chest, but the sharp look and even sharper words when he brought it up made him drop the subject. Food was always a difficult subject for the other man, one that he quickly became defensive about. It was something Ilya quickly learned not to talk too seriously about, not unless he was trying to start a fight.

He was truly going to leave it be, too.

Except.

Except then Shane stopped sleeping. He tried to hide it, but Ilya woke each time the other man slipped out of bed in the middle of the night, not returning until the sun began to peek up over the horizon. Shane refused to play video games with him, and refused to swim in the lake, and refused to do much else other than skate.

Because of course Shane Hollander had an entire hockey rink built beside his summer cottage. Ilya wouldn't have known the shed tucked amongst the trees would have held an entire rink, except for the quick comment from Shane that morning that he was going to go practice.

That had been six hours ago.

Every hour Ilya checked on him. He tried to give Shane space, truly, but after the sixth time he stepped into the shed and still saw Shane skating, his body buzzed with a terrible, awful energy that scared him to death. The other man was red in the face, his chest heaving as he continued to push himself across the ice. Ilya knew the ice must have been smoothed over at least once before after such a long time being used, but even still it was carved up almost beyond what was still safe to use.

That didn't bother Shane. Ilya didn't think anything would bother Shane at this point, as lost in his head as the man was.

“Shane, stop!” Ilya called out then, sure the man would skate himself to death before he called it quits.

When Shane simply continued to fly about the ice, Ilya cursed and stepped onto the ice. He could skate with his eyes closed, but his movements were wobbly as he made his way across the ice on his sneakers. His only saving grace was that the ice was as destroyed as it was after hours of being carved up by Shane’s blades.

“Is time to stop,” Ilya told Shane once he got to him, managing to snag his upper arm in his grip. Shane was strong enough to pull himself out of Ilya’s grip, but he didn’t. He simply looked down at where their bodies were connected as if it offended him, a deep scowl across his exhausted face. “Come back inside. Rest, *lyubimyy*.”

“I don’t need to rest, I’m fine,” Shane huffed, still panting from his overexertion.

“You are not fine.”

“Oh, so you know how I feel better than I do?”

“You know that is not what I’m saying,” Ilya snapped. Fear and anger sat too closely together, twisting and morphing until it was one indistinguishable thing. “You are punishing yourself.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. You are pushing yourself too far.”

“I know how far I can push,” Shane protested. “Let it go.”

“No. I have let it go all week. You are not okay, you are hurting and instead of talking to me about it you hurt yourself more.”

Shane laughed then, a breathy, awful thing that unsettled Ilya to his core. “You think I’m purposefully hurting myself?”

“Not think. I know.”

“Fuck you!”

Ilya was right, and Shane knew it too. He always resorted to those same words when he had nothing left.

“You promised to talk to me. So talk to me, Shane. You are-you scare me. Right now, you are scaring me.”

“You don’t have to stay!”

It was said in panic, like a cat lashing out with its claws when it was cornered. That didn’t stop the words from crashing painfully into him.

“I will not let you keep hurting yourself and ignoring it.”

“What the fuck do you want me to say, Rozanov? That I’m angry they all turned on me? That it fucking sucks that I put ten years into that team, and the second I’m not good enough to win them a Cup they ship me off to the worst fucking team in the league? You want me to tell you I’m happy that I’m going to Ottawa? As if I don’t know that’s the end of the career I’ve sacrificed everything for? Because I’m not! I’m not happy about it! I’m angry! But that doesn’t mean I’m fucking hurting myself over it! I’m mad about it, but I’m fine, *I’ll be fine*, why won’t you just trust me on that?”

“Because you don’t eat. You don’t sleep.” Ilya hated that his vision blurred as he spoke. He hated everything about this moment. It was too heavy, too much. It felt like he was reliving the worst fucking day of his life and he couldn’t do anything about it. He felt like he hadn’t learned a goddamned thing, like he’d spent the last week making the same mistakes over and over again. “You go away in your head. Your eyes do not smile anymore. Now you push and you keep pushing. You will run your body into the ground and even then I think you will still push.”

“You’re wrong. I’m fine.” Shane’s head is tipped down to face the ground, his entire body coiled tight.

Ilya felt miles away. It felt like it was snowing.

“I am watching you slowly kill yourself, piece by piece.”

“No, you’re not! I’m not your mom, Ilya!”

Something cracked. Ilya could hear it as if it really had, ringing over and over again in his ears. Shane’s head snapped up as soon as he said it, expression full of the same horror that Ilya should feel.

He didn’t feel anything beyond the ringing. The cracking. The snow.

“Ilya, I-”

Ilya dropped Shane’s arm like it burned his palm. He couldn’t look at anything but the ice beneath his sneakers. Why was he wearing sneakers on the ice? Did he not bring his skates to the rink?

Shane reached for him.

Ilya’s bruised heart did the only thing he could think of: he ran.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Did the word count of this fic almost double upon adding this chapter? Yes. Did we add another chapter to the final total? Also yes. Look, this all started because I wanted to see Shane finally fight back against the dickhead Metros, and somewhere along the way it became a study in this boys' terrible ability to communicate their emotions and their mental health. But also we're fixing that because I said so. I'm also going to warn you that I didn't deep edit this chapter. I've been super busy with my residency, and applying for other interviews across the country (yes I've been to 7 states in 5 days. Yep.) but I wanted to get this chapter out sooner rather than later after everything we put the boys through last time.

I know realistically Shane's practice rink would not be real ice. In the name of hurt/comfort, though, let me have this one :)

► Content Warnings

EDIT 2/27: Hey y'all. Sorry for the delay in the next chapter. I've had to delete a lot of extremely hateful comments over the last couple of weeks on this fic and it's really made it difficult for me to finish up the last chapter of this. I also wanted to say that the depiction of disassociation here is entirely based off of my real-life experiences and may not be how everyone experiences it. I've stayed faithful to a representation of it as I know it, but understand that it can look very different for each person. That's all.

BREAKING: HOLLANDER ERA IS SO OVER IN MONTREAL

The word 'dynasty' is not spoken lightly, especially not in a hockey city like Montreal. When it came to the Hollander era of Montreal hockey, however, it was easy to understand why fans believed they were watching a new dynasty develop right before their eyes.

Two Cups in back-to-back years and a legendary season that should've predicted a strong chance to win a third in as many years was only further proof of this. What turned around the Metros' luck?

Two words: Shane Hollander.

Hollander was drafted as the second pick overall in 2009, behind only his arch-rival Ilya Rozanov of the Boston Raiders. Since then the once-mediocre Metros skyrocketed to a powerhouse of the MLH in no-small-part due to their newest star captain. Since being drafted, Hollander was named the Rookie of the Year, is a 3-time winner of the Rocket

Richard trophy, 1-time Art Ross winner, 1-time Lady Byng awardee, and most recently was awarded the Conn Smythe last year after the Metros' second Cup win.

At the start of the 2016-2017 season, it was impossible to think of a scenario in which Montreal willingly gives up Hollander after a historic run by who many consider a generational talent. What we saw this year was the one-in-a-million scenario, starting first with the unfortunate accident on the ice in the last matchup between rival teams in Montreal and Boston. No one can forget the scene when Ilya Rozanov was checked from behind and was left unconscious on the ice. What was already a tense situation became even more tragic when Hollander, supposed rival and enemy of Rozanov, dropped to the ice too and revealed they were secretly seeing each other romantically.

Hollander and Rozanov became the first active MLH players to come out as gay. Though neither player has released a formal statement discussing the nature of their relationship, both did confirm that they were gay and bisexual, respectively. This marks a historic shift in a league which has previously been criticized for its poor inclusivity. The true impact of their coming out is only just now beginning to be seen as players, staff, and fans alike sort through what it means to have one of the most sensational rivalries in recent times end in a declaration of love (without saying the word specifically) on the ice. Some argue that these issues are best left off of the ice, while some have already shown the pair strong support and urge the league to protect Hollander and Rozanov from retaliation.

It was clear that tension remained high in the locker room since that game. Hollander's media presence was limited since then to only a few appearances. His teammate, Patrice Drapeau, hinted in a media interview after the next game that he suspected Hollander had been throwing games against the Raiders for years, launching a full-scale investigation by the MLH. Though the committee determined there was no proof of Drapeau's claims, it still called Hollander's ability to successfully lead the Metros into question.

The bomb truly dropped during the playoffs. The Metros, despite initially leading the Atlantic Division in points going into the playoffs, struggled against the wildcard Toronto team. Many blamed Hollander for their poor series in the first round of the playoffs despite him leading the playoffs in total goals scored. It wasn't until Montreal had to face the New York Admirals that this suspicion truly gained weight.

Fights are an inevitability in the MLH, especially during high-stakes playoff games. What's not common is a fight between teammates, which is what happened during Game 4 of a truly poor series for Montreal in the Eastern Conference Finals. Gilbert Comeau, a veteran defenseman for the Metros, and Hollander exchanged words before breaking out into a truly violent fight that left both players requiring to be seen by their medical team in the second intermission. Hollander chose not to comment on the incident, while Comeau stated in a post-game interview that stress from the game led to a fight between him and the captain.

We were ready to chalk this up to a strange circumstance, until Head Coach Theriault released a statement this Thursday morning that they were not going to be engaging in talks to re-sign Hollander at the conclusion of his contract this summer. He noted changes in team dynamics and a need to "head in a different direction" for the reason to leave behind their captain. This brusque admission has raised more questions than it did answer them. What

could have happened to make the team willingly not resign a player who arguably developed their current dynasty? Was there some truth in Drapeau's claims that Hollander was letting Rozanov's team win enough to stay in playoff contention? Was there something else going on in the locker room that made Hollander an undesirable player option?

And, the question on everyone's minds: where will Hollander go next, if his time as a Montreal Metro is truly and officially over?

Shane couldn't feel his body.

He knew from his view of the ice that at some point he'd sat down, or maybe fallen and simply was unable to get up. His back was against the boards of his practice rink. Though he didn't know how long he was sitting on the ice, he knew that if he could feel any of himself that his workout pants were not enough to shield his lower half from the stinging chill of the ice. The skin of his fingers had turned bright red, easing toward the bluish tint that should have signalled to him that it was time to get up.

He would, if only he felt his body. But even that was not his own anymore, left abandoned where his mind could no longer control it. He simply watched the clock on the opposite wall of the rink tick on and on, reminding him of every minute he let Ilya sit in the hurt that Shane had given him.

God, how could he have been so cruel?

I'm not your mom, Ilya.

After Ilya had finally, *finally*, opened up to him about the clear scars that his family had given him, what had Shane done? He'd immediately thrown it back in his face, and for what? For *caring* about him?

It would be a fucking miracle if Ilya wanted to stick around after this. Shane could see it now, as clear as he could see the blue line his legs laid splayed limply across. Ilya was probably inside packing now. He hadn't brought much—only what he'd brought with him to that game all those weeks ago and whatever clothes Shane's mom had bought him when it became clear he needed more for his extended stay. The packing would be quick, maybe it was already done, and then...

And then Ilya would leave the cottage. He'd go back to Boston and would probably ignore any calls Shane made to him after. He'd delete 'Jane' from his phone entirely, and Shane couldn't even blame him because Ilya deserved so much more than to be yelled at for trying to take care of someone he cared about.

Every excuse felt withering on Shane's lips. It suddenly didn't matter that every cell of his body felt like it was going to crawl right off of him, like his lungs were filled with enough electricity to power the entire cottage. It didn't matter that skating seemed to be the only way to quiet his mind after reading that damned article that he knew he shouldn't have read. That he wasn't intentionally trying to starve himself his stomach was just always full, always swirling with nausea that threatened to kick back if he tried to eat anyway.

It didn't matter that he didn't feel the same way as Ilya's mom had, that he didn't want to *die* he just...needed to not exist in anyone else's mind for a while. Temporarily. He needed to spend a few months where the public didn't know who he was, where he didn't have to read his parents' concerned texts, or not read the missing texts from his teammates who didn't fucking care about him being kicked from the team. He didn't want to see that ever-present worry in Ilya's eyes during this week that was meant to be for them. Because each time Ilya stopped initiating sex in favor of trying to ask about Shane, and how he was feeling, and if he needed anything else as if Ilya hadn't already given him *everything*—

Shane had tried to throw himself into this week whole-heartedly. It had been fun at first—life-changing, even, to be graced with Ilya's presence all day and all night, without any worry for either of them being caught. He could lay in Ilya's arms as long as he wanted, he could fall to his knees for Ilya, he could lay back and let Ilya take him apart as many times as they wanted. It was supposed to be their week.

And then that deep urge for non-existence kept poking at him, insistent until it could worm its way through his entire being. It *wasn't* like Ilya's mom, it *wasn't*, but suddenly soft moments like laying on the couch watching TV together turned to long stretches where Shane was trapped within his own mind, his body floating far away from him until Ilya inevitably noticed and shook him back to himself.

It was supposed to go away.

This wasn't the first time he'd felt like this, though it was certainly the worst of them. There were times when his body slipped away from him, when his mind seemed to move in slow motion compared to the world around them. It happened when Shane was stressed or hurt. He remembered a particularly bad day after his first International Prospects Cup, after that devastating loss on home turf to the Russians. But it had been a day, and then Shane was able to move on and shake it off like nothing bad had ever happened. There had been after that day at Ilya's house, too, when Shane left with shaking hands and the taste of Ilya still on his lips. He'd hardly gotten through that game at all, his mind working on auto-pilot and his body working on its own volition.

It always went away. So why didn't it this week?

And now, Shane had run from it for so long that he ruined the one good fucking thing that he had.

Another ten minutes around the clock.

Would Ilya have called for a car to the airport by now? If Shane somehow managed to get himself off of this ice, would he be returning to an empty cottage as cold as this rink? *Was there even a point in trying to move from here?*

Shane groaned, smacking his head back against the boards with enough force to grimace.

Just get up. Come on, Hollander, one foot after the other.

His skates didn't even twitch, completely unresponsive to his mind.

If Ilya left like he was in full rights to do, who would find him here? Would it be his parents? Would Ilya tell them how Shane had hurt him? They loved Ilya now. Both of them had said as much in Shane's brief visits back to Ottawa between playoff games, and he saw it for himself in the comfortable way that Ilya moved throughout that house that Shane was raised in.

He saw it in the casual way Ilya walked around the house with Shane's favorite childhood blanket draped over his shoulders, the thing so small and childish it looked silly around him. It was obvious in the way Ilya moved to help Shane's mom with dinner each night, wordlessly grabbing dishes and ingredients to have chopped and prepared for her before she ever asked for them. He saw in the moment after dinner, when his dad grabbed two glasses of the expensive vodka he never let Shane touch (*because he didn't appreciate it, he always said*) and walked out to the patio. Dad and Ilya spent almost forty minutes out there, sitting on the soft patio chairs *talking* and when Shane had given his mom an incredulous look about it she'd only smiled and said that was their nightly routine now.

God, they would be so disappointed in him if they knew how badly he hurt his, their, Ilya. Would they go to Boston, too, to comfort the man? Would his mom scowl at him with that look she'd taken to giving the TV screen whenever Coach Theriault was on it? Would they shut him out until he figured out how to fix that?

Oh God, how could he fix this?

Shane didn't know how to do this without Ilya. There was so much already going wrong. It was too hard, too much. He was moving to Ottawa, he was playing for the worst fucking team in the league, the entire world knew he was gay and none of it was his choice. And now, the one person he wanted to walk side-by-side with in all of this was probably halfway to the airport. He didn't even deserve to be upset about it either because *he and his stupid fucking mouth had done this*.

"Shane, Shane, do not do this, Shane."

"Come back to me, *lyubimyy*, where did you go?"

"You are so cold, *solnyshko*, is time to get up. Let's get up, yes?"

"You will freeze pretty ass off like this, Hollander. I will be very angry if you ruin such perfect part of you."

"Hollander, I will never forgive you if you do not come back."

"David? Fuck, thank you for answer. Shane is, he is not...*stupid fucking English words*, he is staring at nothing. He is not talking, not moving. I don't know what to do. What do I do?"

"Please, Shane, do not do this. Don't go."

"Please, Shane. One thing. All I need is one word. Please."

When Shane's mind came back to his body, the first thing he noticed was that he was warm.

The warmth surrounded him, wrapping completely around each of his limbs and up his chest. He was laying against something warm, too, his face tucked in against the warmth, feeling the soft beating of-

A heart.

Oh, and there were arms around him, too, keeping him propped up against the warm body he lay against. He knew those arms anywhere, knew that soft spot on the man's neck where he could feel the rapid, nervous thrum of a heartbeat against his nose. Shane moved his head out of habit, pressing his lips to the pulsepoint. *Safe. Warm. Ilya.*

Ilya.

Ilya was there. Ilya was not at the airport, he was there, wrapped around Shane like-like Shane was still something to be loved.

Shane jerked alive then, sitting up quickly and twisting his body so he could look at the man. The splashing noises alerted him to the fact that they were laying in the large bathtub in the cottage, the warmth around him being near-steaming water filled to the brim in the tub. Normally, Shane would hiss and curse at the water that tipped over the edge and spilled out on the floor, but now he couldn't find it in himself to care. Not when, no, not when Ilya looked so *broken* and Shane knew deep in his chest that this was his fault.

Ilya's eyes were red-rimmed and heavy with the kind of weariness that only came from a deep, brutal cry. There were still tear tracks on his face, dried and tacky on his skin like Ilya hadn't bothered to wipe them away in his care for Shane. Those beautiful lips were turned down in a deep frown, like he might never smile again.

"You didn't leave," Shane breathed, reaching out for Ilya like he was his only lifeline keeping Shane tied down to the Earth. One hand came to his also-bare chest, the other cradling the side of his face with the kind of sweetness that Shane wasn't sure he was still entitled to giving. "I'm so sorry. Ilya, I-"

What kind of explanation was there? There was nothing that could make those particular words hurt any less.

"I don't know why I said that. I was so mean to you, and I didn't mean to be, I was just, I was-" Shane's breath stuttered as one of Ilya's hands reached up out of the water to rest over Shane's own on the side of his face, curling his fingers between Shane's.

"It is okay."

"It's not," Shane pressed, feeling that familiar panic build up in his chest again. "It's really not okay. You were trying to help me, and I lashed out. That's not okay."

"Okay," Ilya practically whispered, the word soft on his tongue. "Then I forgive you, *lyubimyy.*"

“You shouldn’t forgive me that easy.”

“I push before you were ready to talk. You say things you do not mean. We are even,” Ilya said then, hazel eyes bright with worry and maybe even more unshed tears. Shane could count on one hand the amount of times he’d ever seen Ilya crack deep enough to cry. His own chest might break open at the sight of more tears in the man’s eyes, all because of Shane.

“You scared me so much, Shane.”

“I know, and I’ll work on it. I’ll try to eat more, I won’t skate for that long, I w-”

“Shane, do you know how long you sit there, not talking, not moving, only staring?”

He could remember twenty minutes in total passing by on the clock in the barn. Somehow, based on the way Ilya’s face crumpled when he said as much, he figured that wasn’t the right answer.

“I took two hours alone to...think, process. When I come back you were like that. Gone. You were gone, Shane.”

Two hours.

“I don’t remember two hours going by,” Shane whispered, something heavy sinking in his gut. He vaguely remembered Ilya talking to him, getting progressively more fearful. Had he even said Shane’s dad’s name? “I’m sorry.”

Ilya shook his head, moving their interlocked hands to Shane’s own chest, as if he needed the proof that his heart still beat within it. “Is not your fault. I am...so glad you came back to me, *lyubimyy*. Where do you go, when that happens?”

“I don’t know,” Shane answered truthfully. “It’s never happened that long before. Usually it’s only a few minutes at a time, and then I-”

“This happened before?” Shane shrank under the steeled gaze of the other man as Ilya’s concern quickly morphed into something darker. “You tell anyone about this?”

Shane shook his head a fraction, enough for Ilya to close his eyes and breath for a moment before returning to the conversation.

“It was only once or twice. It’s like, my mind moves so quick sometimes that I get lost in it. I can still see, I know I’m there but I can’t move. I don’t mean to do it, it just happens. This was...a bad one, I guess.”

“You were so cold,” Ilya said then, moving his hands to wrap around Shane’s middle to pull him forward. Shane stayed on his knees, resting back on his feet, but allowed his front to be moved against Ilya’s, his hands grabbing onto the other man in any way he could. “I thought you would never warm up.”

“Hence the bath.”

“Yes, the bath to de-ice you.”

“I’m going to be so pruny.”

“Hollander, I do not care about your precious wrinkly skin,” Ilya admonished, though Shane smiled softly at the first hint of laughter in the other man’s voice since Shane woke up again. Then, with more care than he’d ever felt from any other person, Ilya pressed a kiss to the side of Shane’s head, the one hand he had tangled up in his hair squeezing him closer to Ilya for a moment. “Thank you for coming back to me.”

“I’m right here,” Shane promised, “I won’t go anywhere again.”

“Can we talk about it now?”

Ilya did not let go of Shane for the rest of the day. He’d carefully pulled them both from the tub when the water cooled down to room temperature. He’d toweled them both dry despite Shane’s initial protests that he could do it himself. That one look, so serious, still so fearful, made Shane sit back and allow Ilya to do this. This was not about him so much as it was about Ilya. Ilya *needed* this, and so for once Shane let him care for him.

They ended up back in bed, wrapped up in so many blankets that Shane started to sweat a little, though he would never undo the loving work that Ilya had put into their bundle of blankets they laid within. They didn’t always speak, sometimes laid there in silence with one another as they both recovered from earlier in the day. Every once in awhile, Ilya would squeeze him a little tighter, and Shane would kiss any inch of skin that he could reach and whisper those words again, a promise, a vow.

I’m right here. I’m right here, Ilya.

That didn’t stop Shane from tensing when Ilya finally asked the question he knew was coming. Already his heart began to race again, a fact he was sure Ilya could feel against the arm wrapped over Shane’s chest. He felt the familiar numbness in his fingers, the jittery energy in his feet that told him to *run, run, run and don’t look back*.

“I can’t,” Shane gasped out instinctively, wincing at the harshness and finality of the words. “Not right now.”

“Why not?” Ilya pulled Shane up a little, enough that they were laying side-by-side instead of over each other. When Shane’s eyes drifted to the side, a gentle hand grabbed at his chin to keep him focused on Ilya’s face. “Talk to me, Shane. Let me in.”

How could he explain it without sounding silly? Shane’s cheeks burned red with the effort. There weren’t any words to explain why these episodes happened or how he felt when it did, only that so many times he woke from it feeling *scared*. *This was the first time he hadn’t. He felt safe, with Ilya*. He’d never talked about these episodes before. His parents knew about his panic, those moments when his breathing escaped him suddenly, but they didn’t know about the times when his body left him completely.

They did now, though, Shane’s mind reminded him bitterly. Surely he had a request—a *demand*—for dinner waiting for him on his phone. Ilya had promised him that he’d told his

parents that Shane was okay, but they both knew that they'd want to see for themselves too.

"When I said what I did, it came out wrong. I meant that I don't..." Shane looked away, trying to gather up any ounce of strength he could find in his exhausted body. It was only when he could look right back at Ilya's eyes that he continued speaking, needing the other man to know that he was telling the truth about this. "I don't want to die, Ilya, I don't. I swear to you."

Ilya let out a pained noise at the words, but dutifully let Shane continue.

"I need you to know that. If you only believe one thing I ever say again, it needs to be that. I know you're worried but I, I just can't think about all of it yet. Every time I try, this happens. It's like I short-circuit or something and every time I try it just gets worse. I'm not ready. I think, if I let myself think about it—the game, my teammates, Ottawa—right now, it will actually break me. I'll talk about it, I just need time. Can't you trust me?"

A long sigh slipped from Ilya, like he was bracing himself for another argument. They were both too exhausted, mentally and physically, but that didn't stop Shane from tensing in preparation for it too.

"Is not trust," Ilya started, voice slow and careful like he was hand-picking each and every word. Knowing that he still sometimes struggled with translating his own thoughts in more emotional circumstances, Shane wouldn't be surprised if he was. "You did not see yourself. You looked—"

Ilya Rozanov was a strong man. Sometimes, too much so. He often boldly claimed that Russians never felt cold when Shane told him to wear another layer of clothing outside. He, more than once, argued that he did not cry, not even for those overly emotional commercials where the lost dogs reunite with their owners. He pushed his body and his mind to the limit so often that Shane even sometimes forgot that he was lying.

It was why Shane initially thought he was imagining the gentle quiver of Ilya's lower lip. His jaw tensed tightly, as though the Russian man was trying his best to force back all of the emotions he currently felt. Ilya's eyes were closed, his eyelids squeezed tightly for half a second before he relaxed, opening them to reveal glassy eyes, blinking to stop the tears gathering in his eyelashes from falling.

He looked like a man already grieving what he hasn't lost yet.

"*Ty vygliadel mertvym. Ia dumal, chto moe serdtse ostanovilos.*" (You looked dead. I thought my heart was killed.)

It was the smallest he'd ever heard Ilya's voice, thick with pain, grief, and unbearable sadness. Shane didn't know what he'd said, wasn't sure that he *wanted* to know, but he did know that the weight of the words burst something wide in his chest. Shane gasped around the feeling, reaching for the man he loved in an attempt to save him from the crushing isolation he displayed now. Like in a frenzy, he held either side of Ilya's face, ends of his fingers dug into his golden curls, and kissed any inch of skin he could find. His forehead, nose, those cheeks now salty with steadily flowing tears, his lips that still trembled as he

fought a war against his own emotions. Shane didn't stop, not until Ilya's hands came up to grasp his wrists, until his voice, heavy with his tears, whispered his name in the way only Ilya ever did.

"I'm here, I'm staying right here," Shane promised, knowing from the cracks in his own voice that the sight of his Ilya, broken and weeping so openly, had reduced him to his own tears. Ilya's arms wrapped tightly around him, enough to almost hurt, but Shane couldn't find it in himself to care. He pressed one hand to the center of Ilya's chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heart. "My heart is yours, Ilya. I think it always has been. I'm not going anywhere you're not, okay? I can't, I can't do it. There's no peace if you're not there."

"I am so sorry," Shane whispered as Ilya tucked his head over Shane's shoulder, entwining their bodies so much that Shane wasn't sure where he ended and Ilya began. One of his hands brushed through Ilya's curls, careful not to snag on any of the strands but putting enough weight on the touch to give the other man some comfort. "I'm sorry the world hurt your mom so badly."

Ilya's hands clung tighter to Shane, a shaky breath against Shane's neck the proof that he was listening intently. "I wish I could've met her. I would've thanked her for giving you her heart, her kindness." Shane knew with complete certainty that Ilya's love came from her and not Grigori, even without meeting either of them. "I would promise her that her son is in good hands, that you and me? We're a team. We're in this together, I'm not going until you go when we're old and squishy and wrinkly. I will never make you feel that pain ever again. Ever, Ilya, I promise."

"You cannot promise that," Ilya protested, though the cries that wracked his body had slowed.

"I can," Shane said back. "I'm Shane fucking Hollander, remember? I'll fight fate and win."

"You are terrible, that was like cheese," Ilya laughed, pulling his head back just enough that he could lean his forehead against Shane's, those bright eyes softening as he met Shane's gaze. "She would have loved you, like I love you."

It's a quiet confession, the words barely sounding on Ilya's lips, and yet they seemed to fill up the entire room. It wrapped around Shane like a blanket, keeping him warm better than the mound of blankets piled on top of him now.

"I trust you, *solnyshko*," Ilya murmured after few brief moments of silence, as though he'd spent that time gathering his thoughts. "Do what you need to, but tell me next time your mind wants to go away. I cannot find you that way again."

And Shane nods, even if the idea of talking about that strange feeling settles something sharp and uncomfortable under his skin.

They don't get out of bed for the rest of the day, caught up in each other.

"Mom, I'm fine."

“Shane Hollander, do not lie to me.”

The moment they walk through the door of his parents’ cottage, Shane’s mom is on him. She reaches for him, grabbing both sides of his face and shaking him minutely, as if to make sure that he was physically there with her.

“Yes, Hollander, good sons respect their mothers,” Ilya chirped from behind her, smirking devilishly as he watched the scene unfold.

So much for helping me out, Shane huffed internally.

His dad is there too, gripping his shoulder tightly with a more serious look than Shane was ever used to seeing on his face.

Ilya did finally tell Shane what happened. How, after taking time to process their argument, he’d realized that Shane had never come in from the rink. When he’d gone to check on him, he’d found Shane sitting unresponsive, practically catatonic as he stared unseeing across the ice. Nothing Ilya tried got a response from Shane. In his panic, he’d called Shane’s dad for help, who’d told him about how they’d learned to bring Shane back when he had his panic attacks.

He couldn’t imagine Ilya having to deal with that horror alone, especially knowing how it had brought up past memories that still ached when Ilya pressed on the scar. Still, Shane’s chest ached when he tried to picture what his parents had gone through yesterday, having received that call and knowing they were hours away, having not quite made it to their summer cottage yet.

So yes, they were pressing too close to him, touching him way too much, but Shane didn’t fight it beyond a gentle eye roll as his mother hugged him tightly and swayed side-to-side, as if to rock him like she might a toddler.

“You scared us, you know that, Shane?”

“Yes, Mom,” he sighed, though he couldn’t be too frustrated with the comment when her eyes shined with worry and a hint that she could cry, if she allowed herself to. Shane’s mom was much like Ilya in that way—they were always strong, always held themselves together in the image of perfection around others. Shane had grown up watching his dad carefully pull those emotions from her, allowing her a safe space for vulnerability.

He’d have to learn from his dad, he supposed.

They all moved to the dining table where the chicken parmesan Ilya was promised was sitting waiting for them. Shane would have to get the recipe before Ilya’s birthday, because he’d never seen the man devour a meal with such fervor as he did this one.

The table is awkward at first. No one speaks, as though no one is sure whether to bring up what happened or to move beyond it. Only the sound of forks against plates sounds in the room.

Shane had done this.

There were so many times in the last few weeks to find Ilya sitting at a table with his parents, talking like they'd been friends for years. This was the first time he'd seen any hesitation in them, and he knew why. He'd scared them all, had pushed the limit of what they'd allow without ignoring it.

No, a voice sounding almost like Ilya's reminded him. They were all worried, but that didn't mean this was his fault. He didn't purposefully hurt them. Shane was doing the best he could to handle everything thrown at him, and considering the war he'd put his body and mind through during the playoffs, it only made sense something would crack under the pressure eventually.

"Teams are allowed to start communicating with offers." Of course, it would be his mom who broke the silence first.

Shane's shoulders stiffened at the mention of hockey, at the reminder of everything that was changing in his world.

Where will Hollander go next, if his time as a Montreal Metro is truly and officially over?

He hadn't left a good impression, in his final minutes as a Metro. There were many reasons why a team wouldn't want him now, almost too many to offset his undeniable skill on the ice and abilities as a team captain. For one, he was a PR nightmare after accidentally becoming one of the first MLH players to come out as gay. There was plenty of support, sure, but there was also a lot of hatred for what he'd done. There was also the fact that he was dating Ilya Rozanov. It was one thing to be gay and be dating someone not connected to the sport. But him and Ilya? Every time they played each other, everyone would be reminded of their relationship. People would question their integrity just as Drapeau had, just as the MLH commissioner had when he'd started that committee to investigate Drapeau's outlandish accusations. Every loss of his could be blamed on his relationship with Ilya, from now until one of them retired. Finally, and maybe most damningly, Shane punched a teammate on the ice. It may have been deserved, but Ilya told him that the cameras hadn't picked up the words thrown between them. The world didn't know that Shane was defending himself from *fucking slurs* being thrown at him. Even then, he wasn't sure any team would take the risk on someone who was willing to turn on his own teammate.

"Has anyone reached out?"

The slight scrunch of his mom's eyebrows let him know he wasn't too far off in his thinking.

"Ottawa reached out an hour after the window opened," she offered, but the sentence fell short.

Shane was a second overall draft pick. He won two Cups. He was the fucking Conn Smythe winner just a season ago. His trophy room is already more full than most of the guys in the league ever will have. Shane was supposed to be legendary. He was going to break records. He was going to be remembered in hockey history forever.

Now only Ottawa, who was dead last in the standings, wanted him.

“I shouldn’t have punched Comeau,” Shane hissed, dropping his fork onto his plate as that familiar wave of nausea took over again. “I fucking knew better.”

“You did the right thing.”

His dad was one of the most gentle, calm people he’d ever met. He was the perfect government worker because of his charisma and soothing attitude when he spoke to others. He never believed in violence, even once claiming there was something impressive about the international rules of hockey which limited the brawls that could be started on the ice.

David Hollander, pacifist to the end, was supporting his son beating the shit out of his own teammate.

Shane was sure he looked shocked, jaw dropped as he tried to search his dad’s face for any sign he was joking.

“Those guys were walking all over you. It was about time you got to fight back,” Shane’s dad said, nodding once in finality before returning to his chicken parmesan like he hadn’t flipped Shane’s entire world.

“Is good thing, Shane,” Ilya spoke up then, his hand reaching out under the table to give Shane’s knee a gentle squeeze. *I’m here*, the touch said. “You will be best player on team. Remember Montreal was shit when you joined?”

“So was Boston, Ilya,” Shane’s mom warned, though she was smiling all the same. “He’s right, honey. You helped turn around the Metros. Who’s saying you can’t do it again?”

Shane didn’t want to. It was exhausting in those early days. There had been countless meetings with his alternates, with the coaching staff, trying to come up with new drills and schemes, trying to rally the locker room around a guy they’d only just met. He was twenty-six already, and while that wasn’t old by any means, there was an obvious countdown on the rest of his career. From this point on, Shane had no idea when he would be forced to retire from the MLH. It could be an injury next season, or maybe his body won’t give out for another ten years. It would, eventually, give out though, and putting himself through another gruelling stint on a poorly performing team would only weather his body down more.

“Let’s talk about something else,” Shane clipped out, picking up his fork even if he wasn’t hungry at all. It would keep Ilya from worrying, if he was able to finish at least this first plate.

He could see his parents and Ilya looking at each other, that same concerned look on all of their faces that made his chest burn. Thankfully, though, none of them said a word about his obvious avoidance.

Ilya turned to Shane’s mom and asked about the set of lakes these cottages were built on, allowing Shane to slip back into peaceful quiet.

Ilya looked like one of those heroes the Greeks always went on about.

After two days of hearing Ilya's increasingly dramatic attempts at convincing Shane to go swimming with him, Shane finally gave in. Though it was summer, the lake would still be too cold for Shane to spend much time swimming in. Not to mention the fact that there were fish, other creatures, and murky-looking plants in the water that made Shane shudder to think about swimming with.

So he sat perched on a decently-sized rock while his boyfriend played in the water. And truly, he played. It reminded Shane of the All-Star Game in Tampa, when he watched Ilya entertain a small crowd of children from some of the other All-Stars in attendance. It was one of the few times that Ilya ever let that softness out for the world to see. Even now, a smile pulled on Shane's lips as he remembered the carefree way Ilya had pretended to be attacked by a shark simply so the kids could celebrate a victory over him in a race.

Ilya was carefree now, switching between doing laps across their section of the lake, using the rope swing tied to a nearby tree that Shane had never used, and doing tricks like handstands in the water. They didn't talk much, but Shane didn't mind when he could relax and simply watch the other man enjoy his day.

It also helped that Ilya was fucking gorgeous, too. His curls were slicked back on his head, slightly darker from being so soaked with water. Shane knew how muscular Ilya was—he was sure after so many years that he'd memorized every plane of Ilya's body, just as Ilya had his—but seeing his chest glisten with water each time he surfaced made something low in Shane's abdomen stir.

"Is this where you do yoga?" Ilya asked when he resurfaced again, catching Shane staring for the twentieth time. "Or up there?"

"No, I do it inside," Shane answered automatically, thinking of the home gym that he used each summer to stay in shape for the next season. "The producers wanted me to—wait, you saw that?"

It had been a silly documentary, a project his mom had organized to show off the new cottage that he'd had built. *It's a way for people to connect with you more*, she'd reasoned, and Shane didn't really have a good enough argument to not do it. Except, the producers were all about capturing the perfect shots rather than showing how Shane actually spent his time in the cottage.

His cheeks burned at the thought of Ilya taking time to watch an entire documentary about him, about this cottage. What had he said in those interviews? Was there anything embarrassing? Shane wished he'd paid closer attention to those filming days, or even that he watched the final product so he knew what Ilya had seen.

"Yeah, it was very good," Ilya said, nodding along. "I needed help sleeping, so."

"You're an asshole," Shane laughed, even if he didn't care at all about the documentary.

Ilya simply shrugged, allowing himself to sink deeper into the water until only his head remained above the surface. “How is water?”

Shane didn’t look away from the other man, but his hand brushed along his own calf as if to double check that, yes, he really hadn’t gotten into the water all afternoon. “You’re the one in it.”

“Yeah, but I want to know how you like it.”

And then, because his boyfriend was the asshole of the year, he splashed Shane with enough water to leave his entire body and hair dripping wet. Shane gasped from the shock of it—the water wasn’t freezing, but it still had that early summer chill to it that left goosebumps across his arms as the wind ran over his skin.

“Fuck you!” Shane protested, arms brought up as if to defend himself as Ilya moved closer. “What if my phone was in my pocket?”

“It is not, you left it on the table it’s been ringing all morning,” Ilya dismissed with a wave of his hand, still moving close so he was perching his upper body on the rock Shane sat on.

Of course it would be. Shane’s mom and Farah were trying to coordinate a finalized deal with the Centaurs, Hayden was trying to lock down plans for him and Ilya to join him skating with the girls, and then there were the countless social media notifications he’d turned on ever since Ilya’s head injury.

Shane knew he shouldn’t have done it. Nothing good ever came from scrolling through his social media mentions, and yet he couldn’t help but look. Maybe it was a good thing his phone was so far away now, where Shane could focus in on Ilya and not on what the rest of the world was saying about him.

“Gimme kiss,” Ilya demanded, his chilled hands using Shane’s knees to lift himself up high enough.

“You’re cold,” Shane complained, but dutifully leaned down to give Ilya what he wanted. He would’ve given Ilya anything he asked for, when the man looked at him as intensely as he did then. Sometimes, and it truly did seem to come out of nowhere, Ilya’s eyes focused on him with this look that said Shane was everything to him. It was something far too intense for how short of a time they’d actually called each other their boyfriends, and yet it made perfect sense. Ilya could be intense, in ways that infuriated Shane and made him fall for the man even more.

“You could warm me up,” Ilya suggested, wagging his eyebrows dramatically before flopping backwards back into the water.

“Splash me again and you can warm yourself up,” Shane warned, already seeing the mischievous glint in Ilya’s eyes as he brought his hands forward.

In the end, Ilya returned to his swimming around, and Shane was content to sit back and continue watching.

This was the most peaceful moment they'd had since arriving at the cottage. Even in the last two days, when Shane worked hard to make sure to eat, and sleep, or at least to tell Ilya when he was feeling like he truly couldn't, nothing had been so peaceful. They'd had plenty of good moments—moments that made Shane's face burn red all the way to his ears, remembering all of the ways Ilya had taken him apart—but this, this might take the prize. It was simple, just a sweet moment watching his love without the burden of responsibility that Ilya normally carried around on his shoulders.

Their summer would be cut shorter than normal, this year. Joining a new team always meant arriving early to prepare. Ottawa wasn't far, but once the contract was signed Shane wouldn't have time to lounge at their cottage with Ilya. His days would be spent meeting with the owners, with the coaches, maybe even some teammates who had stuck around in the city during the break. He would need to get some practice time in, learning the schemes that Ottawa would use rather than Montreal. He'd have to dismantle and unlearn all of the muscle memory he'd built in the years he'd played in Montreal, and put it instead toward what the Centaurs coaches would want him to know before their first game.

As lovely and perfect as this moment was, Shane knew it would end, eventually. Ilya would have to go back to Boston, and Shane would stay in Ottawa.

Then Shane would be alone with the ache in his heart that hadn't quite faded away yet. He'd long since thawed out since his disappearing moment on the ice, and yet there was part of him, deep behind his sternum, that still felt frozen solid. He'd done a good job ignoring it over the past two days, but there were times when he couldn't help but to prod at its edges, daring to re-open that box that he and Ilya had firmly slammed shut that day in bed.

Sometimes, late at night, when Ilya had long since fallen asleep, arm draped loosely around Shane and lips parted, snoring softly in his ear, Shane focused on that frozen part of him more. With nothing else to worry about, he carefully pulled out each word he'd been called by the guys who were supposed to be his second family, lining them up in a row like they were on display.

Traitor.

Bitch.

Pussy.

Spy.

Cocksucker.

F-

He repeated them over and over again until his mind ached. Then, as the sun began to show its first signs of rising for the day, Shane carefully took them down from the shelf in his mind and put them back in that frozen spot for safekeeping.

On Saturday, the Ottawa Centaurs social media page posted for pride month. Most teams had a pride night, something to fulfill the minimum requirements of the league to seem more inclusive. Not many willingly changed their entire branding for the month, along with the promise that any sales of their merch would go directly to a local organization for queer youth. It wasn't just the placating words and the required rainbow. This was action, a dedication to the people that this whole pride night thing was supposed to be about in the first place.

It was-

Well, Shane felt-

Something.

Shane didn't know anyone on the Centaurs team. Most of the players were much older, near ready to retire, or were young rookies either drafted or brought up from the AHL to have their one in a million chance to shine. Shane had only ever been a Metro, and when a Montreal player was near-ready to retire they could usually be traded to a team much better than Ottawa, especially now that Shane played a role in improving their team's reputation.

Shane hated new situations. He liked to plan, to be in control of every step of the process. The worst situation he could think of was having to walk into a brand new locker room again and have to win over a whole new group of teammates again. Farah told him that Ottawa was willing to make him their new captain, which meant he'd have to win over the guy he took the role from. They should hate him. They had no reason to like him except for the fact that he might help them get a few more wins than last season.

And yet, a part of him buzzed with relief.

Because the Ottawa Centaurs actually gave a fuck about queer youth. They donated their sales to them, despite likely not making much due to the poor results they'd had in recent years. They donated to organizations for mental health in the gay community too, and not just in June. They did it regularly, far before Shane and Ilya were accidentally outed to the world.

They gave a fuck, which meant maybe those words stored away safe and sound in Shane's chest could remain locked away. Maybe he didn't have to hear them spit at him from people who he was supposed to fight alongside. Maybe, this season, he could finally stop having to watch his own back, because his teammates would actually step up.

They wouldn't abandon him when it counted.

Maybe, then, Shane could finally love hockey again.

Fuck, he missed hockey. He missed hockey the way he thought he should miss dinner when he skipped over it, like maybe this was some essential piece of him. Somewhere along the way this hobby became vital to Shane's survival. Until, when he momentarily lost it, Shane had no idea who he was or how to go on.

Maybe Shane would never win another Cup. Maybe his trophy room would remain just as full as it was now.

But he could have teammates again. *Friends, brothers.*

He could love the game he'd given everything to again.

He could stop having to imagine a world where he had to pick between hockey and Ilya.

"Hey, hey." As if he could hear Shane think his name, Ilya called out to him. Those cold hands returned to his knees, and then his face. "What are tears for?"

He was crying? Shane brought his fingers up to his cheeks, startling himself when they came away wet.

"I didn't, I-"

Ilya did not look at him with sympathy, nor that outside concern where he would feel urged to tell Shane what to do to fix it. No, the look on his face was a patient earnestness. There was worry, of course there was worry, but most of all Ilya simply watched him and waited for when he was ready.

And that-

Shane crumpled, like the ice had cracked and the dam had broken. He fell forward into Ilya's arms suddenly enough that the other man let out a startled noise, even as he caught him. Shane held on tightly, sharp sobs tearing themselves out of his throat and making the muscles of his chest ache with the force of them. Ilya was whispering something to him, rubbing his back in gentle circles, but he couldn't hear anything over the roaring in his ears of the crowd as he fell to the ice, bleeding from his teammate's fist.

Traitor. Bitch. Pussy.

"It hurts," Shane gasped out between sobs. Later he'd apologize for the way his fingers dug into Ilya's back, trying to keep himself rooted in the moment. Ilya was safety, was comfort, was warmth, and Shane found himself scrabbling desperately for it. "Ilya, it hurts. Make it stop."

"Shh, shh," Ilya cooed, rubbing his back persistently with one hand while the other came up to brush over his hair. "Let it out. You will feel better."

"It hurts too much."

"You have to feel hurt to feel better," Ilya promised, and Ilya never said things to purposefully hurt him. This had to be real, he knew something about dealing with this kind of pain.

And so Shane did. He felt it all, each and every ounce of devastating grief, anger, loss, pain. Everything that started with the initial reaction to his and Ilya's coming out right down to

Coach Theriault's quick, harsh dismissal of him like he was nothing more than the night's trash to discard to the street.

His sobs were loud, maybe more yells of his own hurt. Each one wracked his entire body and yet it also released something wound up tight around each of his ribs. By the time his body fell limp against Ilya's, exhausted from this exclamation of hurt, the ice inside Shane's chest had completely cracked and fallen away.

It left behind something tender and aching. He was still wounded, still would scar over given enough time. But Ilya was right, as he usually was in matters such as these.

Shane wasn't okay, not by a long shot, but for the first time since finding that note in his locker, he felt like, maybe, he just might someday be.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait. I'll be honest, I ended up getting a lot of really hateful comments on this fic that I was having to delete. It was really making me struggle to finish this fic, so I had to take a step away and come back to it so I could finish it with the care it deserves. I still love this fic, I just had to remind myself of it away from the hate. And truly, all of your kind words helped so much to remind me of that. I cannot thank you all enough for your support of this thing that was really only meant to be one lil oneshot. So thank you <3

Also, check the updated chapter count. I know, I KNOW. But the thing is that I started writing and Shane ended up having a lot more to say about this situation than I thought he would. So take another 10k of this.

ALSO, question for y'all because I can't decide. Do you think the fic summary needs updated or is it fine how it is?

Next chapter: comfort in the cottage and the Centaurs make an appearance (not at the cottage to be clear)

► Content Warnings

Ilya wasn't in bed.

The moment Shane reached his hand out and was met with cool bedsheets, he was pulled from his early morning grogginess to full consciousness. Over the years that he'd known the other man, Shane was always awake before Ilya. It came from Shane's regimented schedule that never bended, not even when Ilya stayed over at his apartment. It wasn't that Ilya was lazy—far from it, actually—but rather that he simply didn't feel the need to wake up before dawn like Shane did.

"I like to be awake when the sun is awake," Ilya had said when Shane teased him about it.

Over the last two weeks at the cottage, Ilya urged Shane to sleep in later than normal. Even if he couldn't stay asleep, the Russian argued, relaxing in bed would help him feel better. Shane wasn't sure he agreed—he often stood only an extra hour or two before the itch under his skin won out.

Even then, Shane hadn't known what it felt like to wake up alone since before coming to the cottage.

Wrong, wrong, wrong, something is wrong, the part of his brain he'd been trying to shut out lately screamed. His shoulders tightened as he looked around the room, the beginnings of a sunrise barely lightening the space. The clothes Ilya had hurriedly pulled off of himself were gone, likely placed in the hamper in the en suite by now. Ilya's phone was gone from the nightstand, and the door to the en suite open to reveal it was empty.

Where was he?

Normally the pleasant soreness that ran through Shane's body as he stood would've made him pause. He would smile and take a moment to stretch, basking in the reminder of what he and Ilya had done the night before. Now, though, with Ilya's disappearance in the forefront of his mind, Shane couldn't focus on anything else.

He got dressed in the first clothes he found—his own black athletic pants and one of Ilya's shirts, already moving toward the main space of the cottage before he'd finished pulling the shirt down his abdomen.

And-oh.

"Are you cooking breakfast?"

There was no way he was ever getting used to this. The sight of Ilya, gray sweatpants hung low on his hips and the edge of his black shirt riding up to expose a small sliver of his stomach, stood in front of the stove of Shane's cottage as he divided food onto two plates. His curls were still a little wild, pressed flatter against his head on one side from where he'd slept on them. His eyebrows had been pressed together in focus, but as he lifted his head in response to Shane's questions it was impossible not to notice the brief flash of elation in his eyes. Shane imagined it was the same look he gave Ilya each time he woke up with his arm around his body, like he still couldn't quite believe that he got to have this. It was all so domestic that the sweetness almost made his chest ache.

"I don't think wearing that shirt will be a good first impression," Ilya said back, the corner of his lips twitching upwards with amusement.

Shane glanced down, feeling his cheeks heat up as he realized exactly which of Ilya's shirts he'd picked up to wear. The golden name and logo of the Boston Raiders was something he didn't think he'd ever wear willingly. Distantly, he could imagine his mom having particular words to say about it, even if it was his boyfriend's shirt he was wearing.

"I'm changing before I go, obviously."

"Mm, I think you should keep it. Tell them your mean Russian boyfriend made you wear it."

Shane laughed, stepping further into the kitchen so he could grab hold of Ilya's hips, fingers slipping under the man's shirt. It seemed like a small miracle that he got to do this whenever he wanted now, that Ilya was *his* in the same way that he was Ilya's.

"Mean isn't the word I'd use to describe you."

“No? What then, hot, sexy, completely fucking—“

“An asshole, mostly,” Shane teased, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s lips and smiling into it as he felt the man’s body relax against him. What a wondrous feeling, to know he could have that kind of effect on him?

“Breakfast,” Ilya said against Shane’s lips before pulling his face back just enough to look at him. His fingers found their home against Shane’s cheek, brushing over the freckles he was so obsessed with. “You will distract me from good meal I made you.”

Something sour twisted up in Shane’s gut, tucked up under his last few sets of ribs where he couldn’t reach to rip it out. This part of his day never got easier, even in the last few days of letting Ilya do this. The thought of eating the plate of eggs, sausage, and piece of toast made Shane want to crawl out of his skin at the same time as his stomach rumbled in longing for it. His skin itched as he considered the imbalance of macro-nutrients on that plate, of how he would have no idea of the exact numbers of each he’d be putting into his body. It would ruin his count for the rest of the day, leaving him unable to keep track of how well he was sticking to his regimen.

But not eating it would make Ilya horribly sad. Shane had pressed once, on a particularly bad day that left him snapping and snarling at the mere suggestion he have anything for breakfast than the admittedly terrible-tasting smoothie he’d had for the last several years. Ilya’s shoulders would dip, his eyes would dim, and he wouldn’t purposefully try to guilt Shane into it but his worry would linger all day. It had all made Shane so sick with guilt that he’d given into the familiar urge to work and not stop working until he physically couldn’t keep going anymore. He’d gone into the fitness room in the cottage and locked the door, relishing in the way Ilya couldn’t get in to stop him as he climbed onto the treadmill and started it a couple notches faster than his stretch pace.

Shane was so sore that night he hadn’t been able to do much other than lay sprawled out on the couch. He hadn’t missed the way Ilya checked in on him more often that night, pressing insistent touches to his shoulder every so often and never letting him drift off for more than a few moments. It was irritating, not even being able to retreat to his own thoughts after an intense workout he knew he shouldn’t have done, but each time Shane opened his mouth to complain he remembered the hazy memories he had of that disappearing episode on the ice, of Ilya begging for him like he thought Shane had actually died.

“Please, Shane, do not do this. Don’t go.”

“Please, Shane. One thing. All I need is one word. Please.”

It was precarious, this balance that they had.

Ilya pushed until Shane snapped back. Shane let Ilya take care of him until the itchy, grating feeling under his skin became impossible to ignore.

Rinse and repeat.

So Shane smoothed out his expression and took the plate offered to him. He knew, somewhere deep under the panic, that this was a healthy lunch. The eggs and sausage fulfilled the protein requirements he would need as an athlete, the small amount of carbs enough for an energy boost for his first day back on the ice after the playoffs. He knew once he sat down, too, that Ilya would bring him a modified version of the smoothie Shane had lived off of for so many years. Shane would never admit that it tasted so much better, this new mix of oat milk, spinach, and monk fruit.

Ilya had to be getting tired of this morning routine by now. He must have grown exhausted of seeing this twisted expression Shane always wore while he ate the food Ilya carefully put together for him.

Shane wanted to be thankful for it, but that sour thing in his center kept him from saying the words each time.

“I can drive you to Ottawa today,” Ilya offered, keeping up the routine to a tee. He’d read on some online forum for eating disorders—and fuck, the words still grated on Shane because it *wasn’t* that, he just cared about what he put in his own fucking body—that talking throughout the meal should help as a distraction.

It did.

Shane never admitted it.

Ilya never stopped doing it.

“What? I can drive fine,” Shane said back, scowling at the two eggs on his plate like they’d personally offended him. Where was this coming from? They’d talked through the plan for the day last night, after Ilya had cleaned them both up and they’d tucked into bed for the night together. “It’d be silly to make you wait in Ottawa, I’ll be busy meeting the team all day.”

It was still July, too early for the pre-season to really start, but as a new transfer Shane would have to go into the facility today to formally meet the coaching staff and any team members who spent their summers in town. They’d do some light drills too, to get their new captain and first line center used to their plays.

“I can go visit my favorite Hollanders,” Ilya teased, though his expression still looked serious. “You don’t think a two hour drive is too much before you’ve seen a doctor?”

This again.

Shane groaned, dropping his head forward so he could stare at the table instead of at his boyfriend. “I’m not gonna fucking disappear while I drive, Ilya.”

“How do you know this? You can’t help when it happens, yes?”

“I’m not doing this right now.”

The words were sharp and final, Shane's tone cold enough to be unfamiliar even to his own ears.

"You never want to do this. We have to talk about the disappearing. What if you disappear on the road? You can not ignore this."

Shane stood quickly enough to make the chair scrape loudly against the floor, his fork clattering from his hand onto the table. Why bring this up today? This was already going to be a difficult enough day, one where Shane would put on a different team's jersey for the first time and would be forced to officially face the reality he'd spent all this time trying to forget. After today there would be no hiding from the fact that Shane Hollander was no longer a Metro, and that he was going from one of the most elite and highly-respected franchises in MLH history to a team whose fans even make jokes about them.

Shane's head was already buzzing with nerves, with fear, with anger, and everything else he hadn't quite figured out a proper name for yet. He didn't need this guilt too, like he was somehow terrible for not letting Ilya have this.

"Shane."

There it fucking was again.

Shane closed his eyes and took in a sharp breath through his nose. He hated the way Ilya said his name like that—like he was coaxing a stray cat. If he kept his eyes open, he knew he would see worry on Ilya's face again and that might just make him lose it all together. He didn't think he'd seen much else, apart from pleasure, since that day on the lake. It was like Ilya was scared of him, like he thought Shane would crack apart with one wrong word or touch.

"Stop, okay? Just stop," Shane snapped, feeling all of that frustration rise up now that the dam had been broken. He could feel the guilt too, now only good for stoking the flames of his anger. "I'm not a fucking child, Ilya. I can drive myself to work, I can feed myself, I don't need you hovering and waiting for me to break!"

"I don't think you are a child," Ilya denied, standing up and crossing past the table to stand in front of Shane. He stood far enough back to not be able to touch, though, which somehow felt further away than when he'd been on the other side of the table. "You *can* take care of yourself. You don't have to do it on your own, you should not have to."

"I've been doing it on my own my whole life!"

Ilya's expression compressed into something akin to pain, not dissimilar to right after he was shoved particularly harshly into the boards during a game. "Look where that got you, *moy lyubov*."

"Fuck you," Shane hissed, his head reeling back at the words. They felt like a physical slap, like Ilya had known that they would hurt and chose to say them anyway. "I don't need you to take care of me, like I'm—"

Weak? Broken? A failure?

Look where that got you.

Lying unseeing, unfeeling, unmoving for hours while his body shut itself down from the cold.

Waking from nightmares of his own team betraying him, over and over again until he was the most exhausted he'd ever been in his life.

Not knowing the last time he truly enjoyed a meal.

The familiar ache of well-worn muscles after a difficult workout. Unsure if his body had ever gone a day *without* that soreness.

Sobbing next to the lake until he could hardly breathe, ruining a sweet moment he wanted to have with his boyfriend.

Making his boyfriend worry so much he knew Ilya was losing sleep over it, evident by the hint of dark circles forming under the man's eyes. He'd heard Ilya on the phone with Shane's parents more than once, talking in hushed tones to update them, like they were all conspiring against him. More than once Shane caught Ilya simply watching him, like he thought Shane might disappear in a blink. The annoying fucking thing was it wasn't wrong either, because there were still times when Shane's mind floated away somewhere his body couldn't follow, leaving him exhausted and disoriented by the time he found his way back.

Shane was single-handedly ruining what was supposed to be a perfect, romantic getaway to his private cottage and there wasn't a fucking thing he could do to fix it. Ilya was realizing how much work it would be to really be with him, to be more than the guy that fucked him so well that Shane gave up control in a way he never had with anyone else. Eventually, Ilya would realize he didn't want this.

And Shane would be left alone, again, too used to being taken care of by someone else.

It would break him if he didn't prepare for it now.

"I'm going to Ottawa early," Shane said, wincing at the flat, neutral way the words came out. He turned to head back to the bedroom to get ready, feeling something painful flutter about in his chest when Ilya didn't try to stop him.

When he did finally re-emerge, dressed in something more fitting for a first meet with his new team and with his bag slung over his shoulder, Ilya was still standing where he'd left him.

It hurt, seeing the way he'd hurt Ilya.

It didn't stop him from leaving.

This would be good for them, to have a day apart. Ilya didn't need to deal with his bullshit today, he'd already had to deal with so much.

“I might stay with my parents tonight, if practice gets out late,” Shane spoke, the uncomfortable and thick air that always lingered after a fight making him sound unsure. “You’ll get a break.”

The muscle in Ilya’s jaw tensed visibly. His fingers toyed with the chain of his mother’s necklace in that idle way that Shane wondered if he even was aware of. Shane could make himself sick thinking about leaving things unresolved like this, but how could they figure this out in only the day? Shane had a big day ahead of him, and he wanted to focus on that. He didn’t want to risk disappearing when he needed to prove to the Centaurs that they were right to take him when no other team would.

For the first time in a long time, Shane had something to prove again.

He hated that faraway, pained look on Ilya’s face though. He hated it more than anything. Shane would take a million more days of meals that broke his own nutrition plan, of being driven around in his own car, of anything Ilya wanted to make that look go away.

He knew that’s what got them here in the first place.

“I just don’t want you to think I need to be babied. I’m still me. I’m still...”

Shane fucking Hollander, the words sounding in his own brain like Ilya’s voice, muffled from where he’d murmured them against the bruised bare-skin of Shane’s chest all through the playoffs. There was once a time, not long ago, that Ilya said his name almost reverently, like he recognized exactly who Shane Hollander was to the world.

But who the fuck was Shane Hollander anymore?

He wasn’t a Metro. He wasn’t a desired MLH star anymore. He wasn’t the uncontroversial golden boy. He wasn’t the perfect role model that every kid who looked like him could strive to be.

“Drive safe,” Ilya spoke, voice thick with something Shane couldn’t parse out. “Tell me when you get to Ottawa.”

“I will.”

Their conversation hadn’t been so stilted in a long time.

Shane walked out of the cottage feeling like something had broken, he just wasn’t sure how repairable it was.

“Mr. Hollander, it’s great to finally meet you in person!”

The last time Shane met the owner of a team like this, he’d been freshly 18 years old and picked second overall in the draft. He’d stood in the after-party and listened as the owner made references to how *inclusive* and *inspirational* Shane was going to be, as if he’d needed a wealthy white man who’d never stepped foot on the ice to remind Shane of how much his career could mean to kids someday.

That conversation had been stiff, full of pleasantries and the obvious fakeness that came from trying to impress someone who really didn't care. Because the truth of the matter was, it didn't matter to the owner of the Metros who Shane was, as long as he was good enough to improve their standings in the rankings at the end of the day. They saw someone easy to profit from. Shane wasn't blind to the fact that he was drafted during a time when the fans were beginning to question how uniform the league looked. The fact that Shane was half-Japanese was brought up in his interview no less than a dozen times, right alongside *dedicated, straight-laced, uncontroversial, history in the making*.

Shane was signed for as many off-the-ice reasons as he had been for those on it. It was a fact he'd had to choke down ever since the interview. He knew from a young age that everything he did would come with its own qualifier attached. *First, only, youngest, first first first*. It had been worth it, Shane told himself each and every time the owners met him and brought it up, as if to remind him of something that was a part of him from the very beginning.

As if to say, *hey, remember when we made you the first Asian Canadian captain of an MLH team? Remember how forward thinking we are?*

The Fraser siblings were decidedly not like that.

The three of them were already standing by the time Shane was guided to their office. He'd seen pictures of them before—the two brothers and sister having made waves by buying the Centaurs five years ago when the team almost went under completely. Their dad was a legendary coach in his day, having coached the national team for a few years. The oldest son, Miles, and the daughter, Isla, both played hockey at university though none of them ever went pro.

They seemed to carry the casualness with them to the room, like they were simply hockey buddies meeting Shane for the first time. The youngest, Noah, wasn't even wearing a suit but rather a Centaurs sweater. It all was so unexpected that it made Shane's head dizzy. Was there something he was missing? Were they trying to catch him off-guard intentionally?

"Just Shane, please," he corrected, the formality from before sounding strange in context with how casually the Frasers gathered around the table on one side of Miles's massive office. "I'm honored to meet you. Thank you for taking a chance on me."

Isla laughed then, a sound that spurted out like she might've done a spit-take if she had a drink with her. "Please, take a risk on *Shane Hollander*? As if."

Did she not know anything that had happened in the last few months?

His confusion must've been apparent on his face, because Isla shook her head. "I guessed when you accepted our offer that it must've been the only one, most players don't purposefully go to a team who can't afford their well-deserved salary."

So she did know. Shane's cheeks warmed quickly. Was she trying to humiliate him by bringing up how few options he had? Was this their attempt at gaining some kind of control over their new star player?

“I just couldn’t believe the rest of the league would really be such goddamned morons about it.”

What.

“Isla,” Miles groaned, clearly as the oldest taking responsibility for maintaining some semblance of professionalism. He pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes as if to compose himself for a moment before returning his attention back to Shane. “Forgive my sister, she doesn’t know how to not say everything she thinks.”

Shane shrugged. “I don’t mind it. I don’t have to guess what you’re thinking, at least.”

Isla grinned like he might’ve told her that he loved her. It was a little feral, reminding him of the way Ilya looked after someone dared try to knock him off of the puck. “Oh, I’m gonna like you Hollander.”

“Can you try not to scare the new talent, Isla? We kinda need him,” Noah laughed, leaning forward across the table to shake Shane’s hand. “We’re really happy you came here, man, no matter why you did. Maybe we can even make the playoffs this year.”

A lofty goal, considering they’d ended the season at the bottom of the conference last year. But last year they’d had a center who was forty-two years old and who should’ve retired five years prior. He’d had a bad injury to his knee that he’d never fully recovered from, and eventually had gotten shipped from his long-time team in Chicago to Ottawa.

Ottawa, where hockey players go to end their careers.

Was that what Shane was doing?

After all, there’d never been a question of if they would have a chance at making the playoffs or not when he was in Montreal. If they didn’t make the playoffs then it was a terrible season, one that would make Shane push himself harder than usual during the summer months. The end goal in Montreal was never just to make the playoffs, they always kept their eyes on the Cup. Here, the Cup wasn’t even a part of the discussion, as if the owners even knew how outside of reality trying to reach for it would be.

“I’ll do my best,” Shane promised, straightening his shoulders back and taking on the familiar persona he was used to in these conversations. Be perfect, be confident, be everything they expect him to be. “I’ll work hard, I’ll make your signing offer worth it for you. We’ll make the playoffs this year.”

“You’ll notice we do things a little differently here than the rest of the league. Commissioner Crowell isn’t our biggest fan, but he can’t really do anything to a team at the bottom of the standings, now can he?” Isla said, the shimmering mischief in her eyes making it seem like maybe she’d *said what she thought* to the commissioner more than once before. “You can relax. We don’t want our players to be perfect little robots out there.”

“What my sister means to say is that we think players do what they do best when we give them the space to be themselves,” Miles explained. “You never want to do a post-game media

room appearance again? I wouldn't like it, but I'd respect it and you wouldn't lose any standing here. We want you to play some good hockey, and we'll have your back in everything else."

"We're not the hands-off type. Our coaching staff is great, Brandon Wiebe is a god-send," Noah said, his expression taking on something a little more serious. "But if there's anything going on you don't want to or can't tell them? Anyone saying what I think your previous teammates were saying last season? We'll stick Isla on 'em."

Isla grinned, smacking one fist into the palm of her hand as if to mime the violence she'd be happy to dole out. "Like I said, Hollander. The rest of the league are fucking morons for letting a talent like you go over something that isn't a problem in the first place."

It was too good to be true.

A prickly feeling settled underneath Shane's skin as his eyes flicked between the Fraser siblings. His back was stiff, muscles in his legs tightened as if his body were preparing to escape. His fists clenched tightly against the fabric of his pants over his thighs, willing himself to not squirm under their serious, but earnest gazes.

This couldn't be real.

Sure, they'd picked him up when the rest of the league had passed. Honestly, Shane always assumed that it was because they were desperate. They knew he was good—a lot better than good, actually—and were willing to take a risk on him starting another internal fight on the ice and on the PR nightmare that came from his accidental outing.

But this, this casual admittance that they weren't just okay with it, but that they were going to ensure he was safe there?

Fuck, it felt like a dream.

Ilya told him this. He'd shown him the routine donations to vital local organizations that protected queer youth. He'd shown him the support they showed all year round, the kind of thing that felt less like a show and more like an outward expression of their real beliefs. This had been going on for the last couple of years, and had in no small part been part of the reason they couldn't get good trades. Many players didn't want to be there, not when it was an expectation that players participate, that they fight against the kind of locker room culture that was always accepted in the sport.

The unsteady feeling followed Shane throughout the tour of the arena, as Coach Wiebe introduced himself in a much more laid-back way than he ever would have expected from a head coach. Thierault had been stiff and professional, always. He was cold and distant from his players, preferring a harsher hand when handling them. They were not best friends, and he didn't so much care if they all hated him as long as they were pushed to perform well enough to win games. Wiebe was different. Shane wasn't sure if that was because this was his first head coaching job after retiring or if this was just the way he preferred to do things, but it felt strange and pushed Shane even more off-kilter than he'd been after his meeting with the Frasers.

Then came meeting Alternate Captain Boodram. Bood, as he'd insisted on.

"We're gonna crush those damn Metros this year!" Bood announced loudly after he'd shown Shane his new cubby.

The cubby that contained a new jersey. It was black with red and gold accenting. He was sure on the front he would see the strange cartoon centaur playing hockey that made up the team's logo. The jersey was hung up so the back was facing out, however, revealing...

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"Mak said he'd gladly switch numbers so you could have yours," Bood explained, clapping him on the back excitedly. "What'd you think? Awesome, right?"

It looked *wrong*.

His name had always been surrounded by blue with accents of red and white. For ten years that's what he'd seen, all he'd known. Sure, on the national team he got to wear red or black for his country, but here? In the league?

There was no blue on this jersey. There was hardly any blue throughout the arena itself, all rightfully decorated to celebrate the team's colors.

"Yeah," Shane forced out, not wanting to seem ungrateful, "It's great."

He'd get used to it. He *had* to, because retiring seemed like a better idea at this point than ever wearing the Metros colors again. It would just take time.

It would be okay.

It would.

Eventually.

"Look, man, we have these team parties," Bood started, shifting as if he could feel the nervous energy radiating off of Shane. "The guys are coming over to my place for burgers and drinks this Saturday. It'll be real chill, a lot of 'em bring over their wives and kids too. You should come, get to know everyone."

The Metros had parties too. They wouldn't usually invite the WAGs though, except for the bigger parties around holidays. Shane went sometimes, usually if the activity involved watching the playoffs if they happened to be knocked out already or if it had been too long since the last time he'd gone. It hadn't ever been his scene though, since most of the time the guys planned to drink so much they'd have to call someone to pick them up from wherever the party was hosted. Shane's favorites had always been when Hayden hosted, because no one ever minded if he disappeared under the guise of helping Jackie with the kids. He could play a game of Sorry with the twins in their much more quiet room, and not have to worry

about anyone thinking ill of him stepping away from the loud party going on in the next room over.

Except Hayden wouldn't be hosting any of these parties. If the WAGs were there, then there wouldn't be any reason for him to help babysit, and even then it'd be strange to offer. He was practically a part of the Pike family, each of the kids calling him 'Uncle Shane' as soon as they could speak. He didn't know anyone here. They'd all be paired off with their families and he'd, what, stand there with a beer he didn't want to drink and a burger that went against his entire diet plan?

The parties seemed great, much more his speed, but only once he knew everyone and could—

“You should bring Rozanov, too, if he's in town for the summer.”

Shane really must be dreaming now.

“What?”

“Yeah, dude, he's your WAG right? So he should be there.” Bood shrugged, then widened his eyes as he realized something else. “He's not a *WAG*, Jesus don't tell Rozanov I called him a fuckin' wife, he'll check me so hard I'll think *I* play for Montreal.”

Bood was nervous, but not because he was talking about inviting a boyfriend. No, he was nervous because it was *Rozanov* and that, that Shane could deal with. He knew the image that Ilya put out, he knew it because he loved that dangerous smirk that terrified rookies and vets alike when the Boston center was on the ice. It settled something almost like pride in Shane's chest, hearing Bood try to figure out how to loop Ilya so casually into their party invites even when he knew how legendary the man was.

“You're really cool with Il-Roz being there?”

A pause. A blink. Then a grin.

“Hell yeah, man. WAGs plus Rozanov,” Bood answered, clapping Shane on the back again like he was trying to leave a bruise there. “It's a working title, Cassie's the smarter half of me, she'll come up with something more clever.”

It was so simple.

Just like that, Shane and Ilya were brought onto the team. It didn't fucking matter that Ilya was another man, or even that he played for a conference rival. There was no insinuation that he'd be there to gain information, no threat to not share trade secrets with the other man. It was just an invitation.

Zane Boodram just met Shane, but already he trusted him more than the guys Shane had played with for a decade.

Shane nodded, running his fingers over the stitching that fixed his name to the back of the black and red jersey.

“Right, WAGs plus Rozanov. We’ll think about it, okay?”

Shane didn’t go to his parents’ house after the meeting.

He didn’t go back to the cottage either.

It wasn’t on purpose. Truthfully, he was exhausted enough that he probably *should’ve* gone to his parents’ if only to get a full night’s rest before driving back to Muskoka.

But then he’d get there and his mom would ask him why Ilya didn’t make the trip too. Shane would have to see that brief disappointment in her eyes when he told her that she wouldn’t get to see his boyfriend this trip. He’d have to tell them both about their fight, which still sat painfully in his chest. The fight felt like a knife that hadn’t been pulled out of his chest yet, every moment and every reminder causing the knife to shift and reopen the wound it was holding onto.

Then his mom would make them dinner. She’d make her and his dad something like lasagna, and because she was so attentive she’d set a plate of salmon and lentils down in front of Shane without asking. She may not always approve of his diet, but she’d never made him eat anything that broke it. But Ilya wouldn’t be there to tease him about it, or to look worried when Shane’s eyes hovered on the lasagna because it had been one of his favorites as a kid, something he hadn’t tasted again since being drafted. If Ilya were there, he’d convince him to have a small portion with his vegetables, citing something about how that night they were celebrating Shane’s start with his new team.

But Ilya wouldn’t have been there, because Shane told him not to be. He’d yelled and fought against the man when he tried to help, because the thought of breaking his routine now still made his skin shiver and shift uncomfortably.

Then Shane would go to bed early, because he didn’t want to deal with his parents’ worried expressions. Everyone was always so worried about him now. Couldn’t they see that he was *fine*, that he was handling things? Sure he’d had a moment, a few really *bad* moments, but he was doing better.

He was fine, and he definitely didn’t want them to be worried about him forever. He wanted things to go back to the way they were before, when Shane was his parents’ perfect son who made them proud not worried, when Shane was Ilya’s strong hockey player boyfriend that he could chirp at instead of coo over.

So no, Shane didn’t go to his parents’ house.

When the turn came, he found his hands keeping the steering wheel straight. He continued on the freeway even beyond the turn that would’ve taken him to the cottage.

Shane didn’t remember the rest of the drive. He could vaguely feel the steering wheel under his hands, feel the slightly warm air being pushed onto his face by his car’s temperature unit. He could distantly hear Ilya’s voice reminding him how dangerous it was to be driving when he could disappear, and couldn’t help but think that maybe Ilya was right about this one.

But it didn't matter, because one second he was driving past the exit toward his parents' house and the next his car was sitting in the driveway outside the Pikes' house.

It was Jackie who answered the door, little Amber propped up in her arms. She looked a little irritated at first, and Shane distantly remembered that Amber was still only a couple of months old, and that she and Hayden were probably exhausted trying to take care of her along with their three older kids.

I should leave, they don't need to be dealing with this too.

But the expression on Jackie's face shifted to something much softer the second she saw him. Whatever she'd seen on Shane's face changed everything, because suddenly she was stepping back so he could come in.

"It's good to see you, Shane," she said, even when Shane had the feeling that wasn't true. "Hayden's getting the girls settled down for sleep, so he'll be out here in..."

"In half an hour at best," Shane laughed, following her through the familiar house to the kitchen. After Jackie sat Amber down in her crib and started to head toward the fridge, though, he stopped her. "Hey, sit down and rest. I know where everything is."

And he did. He knew the Pikes house like he knew his own.

Jackie smiled softly and nodded, getting comfortable at their kitchen table as Shane milled about in her kitchen. "I'll have some water too, but w—"

"—the pitcher with the blueberries and mint in it," Shane finished, raising up the pitcher from the fridge that he'd already grabbed. Jackie didn't like the taste of plain water, but tried her best to drink it to set a good example for her kids. She'd started testing out various flavors to try with the water years ago, but settled on blueberry and mint as her favorite.

Eventually, Shane settled into the chair across from her, both of them holding onto plastic cups with different cartoon characters on them. Shane thought his might've been from a Disney movie about princesses, but he wasn't sure.

"How are you, Shane?"

What a loaded question.

Everyone kept asking him that, but Shane still didn't know how he was supposed to answer it. If he told them the truth, then everyone just got so *sad* and *worried*, and it hurt Shane to see that he'd made the people he cared about so upset. If he told them he was fine, though, they still seemed to get hurt. No one was ever clear on what they actually wanted with that question, so it started to feel a little more like a trap than a genuine inquiry into his mind.

So Shane shrugged, eyes focused on a little piece of mint that had slipped into his cup when he'd poured it. "Fine, *good*. I met with the Centaurs staff today."

"Oh, that's so exciting!"

Shane thought maybe she was telling the truth. When he'd punched Comeau, Jackie had texted him and told him that he should've broken his jaw to really shut him up. It was the most violent thing he'd ever heard come from Jackie Pike, but when he'd shown it to Hayden the man had only smiled and said his wife was protective of her family.

Her family.

"Yeah, I guess. They seem nice," Shane answered, wondering when he started feeling so awkward around his best friends.

"Good, you deserve it," Jackie told him. "Selena Chouinard says you'll fit in great there."

"You know someone there?"

"Yeah, Selena grew up in Montreal, you know? We went to school together," Jackie explained. "You might want to talk with her and Nick, they can help with the transition."

"I grew up in Ottawa, remember?" Shane said with a small, breathy laugh.

"You've also lived here for ten years," Jackie returned gently, not dissimilar to how she might explain something to Ruby or Jade. "You don't have to pretend this is easy, you know? I know you too well for that, Shane."

"It'll be better."

He'd been telling himself that ever since Shane first accepted that phone call from Farah, alerting him to the offer.

The Metros had burned him, had cast him out for something he didn't want to control. They expected him to have a perfect wife and perfect kids, they wanted him to fit in with their perfect little image that they had of their star player who broke boundaries and paved the way for all the little kids who looked like him. They wanted him to be uncontroversial. They wanted him to be someone who didn't kiss guys and didn't fall in love with other players and who didn't punch their own teammates for using a word that was commonplace in the league.

The Centaurs didn't want any of that. After today, it was clear they just wanted him to be... Shane Hollander, whoever the fuck that was now.

It was going to be better. His skin still itched. His heart still pounded. This feeling wouldn't ever go away, he was sure of it.

"Sure, doesn't make it easy, though."

She was the first to say it, the first to acknowledge how fucking hard this was. Shane *knew* it was the right thing, the good thing, but it still felt like he was tearing his heart in two with every step he took from Montreal.

This was his home. His life. The words Montreal and Shane Hollander were so entwined he wasn't entirely sure who he could be once it was ripped entirely from him.

“I hope Hayden tells you every day how lucky he is to have you,” Shane said, standing as Jackie did too.

She crossed around the table quickly, wrapping him up in a tight hug.

“I’m really gonna miss you, Jack.” Shane wouldn’t cry. He didn’t cry in front of people, not if he could help it, but he felt the tears building and un-fallen in his eyes. “You’re one of my best friends, too. You and Hayd.”

“Hey, hey, I’ll miss you too, but guess what? We’re only a couple of hours apart,” Jackie told him, running her hand along his back like a mother would to comfort a child. “And the kids will still need their Uncle Shane to come visit and take them skating and sneak them candy when he thinks I can’t see it.”

Shane’s cheeks burned at the admission that she knew the whole time, but he didn’t comment on it. So what if he couldn’t say no to Ruby’s little pouting face every time she asked for a sweet?

“I’ll come visit so often it’s annoying,” Shane promised, blinking to hold back his own tears when he pulled back from the hug to see that she was crying openly.

“You always have a place here, even if you and Hayden aren’t teammates anymore.”

Shane knew it. He did, but something warm and comforting washed over him at hearing it anyway.

“You trying to steal my wife, Hollzy?” Hayden asked playfully when he walked into the kitchen from where Shane knew the girls’ bedroom was.

“Fuck you, I’m gay,” Shane tossed back easily, though he felt as stunned as Hayden looked at the simple admission of it.

Shane hadn’t said the actual words aloud to too many people. Ilya, of course, in a hotel room in Tampa, Florida. He didn’t need to say it to Rose, who had said it for him before he had the strength to. He hadn’t even needed to say it to his parents, who had figured it out based solely on his reaction to Ilya getting hurt on the ice.

So twice, now.

Shane laughed at the thought. The entire world knew he was gay, and still this was only the second time he’d ever said it aloud.

How fucking strange his life was.

“Good, ‘cause I don’t share,” Hayden teased back, thankfully keeping up the lighter air despite his clear surprise.

Jackie groaned, pressing a kiss to her husband’s cheek. “Only you would be jealous over your best friend,” she laughed softly. “Goodnight, boys.”

Shane knew this was her purposeful attempt to give him and Hayden the chance to talk. He hadn't seen him since before he and Ilya went to the cottage, having had to postpone their day out on the ice with the girls because of his own magic disappearing act.

He missed his best friend, too.

The pair of them settled on the couch, Hayden with a beer and Shane with a ginger ale. They always kept it in their fridge despite the fact that none of the Pikes drank it. Jade had started affectionately referring to it as 'Uncle Shane's spicy drink' after the only time she'd tried it, having instantly scrunched up her face in distaste.

It was nice, to be able to talk about light things. Shane and Hayden talked about hockey, about the kids, about that road by the arena that had been under construction for the last six years and might never be actually finished.

"Rozanov keeps calling," Hayden called out as Shane came back into the living room after grabbing his third ginger ale, on pace with Hayden's beers. "Don't tell me he's the jealous type who doesn't let you go anywhere without his permission."

Shane scoffed, rolling his eyes at the thought of Ilya ever trying to do so. But Hayden didn't know Ilya, not beyond the persona on the ice that loved to pick fun at Hayden specifically. "No, he's not like that," Shane promised. "We're just...I don't know. I told him I was going to my parents' after the arena."

"Does anyone know you came here instead?" At Shane's silence, Hayden groaned. "Dude, they probably think your car got wrapped around a pole or something. You've gotta tell someone you're here."

Shane hadn't thought about that, honestly.

Still, though, the thought of talking to Ilya now, after what he'd done to the poor man this morning sent a new wave of nausea through him.

"Everything okay with you two? I don't like the guy but I don't wanna see you moping either."

"I don't *mope*," Shane protested, eyes still focused on his phone where it sat face-up on the table.

Five missed calls.

Lily: Yuna said you never got there. Are you okay?

Lily: Shane.

Lily: I don't care if you decide to break up with me forever, you have to tell me you are okay.

Jesus Christ, all Shane can ever do is worry him. There was no way Ilya would stay with him now, not after this. He might've been able to salvage things after their fight this morning, but

now he can't see a world in which Ilya would want to stay. What did he have going for him, being with Shane? The Russian had to see that all he would ever have is this—this panic, this worry, this fear.

“Shane, what's going on? You're doing that thing where you're all caught up in your own head.”

Even Hayden knew he did it.

Why did anyone ever stick around him?

Fuck, this was all so messed up. *Shane* was so messed up.

“Hey, c'mon, man,” Hayden called out, grabbing Shane's shoulder and shaking him rough enough to jerk him out of his thoughts. He moved his gaze from his phone, still lighting up with messages, to his best friend who looked more than a little concerned.

He even worried Hayden.

“You know I love you, right, man?”

They didn't talk like this. They were never so emotional, never this earnest about talking about the tough things. It was just one more piece of evidence of how Shane had categorically scarred every piece of his life by not being able to handle a couple of shitty words thrown at him.

Still, Shane nodded, because he did. They were more than best friends at this point. They were brothers. He was the godfather to Hayden's four kids. If Shane were to ever have any of his own, he knew he'd want Hayden to be just as involved. Jackie was his emergency contact while he lived in Montreal, because she could get there the quickest and he trusted her with any kind of emergency decision-making that would need to be done. They'd grown up together, played on the same line for nearly a decade, Shane knew him about as well as he knew himself.

So yeah, he knew Hayden loved him.

“You remember when Arthur was born and I took those couple months off?”

How could he forget? He'd wanted to come over to help in any way he could, but between the playoffs keeping them busy and Hayden's insistence that she just needed a bit of time, Shane hadn't made it over there until after Jackie had recovered.

“Yeah, Jackie had those medical complications from the c-section.”

“Yeah, uh...we kind of lied? Not that we didn't trust anyone, but Jacks was really embarrassed about it for awhile, and...”

“Embarrassed? They cut her stomach open, that's super fucking traumatic. Why would she be embarrassed about needing to recover from that?”

“It wasn’t the C-section,” Hayden admitted. His forearms were resting on his knees, eyes focused on his hands clasped together. “She was fine for a little bit, but then she got really, I don’t even know how to explain it. It was like someone had died or something. She slept all the time, and she was so sad. She just kept crying and it seemed like taking care of Arthur made it even worse. She stopped eating, stopped doing much of anything really. It was... fuck, it was really fucking scary.”

“Jesus, Hayden, I’m sorry,” Shane blurted out. It was hard to imagine, impossible really. Jackie was one of the strongest people he’d ever met, always able to weather any storm. It seemed so odds in his head to picture her like that, like she was mourning something instead of celebrating a new life. “That sounds really scary. Was she okay?”

“Eventually, yeah. Her doctor called it postpartum depression. She said it happens to moms sometimes, when they have a kid. It’s totally normal, but it makes moms feel really guilty, like they shouldn’t be feeling that way or something.”

“Did Jackie...?”

“Yeah, she tried to hide it from me for awhile. It wasn’t until it got really bad. I mean, I came home from a game one night and Arthur was screaming his head off, and Ruby was drawing all over the damn walls, and Jade said Momma had been in bed all day. I went in there and Jacks was just...fuck, man, it looked like she’d died or something.” Hayden scrubbed viscously at the skin around his eyes, like that might prevent him from crying. Shane could feel his own sadness burning around his eyes at the thought of his closest friends suffering like that. “She was just laying there, staring. And when I walked over there? She just kept apologizing. Even when I started staying home to help with the kids, she kept trying to push me away and do it all. She didn’t want to accept my help. She said that if she did, she was failing at being a mom. It was the hardest fucking thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

Shane’s chest burned as he realized why Hayden was finally telling him all of this now. It wasn’t to open up about something that he and Jackie had worked through together, although he had to think it must’ve been a relief to tell someone about it after three years of quiet. No, this was because of the similarities.

He wondered who told Hayden. Shane hoped to God it was his mother, because the thought of Ilya and Hayden getting along only to talk about how Shane was doing sent something shameful and angry through his spine.

Maybe no one had to tell Hayden. The pleading look on his friend’s face was clear now, aching from the pain his wife was in but also still carrying that worry from before. Hayden had already said he knew as much.

You’re doing that thing where you’re all caught up in your own head.

“How’d you get through it?” Shane asked, voice almost a whisper. His heart fluttered and leaped painfully in his chest, as if it were trying to escape from hearing the answer.

“I was really fucking annoying. I didn’t let her do it alone. She screamed and yelled at me but I woke up every day and got Ruby and Jade ready for school. I made her breakfast when she

said she wasn't hungry, I took care of Arthur whenever I could so she could rest. Jackie was so pissed at me. There were times I thought she might actually fucking divorce me, but eventually...it got better. She still had a lot of bad days, but she started being able to sit with the girls and I for breakfast in the morning, and she'd go to Arthur when he cried and would come back smiling talking about how perfect he was."

"I'm still so fucking scared sometimes," Hayden admitted, his voice dropping lower too. His eyes were on the hallway where his and Jackie's bedroom was, like even keeping an eye on her might help. "I'm scared she'll wake up and be hurting like that again. She's gotten comfortable asking for help when she needs it, but I'm still so scared she won't, that she'll let herself suffer alone when I could be there, when I could do *something*."

Making breakfast.

Holding her.

Comforting her.

Reminding her who she is.

It all sounded so much like—

You can take care of yourself, moy lyubov. You don't have to do it on your own, you should not have to.

Because even when Shane was angry, when he was lashing out, there was only *drive safe. Let me know when you get to Ottawa safe.*

"Fuck," Shane hissed, sitting forward and bracing his elbows on his knees so he could rest his face in his hands. "Hayden, I fucked up."

"What, perfect Shane Hollander? I doubt that," Hayden laughed, trying for a lighter mood, though from the tone in his voice even he thought it fell flat. "Jackie and I are still figuring it all out. We both hurt each other a lot in those early days, before we knew what we were doing. It's okay to need help, you just gotta accept it now."

"I don't want to," Shane admitted quietly into the palms of his hands. It was safer that way, where he couldn't see Hayden's reaction to it. "I don't want him to feel like he *has* to be there. Like I'll be fucking broken or something if he doesn't do stuff for me."

"Okay, buddy," Hayden sighed, moving to put a comforting hand on Shane's back. "If Jackie were standing here right now, would you tell her she's broken and selfish for needing my help?"

And that—

Shane snapped his head up from his hands, eyes wide with terror at the implication.

"What? No! Never," he gasped, shaking his head as if he needed to prove it to Hayden.

"She's so fucking strong. That took so much for her to ask for your help, for her to let you in.

No, I'd never say anything like that to her."

Hayden raised his eyebrows, nodding once at Shane like it should've been obvious. And—"Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*," Hayden laughed, though he looked more relieved than amused. "Dude, if Rozanov is anything like me he's freaking the fuck out right now. It's absolutely fucking killing him not being able to help you."

It's absolutely fucking killing him.

All Shane wanted to do was keep from being a burden to Ilya. He wanted to stay the strong, resilient Shane Hollander that Ilya had first noticed. He didn't want to *need* anyone because that would mean failing and—

But Jackie had needed someone. If she wouldn't have let Hayden help, who knows what would've happened to their perfect little family. No one would have gotten better, everyone would have been hurt.

Accepting the help had been the kindest answer.

"Look, man, if you want to stay the night the guest room is still made up from the last time," Hayden offered. "We can take the girls for breakfast in the morning and figure out a game plan for making up with your man."

It sounded great. It really did. The thought of spending even one more minute without letting Ilya know he saw him, that Shane *knew* now what he was trying to do, though, was too much to bear now. Ilya wasn't babying him, he wasn't trying to make Shane less of the legendary hockey player he was.

He was trying to bring him back to that.

He listened to Shane scream and yell and say harsh things, and he stayed. He made breakfast. He offered to drive two hours for no other reason than so Shane didn't have to. He held him close in bed and reminded him when he'd spent too much time exercising. He'd picked him up off the ice and unfrozen him with the care of someone who, who—

Someone who loved him.

"Thanks, Hayd, for everything, really. But I have to get back to the cottage."

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your kind words on the last chapter. This fic ended up being one that means a lot to me because of the subject matter and because I'm proud of the writing I was able to do on it, so it truly makes me unspeakably happy that so many of you have enjoyed it so far.

I do want to say as a note, there is plenty of comfort starting here but I don't want anyone to think I'm trying to say they're all 100% okay just like that. There's a lot more work down the road for them, but our boys deserve a moment of joy in this moment to kick things off. I also wanted to note that Shane and Ilya refer to Shane's dissociative episodes as "disappearing" simply because they don't have the proper words to describe them yet.

The final chapter is ~80% written and should be up within the week. It was all going to be one chapter but it was getting a little too long, so I decided to split it into two.

That said, if anyone has any ideas for things they want to see in future oneshots in this universe, I'm all ears. I have a oneshot planned surrounding Hayden's response to some of this, one about Ilya and the Raiders playing Montreal for the first time, and a oneshot with various POVs of the Cenaturs players as Shane joins the team.

Thank you all, and I hope you enjoy this one <3

► Content Warnings

A strong body barreled into Shane only seconds after he walked through the door of the cottage.

It hurt in the same way that a particularly rough check on the ice would—that dull ache in Shane's chest that forced his breath out of his lungs momentarily, his muscles protesting against the sudden knock to his balance. Normally, when Ilya leaped on him like this, he'd tuck his hand protectively between the back of Shane's head and whatever wall he was pressing him up against. This time, though, Shane's head hit sharply against the front door he'd just stepped through. He hissed at the sting, but it was like Ilya didn't even notice that he'd done it.

Ilya's hands were frantic on him, obviously shaking, but no less strong as they moved first through Shane's hair, then over his face, his neck, shoulders, all the way down Shane's sides like he was checking for injuries. His eyes were wide, panicked in a way that had Shane wondering if he was even aware of what he was doing now or if his body was moving for him as an extension of his fear. When his hands cleared Shane's body of any physical harm,

Ilya pulled him into a bone-crushing embrace, fists clenching so tightly into the back of Shane's shirt that they pinched painfully at his skin there too. Ilya's face was pressed tight into Shane's neck, a few of his curls tickling Shane's face as the Russian readjusted in an attempt to pull them impossibly closer together.

"Ilya, Ilya, hey," Shane tried to soothe. Why was Ilya so panicked now? What had happened?

Lily: I don't care if you decide to break up with me forever, you have to tell me you are okay.

The fight.

Shane had practically sprinted from Hayden and Jackie's house in his frenzy to get back to Ilya, to explain everything he'd been thinking this morning and everything he was thinking now. Talking with Hayden had been a revelation in and of itself, not even to mention the overwhelming and shocking support he'd been shown at the Centaurs home rink. It put the morning into more perspective, so much so that Shane couldn't imagine going another second without apologizing for his part in the hurt. The six hour drive couldn't have gone any slower, his mind focused entirely on apologizing to Ilya, on promising to work together from now on.

On promising to accept the help Ilya was desperately trying to give him, or at least to try his best to do so.

But Ilya didn't know any of that.

All he knew was the fight they'd had hours ago. All he knew was Shane telling him that he couldn't do this, that he was tired of the way Ilya was treating him as if he'd done anything wrong to try to help.

I don't care if you decide to break up with me forever.

As if the mere thought of doing so didn't send sharp pricks of pain through Shane's heart. As if he could picture a future life that didn't involve Ilya Rozanov in it.

Shane still didn't want to be coddled, and even though he'd talked to Hayden about it the thought of accepting the help still made his skin itch, but fuck if he was going to let Ilya spend one more second thinking that he was too much for him.

"We're okay. We're okay, Ilya. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry about everything I said this morning, I was hurt and frustrated and I took it out on you," Shane rushed to say, hoping it would be enough to calm Ilya down.

It seemed to do the opposite though. Ilya pulled his head back from Shane's neck, something like shock—and anger?—alight in his eyes now.

"This morning? Hollander, I thought you were fucking dead."

What?

When Shane didn't answer immediately, too caught up in the confusing words he'd just been told, Ilya pressed on. "No one heard from you for eighteen hours. You said you were going to your parents and then you didn't show up. You did not answer your phone. No one knew where you were."

"Hayden knew," Shane said, voice quiet. He knew even as he said it that the statement wouldn't help, but it was all he had against the situation that had clearly gotten away from him.

The raw ache of guilt settled over him. There was only one other time he'd seen this kind of pain in Ilya's eyes, and it had been in a hotel room in Tampa after Ilya had opened up about the choice he had to make between being himself and being able to go home. *Shane put that hurt there*. He'd fought and pushed and said hurtful words, and then he'd left and didn't come back for eighteen hours. Ilya told him that his worst fear was Shane getting into a car accident because he had a disappearing episode behind the wheel, and then Shane had gone and made him think it actually happened.

There was no way to reconcile that with the desperate need to defend himself. He hadn't meant to, he forgot to answer the text in his attempts at finding the perfect response, he didn't realize Ilya would even want to see him tonight, after their fight that morning.

"You went to Montreal?"

It sounded ridiculous, hearing it out loud. Shane's cheeks flushed and he felt the familiar lurch in his body as his nerves itched to lash out. Ilya was upset, but maybe more importantly to Shane's nerves he was calling out something that Shane hadn't done perfectly. His body was hard-wired to fight against it, to defend himself against the accusation because Shane Hollander was not someone who could afford to be wrong.

"I needed to get away."

That wasn't what he'd meant to say. It wasn't how this conversation was supposed to go.

"Then you tell someone! You don't drive to another fucking province and—" Ilya groaned, letting go of Shane for the first time since he got home to run them harshly over his face. "I thought you disappeared and crashed your car. I thought I would get a call from Yuna telling me to come to morgue."

"I'm right here," Shane told him, fighting against the instinctive need to fight back, to call Ilya over-dramatic and try to brush this off. He knew it would only hurt the other man and push him further away. Worse, Shane knew that Ilya had a *point*, remembering the way he blanked for the entire drive from Ottawa to Montreal. So he tried to ignore the trapped feeling he had, still pressed against the door by Ilya, those arms that usually meant safety now only making him feel cornered. "I'm right here, Ilya. I didn't go anywhere. I should've answered you."

Ilya shook his head, his left hand finding its home against his cheek, thumb brushing over Shane's freckles. "Why do we keep fighting?"

Was this how it would always be? He and Ilya had been seeing each other for the better part of a decade, but this was the first extended period of time they'd been able to spend together in all those years. What if they weren't ready to handle it? What if all they were meant to be were...*lovers*?

"I don't know," Shane admitted quietly, feeling his heart rate begin to pick up again in his chest. "I don't want to."

"I don't either."

"I talked to Hayden tonight, about us," Shane said, focusing his eyes on the mole along Ilya's jaw so he didn't have to see what the other man's expression did. "I think it helped."

"Hopefully Pike was more helpful than he is on the wing."

"Ilya," Shane groaned, though there was an undercurrent of a laugh to the word as he noticed the playful smile just beginning to pull at Ilya's lips. It was the first sign of anything other than panic on his face since Shane had gotten home, a welcome sight and proof that maybe they would be okay. "You know he led the team in assists last season."

"That is not saying much, Hollander," Ilya countered, that smug look on his face that normally would have Shane rolling his eyes and calling him an asshole.

Now, though, Shane steadied himself to bring it back to the conversation he truly needed to have. "Can we sit?" He thought his knees might give out if he tried to say everything on his mind like this.

Shane assumed Ilya would let go of him, but instead the other man simply took a few steps backward, his hands tugging at Shane's hips to pull him along. It was a testament to how comfortable Ilya was in the cottage so quickly, how he was able to steer them backward back to the living room with the large couch. Normally they'd lounge with Shane laying between Ilya's spread legs, his back pressed to Ilya's chest.

Now, though, they sat on either end of the couch, socked feet and ankles tangled up together in the middle.

It felt like too much distance.

It didn't feel like enough.

Ilya watched him carefully. It was a look that Shane hadn't seen in a long time, one that reminded him of parking lots in Saskatchewan and breaks between photoshoots spent trying to figure out how to talk to one another. Ilya was analyzing his every move, every change on his face, like he was trying to relearn Shane.

Shane didn't squirm under the intense look, instead pulling his own gaze up to meet Ilya's. He knew what the Russian would find in him, knew that if anyone looked they'd be able to see the love he had for Ilya clear in every fiber of his being. He'd fought against it for so long, but even back then he'd known how inevitable it was. Shane Hollander loved Ilya

Rozanov in the same way honeybees loved wildflowers—like it was written into the very code of his body.

“I don’t want this to change how you see me,” Shane said, voice more steady than he felt. “I don’t want you to think I’m weak, or that I can’t handle this, or...I don’t know, I don’t want you to think I’m broken by what happened.”

I do not want you to think she was weak.

I don’t.

“I, uh...Hayden made me realize that I’ve been hurting you for a long time and never knew it.”

Ilya’s face was not always quite so expressive as others, often citing the fact that North Americans were far too loud and gave away their emotions too much. Still, Shane had become an expert in the micro-expressions that gave clues to what Ilya was feeling.

There, the slight widening of his eyes.

The twitch of his right eyebrow, the tiniest raise in the arch of it.

The tightening and releasing of his lips, like he’d noticed the change and forced himself to relax.

The jumping muscle in his jaw as he worked it.

Surprise. Brief anger, maybe on Shane’s behalf at the accusation. Hurt. Fear, always fear.

Ilya was hardwired to be afraid.

Sometimes, Shane wondered if there was ever a time in his life when Ilya hadn’t been afraid. It wasn’t in the years that he knew Shane. He hid it well, so well that it had taken years for Shane to truly understand the short bursts of anger or frustration any time Shane brought up something unrelated to *completely casual* sex were a glaring sign of how afraid Ilya was. Of his family, of losing hockey, of people seeing the real him and deeming it lesser than the part of him he let the world see, of *Shane*.

“Shane, it’s okay.” Ilya wasn’t looking at him either. He glanced to the side, his chin tilted slightly in that direction as if to hide from the conversation.

“It’s not,” Shane continued, knowing if he didn’t get it out now then he’d never have the courage to say it again. He was still bursting with the adrenaline that came from realizing he had an answer to fix what had gone wrong between them, of knowing his best friend had seen him and chose to help instead of cast him off, of knowing he had a man like Ilya love him so much that the Russian was willing to hurt for it.

There was a string coming loose on Shane’s end of the blanket draped over their legs. His fingers found it instantly, pulling and tugging on it. Ripping the thread out would damage the integrity of the overall blanket, but leaving it would be evidence of the damage the blanket

had gone through. He would look at the loose string and be able to see clearly that the blanket wasn't perfect anymore. At least if he tugged the string, he could pretend everything was okay, and when the blanket completely unraveled months down the line he could pretend he was surprised by it, as though there had never been any warning signs.

"I didn't want your help," Shane started, pulling his knees up so he could wrap his arms around his legs. "I kind of still don't. But I think I'd be a lot worse off here if I didn't have you doing...all of this."

Ilya watched him for a moment, his eyes moving rapidly as if that might help him take in more information. Finally, he sighed and admitted, "I need you to explain, I do not understand."

Yeah, he wasn't explaining it very well.

"Hayden told me this thing with Jackie, and how they were both hurting when she pushed him away instead of letting him take care of her. It made me realize you weren't trying to make me feel less than I am, you were taking care of me."

That cracked something open in Ilya's expression. His eyes widened, his lips parting in clear surprise. Then the hurt followed, eyebrows stitching close together.

"You thought I wanted you to be less than you are?"

No, he didn't, not really. But the part of his brain that was used to fighting against anything that tried to take any of the weight from his shoulders had scratched and clawed at the idea that Ilya was allowed to take care of him. So Shane shrugged, gaze dipping to watch the tops of his knees rather than Ilya's hurt expression. When would he stop hurting the other man?

"I don't know. It was like I couldn't be trusted to eat for myself, or think without disappearing. I know you call my parents everyday to talk about how bad I'm doing, and then with the driving it felt like there was another thing I couldn't be trusted to do on my own now."

Ilya leapt at that, lunging forward across the couch to force his way into Shane's space. He grabbed hold of Shane's knees and tugged, spreading them enough so Ilya's strong body could work its way between them, hands on either side of Shane's middle on the couch so Ilya could hold himself up over him.

"It was not about trust," Ilya said firmly, moving one hand so he could grip Shane's chin and guide it up enough that their eyes met. Shane often rolled his eyes when Ilya did this, but he loved the firm grip Ilya always kept on Shane's chin, his jaw, always keeping Shane's eyes watching his. This was not in an attempt to flirt this time, though, no this was to make sure that Shane understood how serious he was now. "I cook for you so you eat healthy and not feel bad about breaking your bad diet yourself. I do not want you to disappear again because is scary, and because you cannot take care of yourself when you are that way."

"I get it," Shane whispered, a fluttering feeling in his chest making the rest of his nerve endings buzz.

“No,” Ilya denied, shaking his head enough that one of his curls fell loose around his temple. “I call your parents because I like talking to them. I lived with them for weeks while my concussion healed, I want to talk to David and Yuna sometimes. Also,” Ilya leaned closer, the grip on his chin softening as his hand moved to brush over Shane’s freckled cheek. He’d never understand Ilya’s fascination with them, but it always made his skin burn and his cheeks flush when Ilya did this. “Also, you are their son. You are hurt and will not tell them how you are. I tell them so they do not try to rush you or show up here to find out.”

“They’re not that worried,” Shane said, a huff of a laugh beginning in his throat until he caught the look in Ilya’s eye. “It’s not that bad.”

“Shane, no more lies about this,” Ilya practically pleaded. “You remember the lake? It was better to say.”

It had torn Shane down to his foundation to breakdown like he had by the lake. The crying had left him starkly embarrassed in a way he hadn’t felt before, but Ilya was at least right in that he’d felt lighter afterward. It didn’t make it any less embarrassing, though, to remember the way he’d broken down and wailed in Ilya’s arms over all of it.

“It is that bad,” Ilya answered. “Your team called you names. The world called you names. They abandoned you, made you go to a new team when you did not want. It is everything you did not want to happen when you came out, and it happened.”

It happened.

It happened.

Shane’s vision blurred momentarily, but like a pro he blinked and held his breath until his vision cleared, refusing to let himself cry in an already tense moment.

“That there,” Ilya spoke softly, thumb pressing gently into the tender skin just under Shane’s eye, “The hiding, the trying to be strong, is why I worry. Not because you are weak. You are still Shane Hollander, *moy lyubov*.”

“I don’t know what that means anymore,” Shane whispered, though it felt like the words still echoed around the cottage. “That name means nothing now.”

Ilya’s hands flexed, tightening briefly before he willed them to relax.

“Did you hit head too?” Ilya asked, trying for teasing though his expression remained serious. His hand brushed Shane’s hair back off his forehead, then moved down over the side of his face, his thumb taking time to brush first over his eyebrow, then freckles, then along Shane’s jaw which was clenched tight as he watched the other man. “Shane Hollander is not nothing to me.”

Shane’s eyes fell closed as Ilya leaned in close, pressing his lips first on the bridge of Shane’s nose and then to Shane’s own. Shane tipped his head, searching to deepen the kiss but Ilya was quick to pull away, continuing his path over Shane’s jaw, to the spot where it met his neck, then where his neck met his collarbone.

“Shane Hollander is hockey legend. You have done more in ten years than most players will ever do in entire careers. You are unstoppable on the ice. Do you know how terrifying you are out there? Shane Hollander is a force that cannot be stopped.”

Ilya’s hands were warm on his skin as they shuffled under the hem of Shane’s shirt, tugging it up and off of him insistently. Shane moved to make it easier, his own hands reaching to pull Ilya’s off. Normally he’d wince at the careless way both were tossed over the back of the couch, but now all he could do was relax into Ilya’s touch. He hadn’t realized how tense his body had been all day until those familiar hands moved over muscle, unknotting each one as he went.

“Shane Hollander has not changed,” Ilya murmured against Shane’s chest, his lips relaxed there like it was their home. He’s sure Ilya can feel his beating heart from where he rests, and finds himself sliding his hand over to feel the other man’s. It’s steady against Shane’s palm, a little quicker but nonetheless strong, firm. “The world has, and you will make them fucking regret it.”

There was nothing but certainty in Ilya’s voice.

And reverence.

God, the look Ilya gave him could shatter glass and send the strongest men to their knees. He was looking up, neck slightly strained from his spot against Shane’s chest to meet his eyes. Those eyes—those fucking eyes that were normally so confident, so strong, looked at Shane like he was something to be worshiped. As though Ilya was content to pray on the altar of Shane Hollander all night, his hands paying tribute to the strong body that made him up.

“I love you,” Shane said, never more sure of anything in his entire life. His body was made to play hockey. His heart was made to love Ilya Rozanov.

“I fucking love you so much,” Shane repeated, as if the first wasn’t enough. It would never be enough—there weren’t words strong enough to encapsulate everything he felt for the man who laid him out and cared for him now, but these would have to be enough. Shane’s hand brushed over Ilya’s curls, resting over his cheek as the man’s face softened at the words. “It’s not fair how much I love you.”

Ilya grinned, sliding up so he could press another, more insistent, kiss to Shane’s lips. “Shane Hollander is also a sap.”

“Fuck you.”

“Mmh, gladly,” Ilya hummed, the mood turning with one look.

Shane smiled and allowed himself to melt into it.

The next morning, Shane woke to the smell of breakfast filling up the cottage.

It felt like a repeat of the previous day. He woke up alone again. He climbed into a pair of sweatpants and a shirt—this time his new Centaurs one. If time loops were real, Shane was beginning to think maybe he was in one. Ilya was standing at the stove again, grey sweatpants slung low on his hips and completely forgoing a shirt this time.

“You sleep in later here,” Ilya remarked with a small smile before returning his focus to the pan in front of him.

“It’s 8AM,” Shane said, rolling his eyes. Late was a stretch, though he supposed it *was* a couple of hours past when he would normally be attacking the day. He leaned back against the counter, close enough that he could look at what Ilya was cooking. Eggs in one pan, bacon in another.

Shane could avoid the yolk if he wanted. He could pick at the bacon until it looked like he’d eaten enough of it so Ilya didn’t keep pushing about it. It would not be so bad this morning, even if the numbers were already stacking up in a terrifying way for his first meal of the day. He could make this work, at least enough to avoid a fight like yesterday.

“Yes, and the Hollander I know likes to compete with the sun over who can be awake first,” Ilya teased. “Is nice, you need the rest.”

He’d never slept so much than he did in the cottage these last few days. It was impossible to ignore the effect it had on his body, the way his shoulders were loose and relaxed now and the way the dark circles under his eyes had started to lighten.

As Ilya grabbed two plates for the food, he leveled Shane with a look, the arch of his eyebrow raised slightly. “Eggs?”

Here it was.

How much would Shane give, how much could he hold onto, to avoid a fight again?

“Yeah,” Shane agreed, nodding as Ilya separated the eggs onto the two plates.

“Bacon?”

Shane’s stomach flipped, the swirling in his gut becoming too familiar at this point. He didn’t want it, not with all of the grease. Pork did not have a place in his diet, especially not as fat-riddled a cut as bacon. Still, Ilya had made it and he would expect Shane to have some. He was always going on about protein, claiming that Shane’s diet wasn’t enough to sustain an athlete. Ilya may have been right, knowing in the last few days he had more energy to spare than before, but still, this felt like a reach. It felt like dipping into somewhere dangerous and unnecessary and—

“Hm, sorry, Hollander, I only made enough for one and I am greedy.” Without protest, Ilya dropped the entire portion of bacon onto his own plate, his eyes never leaving Shane’s face as if to judge the reaction he got.

As if to say, *is this okay?*

Shane's heart leapt as he nodded, once.

"I made your smoothie with oat milk today," Ilya said, already heading to the dining table. A deviation from Shane's normal breakfast smoothie, the milk an indulgence that didn't fit his diet.

Still, oat milk was manageable.

It was okay.

It did not make his stomach lurch with unbearable guilt and nausea.

So Shane grabbed his plate of eggs and his smoothie cup, sitting across from Ilya. This was already so different from how the last few days had gone. Ilya was still pushing him, but never beyond the line that made Shane sick with guilt and panic. He was letting Shane keep some choices, let him contribute to his own meals without sliding back to his normal routine. It eased the dark feeling tucked up under his ribs. Shane slid his foot until it bumped the other man's, smiling when Ilya's eyes snapped up to meet his. "Thank you."

A pause, where Ilya simply watched him. It was these kind of looks that Shane still couldn't decipher, seeming too complex to sort out all of the different emotions contained within. It didn't scare him though, because he knew Ilya would tell him. He always did.

"It is just breakfast, Hollander."

The words were simple, contained. As if Ilya had not cooked something still healthy enough to make Shane feel okay about eating it, as if he hadn't learned from yesterday's conversation and did not press about the thing that pushed too far from Shane's comfort level. As if Ilya had not already learned Shane's every move with the ease of someone who'd had a lifetime to study him.

"It's not," Shane said, sure he had a goofy-looking smile on his face as he regarded the man in front of him. Fuck, he loved him so much it didn't seem real sometimes.

"Eat your eggs," was all Ilya said before returning his focus to his own plate, though he had his own silly smile on his face too.

Shane finished his plate.

Ilya didn't ask him to have more.

For one singular moment, everything was okay and Shane couldn't ask for anything more.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Y'all, I'm sorry this chapter took awhile to come out. I could genuinely write 100k more about Shane and Ilya's recovery from everything they went through in this AU and truly I didn't want this fic to end so soon, but ultimately I decided that these two scenes said everything I wanted to say. At least for this summer at the cottage. I hope you agree, but even if you don't I hope this chapter was worth the wait.

I'm not done with this series. Up next is a oneshot from Hayden's POV featuring meeting Ilya as Shane's boyfriend, them taking the girls ice skating, and a surprise scene. Also on the horizon is a fic, maybe a multi-chapter maybe a oneshot, about Shane settling into his new life as a Centaur while Ilya navigates the aftermath of his injury and everything that was revealed now that he's in Boston instead of Ottawa. Also, Ilya and the Raiders fucking up the Metros in their first game against each other.

I have loved writing this AU so much, and I am so grateful for all of you for your continued support and words of encouragement along the way. Your enjoyment of this version of the boys, as painful as it has been at times for them, is truly the reason I'm still writing so much of this. I cannot thank you enough for coming along on this journey with me, and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

Yuna and David's cottage was a storybook of Shane's life.

He hadn't realized how many photos they had of him decorating the walls until a few days after his surprise trip to Montreal. Now he stood in the hallway connecting the entryway to the living room, eyes taking in each and every frame that decorated the surface. It ranged from a picture of David holding a tiny bundle of blankets he was sure contained him somewhere within, to a picture Shane knew was from draft day, of him wearing a Montreal Metros jersey over his suit. It wasn't in the photo, but the back of the jersey had his name on it. Yuna was crying. David was smiling so wide, his eyes so gentle that he may as well have been too.

Shane was barely smiling.

Even back then, he gave himself unrealistic expectations to reach. This version of Shane had just been drafted second overall in the entire MLH, and still he couldn't let himself celebrate it, too focused on the fact that he hadn't been first. Being drafted first overall was in his ten-year plan to someday watching his jersey be lifted up into the rafters of the Bell Centre. That day, all Shane could think about was the fact that he would always be remembered as being *second*, as being *almost* the best. All he knew was that his hockey career was already off to a

rocky start, and he didn't know if he would be able to steady his feet enough to stick the landing.

Now, looking at the haircut and the face that still hadn't quite lost its baby fat and the soft but dejected look in his eyes, all Shane could think was that he'd been so *young*.

Who the fuck had let an eighteen year old think that his entire career, his entire life, would ride on this one night?

"Your mother and I were so proud of you that night," Shane's dad said, startling him a little as he hadn't realized the man had approached. Normally Shane was hyper-aware of his surroundings, finding it near impossible for others to sneak up on him. It was a testament to the mood he was in now, staring at these frames he'd walked by countless times but never once stopped to look at.

"Proudest day of your lives, I know," Shane groaned, though the slight smile on his face betrayed the endearment in it. He'd heard it plenty of times from his mom, who he knew was so proud of the hockey player he'd become.

"You don't know everything, kid," his Dad laughed, reaching up to mess his hair up in the same way he always used to when Shane was a kid and it would rile him up. "I was proud, but that wasn't the proudest I've ever been of you."

That was a new one.

Shane's head whipped to the side so he could stare at his dad properly, eyes wide as he considered the man. He thought he'd had his dad all figured out, in the same way that the man knew Shane from the inside out.

"Do you remember the only time you got suspended from school?"

Shane's eyebrows lifted, feeling a little like he was missing an important piece of the puzzle. "You were proud that I got suspended for starting a fight in elementary school?"

"No," his dad laughed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I was proud of you for standing up for that little girl. That jerk kid was so mean to her, made her cry all the time, and you just... didn't let it happen. The teacher said you, quiet, shy little Shane Hollander, stood right up and punched that kid so hard he cried. When the teacher told you she had to send you to the principal's office if you didn't apologize, you told her—"

"—I'd go to the principal's office anyway because she should have a friend to stick up for her."

"The teacher said you didn't even talk to this girl normally you just, didn't want her to be alone." His dad smiled, a little sad, and definitely a lot proud as he looked from the draft day picture over to Shane. "When the principal said she had to suspend you instead of the other kid because you were the one to throw the punch, I was livid. They were punishing you for standing up against bullying, and I was ready to let them hear it but then you... God, Shane, you grabbed my hand and asked to go home. You said it was okay, you could be suspended

because the girl already knew she had a friend and that was the whole point. I was so proud of you in that moment that I took you to go get ice cream.”

Shane smiled, remembering that day. His dad was busy with his government job, meaning he didn’t always get to spend that much time with him. It felt like a treat to get to spend all afternoon getting ice cream and running around the park with him.

“You were hiding me from Mom,” Shane laughed then, also remembering when, three days later, they finally got busted. “You didn’t want her to know I got suspended.”

“She thought I was teaching you that punching people is okay.”

“It *is* okay, if you’re doing it for the right reasons.”

“Yeah, I thought that’s what you might’ve learned from that day,” his dad said, voice sounding a little more wistful than it should for what was a silly childhood memory. “I was reminded of it when you punched Comeau.”

It felt like someone punched *him*, the center of his sternum feeling like it might cave in against the sudden invisible impact of those words. Shane even reached a hand up to his chest, rubbing at it gently as if to soothe the uncomfortable feeling there.

“I shouldn’t have punched my own teammate,” Shane said reflexively, a learned, media-trained response. “Our issues off the ice shouldn’t made it onto it.”

“The proudest day of my life was when you punched him, Shane.”

It was like his dad told him that the sky was green. Shane stared at his dad as if the man might burst into laughter at any moment and reveal some kind of joke that Shane wasn’t in on. David Hollander was not a violent man, nor did he usually condone as such. He respected hockey scrums because he played for so long, but he hated the way that some of the younger guys seemed to start them for no reason. He hated Boston because he claimed that team seemed to base their entire strategy off of starting and ending fights and taking penalties.

“It was one of my lowest moments, Dad,” Shane said, practically pleading with him to understand. He stared back at his draft day self, as though that younger version of him might hop out of the picture and help prove his point. That version of Shane would never have stooped so low as to punch his own teammate on the ice, during a game, no matter what had been said to him. He would’ve taken the words on the chin and moved on, he would’ve had the strength to wait until the game was over to deal with his problems.

That version of him wouldn’t have let one word destroy his chance at retiring his jersey at his dream team.

“I don’t know, bud, it seemed pretty strong to me,” his dad said, shrugging his shoulders as if this was a light conversation about movie choices instead of one that had every tendon in Shane’s body tight with nerves. “It takes a brave man to stand up to bullies, knowing there will be consequences and doing the right thing regardless.”

“I wasn’t trying to make a statement.”

“You did anyway.”

Shane sucked in a sharp breath, feeling tears gathering at the edges of his eye-line. His eyes ran over the photo wall, taking in photos of him out on the ice at all stages of his life. From as young as a toddler with the skate trainer to an image of him hoisting up the Cup. His parents had always been there for him, had given up so much to allow him the chance to do this.

“You and Mom really aren’t disappointed I’ll be playing for Ottawa next season?”

It was a question that kept him awake more and more lately. He’d come to terms with the fact that he would be moving there for this season—at least, in anyway he could. The meeting with the team owners helped, and so did meeting the current captain and brand new coach in Brandon Wiebe. Ilya helped too, having surprised him by ordering an Ottawa crewneck for himself to wear around the cottage, like it was a perfectly normal thing to do.

“Shane.” His name sounded sad on his dad’s lips, like the man was hurt by the very idea of the question being asked. Shane would’ve never asked it if it weren’t for Ilya’s encouragement throughout the last few days, the last few *weeks* really, knowing it would’ve hurt his parents to hear his doubts. He had to admit, though, it felt like a weight lifted off of his own chest to vocalize everything he’d been worrying about since that night. “You could never play hockey ever again and I would still be just as proud of you as I am now. It was never about hockey for us, I hope you know that, Shane.”

“It’s always been hockey,” Shane said in return, the words not quite making sense in his head, not standing here in front of the wall that detailed his entire life—hockey taking up more of the photos than not. His high school graduation was not on this wall (maybe more likely because he’d been homeschooled by a tutor through it) but his first game on the Canadian Juniors team was. “Everything you did for me, everything you gave up, it was all so I’d be the best at hockey.”

His dad shook his head, his hands reaching out to grasp onto his shoulders. “I’m sorry we didn’t make this more clear years ago.” His voice was quiet, his eyes shining with more vulnerable emotion than Shane was ever used to seeing on his dad. “I’m so sorry we let you go this long thinking it was only hockey. It’s only ever been because this is what *you* wanted. Hockey was the thing that made *you* happiest, so of course we’d do anything to make sure you could keep playing it. That was all this has ever been about, Shane, please know that now. It was never about the gold medals or the Cups or the retired jersey numbers, just that smile you get out on the ice. That’s the only place you smile like that, you know.”

“Like what?”

His dad tilted his head, the tears in his eyes obvious.

“Like you’re free, Shane. That’s the only place you’ve ever been so free.”

“How are Yuna and David?”

Ilya had not gone with him to their cottage this time, instead staying lounged in their own. Shane wasn't sure when he started to think of *his* cottage as *theirs*, but it settled comfortable in his chest as he stepped through the door to see the other man relaxed on the large couch, bundled up in two blankets and his Ottawa Centaurs sweatshirt.

"Don't pretend you didn't talk to them this morning," Shane said back, toeing off his shoes and joining Ilya on the couch. He slotted in comfortable against the Russian's side, the position a familiar one over their time in the cottage. "My dad says hi. My mom wanted me to tell you to answer her email which, why is my mom emailing you?"

"That is hockey manager confidentiality," Ilya boasted proudly, smirking at the unimpressed look on Shane's face.

"She's not your manager."

"Yet," Ilya grinned. "Yuna is going to need new star player on her roster now that her old one retired to Ottawa."

"Fuck you." If Shane would've heard those words a week ago, he thought it might've broken him. From anyone else, he thought it still might've. This was from Ilya though, who was still so careful in the way he handled Shane. He was the man who urged Shane out of bed when it seemed impossible, keeping him on his schedule that Ilya often complained was too strict. He's the man who learned what foods were okay to push with and which were always going to be a part of Shane's healthy diet, and the man who learned the subtle ways to check if Shane was slipping into a disappearing episode without completely making the moment about that.

"You love me," Ilya teased.

Shane's entire expression softened at those words. Before the hit on the ice that terrified him to his core, Shane didn't know those words were true. He was convinced all of this was casual, which seemed laughable now after everything that happened. It seemed impossible that Ilya's injury was still only a couple of months ago, and that before then all they'd been were two men sneaking around in various hotel rooms across the continent.

Now Shane got to have this—coming home to this gentle version of Ilya that no one but him got the privilege to see.

"I really do," Shane agreed. The kiss was objectively bad, the two of them smiling too much to make anything good of it, but still it sent fluttering feelings through Shane's chest like it was the best kiss he'd ever had. "I had something to ask you."

"Yes, Hollander, the blond is all natural," Ilya teased, though there was something nervous in the way he held his body. Shane was quickly becoming an expert in all things Ilya Rozanov. The man would never say when he was scared, but there were learned responses. He hated being surprised by the serious stuff, it always reminded him of when his father would critique him for everything. It always felt like a trap to him.

Shane wouldn't let him sit in that feeling for long. "The captain of the Centaurs invited me to this...barbecue thing. We missed the first one, but he let me know today they're having one again next weekend. To celebrate the end of the summer, to kick-off training, or something."

"You should go, it would be fun," Ilya said automatically, his body relaxing as he realized this would not be a confrontation for anything he'd done. The way this man trusted him enough to relax this far would have Shane weeping if he spent too much time thinking about it.

"They invite all the WAGs, you know. Boodram made a point to say you should come too," Shane said without thinking, though his cheeks flushed bright red at the implications of his words. "Not that you're a WAG. You know what, forget I said anything. It's silly, why would you want to go to a barbecue for a team you don't play for?"

"Hollander, Shane, you're spiraling," Ilya laughed, though his expression was soft. He turned his body in their hold on each other so he could face Shane, strong hands always finding their familiar holds on his body. "I would be happy to be your WAG at this party."

"Wait really?"

"Why not? Is my only chance to show you off," Ilya said. The words were light, teasing, but the man's eyes shined with something far deeper.

Because it really would be. The rest of the world knew they were dating, but they wouldn't be able to be themselves in public yet. There was still the question of how the season would go, considering they were still in the same conference against each other. The official MLH investigation into whether or not Shane had been throwing games for Ilya may have concluded weeks ago, but the lasting effects of it were still yet to be seen. For now, they would have to play it safe. They would have to limit their outward displays of their relationship during the season.

But they could have this.

A party. A party with Shane's new team, who had made a distinct point to make it clear that both he and his boyfriend were invited in the same way that the other players and their loves were invited.

It was just a party. It was also so much more than that.

"I'll let Bood know we're coming then," Shane said, something bright and shining warming his chest from the inside out.

Later, after Shane fired off the text message so he couldn't try to back out of it when the day came, he asked, "Want to go skating?"

Shane hadn't been to his practice rink since that disappearing episode that nearly killed him. It was a non-memory that Shane knew would be one of the first things he'd talk about with his new therapist, once he had his first visit with him next week. He'd been avoiding the rink like the plague, finding any kind of excuse to not go back there in fear of it somehow

triggering another bad episode. It seemed Ilya knew it too, because the flash of worry was too strong to hide in the man's expression. Shane still didn't remember much of that time, but he knew Ilya did. He knew that Ilya still had nightmares about it sometimes, when the memory of finding Shane's limp form on the rink entangled messily with his memories of finding his mother. Those nights often sparked bad days, when Ilya's mind got the best of him and he spent the day fighting against it.

Except Shane had learned more about Ilya in these days at the cottage too, in the same way that Ilya learned him.

He knew that on bad days, even a bottle of paracetamol could make Ilya sick with worry. He knew that Ilya's mind was particularly cruel to himself on those days, would cause him to replay those memories over and over again until he was lost in them. So Shane would be relentless on the bad days, keeping the other man busy with video games, and soccer, and swimming, and *sex, so much sex*, because if Ilya was busy then he didn't have to remember what it felt like to slowly warm his boyfriend back to life.

"Only an hour," Ilya bartered, his hand coming up to rest against the side of Shane's face, his thumb finding its home across Shane's freckles. Shane asked him, once, on a night when they laid outside and watched the stars why he was so obsessed with them. Созвездие was the word Ilya had whispered then. *Constellations*.

"I'll set a timer." Shane meant it to be teasing, but he could see the way that Ilya's shoulders relaxed half an inch at the words. They were still recovering from everything that had been done to them, everything they'd done to each other. It would take time, and things would not be so perfect. There would be bad days, and maybe there would be even worse ones when he went to Ottawa and Ilya went back to Boston.

But for now, he had this. And if Shane had to set a timer for their shared ice time, then he would for the rest of his life as long as it earned him that brilliant, trusting smile from Ilya again.

For now, Shane and Ilya laced on their skates for the first time since that day, and they were both happy.

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